Reconsidering Faculty Resistance to Writing Reform

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Over the last decade, writing and educational specialists have devoted considerable attention to defining and studying resistance. By determining the various ways that students respond to curriculum, educators and compositionists have illuminated how resistance can represent both "positive" and "negative" responses to teaching, as well as how we can identify and respond to these behaviors to effect transformation. Perspectives on resistance represent a range of oppositional behaviors that are significantly influenced by social relations, pedagogical objectives, and institutional conditions. For instance, some perceive resistance as oppositional behavior that both reacts against the demands of the dominant ideology and serves the goals of affirming student voices, exercising critical interrogation, and improving the quality of education (Giroux 107-08; also see Chase 15, 20-21). Others, by contrast, consider it a "negative" response to the ideology that informs a particular pedagogy, such as feminism, which can be productively resisted through teacher commentary and response (Wolff 485, 490-91; also see Bauer 387, 392-93). What this sampling of recent work suggests is that by considering competing perspectives on resistance, writing instructors can attain clearer understanding of what is being resisted, the causes of such resistance, and how to address such behavior.

The scope and concerns of this recent work do not characterize all discussions concerned with resistance, however. When proponents of writing across the curriculum (WAC) speak about resistance, coming from faculty rather than students, they generally assign a negative meaning, identifying institutional divisions, policies and practices, as well as faculty attitudes and beliefs, that represent obstacles to "positive" curricular change (Fulwiler and Young 289-93; McLeod 343; Russell 191). Impediments to WAC reform have been defined, recently, as "the enemies" of cross-curricular writing programs (Fulwiler and Young 287). From this perspective, resistance becomes support for the status quo, and those who resist oppose meaningful reform.

This thinking restricts our ability to understand the reasons for and nature of resistance because it fails to perceive the possibility of productive opposition to reformers' attempts to influence others. As discussions concerning student resistance show, resistance can signify something other or more than "negative" behavior. Although faculty resistance to cross-curricular writing instruction can be a conscious or unconscious attempt to preserve the status quo, such response also can represent a critical interrogation of the purposes of reform or uncertainty about the objectives of educational change. To deny either possibility limits our ability to distinguish unproductive opposition to arguments for reform from productive responses that question the agendas that reformers impose on others.

I want to reconsider the way WAC proponents have been defining resistance, taking into account how oppositional response to writing reform--like student resistance to teaching--can represent both "positive" and "negative" behavior. My aim is to illuminate reasons for and forms of faculty resistance to writing reform. I will base my analysis on my collaboration with faculty during a summer seminar and over the ensuing semester, concentrating on how their writing and their behavior suggest and represent forms of resistance to reform. I will focus on two faculty members who supposedly intend to change their teaching by using writing to promote learning, who have similar interests and experience, and who distinguish themselves through their ideological dispositions.

Writing Before the Seminar

The seminar aimed to introduce participants to theoretical and practical literature so they could gain awareness of how students can learn course content and discursive practices, as well as reformulate their understanding, through writing and revision. In addition, during seminar sessions faculty were asked to play roles students can (and often do) assume in the educational process, and then to discuss the various ways students might participate more actively in the classroom. Before the seminar, participants responded to questions about themselves as writers and about the writing that they require from students. Through these introductory statements, then, participants suggested their support for and/or opposition to the seminar's objectives.

Robert, a rhetorician and senior member of the faculty, introduced himself by providing two responses, one focusing on himself as a writer and the other describing his teaching. When Robert discussed his own writing career, he inscribed himself in an exploratory mode:

> What scares me is not writing. For years I did not write because I had nothing to say. Today I write regularly . . . . How do I feel about this writing? I do not enjoy writing this specific assignment. It is a

> struggle; it is taking more time than I thought. What I have written is written in a computer, not in stone.

These statements reveal Robert's understanding of how writing can be a complicated activity, one that entails "struggle." Robert also suggests that he believes writing is a process of revision, that is, nothing is written "in stone." His statements about teaching, however, indicate that the aforementioned convictions about writing, particularly his implied beliefs concerning struggle and revision, do not apply to his use of writing in the classroom:

> Public speaking is discovering the best answer to a question of policy or value over which the truth or falsity can be argued and locating and refuting the reasons that the audience is against the speaker's conclusion. The public speaker is a participant in a process by which citizens arrive at good judgments.
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> In the course, students write three manuscripts [of speeches] and two short papers. The manuscripts are graded on the learning goals for the speech and on the standards of university level writing. For each paper, students select a topic, locate the crucial issue and refute it . . . . Students develop critical reading skills by evaluating papers, ranking them according to how they meet the learning goals of the assignment and how they demonstrate university level writing.

