The Power of Naming:
Names that Create and Define
the Discipline

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Among other responsibilites, Writing Program Administrators have the task of naming. We must decide whether to have a Writing Lab or a Writing Center; a staff of tutors or consultants; courses in Freshman composition, expository writing, or writing workshop; whether to direct a program of writing across the curriculum or writing across the disciplines; and even whether to call our own discipline rhetoric or composition. Though this task may appear commonplace, Paulo Freire's observation that naming the world is a model for changing the world suggests that the actual impact of our acts of naming may be much greater than we have imagined (97). The names Writing Program Administrators choose have both immediate and far-reaching effects, shaping others' perceptions about the places or programs we name and also about Composition. As such, they provide a valuable lens through which to observe the discipline as it evolves, as its perimeters continue to shift and come into focus. The lens provided by the stories—what Stephen North calls the lore—of WPAs who must make decisions about naming will allow members of the discipline to self-consciously observe Composition take shape, to look for telling contradictions, patterns, and trends in its development.

In this essay, by reflecting on naming in Composition, we will see what observations can be made about the discipline, about what is important to it, and what concepts define it. We will share our own stories as Writing Program Administrators who select and change names, as well as what we have learned from stories of other WPAs. Further, we wish to consider the psychological and social dimensions that lend power to the act of naming and make this everyday activity into something much more influential than it may initially appear. The power and influence inherent in the act of naming suggests that where we can identify common moments during which names have been given or changed, during which related negotiations have occurred or conflicts arisen, we should also find important points of growth or tension in the field. Examining these collective naming stories should allow us to draw some generalizations about the developing discipline of Composition.

The Authors' Stories

Our interest in the importance of naming began recently, after we each had accepted positions at schools which were very different from our previous institutions. During the course of several conversations, it became clear to us that regardless of the size or affiliation of our schools, as Writing Program Administrators, we shared common experiences, and some of the most complex of these had to do with naming.

Cherryl Armstrong:

At California State University, Northridge, one of the largest of the nineteen Cal State campuses, with a mostly commuter population of around 30,000, I have had several experiences with what Sheryl and I have begun referring to as the "name game." Perhaps the most striking of these has been my not entirely successful attempt to change the name of the Composition faculty. Ladder faculty at Northridge only rarely teach Freshman writing. The courses are staffed by graduate teaching assistants, and mostly, by members of the faculty called "part-timers." Some part-timers have taught composition on our campus for as many as ten years. Many part-timers teach more courses per semester than full-timers. Although it has yet to fully catch on, my coadministrator, Thia Wolf and I refer to the staff, as a group, as the Composition faculty and, as individuals, as lecturers. Before coming to Cal State, I already had some experience with the name game when I taught at Harvard University. There, it had been my job to set up, within the Expository Writing Program, Harvard's first basic writing course for students who find writing particularly difficult. The apparent contradiction of the names "Harvard" and "Basic Writing" at first led some students and faculty to question whether the course or the students in it or both were appropriate for the university. In the second year of the program, the course did not provoke this uneasiness, not only because the first year students could recommend it to new students, but because we changed the name from "Basic Writing" to "Introduction to Expository Writing," and we changed the course number from 5 to 10 so that "Introduction to Expository Writing" fit in the sequence that begins at number 11 (Armstrong).

Sheryl I. Fontaine:

Like Cherryl, I initiated the renaming of the basic writing course at Claremont McKenna College—a small, highly competitive private school and one of the consortium of five Claremont Colleges in Southern California. During my first semester, I taught a writing course named "Preceptorial English" and numbered Lit 10X. Many students referred to the course simply as "X." I supposed that because Lit 10 was the required writing course and Preceptorial English was the extra one, it had become 10X. And the name "Preceptorial," I imagined, had had something to do with the British education system and the fact that originally each section of the course had an assigned tutor to work with students individually. It turns out that Preceptorial English was named by default, taking its name from the summer bridge program which had predated it. In fact, the department hadn't named the course; the registrar had done so in order to fill in the requisite space for "name" in the course catalogue. Given that we now have a full-fledged, semester-long course separate from the bridge program, I suggested that we change the name to one that reflected the changes in the course and that would make the course seem more connected to the rest of the college writing curriculum. The name "Fundamentals of College Writing" was selected by the department. The course was renumbered Lit 9—certainly an improvement over Lit 10X, but unfortunately, the only single digit course number in the department.

