

## In the Spirit of Wyoming: Using Local Action Research to Create a Context for Change

Elizabeth Rankin

As writing program administrators, we all have stories to tell--stories about what it's like to teach on our home campuses, how adjunct and part-time faculty are treated, what changes we are trying to make in their status and working conditions. Many of the stories sound familiar at first. They seem to have the same cast of characters, the same setting, the same plot, but the longer we listen to stories like these, shared at national conferences and professional gatherings, the more we begin to notice the differences. True, common elements pervade many of the stories we tell, but at the same time, local factors shape our separate academic communities.

At some level, of course, we all know this. It explains why some of us were dissatisfied with the Wyoming Conference Resolution and why some are still unhappy with the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards that later evolved from that Resolution. Despite the CCCC committee's best efforts to come up with a set of recommendations that would apply to all of us--from TAs to tenured professors, from those who teach at community colleges to those who teach at research universities, from those who choose to teach part-time to those seeking full-time positions--they simply could not satisfy everyone; however, this does not mean that we should throw out the CCCC Statement, or even that we should spend more time trying to fine tune it further. What is needed at this point instead is some consideration of what we, on our own home campuses, can do to enact the *principles* of the Wyoming Resolution within our own institutional contexts.

In that spirit, I offer here two stories--or rather, one story with two intersecting plot lines. The main plot, a story about the situation of part-time faculty on my campus, may be fairly familiar to many of you. But no matter, it is the subplot--a story about the research project I undertook in an effort to understand that situation--that is the real subject of this essay. What that subplot suggests is that research of the kind I will describe, when it is undertaken locally and shared with a local audience, can complement, not substitute for but complement, broad based reform initiatives like the Wyoming Resolution and the CCCC Statement.

I will begin by giving some brief background on the situation I am about to describe. At the University of North Dakota we have recently relied on fifteen to twenty "part-time" non-tenure track lecturers and thirty to thirty-five GTAs to staff our composition program. Lecturers also teach occasional introductory literature courses and entry-level linguistics or creative writing courses. What we call "the lecturer problem" (shades of James Baldwin here) seems to have plagued the department, in this form at least, for the last fifteen years but reached a climax two years ago when a lecturer-organized request for upgraded positions (based on the LSU model of Career Instructorships) generated so much discussion that a departmental retreat was called to deal with the issue. Out of that original retreat--plus a subsequent Ad Hoc Committee proposal, a follow-up retreat, a revised proposal, and a departmental vote--came a unanimous English Department endorsement of a plan to create ten full-time Instructorships, designed for those with MAs who would teach primarily composition and lower-division literature courses. Although this would not entirely eliminate the use of part-time temporary Lecturers, it would reduce such positions significantly, while upgrading the professional status of most teachers in the department.

By no means an ideal solution to the problem (the plan still falls far short of the CCCC guidelines), this move by the department nevertheless constituted a significant victory for the lecturers. Still, it was only a temporary victory, because the department's request to hire four such Instructors in the Fall of 1991 was turned down by the Dean of Arts and Sciences. At this point the subplot begins.

In an attempt to find out what had happened to the department's proposal, how it got as far as it did and why it got no further, I set out to interview people who had been involved in the situation. I interviewed six Lecturers, six faculty members, and three administrators, all of whom had been at UND longer than I had. My idea was to use the open interview format, to begin with a broad general question ("How would you describe the situation of part-time faculty in the English Department today?") and then listen to the way people talked about the situation. By listening carefully not only to what was said but to how it was said, I hoped to pick up some important cues that would help explain what went wrong the first time we made our proposal and how we might be more successful in the future.

Later, I was to learn that there are names for this kind of research (e.g., action research, advocacy research, critical praxis) and that it has a short but honorable history in the more progressive branches of social science,

including education, anthropology, sociology, and feminist studies. In their 1983 volume *Becoming Critical: Knowing Through Action Research*, British and Australian education researchers Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis describe action research this way:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (162)

Based on the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin, action research of the type described by Carr and Kemmis began in the 1940s as a reaction against the limitations of positivist social science research. From there, the method spread into British and Australian education circles where it merged with the burgeoning teacher-researcher movement of the 1970s and emerged into our own field through such people as James Britton, Garth Boomer, and Ann Berthoff (Goswami). Most recently, American theorists concerned about the "technocratic co-option" of action research have developed its political and historical basis, thus reinventing it as critical social praxis (Kincheloe 19).

In terms of method, action research resembles other modes of qualitative research, making use of interviews, observations, and participant-observation studies, although the critical praxis arm of the movement also draws on methods associated with critical theory and historiography. As for "minimal requirements," Carr and Kemmis state:

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; thirdly, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process. Some of the work that

now passes for action research in education does not meet these criteria. Some will develop towards meeting all of the requirements; some will be arrested action research and falter before completing its development. Still other work will fail to meet these requirements and cannot seriously lay claim to the title "action research" at all. (165-66)

Although my own research project might not lay claim to the title of action research—it certainly was not as "systematic" as it might have been—it does bear enough resemblance that I have since been able to understand and critique my own work in terms of those criteria.

