

ComPost: A Writing Program Newsletter and Its Rationale

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Writing program administration is inexorably shifting from pursuit of coherence to pursuit of consensus. The maturing of writing as a research-based academic discipline, the diffusion throughout academe of graduates of programs in composition and rhetoric, and the expanding disciplinary consciousness among teachers of writing have yielded this change. The diversity of people, theory, and pedagogy resulting from the solid study, research, and experience of practitioners must be recognized and acted on by the community of individuals who constitute the program.

In the 1990s, this common effort is one of developing writing program consensus—a continually evolving agreement, sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of students, teachers, and the discipline, yet sufficiently cohesive, stable, and orderly to meet the demands of complex and often large organizations. Policies and practices and the means to implement them now derive from the people most intimately involved in the work, propelled by program consensus rather than administrative directive.

Participation and communication, it perhaps should go without saying, are processes central to developing and sustaining writing program consensus. However understandably, we have to date attended more fully to strategies that promote participation rather than to those that improve communication. Composition programs generally are increasingly open to the participation of instructors, support staff, and students, often despite rigid and hierarchical institutional contexts in which they may operate. At the University of Louisville, for but one among many examples, we have made a concerted effort to capitalize on the intimate link between graduate study in composition and rhetoric and the writing program. We are seriously engaging as many people as possible, in a wide variety of ways, in a host of essential functions: defining course goals and objectives, developing curricula and selecting texts, conducting basic and program research, revising course guidelines and model syllabi, determining the agendas, as well as designing and delivering staff development workshops, visiting one another's classes, developing assessment norms and practices, and formulating and executing administrative policy.

Although strategies for expanding participation in program development are a much discussed concern among writing program

administrators, the matter of communication remains relatively neglected, and unhappily so; it is crucial that knowledge of this work be shared systematically with program colleagues and with colleagues throughout the institutional community. Sure symptoms of the need to attend to communications are the expressions of surprise by a program colleague, a chairperson, a dean, a vice-president, or a president—anyone who should know—on learning about a particular program development or a special undertaking by a group of teachers and students or a distinction earned by a member of the program. Even more serious signs are misconceptions of the program's ends and means expressed by teachers in one's own or other departments or by people working in an advising center or a tutoring program or a student services office.

People commonly do not know that important work is being done in the writing program, who is doing it, and how they are going about it. This situation results, as many of us are painfully aware, in squandered morale and in isolation of instructors, both of which have unfortunate effects on teaching and learning. This particular failure to preserve psychological capital is especially common in larger programs where substantial efforts may be known to relatively few or may even be lost to anyone's attention, an ignorance singularly debilitating to the process of consensus building.

Among the many uncharted duties of a writing program administrator are those of chief information and morale officer. They are, however, among the most important and worthy of the time and effort they require. Because they are so close—or, perhaps not close enough—to the people they work with, writing program administrators too often tend to think that the ordinary news, the common knowledge of the program "goes without saying." What goes without saying, however, is precisely what needs to be said, perhaps noisily so, when the aim is consensus building. Many are the ways of promoting morale and dispensing information, but I have found one device that makes a particularly effective contribution to the effort. While not a terribly novel undertaking, our writing program newsletter has proven worth the effort. I'd sooner give up my job than *ComPost*.

The first number of *ComPost* appeared in August 1991 when I began serving as director of composition. Now, every Thursday, August through May, its four to six pages find their way to every member of the Composition Program, the English department faculty and staff, and the Writing Center (a related but independently administered developmental writing program) and to all graduate students in English who request it. *ComPost's* circulation also includes a large secondary audience: the dean and associate deans of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate School, the Academic Advising Center, the Preparatory Division, the

Multicultural Center, the Women's Studies Center, the university's president, provost, vice presidents, and assistant vice presidents, the director of academic computing, any university faculty who request it, the writing programs at colleges and community colleges in the immediate area and, finally, graduate student alumni who have taken jobs or are doing doctoral work elsewhere. At present, we distribute some 170 copies a week. While I will foist it on anyone, the primary audience remains the sixty or so people who teach composition, most of them graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and doctoral students in Composition and Rhetoric, with the remainder part-time lecturers (PTLs) and tenure-track English faculty.

