

Cold-Fusion and The Road Less Travelled: A Review of *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* (Edward M. White, Jossey-Bass, 1989)

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When I first picked up Ed White's *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*, I was hoping, secretly—as I always do when I see a book with this kind of authority and scope, a book by a senior person respected in the field—I was hoping for answers, for magic. What I secretly wanted was a new formula or grand scheme to help me out of the day-to-day messiness of being a WPA at a state university. And because White is well known for his work in assessment, I also had a complex expectation about the “database” that might support the book, an expectation typical, I suspect, of WPAs nonetheless uneasy about empirical research: maybe there's an answer here after all, something hard and fast, something provable. Maybe all of us gooey types, all of us publicly dismissive of empiricism, secretly hope for some composition equivalent of cold-fusion—unlimited power with lots less energy going in, and that's why we keep reading and writing books and articles and texts about how to teach writing.

Of course that's exactly what White doesn't deliver. *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* is more the composition equivalent of Scott Peck's best-selling *The Road Less Travelled*, which begins with the oddly reassuring line, “Life is difficult”—reassuring because we don't then think there's something out there we're supposed to know and don't, some key we've missed that everyone else has. We can settle down to work.

White's purpose in the book is to review current program research, discuss the issues most pressing for writing programs, and in the end make practical recommendations for running writing programs. As Richard Lloyd-Jones says in his foreward, “almost nothing about writing program administration is otherwise available in an accessible form.”

Part of the value of the book is that it brings together research we haven't had a chance to review and assimilate ourselves. Here, clearly summarized and carefully explained, are the methods and conclusions of the Kitzhaber report on composition, the Wilcox survey, the Austin Research Project, the California Project (which White himself directed;

see *Research in Effective Teaching of Writing*), the Connolly and Vilardi survey, the Hartzog survey, and George Hillocks' important review of empirical research, *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. The third chapter, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Approaches," evaluates the six approaches to writing instruction developed by the California Project and the patterns of composition instruction developed by Hillocks, providing WPAs with a number of useful terms and schemas. Chapters 5, 6, and 10 take up the issue of assessment, drawing heavily on White's influential study, *Teaching and Assessing Writing*. White's approach in these chapters, as throughout the book, is to summarize, explain, and review, so that WPAs (like me) who are behind in their reading about assessment can catch up in short order. It's very useful.

Another part of the value of the book is that it expresses so well what we already believe about composition pedagogy and theory. Program administration in writing is necessarily grounded in pedagogical theory; much of this reads like White's version of what Irmischer, Lindemann, and many others say in their overviews of composition theory in general. There's a fine definition of writing in the first chapter, for example: "Writing is important, even central, to liberal education because writing stimulates (even as it records), the processes of learning, thinking, discovering, combining, evaluating, and imagining" (6). Chapter 4, "Writing Within the Undergraduate Curriculum," contains one ringing affirmation after another of the new rhetorical paradigm and the accumulated wisdom of the last twenty years.

Still another part of the book's value is that it brings to one place a set of practical recommendations for program administration. In this sense reading the book is much like going through a WPA evaluators' visit (not surprising, since White is a WPA evaluator of long standing). There is the same balanced, commonsensical advice about statements of purpose, syllabus construction, assessment, TA training. There's the same polemic about the low status of writing instructors and WPAs, always good to hear again. There's the same measured effort to provide options rather than prescribe one method applicable to all programs. White also simply gathers some useful material and information, including the text of the Wyoming Resolution and the WPA Guidelines for Self-Study.

In other words, there's nothing new here exactly, and at first that's a disappointment. On second thought, that's a real strength. It's a question of what was oft thought but ne'er so well expressed or put together. For an audience of experienced WPAs the value of *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* is that it clarifies, synthesizes, and reinforces. How many of us could express so wisely and so well what we take as

central about what we do, as, for example, this passage, one of my favorites in the book:

The place of writing at the center of the liberal arts undergraduate curriculum derives from its double role as a socializing discipline (enforcing and confirming student membership in the educated community) and as an individualizing discipline (demanding critical thinking and an active relation of the self to material under study). While both of these functions are important, the second one is more significant for the undergraduate curriculum. That is, writing instruction becomes a *liberating* activity—and hence properly an essential part of the liberal arts—when it demands and rewards thinking for oneself. (62)

Yes! That's it! That's what I've been trying to say. The book is a fine, wise, experienced introduction to the field, explaining clearly and in one place all that we know now from experience and research about the teaching of writing and the administering of writing programs. For an audience of administrators, the book is a godsend. Instead of stuttering and stammering at the next dean's meeting, we can put this book in their hands, or we can quote from it to write persuasive proposals and reports. All the key ideas of the new rhetoric are expressed here with authority and weight, a sense of prestige and experience.