The way Robert uses writing suggests that his assumptions and goals are at odds with the objectives of the seminar. He provides students with a list of "learning goals" and "standards of university level writing," which students apply when they evaluate an oral presentation or rank their peers' papers. Although students receive responses to their writing, through verbal feedback to speeches and numerical evaluations of papers, this commentary is not intended to assist them in revising a speech or rewriting a paper.

Robert closes his introductory statement with a series of questions that could signal positive and negative resistance to reform: "Why are several short assignments better than a single paper?"; "Does peer feedback provide quality as well as quantity?"; and "What is university writing and how does one teach it?" Considering his description of his public-speaking course, his years of teaching experience, and his expertise in a form of language use, Robert may be challenging the "writing expert," a stance that

suggests his potential resistance to change. (His questions could also reflect a longstanding dispute between public speaking and English departments over the purposes of teaching writing.) At the same time, however, his inquiries may represent his genuine interest in entertaining activities that he is aware of but has not yet integrated into his teaching.

In contrast to the way Robert separated his responses to questions, Robin, a philosopher of language and senior member of the faculty, integrated his analysis of his writing with his discussion of teaching:

> I start out to write a defense of Socrates but end up with a personal paper relating my mounting climbing experiences to the simile of the cave by way of Wittgenstein . . . . Now the problem is whether this is an excuse for being unphilosophical or whether such an approach can only be made after one has established oneself.
>
> This is my dilemma with students as well. Are they inventive or sloppy, insightful or lucky, scholastic or Socratic? Perhaps that's why I have students keep notebooks that they turn in from time to time. The format for this writing is the problem, however. Should students copy a passage from the [assigned] reading, interpret it, and relate their response to previous entries? Or should I select a specific passage and have them follow "how-to-read philosophy" guidelines?

Robin's discussion of his own writing indicates that he believes composing is a process of producing new understanding because intention changes through the process of writing itself. At the same time, however, he questions the value of exploration for students. Before finishing his introductory statement, Robin reveals a possible cause of his "dilemma." He explains that he presently asks students to follow a guide and to write about a passage selected for them, because "reading diverse responses and rereading earlier responses is just too much work." Moreover, he reads these notebooks "at midterm and at the end of the semester." His primary concern seems to be managing the work load, and because of this priority, he may resist any change that requires more of his time and labor.

Writing During the Seminar

During the first two weeks of the seminar, participants read and wrote about articles concerned with theory and practice, becoming engaged with issues such as the purposes of schooling, writing in the disciplines, writing assignments, and responding to student texts. Faculty scrutinized, through writing as well as discussion, the convictions they held and the theory presented to them in the seminar. Each day we discussed the readings and participants' writing, in small groups and as a seminar, focusing on the pertinence or irrelevance of the readings to participants' concerns and objectives.

Robert, the rhetorician, wrote terse responses that focused on how the readings failed to address one or more of his concerns. Moreover, he consistently inquired about the university's freshman reading and writing course, particularly how instructors prepare students to write for other college courses. At his request, and with the approval of other participants,[1] we read articles that pertain to the introductory writing course, which elicited this response from Robert:

> You offer me some theoretical mumbo jumbo. Perhaps I am a nuts-and-bolts teacher. You propose that it is possible for students to become more competent writers if they try to "discover" what they want to say. I am more interested in reasoned argument than exploration. What happens when students have neither anything to say nor skills to write? What about mechanics and organization? Students in the classes that I teach who have taken English 1 have problems. What can I expect of your students as writers after they complete English 1?

Robert's questions suggest assumptions about teaching, learning, and institutional responsibilities that might cause him to resist change. Suspect of the freshman writing course's objectives and critical of what students learn in this course, he appears to challenge the "writing expert" and may wonder why he should listen to the recommendations proposed in this seminar. At the same time, however, his questions may represent an attempt to initiate a dialogue, his combative approach notwithstanding. Being a "nuts-and-bolts" teacher, as well as a rhetorican trained in the classical tradition, he encounters "mumbo jumbo" that challenges his assumptions and priorities, and therefore he questions this "new rhetoric." Robert considers himself a language expert and an accomplished teacher, subjectivities supported by his scholarship and institutional recognition,

and it is reasonable to assume that he will not change his beliefs unless persuaded by "reasoned argument"--what he expects from all orators--that addresses his concerns and priorities.