Ostensibly *ComPost* began as an effort to save a tree and a dollar or two by consolidating and cataloging the host of separate announcements, warnings, and pleadings that it had become our habit to send to all hands. I sought especially to end the execrable practice of bumping a memorandum by scribbling "copy all instructors" across the top and giving it to a hapless student worker for distribution. Communication had gotten lost in the mailbox clutter that democratizes the crucial, the interesting, and the trivial along with the immediate and the remote. *ComPost* announces required staff meetings; availability of desk copies; due dates for teaching preference, book order, and payroll forms; changes in schedule, offices hours, and phone numbers; inevitable reminders of all kinds; and routine messages necessary in an increasingly complex academic environment.

The environment at the University of Louisville, for example, is complicated by the fact that the writing program offers eight different courses in 120 sections per term, conducted by sixty different people who teach and confer with students and take their own classes between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., Monday through Friday and often on weekends, on two campuses, and have their offices, such as they are, in five different sites in three buildings—a not uncommon pattern. In a considerable exercise of self-discipline, *ComPost* has become the only vehicle for distribution of this kind of information. To make reading *ComPost* an unavoidable routine, however, is less an exercise of administrative efficiency than an effort to expose people to the newsletter's other contents because the primary motive for this effort is to promote program consensus.

From the outset, *ComPost* sought to do and be more than a bulletin board and so to include information of every description about the program's instructors and of possible interest to them. The program has only one standing committee, the Composition Committee, but many ad hoc committees and interest groups. *ComPost* is used to recruit participation in these efforts, which, often as not, are initiated, designed, and carried out by members of the program rather than by program administrators. *ComPost* reports on the work of people reviewing and recommending texts;

using portfolio grading; developing multicultural approaches to English 102; sharing techniques in computer assisted instruction (CAI); organizing a symposium on the relationship between creative and expository writing instruction; designing a staff development workshop on responding to student writing; preparing a series of workshops on using computers; consulting in the schools of law, engineering, or business; participating in a university writing-across-the-curriculum project; and the like. *ComPost* makes these activities available to more people and, as people are moved to undertake activities that interest them or meet their immediate needs, it seems to generate more enterprises of this kind. As in any small town weekly, *ComPost* is careful to put people's names in the paper, printing them in boldface and trying to spell them correctly. We try even harder never to let appreciation for a job done go without saying and saying so as publicly as possible.

ComPost also chronicles the successes of individual members of the program. When I began as director of composition, I was alarmed at how little I and others knew about accomplishments of the program's people. The "Congratulations" section is a direct assault on what I took to be a serious impediment to good morale and consensus building. *ComPost* routinely honors completion of every graduate program requirement. When people have passed language and doctoral exams, it notes the achievement. When a thesis or dissertation prospectus has been approved, *ComPost* publishes the name of the writer and the title of the project, soliciting any help colleagues might be in a position to provide. Notes of congratulation mark the defense of every thesis and dissertation and the awarding of the degree, with an account of where the person will next study or work, and the new address and phone number. *ComPost* details as fully as it can all successes: awards, attendance at professional meetings, special teaching activities within or outside the university, reviewing for publishers, papers read at conferences, poetry readings, papers accepted and published, and the like. In the beginning, *ComPost* had to overcome an understandable reluctance among many, who perhaps feared being seen as tooting their own horns, by resorting to what I suppose might pass for low-level investigative reporting. In time, however, the convention has become established, and people with good news, or their close friends, readily provide it. Success, obviously, begets success, but only if it is known. And knowing it begets a sense of community and program consensus.

However well disposed we might be, we are in a position to help one another only when we know what one another is doing or what a person specifically needs; and many people—perhaps it is a function of American culture—are reluctant to ask for help. Some are even crestfallen when desperately needed help is not provided, despite their not having asked for

it. From the beginning, *ComPost* has served as a forum for expressions of help and thanks.

To establish the precedent, I appealed for help on two papers I was writing that term and received very useful information in return from people I would never have thought of asking. I coaxed a couple of other people to do the same, and the practice caught on. The help sought ranges widely: people needing to borrow a copy of a book or wanting to briefly use a book checked out of the library, looking for a bibliography on a given subject or author, considering a writing assignment on local politics for 102, needing someone to take their classes so they can attend a conference or have surgery, hunting someone to exchange classes with in order to accommodate a change in child care arrangements, wanting to talk to somebody about statistics, looking for a roommate or someone to share a ride to CCCCs, needing to find a new apartment or a good VW mechanic, wanting to unload free kittens, looking to get a group together to go to Shakespeare in the Park. *ComPost* helps to articulate a commonality of problems, interests, resources, and solutions and to reduce the reinvention of wheels.