I am not altogether happy with the name of the English Resources Center—a writing center that I was hired to direct. I would like to change the name to Writing Center, a simple name which would more accurately reflect the spirit of the place. For the moment, I have only renamed the "tutors" as "writing consultants" in an attempt to soften the prescriptive edge of "English Resources Center" and to encourage students who come see us to ask for response and advice rather than editorial changes in spelling and usage.

Psychological and Social Dimensions of Naming

The name game stories that we have told are not unlike the experiences of Writing Program Administrators around the country. While the specific courses or programs and the names we choose may vary, our stories are neither unique nor surprising. But before we add to our own stories what we have learned from other WPAs, let us consider the psychological and social dimensions of naming, dimensions which are the source of its power.

Post structuralists, following Saussure, have argued that while the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (Eagleton 127-29), once established it lends a heuristic power to language. Consequently, as we use language to name, order, and codify the world, we both alter and create perceptions (see, for example, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes for various perspectives on this topic). Central to this conception of naming is the understanding that naming, in its most simple representation, involves individuals in a concurrent process of sorting and gathering, comparing and contrasting within one's evolving view of reality (Berthoff, *Making* 110). Through this process and guided by one's own values, an individual abstracts what she perceives as the salient features of objects and experiences, using these to classify and, finally, name them. By naming something, one actively carves out a

space for it to occupy, a space defined by what one values in the phenomenon and by how it appears to be like or unlike other parts of one's world view. James Britton explains that by conferring names on objects, we engage in a "process of bringing into existence the objects of the immediate environment" (40). In this sense, we create the phenomena that we name, imperceptibly shaping the objects we see or the experiences we recall.

The power of naming, however, goes beyond shaping the perceptions of the namer. Once chosen, a name suggests permanence, as if it could lay a claim upon the true nature of an object. By fixing an object or experience with an apparent unity or permanent focus, names appear to represent the true nature of phenomena (Berthoff, *Reclaiming* 151). And when names we use are passed on, or when we integrate existing names into our own language, we assimilate with them what they imply about the nature of the phenomena named.

But acts of naming do not often occur in isolation. Rather, they take place in a social context. We name the parts of our world within an already existing structure of previously named parts where we, too, have already been named, where we are called college graduate, Democrat, or resident of Southern California. We name the world not merely as individuals but as members of social and political groups or organizations.

The characteristics inherent in naming—its variability and its false promise of permanence, its way of narrowing down our perceptions—become for us, as social beings, the problems of marking our social and political territory. Based on their personal interests and values, individuals abstract the salient features from objects and experience, using them to classify and name. In a social context, these salient features become the territorial boundaries and conditions of group membership (Taylor 17).

And so, in the academy, the names we choose, which selectively highlight what is valuable to our social or political group, are understood to represent the true nature of what we have named, and in that sense they "create" the course, program, or job. Similarly, the implications and conceptual connotations of the names we select powerfully influence our perceptions of the curriculum, shaping what Mike Rose has called our "political-semantic web" (342). The status or value of our honors program or basic course is achieved and maintained, in part, because of the names we have chosen for them. Modifiers such as "student-centered," "creative," and "collaborative" may, for instance, have political connotations with the left, while "basics," "core," and "excellence" may have connotations with the right (Taylor 8). A "writing clinic" may have medical, quick-fix connotations, and a "writing workshop" may appear to be more collaborative than a "composition class." Each name and connotation works to shape our understanding of and beliefs about the part of the curriculum being named.

Moreover, as Kenneth Burke explains, because by naming we are not only classifying what has taken our attention, we are necessarily "directing the attention into some channels rather than others" (45), every act of naming must be viewed as exclusionary as well as creative. Just as an individual carves out a piece of reality for herself through the act of naming, shaving off those parts which she does not deem valuable, a group (or the individual who represents it) takes on the ability to exclude or include, burden or empower other individuals by the act of naming them. In naming the honors program, we do more than lend status to it; we in turn diminish the prestige of the other non-honors programs. Conversely, by conferring the name of basic to one course, we raise the status of the rest of our courses.