For instance, although I could not say that I went through a "spiral of cycles of planning, action, observing and reflecting," I did discover, in the course of my interviews, that I needed to understand the historical base of our lecturer situation. Often my interview respondents would refer to events in the history of the department that had significance for them: the dismissal of three instructors on temporary appointment in the mid-1960s, the hiring of "the first lecturer" in 1975. Or they would refer to particular documents to corroborate a claim: the faculty handbook, the Board of Higher Education manual, Professor Joseph Smeall's history of the department, written during the University's Centennial year. Eventually I did become an historiographer of sorts, putting together a chronology of important dates and events, and assembling a file of documents relevant to the situation.

As I went about my research, which soon began to expand in scope and implication, I made some interesting discoveries, three of which I will recount briefly here. In some cases, what I learned may have implications for those on other campuses, but that is not my point in telling these stories. More than anything, the stories illustrate the importance of understanding the local context and then using that understanding to bring about change.

The first discovery I made had to do with terminology. One of my earliest interviews was with the Dean of Arts and Sciences, a well-seasoned and wily administrator whose association with the English Department dated back furthest of all those I interviewed. Because his own academic background is in English (he occasionally helps out the department by teaching a course in Renaissance literature) his ties with the department are closer (and thus perhaps somewhat more complex) than might be the case if he were in another field. When I called for the interview, I explained that I was working on a presentation to give at the following Spring's CCCC; thus, his opening remarks referred immediately to that context. I quote them here, verbatim, from the transcript of that interview:

I'm glad to have this opportunity to talk with you about a subject that's important. My understanding, Libby, is that you're preparing a report, a paper that you're going to share with others in March at the annual meeting of CCCC . . . . The title--I may not remember it exactly--of your panel, but as you said it to me, it includes the word "Adjunct Faculty," and later in our informal conversation you three times used the term "part-time faculty." I have no statistical data on this but I have observed, in discussions with my fellow deans at national meetings and with faculties at other institutions, that our university, the University of North Dakota, and the other schools in the North Dakota system, are in the very least a minority. Here we have almost no part-time faculty. . . . We have at UND principally three kinds of teaching personnel. We have faculty, GTAs, and lecturers. The lecturers are not part-time faculty or adjunct faculty. They are defined as "instructional other." And this is a policy of our State University Board. They are teachers, which is a very honorable profession, but they are not University faculty.

After some discussion of the role of faculty at a university, and the expectations of them in terms of scholarship and research, he went on to offer the following cautionary remarks:

I hope if you're speaking about our situation you'll make it clear that we don't have, we have almost no, part-time faculty. But we do have a large number of lecturers.

I quote this opening segment of our interview at length because it illustrates one of the most important facts I learned in the course of my research: terminology counts. For in one sense, the Dean is absolutely right. At my university, and perhaps at many others, the designation of "faculty" is reserved for those tenured or probationary personnel who hold the rank of Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, or Professor. Lecturers, grouped with Graduate Teaching Assistants in a category called Academic Other (!), are not regarded as faculty and thus not entitled to certain faculty rights and privileges.

As it turns out, though, the situation regarding terminology is far more complex than the dean had led me to believe. As I tracked down

documents that would corroborate what he told me, I learned that the university has, in fact, as many as sixty-two different titles to refer to academic personnel. Some of these titles were familiar ones: Lecturer, Instructor, Adjunct Instructor; others, like Clinical Instructor, are less familiar, but intriguing to those of us who would like to find a place in the university for trained, knowledgeable, and professionally active full-time teachers of composition and literature.

Another of my discoveries had to do with the history of the current situation. As I learned in my interviews, many in my department date the beginning of the "Lecturer problem" to 1975 when the first two people given that particular designation were hired; however, those who had been in the department longest, including the dean and a former chair, cited predecessors of the Lecturers who shared with them the secondary professional status that has made declarations like the Wyoming Conference Resolution fairly regular occurrence in the profession.

