

Initiation Rites, Initiation Rights

Thomas Recchio and Lynn Z. Bloom

Last fall, as newcomers to the University of Connecticut ourselves, we taught the indoctrination course to some twenty beginning TAs. Many were new to graduate work, most were new to the university, all were new to teaching, and nearly all were unfamiliar with the rhetorical theory on which we were basing the course. Tom, the new Writing Director, had taught English in American and Japanese universities for some fifteen years. Lynn, first holder of the newly endowed Chair of Writing, had taught twice that time in colleges and universities north and south, east, midwest, and west. Despite our considerable experience, we soon came to realize that we, like our new TAs, were strangers in a somewhat strange land. Although its contours looked like familiar *terra firma*, this new land proved to contain more potholes, sinks, and depressions than met the innocent eye.

The natives were friendly, even genial, with a single conspicuous exception. After all, they had invited us to join them and had already made Lynn a permanent member of the tribe. However, their mores and customs were in some ways curious and unfamiliar. The price of survival was, perhaps, to learn these well and rapidly and to blend in as if we'd always lived there. But because we arrived given not only a mandate for change but also the opportunity both to invent our jobs and transform the writing curriculum, up, down, and across, we did not expect simply to adapt to our new milieu. We wanted our presence to be felt. So although we were polite and said we hoped our new colleagues would approve of the changes we were suggesting, we actually hoped to effect utter transformation. However, as newcomers in an already established culture, our real status, as anthropologist Victor Turner would say, was liminal. We were neophytes, our place as fully functioning members of the dominant culture was unclear. Our new jobs, like any others, were to be accompanied by initiation rites. Thus we had no choice but to participate in these rites, formal and informal, and all of them inevitable.

Although we knew we could not avoid these rites, we have come to see our participation less as the performing of ritual gestures that signal our willingness to conform and to play by a set of inviolable rules, and more as an engagement in a dynamic process. Initiation rites, Turner implies, open

up spaces that enable the initiates to shape the culture even as the culture shapes the initiates. Ritual gestures acquire the performers' styles and, as a result, the rites and the culture which sanctions them are both changed in a complementary process. Thus the vitality of the culture is ensured. Notwithstanding the folk wisdom that says "it is easier to move a graveyard than to change a curriculum," universities, departments, curricula are of necessity susceptible to change, for change is indeed the price of survival, both institutional and individual. Thus initiation rites can become initiation rights.

Though their manifestations may be diverse, these rites have predictable characteristics common to all the colleges and universities we're familiar with. In the immortal words of Ann Landers, "We've been there, Honey, often enough to know." For the information of job-seeking WPAs everywhere, the refreshment of the newly-initiated, and the postgraduate education of those so long on the job they have forgotten what it was like to be new, we identify these rites here. An *explication de texte* will be followed by some suggestions for how to deal with them—in some instances through re-active behavior that accommodates the rites; in other instances through taking the initiative that transforms initiation rites into initiation rights.

The Rites¹

Rite #1. Something important that you've been promised will not be ready when you arrive new on the job, like an office, a computer, a salary check. You may not even be on the payroll.

Corollary: It will gradually become clear that a promise made when you were hired (even, alas, in writing) will not be kept, such as a reduced course load or the services of an assistant.

Rite #2. Whatever you anticipated your duties to be, they will be expanded. If you cheerfully accept this increase (an extra uncovered class, running the writing center along with the writing program, monitoring WAC, and/or supervising the summer Writing Project), more will be added. And more.

Corollary: If you grudgingly accept this increase, you'll still have to do the work—but your lack of alacrity will be noted at tenure time even though "service" may not "count."

Rite #3. The funding for a major program you anticipate running will be curtailed drastically or wiped out entirely. You will nevertheless be expected to deliver the goods anyway.

Rite #4. Someone will let slip a denigration of your job, your discipline. Writing Director. Writing. Freshman English. They will make it clear to you that you are—unlike medievalists, Renaissance men (yes), Victorians, Americanists, modernists, theorists—a second class citizen. Writing instruction is a service; therefore, you're a servant, not the real thing. After all, writing is easier than thinking; when the going gets tough, the tough-minded become critics, not WPAs.

Corollary: Somebody will be gratuitously nasty to you. They will demean and insult you. They will do it anonymously. The well-intentioned will tell you, perhaps even to your face, that they really like your work—even if it is in writing.

Rite #5. Somebody "out there"—a corporate donor, a captain of industry, a state legislator, a trustee—will call your department chair and complain that the students from your program "don't spell so well" and "they don't write too good either" and "it's all your fault." Just because this happens within the first month you're on the job doesn't mean it won't happen again. And again. Every time it does, bad PR will result.

Rite #6. Some of your diverse constituency will try to enlist you in the lost cause of a minority faction, say disgruntled adjuncts. Maybe you're sympathetic to it. Maybe not. You will have to decide, perhaps on the basis of very little or limited evidence--and no sense at all of the politics, where you will place your allegiance and how much effort you're willing to spend to keep your lounge chair on the deck of the Titanic.

Rite #7. Whatever you were told you needed to do to get tenure will be changed: the date for review, the expectations (better finish your book on James), the weight given to external reviews, whatever.

Corollary: Work that looks respectable at some other colleges and universities won't "count" where you are: publishing textbooks, co-authoring articles ("Who *really* wrote it?"), editing books or compiling bibliographies, making instructional videotapes, conducting workshops, training tutors or mentoring TAs²

Rite #8. Your new writing program agenda will become the surprising subject of department meetings. Though such meetings may have been sparsely attended in the past, this new agenda will suddenly attract phalanxes of ghosts of faculty past, and passing, and to come, rattling chains forged of the sins of previous writing directors as dire warnings. You, you may assume, are guilty—if not now, you soon will be.