Robin, the philosopher of language, produced a response that, like Robert's writing, is critical of some academics, but Robin's criticism is directed at those who allegedly control language use in the university and in professional journals:

> The rules for successfully inventing the university reside in the hands of mostly white men who do not give others the secrets of successful invention. If the writing is white enough, it is deemed to be a proper copy of the Platonic form of the university. Now we all know about studies that show how blind referees cannot discern male writing from female writing. We also know that at times most blindfolded people peek.
>
> Bartholomae claims that all the student writers he knows are aware of [academic] conventions. This may be true . . . but the guardians of academic language games decide whose inventions of the university are genuine and whose will never get a patent. I'm inclined to think that such talk about students "learning to speak our language, to speak as we do," is a way to exclude whomever we want under the guise of objective standards.

Although Robin's oppositional voice appears to support the expansion of language use in the university, he fails to discuss how his teaching would serve this end. On the one hand, he implies that he opposes educational practice that underscores teaching students "to speak our language," because this agenda excludes certain students and preserves the status quo, yet at the same time, he makes no effort to explain how he would encourage students to write in ways that would counter the alleged objectives of the "guardians of academic language games."

Perhaps Robin fails to present an alternative to the status quo because his primary interest is not the expansion of language use in the classroom. In other words, his main concern may be the effect of institutional power on himself, not on students. When he refers to those individuals who will never receive a "patent" for their "inventions," is he speaking about students, teachers (like himself) outside the mainstream, or both groups? In his response, Robin is preoccupied with the idea that the "rules for successfully inventing the university," as well as for gaining entrance into

professional journals, are available to a select few, a group that Robin suggests, in his response, ignores him and many others.

Writing After the Seminar

Before the seminar ended, participants and I met to discuss their plans for revising their courses. We agreed that during the fall semester we would work collaboratively, so I could assist them with designing assignments and responding to student writing, as well as converse with them about any problems or complications they encountered. We also agreed that teachers and students would evaluate the uses and value of the writing activities and that I would visit classes.

During the seminar, Robin decided that he would allow students in his philosophy course more interpretive freedom, no longer requiring that they follow rigid guidelines for interpreting an assigned passage (see p. 53). He also intended to read student writing frequently throughout the semester.

Robin and I neither spoke nor corresponded about his philosophy course until the fifth week of the semester when he sent me his syllabus and promised to forward copies of student writing. Not until the week before finals was I allowed to visit his class and given the opportunity to read his students' writing. In his course evaluation, Robin explained his intentions for revising his course and what actually occurred when he returned to the classroom:

> When I left the seminar, I decided to abandon the step-by-step guidelines for reading and writing. I also wanted to make writing a central concern of the course.
>
> . . . I quickly let writing take a back seat to lecture, [however], occasionally using it to initiate a class discussion. Although I intended to collect the writing every other week, I pushed it to the side because I felt I didn't have time for it. It wasn't until mid-semester that I read and responded to what students had written . . . . The notebook was extra work which was placed on top of an already existing course.

Robin's earlier writing foreshadows the behavior described in this

reading and writing assignments, and his indecision can be partly, and perhaps mostly, attributed to his concern for managing the work load. After the seminar, he intended to make "writing a central concern of the course," yet in the classroom he "quickly" ignored this "extra work," assigning "it a back seat to lecture," pushing "it to the side." It appears that Robin made no genuine attempt to use writing to promote learning and that he resisted reform because improving the quality and conditions of learning is less important to him than managing time and labor.

The lack of communication that characterizes my "collaboration" with R bin contrasts with the regularity of conversation that characterizes my work with Robert. Before the seminar ended, Robert and I discussed and debated many issues, and he eventually decided to restructure his use of writing in his public-speaking course. We agreed that Robert would send student writing to me each week throughout the semester and that we would discuss the assignments and his response to writing on a weekly basis.