In the negotiations surrounding the process of naming, we sense its real strength. If names create and alter reality, making territorial claims for groups, then certainly negotiations among groups or the representatives of groups will play an integral part in the naming process. When names change or when different groups appropriate the same name, negotiations occur not only over the names themselves, but over the perceptual alterations that insue, and most seriously, over who has the authority to give or change names. When ownership of a name is tossed from one group to the next, the status and connotations attached to the name vary and it becomes increasingly difficult to predict how the name will shape perceptions, or to feel secure in its apparent stability. And when the representatives of more than one group believe *themselves* to be the most appropriate namers, to be the ones who should control perceptions, then negotiation can easily turn into conflict. Indeed, the degree to which the process of naming is likely to create conflict, even violence, is suggested in Jacques Derrida's discussion of language. According to Derrida, language, by its nature, inscribes the world with differences, with classifications which one comes to believe are unique. And, thus, using language is an act of "arche-violence" (Siebers 83), of separation and division. The process of naming takes particular advantage of the inscriptive, classificatory nature of language, heightening the potential for such conflict and violence, not only within the language system but among language users.

The Power of Naming in Composition

We feel that the creative power of naming then is particularly important in an emerging discipline such as Composition. Complicating the naming process for our discipline is our territorial relationship with Literature. Members of Literature departments traditionally have been in charge of naming Composition courses, programs, and instructors. As Composition has become a more established discipline, the relationship between

Composition and Literature has become more strained. The exact relationship varies among departments—from programs where Composition is marginalized within a Literature department, to programs where Composition is a comfortable sibling with Literature, to programs where Composition is completely autonomous.

In Composition, the volatility of negotiations over naming will vary correspondingly. At their most volatile, negotiations may turn into heated conflict when the two groups are struggling for authority or when one group fears being displaced. When this happens, names can be the visible manifestations of this conflict. For example, a Composition specialist who wants to name a new program "Rhetoric" may face severe opposition from faculty who wish to retain the name "Rhetoric" for courses in Classics. This opposition could create a harmful rift among faculty members, preventing any changes in the program from occurring.

What We Learned from Writing Program Administrators' Stories

At this point, we would like to examine the stories we told earlier as well as what we have learned from other Writing Program Administrators, looking first at the similarities among our naming experiences, and then beyond the names to the negotiations that take place in response to our acts (or attempted acts) of naming. If our assumption is correct, what we negotiate for in our daily experiences of naming will reflect larger areas of definition for which the discipline as a whole is fighting.

Most of the stories from which we have drawn were told to us by participants of the 1988 Council of Writing Program Administrators Summer Conference in Newport, RI. We are grateful to them and to other WPAs who have shared their experiences with us. Because these stories have been passed on orally, without any permanent tape or written record, the observations that follow are based on our recollections and notes. Needless to say, a permanent record of such stories would make a valuable document of WPA lore.

In the stories we heard, we found that Writing Program Administrators most often share the common experience of naming and renaming (1) courses, (2) job titles, (3) programs, and (4) the discipline.

Like the two of us, many WPAs tell stories about changing the names of basic writing courses. We changed the names and numbers of our courses from "Basic Writing" (Expos 5) to "Introduction to Expository Writing" (Expos 10) and from "Preceptorial Writing" (Lit 10X) to "Fundamentals of College Writing" (Lit 9). Other administrators tell stories of courses that have changed from "Subject A" to "English 1" or from "Freshman Composition" to "Writing Workshop."

Many of us also share stories about changing the names of job titles—our own or others'. Some Writing Program Administrators have changed the name "coordinator" to "director," while others have done the reverse. Several administrators told of changing the titles given to the writing tutors they supervise, replacing "tutor" with "writing consultant" or "writing adjunct," or adding the term "peer" to "tutor." At schools where most of the writing faculty are hired on a part-time basis, the job title of "part-timer," "contract teacher," or "adjunct" versus "lecturer" has become a recurring naming concern.

Stories of naming and renaming also occur in relation to programs. At two universities in California the name "Composition" was exchanged for "Writing": the "Third College Composition Program" became the "Third College Writing Program" and the "Freshman Composition Program" became the "University Writing Program." One writing program named itself "SCRATCH: Special Committee to Recognize and Teach Compositional Hang-ups." Later, this name was changed to the "Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Composition Program."

Finally, naming stories overlap and may be said to converge in the shifting names of the discipline itself. Some Writing Program Administrators refer to the discipline as "Rhetoric" while others adamantly insist it is "Composition," and still others argue for the name "Writing." (Stephen North describes the emergence of the discipline as in part a change from composition to Composition.) Professional identities fluctuate among these names as WPAs are referred to and call themselves "rhetoricians," "composition specialists," "writing specialists," or "compositionists."