Rite #9. Somebody—perhaps a department chair, dean, or curriculum committee—will want you, as a WPA, to fulfill their impossible dreams, to accomplish what they've been thinking about for the past ten or twenty years but never got around to acting on. Such as setting up a Writing Center. Or a WAC program. Or an entrance-exit testing screening. And make sure it reflects what they won't compromise on. They have high standards, and it's your job to uphold them.

Rite #10. Somebody, maybe lots of people, will want what you have. Salary. Space. Reduced teaching load. Secretarial support. The opportunity to mentor disciples in the discipline. As Judy Syfers says in "I Want a Wife," "My God, who *wouldn't* want a wife?" or space. or . . .

Corollary: Or people will want you to start where they did twenty years ago and "earn"—perhaps in twenty years—your right to your current salary and amenities.

Responses, Ritual and Reinterpretation

These rites can be divided roughly into two categories, though there is some overlap. Some rites (# 1, 3, 4, 5, and 10) represent either bureaucratic glitches (#1—What, no paycheck? No kidding! That's never happened to anyone before!) or an unambiguous assertion of power by the entrenched natives to maintain control over status, space, resources, curriculum. By virtue of their longevity and rank they expect us, as newcomers, to automatically acquiesce to our own marginalization or a diminution of our authority. Although as initiates we may regard this as the product of naive or wishful thinking, we will nonetheless have to respond or react to these claims, or we won't be able to do our jobs well. We cannot afford to be shut out of the territory, even though our arrival may signal that the land rush is on.

Take rite #4, for instance. Literature faculty who complain about student writing and in the process denigrate writing teachers may be more

frustrated than ferocious, wanting their students to write far better than they actually do. We've encountered such students ourselves, mild versions if not replicas, perhaps, of the students whose basic writing so troubled Mina Shaughnessy. (Could we have been so crass as to blame high school teachers for the failure of these students to write well?) Because some of our colleagues may not know either how to elicit good writing or respond to writing that's off the mark (except to fail it), instead of becoming knee-jerk combatants at the apparent slurs, we can try to treat their complaints as invitations for dialogue. Isn't it true that to teach literature is indeed to teach writing? After all, we evaluate our students' understanding of texts, literary and otherwise, according to their ability to write critically about those texts. But what does it mean to write critically? What sort of orientation toward texts does a critical response involve? What kinds of knowledge can students gain from writing critically? How can that knowledge be validated? In what ways is writing instrumental in learning?

These questions, the questions that "writing specialists" ask, are questions appropriate for any teachers to ask in courses involving critical thinking and writing. We don't need to passively permit ourselves and our roles to be defined by denigration. We can't allow ourselves to become the departmental scapegoats—especially for sins we didn't commit. Instead, we can take the initiative and try to transform doubts and criticisms into constructive dialogue—even if they weren't initially meant that way. That our institution hired a new WPA implies, after all, that the department recognized the need for the services and expertise that a WPA can provide. And we weren't recruited by mass mailing; they invited us, chose us, perhaps over hordes of applicants, to join them. So what may at first appear as an unambiguous assertion of power or peevishness or perversity may in fact be an acknowledgment of need. When we engage in dialogue, however heated, that addresses that need, we're creating a climate for change.

Although the other rites (# 2, 6, 7, 8, 9) may appear on the surface as additional re-assertions of the status quo, in fact these too contain covert invitations for constructive change, for a further transformation of rites into rights. Rite #9, for example, brings a latent concern for writing out into the open, however circuitous the route. When this surfaces it provides the opportunity not only for constructive dialogue but for collective action. Again we as WPAs can take the initiative. When the question is raised, "What can *you*, the WPA, do about inadequate preparation or about making sure everyone can write?" we can change the implied burden to a

shared responsibility for its solution. "Here's the problem. Our students can't read with understanding. Or write critically. What can *we*, the faculty, do to solve it?" Then we can bring our particular expertise to bear in working collaboratively first, toward a shared—and perhaps new—understanding of the problem, clarifying or reinterpreting the issues. Ultimately we can work together toward a resolution.

As with most discussions of the processes of transformation and change (revolutionary documents, after all, range from Marx's *Communist Manifesto* to Spock's *Baby and Child Care*), this sounds simpler and easier than it may actually turn out to be. But we are all teachers, and teaching is, by its very nature, a transformative activity for both mind and soul. As WPAs, our teaching role is multi-faceted. We are in the unique and privileged (yes!) position to challenge our students, our colleagues, other administrators, even ourselves, as we struggle to move our marginal selves to the mainstream. As we become full participants in an institutional culture, we change that culture through the very process of finding our place within it. In defining, redefining, transforming that community, we transform the ritual process from rites to rights.

Notes

1. These rites are representative of the profession at large and are not particularly derived from practices unique to our home institution. Indeed, the University of Connecticut is one of the more benign institutions we've encountered, and we are happy to be here.
2. This is where statements of professional principles and competence, such as the CCCC "Statement of Principles and Standards," the WPA consultant-evaluators' reports following campus visits, and letters from established WPAs at tenure time can often make considerable difference. Such documents help to interpret and legitimate the WPAs professional activities for an audience up the administrative line; we have proof that such interpretations have helped convince tenure review committees, deans, and other evaluators that these activities do and should "count." If WPAs are hired to perform duties such as those identified here, then they should be evaluated on how well they've done what they've been hired to do. Whether or not such duties should be performed at all is an appropriate subject for a job description, not for a tenure review.

Editor's Note: For more ideas on turning "initiation rites" into "initiation rights," see Susan McLeod's report on page 73.