The lot of one of those predecessors is described by our late colleague, Joseph Smeall, in his centennial history of the department. When the university opened in 1884, writes Smeall, its entire "instructional force" consisted of four teachers, W.M. Blackburn, W. Merrifield, H. Montgomery, and E.S. Mott:

Symptoms of cultural unease soon appeared. Blackburn, Merrifield and Montgomery agreed to deny Mott a full role in determining institutional policies. Mott, in turn, complained of an unfair workload due to the policies. Expressions consequent upon the ensuing tensions sketch out roughly the nature of the uneasiness. Policies designed to cope with it were to give an unchanging core to the shape-changing Department even to its present times (1982). Blackburn, Merrifield and Montgomery had made up and administered entrance examinations. It might be assumed, in the circumstances, that these were quite standard and hence sacred. One result, however, was that not one student who applied for admission to the University that Fall was admitted; all were relegated to a primary or preparatory or sub-preparatory department. As a consequence most students in most branches became Mott's responsibility. By a very rough indexing of weekly teaching loads during that first term, Blackburn's comes to 4.277, Merrifield's to 4.277, Montgomery's to 8.820, and Mott's to 20.368. (2)

For those of us who teach composition, this story has a familiar ring. Here were Professors Blackburn, Merrifield, and Montgomery deciding that they had better things to do with their time than to teach the great unwashed of the Dakota Territory. And here was E.S. Mott, Lady Instructor (apparently, her official title), ready to take up the slack. Infuriating as it is, however, this story too offers useful information, for it demonstrates convincingly that what we call the "Lecturer problem" at UND did not begin in 1975 with the hiring of the first two Lecturers. Armed with a fuller understanding of the true history of the situation--an understanding sometimes called "dangerous memory" (Kincheloe 183)--we are in a better position to respond to the argument often advanced, that these positions are in fact only temporary ones, created to fill an unusual and temporary need.

An interesting sidenote to the story told by Professor Smeall underscores the point about terminology made earlier. In a detailed appendix to his narrative account of departmental history, Smeall lists "the two hundred and twenty or so teachers, who over the century would work within the Department." Acknowledging that his list is "incomplete and probably occasionally in error," composed from old catalogues and class schedules, Smeall nevertheless makes a surprising and disturbing omission; he does not include on his list the names of thirteen Lecturers (eleven of them women) then serving with him in the English Department.

From this evidence one can readily see one consequence of the use of the title Lecturer. Because Lecturers at UND don't hold budgeted faculty positions (they are paid from a general pool of funds) and because they teach multi-section courses listed as "Staff," their names don't show up in university catalogues or on class schedules. For the women and men holding these positions, then, the title of Lecturer seems to have magical properties, making them virtually invisible!

A third discovery I made in the course of my research is perhaps more mundane and less intellectually interesting than those I have just mentioned, but in some ways it may have been the most important as far as our immediate situation is concerned. This discovery had to do with clogged channels of communication, a chronic problem on our campus, and on many others, I suspect.

One of the first interviews I conducted when I began was with our newly-elected department chair. A former part-timer herself and a Marxist/feminist cultural critic, she spoke passionately of this "increasingly acute problem" as part of a larger context, "the de-skilling of labor in our economy":

I'm afraid that academic life is going to follow other modes of production. And that means that people will be taking the equivalent of piecework in academic life. That's what is happening to other modes of production in the American economy. So why should education not follow that line?

In fact, she went on to say,

*We are* the part-time workers. I think it is a mistake for us to remove ourselves from the position of part-time workers in our universities. We . . . are thought of in the same way, those of us in the humanities are thought of in the same way. We can "round out" a student's professional education. Or we can provide the "soft side" of a business major's thinking about management and theory . . . We can become a series of general education requirements that . . . distinguish between a technical education and a university education.

As she talked, it became more and more clear that, in her view, what was needed was not the creation of ten new positions but much more massive change--on campus, the dissolution of the tenure system; and in society, the radical "de-centering of professional life."

When considered in such a context, the department's resolution seemed far less dramatic, its proposal less likely to bring significant change. Still, I was surprised that the chair had not pressed the dean on the matter of the new positions. She seemed to expect the Lecturers to make the next move.

As for the Lecturers, they assumed that the request to hire had gone forward. When I passed on the word in the course of another interview that it had not, they went directly to the chair's office, where they obtained her promise that the request would be reinitiated immediately.

In the end, that renewed request resulted in the creation of four full-time Senior Lecturer positions that took effect Spring semester 1992. Clearly, these Senior Lecturer positions are not equivalent to the ten tenure-track Instructorships we had asked for. In fact, the position of Senior Lecturer, conspicuously absent from that list of 62 academic titles, seems to have no official existence beyond the Dean's office. For all we know, this

may simply be an appeasement, an attempt on the Dean's part to grease the squeakiest wheels in the Lecturer ranks.

Still, it is a positive move of sorts, another in a series of positive moves our Lecturers have witnessed over the past few years: first, full-year contracts; then benefits; then tiny across-the-board raises; now a few full-time continuing appointments with modest salary increases.

How have these changes come about? I would argue that they are a result of both Lecturer-initiated action and sustained faculty support for that action. Such support can take a number of forms, of course, including endorsement of the CCC Statement. What I have described here is another kind of support: local support in the form of critical action research. With this kind of research we not only get to know our local academic communities, but we also create within those communities a context for positive change.

## Works Cited

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