Negotiations Over Naming

In the process of recording the occasions for naming shared by Writing Program Administrators, we have also heard about many instances of negotiation and, at times, conflict. Few WPAs are able to instantiate name changes without at least some negotiation with colleagues. Indeed, we have come to believe that the negotiations that occur around proposed name changes may tell us more about ourselves and our discipline than the proposed changes themselves.

In each instance of naming a course, job, or program, WPAs find themselves hoping either to affect its relationship relative to other courses, individuals, and so on, or to describe more accurately its function. When, for example, we propose changing the names of basic writing courses, we are nearly always attempting to connect them with

the rest of the college curriculum, to bring them in from their marginal, remedial position, to change their status in the department or university. Similarly, when we change job titles, we negotiate our position in relation to our colleagues'. A WPA who wanted to keep his title "coordinator," explained that he believed "coordinator" would imply articulation between himself and his department. On the other hand, some WPAs who insist on the title "director" feel the need to add prestige to their positions, while others prefer "director" as simply a more accurate description of their administrative function. Administrators who find the name "part-timer" objectionable argue that it is at once a demeaning and inaccurate title, describing an internal contractual ranking rather than an individual's function as a teacher.

The stories we have heard about naming writing programs also point to a concern with repositioning programs in relation to departments or the university or with supplying more effective descriptions of a program's function. The negotiations between those who would name a program "Special Committee to Recognize and Teach Compositional Hang-ups" and those who wanted to change the name to "Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Composition Program" reflect a difference in the way the members of the two groups view composition and teaching. The avant-garde status of the first name may have been lost to those who suggested the second content-focused name. At the same time, the creators of the first program name may not have appreciated the substantive and interdisciplinary status of the second.

By examining the shared moments in the naming stories we tell and have heard, we have identified two points of tension and discussion: (1) the relative position or relationship that our course, jobs, and programs hold in the curriculum, department, and university and (2) the function or process of these parts of the discipline that we name. From here, as suggested earlier, we may move to recognize the value that these issues have to the discipline as a whole. We would argue that these issues mark where and how the discipline is most actively growing and changing. Compositionists continue to examine and reexamine, from different perspectives, the relative position of students with respect to their teachers, their texts, and their peers and to explore the dimensions of what process and function mean in writing and learning.

Our goal in this essay is certainly not to claim that we are uncovering for the first time the existence of these issues. However, their appearance in the shared stories of Writing Program Administrators is more than an interesting coincidence. Our tales of negotiation, success, and sometimes even defeat are not just stories to exchange over conference cocktails; they are telling moments in the evolution of our discipline. The extent of our concern with the relative position held by our students, our

courses, and our jobs and with the theoretical and pedagogical importance of examining process and function underlies what is most important to our burgeoning discipline. These issues appear in journal and conference discussions about academic discourse and alternate discourses, about the role of the "expert" in WAC programs, about the kinds of textbooks and the complexity of teaching apparatus that a writing course should use. And as interesting, if not more so, is the fact that these issues raise the most dust in departmental debates, suggesting that they may also be the locus of important disciplinary struggles.

The Ultimate Power of Naming

But even our current discussion is not exempt from the false promise of permanence inherent in naming. For the sake of our argument, we have named the two points of negotiation in the discipline "relative postion" and "process/function." In so doing, we categorized our own perceptions of what is valuable in the naming stories we experienced and heard, and, using the power of naming, carved out for our readers a way to look at and understand the issue. While we don't want to understate our conclusion that these are important points of tension, we must also point out that in the course of making our argument, we have identified something even more fundamental to the act of naming: we have named component parts of naming by assuming for ourselves the authority to do so.

Negotiations over course names, job titles, and program terminology are certainly telling and worthy of attention and study, but underlying these negotiations is the more basic negotiation for the authority to name and thereby create our discipline. When we struggle for what may appear to be minor changes that will be written in course catalogues or job descriptions, we are simultaneously struggling to shape the perceptions of those who read these changes, and, most importantly, we are fighting for what is really at stake: how our discipline will evolve, and who will shape its future. In this regard, Compositionists would do well to listen to Audre Lorde advising women poets, "If we don't name ourselves we are nothing. If the world defines you it will define you to your disadvantage" (Ostriker 59) and to consider, for Composition, the dangers of not claiming the instantiative power of naming for ourselves.

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