Robert intended to use writing to promote learning by having students revise and write more frequently. He planned to modify his course by asking students to rewrite their speech texts after they receive feedback from the class and by requiring them to write "reflections" on what they learn from giving a specific speech. I recommended that Robert respond to the drafts of speech texts, but he rejected my advice because of the amount of work involved in responding to drafts and rewrites. Early in the semester, when I read drafts and revisions of speech texts, I noticed that students were concentrating on changing the surface features of their writing. I suggested to Robert that if he responded to the content of early drafts, students might then produce more substantive revisions. In response to my suggestion, he wrote, "Your point about responding to manuscripts before rewrites is well taken. Students aren't rewriting 'content.' I'll try reading and responding to their manuscripts."

That Robert resisted yet eventually adopted my idea suggests that his previous opposition to change (see p. 54) stems from ingrained belief about learning, which now, after our discussion, is being tested by his repositioning himself in the learning process. Throughout the semester, he scrutinized and revised his teaching, and such behavior is described in his course evaluation:

> I required students to write so they could become more proficient as public speakers and more knowledgeable about public speaking.
>
> I modified my original plan to allow for revision, first by requiring rewrites and then by helping students

with their revisions. What I have discovered, however, is that not much change occurs through rewriting. Perhaps I am partly responsible for the results of this experiment, because my commentary may not have given students specific reasons for revising.

I believe the reflections on oratory have worked. For the final assignment, I asked students to read their first reflections and write about how their thinking has changed. On the whole, students reformulated their thinking . . . . Next semester, I will require students to reflect on present and past performances throughout the course.

Robert's evaluation reveals both positive and negative resistance. On the one hand, he experimented with and scrutinized my ideas, which caused him to use revision for his own purposes--to have students reformulate their ideas in their "reflections." On the other hand, he has not entirely changed his assumptions about learning and therefore does not modify the way he responds to student texts. Throughout the semester, he provides students with directives, such as "explain this subpoint" or "provide support," despite our discussions concerning ways to ask questions that give students "reasons" for expanding and/or rethinking their writing. By maintaining this approach to responding to student texts, Robert works against his goal of assisting students as they attempt to reformulate their understanding of oratory.

Working Against Resistance

One inference that I draw from this analysis of my colleagues and their writing is that to understand the sources and nature of resistance, and to assist teachers who are serious about changing their pedagogy, we need to collaborate with instructors as they revise their courses. The short seminar has serious limitations as a means of effecting change, in part because teachers are frequently responding to novel, complex ideas; in part because we can misread the reasons for and the nature of their responses; and in part because genuine pedagogical transformation requires the implementing and testing of ideas and strategies in the classroom.

As Robert's and Robin's cases demonstrate, when we work with teachers as they revise and scrutinize their teaching (if they elect to do so), we attain fuller understanding of their ideology and resistance, and with this knowledge we can work more effectively to encourage different levels

of transformation. As Deborah Swanson-Owens argues, the effectiveness of our efforts to improve curriculum is contingent, in part, on our understanding "why it is appropriate" for teachers to respond to reform as they do, which necessitates understanding "practitioners and not just practice" (94-95). Both Robert's and Robin's actions after the seminar reveal how different determinants, including personality, assumptions, beliefs, and institutional conditions, affect teachers' decisions about pedagogical priorities. And Robin's writing and behavior before, during, and after the seminar illustrate how a teacher can behave one way in this educational context and a different way when he returns to the classroom where he must contend with institutional pressures. If we work with teachers as they encounter institutional pressure, we have a better opportunity to understand their behavior and how to respond to such behavior.

By engaging in conversations about teaching and learning and by testing and implementing classroom reform, we work with our colleagues against the structures, attitudes and beliefs that are obstacles to reform. This type of collaboration is at odds with the nature and structure of the postsecondary institution, and, consequently, this activity will be met with resistance. Even when these conversations occur under optimal conditions, they will entail compromise and will likely produce tension. But WAC reformers claim that faculty value the discussions and connections that emerge in workshops and seminars (see, for instance, Fulwiler, "Evaluating" 65; "The Quiet" 184). Whether or not teachers will value collaboration when they return to the classroom can be determined only by continuing and maintaining discussions and debates begun in these forums.

Note

1. The freshman reading and writing course is based on an epistemic pedagogy similar to the one David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky present in *Ways of Reading*. For this day, faculty read Michel Foucault's "Discourse on Language," David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University," and Kurt Spellmeyer's "Foucault and the Freshman Writer." I also gave participants a description of our freshman writing course.

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