The deeper effect of White expressing so well what has oft been thought is to remind us again that there are no easy, no hidden answers. One of our main responses to the book—as to a WPA evaluators' report, I think—is to say, "Heh! Wait a minute, I already knew all this" or, "Of course those are the options! I want to know what to *do*." But that's the necessary response, it seems to me, the point of conversion. On the one hand, we are empowered by White's synthesis, assured that we already have the available tools for doing the job. On the other hand, we are brought back to reality. No clouds will part, White keeps telling us, no bushes burn. WPAs must resign themselves to the muddle, learning from the real advances that are occasionally made, but by-and-large, simply doing the best they can with what they've got, responding to the concrete moment, adapting to all the stubborn contexts.

This is also the message implicit in White's treatment of empirical research, and for me the most powerful effect of *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*. White sets up the book to emphasize the move from research to practice, carefully laying out the existing empirical studies in the first few chapters and then exploring how and whether this research can justify specific recommendations about both pedagogy and administration. But in his own particular recommendations, White is continually falling back on commonsense and conviction and personal experience. After all the surveying of the research models and the California study and the questionnaires and the control groups, we get statements like

(statements I for one completely agree with): "Perhaps I am extrapolating too much from my own experience with composition faculty outside English, but I think that writing teachers have to be the most sensitive readers in the university" (37); or "While I have no respect for ignorance or for the foolish repetition of workbook formulas that some teachers mistake for instruction in writing, I have a great deal of respect for much of the teaching of writing that my English colleagues do" (38). In Chapter 3, after weighing in great detail the strengths and weaknesses of the six different approaches to composition surveyed in the California Project, White simply asserts:

"I, for example, am firmly committed to the text-based rhetoric approach, because that approach works best for me and my students at my institution" (55).

At first there seems to be a gap here, a gap that I think is typical of much composition research. Too often in the articles that keep getting published in our journals, a complex research design, announced with much solemn scientism, is followed by commonsense recommendations that could have been made without all the statistics or ethnographic description, or assertions get made that are not justified by the empirical research, that reflect finally the author's own values and rhetorical paradigm. It's not that as a reader of this stuff I want empiricism necessarily, only consistency, consecutive reasoning. It's as if we have at least two voices in the discipline—the voice of the researcher, the investigator, and the voice of the teacher in the classroom, the professor, the person in the world telling stories and expressing value—and we can't figure out how to relate these, how to move from one to the other. There's a waffling.

But White avoids this waffling by describing it. He fills the gap by admitting it—by explaining as clearly and honestly as he can the strengths and weaknesses of empirical study. There is this research, he keeps saying—and it does have value, we should keep doing it and reading about it, but finally we have to realize that "programs, students, teachers, and writing itself are all too complex for conventional educational research methods" (18). Or again: "It is clearly too early to ask research in composition programs to provide answers to the thorny problems in the field" (33). Or: we must face "the depressing inability of empirical research to provide us with convincing program evaluation" (199). Over and over White makes the point that in composition studies there are always these two poles of experience and theory, conviction and research, and that to be valid, to be useful, composition must constantly travel back and forth between them, hold them in tension. It's research *and* experience, data *and* desire, and all the fuzziness, the murkiness in between. With such careful qualifiers inserted between the descriptions

of research and the final personal recommendations, there is no inconsistency in White's analysis. Given the complex and problematic nature of composition, the recourse to "I" is one of his most responsible moves. It's White's concrete, human, committed voice, then, that finally gives the book its authority. It certainly makes it readable and interesting. The style is blessedly free of jargon, direct and straightforward, conveying the voice of a real person. But more than that, it reflects the way things really are in this business. The wholeness and complexity of the writing process is mirrored in the administering of a writing program, White is saying. It's all rhetoric not dialectic, involved always in contingency and desire. As he puts it in the eloquent final paragraph of the book:

In program evaluation, as in all other aspects of writing programs, we need to resist using or accepting simple and reductive definitions, procedures, tests, and inferences. It is surely a wise instinct that leads us to trust writing instruction more to poets than to scientists, or even to logicians. The resistant reality of learning to think, to write, to create, to revise and recreate, to understand does not yield its secrets readily. Our primary job, in program evaluation as in many other aspects of our work, is to help others see the complexity and importance of writing, to distinguish between the simple and the not so simple, to be willing to accept the evidence of many kinds of serious inquiry into the nature of creative thought. That, of course, is just one more way of defining the function of every teacher and scholar. (206)

This is the truth we already knew, but we needed a scholar like White to remind us, to say it again, and to say it this powerfully. Reading White we experience again that inevitable, wry recognition that we just have to muddle through. And there is also the old exhilaration, the old humanistic paradigm reasserting itself. We only wish for the empirical panacea, for scientific salvation, for a moment. Deep down we really wouldn't want a simple answer because that would falsify our experience and take away our freedom. Deep down we want to be poets and scholars, which is why we got into teaching to begin with.

In *The Road Less Travelled*, Scott Peck tells us that to be healthy and mature as people, we need to accept complexity. "It is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning," Peck says, in his pop-psychological (but nonetheless wise) way. Ed White reminds WPAs that poetry and scholarship embrace complexity by their very nature, and that, in this sense at least, to grow into maturity, to be healthy, writing program administration must remain fundamentally poetic and scholarly.