ComPost's function as a help-line has evolved in other ways. For example, it publishes each term the schedule for doctoral exams, with an appeal for support of the people named who are taking them, in the form of well wishes, or of an offer to take a person's classes during exam week. Indeed, it has assisted in the formation of a variety of interest groups: exam takers, CAI writing teachers, computer and software users, people using portfolio grading, people developing panels for conferences, poets and fiction writers, business and technical writing teachers, and people sharing interests in social and political issues.

Exchanges of this kind, of course, have been among the most fruitful and enjoyable parts of academic life since time out of mind, and no newsletter will replace the discourse of the corridor and coffee room. But *ComPost* is a useful supplement, particularly to the benefit of those new to the program, those who are shy, or those isolated by their teaching and academic schedules or the geography of their offices or classrooms. *ComPost* provides some order to what is inevitably a fragmented discourse; to a degree it fixes, externalizes, and makes more accessible the program's ongoing conversation.

Moreover, *ComPost* is at the disposal of a very active English Graduate Organization (EGO), which uses its pages for work on a speakers program, professional development workshops, computer workshops, work with the Twentieth Century Literature Conference, administration of graduate school travel money, social activities, improving benefits and working conditions, and defining and solving problems. I think it is safe to say that

EGO's efforts have both expanded and improved since, and in at least a small part because of, the advent of *ComPost*.

ComPost also includes, for want of a better expression, a lot of miscellaneous stuff that adds to its usefulness and character. Announcements of events on campus likely to be of interest to writing teachers and their students: the meetings of the critical theory forum, the several events of African-American History Month and Women's History Month, the schedule of the multicultural video series, and poetry readings, lectures, films, plays, concerts, and the like—anything that the editors think of interest or any reader brings to our attention. *ComPost* also runs notices of recent acquisitions to the program's Bonnie Collection of books, periodicals, and materials on composition and rhetoric; information on job openings; announcements of new journals or special issues that might offer a publishing opportunity; calls for papers and conference announcements with notes on application procedures and deadlines; and creative writing contests.

ComPost is prepared by the director and associate director of composition, both of whom are full-time faculty members, and two assistant directors of composition, who are GTAs. EGO copy is provided by the organizations's officers. Since the editing chores are rotated weekly, no one voice dominates *ComPost*. Each of us is free to impose his or her own style on the issue. We try to get as many people involved in the creation of copy as possible and try to keep the tone light. We run engagement, wedding, and birth announcements and handle the general social calendar. The newsletter's title is the result of a name-the-newsletter contest, the first of many such competitions after the precedent of those in *New York Magazine*. When necessity requires a general remonstrance of some kind—that people need to return overdue books, stop using the Modern Languages photocopier or, get marks in on time, or the like—the word comes from Ensign Pulver, the program's chief laundry and morale officer, a persona whose directives are easy to grouse about and make fun of, and, on that account perhaps, a little easier to follow. Each issue ends with a summary of dates, times, and places, with each item coded so that a reader can refer to the issue that describes the event in greater detail.

ComPost also runs stuff in each issue simply for the sake of amusement: short notes or observations or reprints of poems or short prose pieces from anyone who cares to submit them, especially for special holiday issues that strain to be as funny as our collective wit can make them. We always find space for a cartoon or two, scavenged from the likes of the *New Yorker* or *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or the funnies, that more often than not have something to do with writing or academic life, *ComPost* serving as the

communal office door on which we seem compelled to post such reminders not to take ourselves too seriously.

While teachers of composition are *ComPost*'s primary focus, the substantial secondary audience is also important to the process of consensus building. I have no illusions that the university's president or any of the others on the vast distribution list eagerly await their copy of *ComPost* every week or even that they see it or read it, but I want them to be able to. While on the university meeting circuit that is the lot (curse?) of all writing program administrators, I tout *ComPost* shamelessly. When questions arise that reading it would answer, I do not hesitate to note the value of being a regular *ComPost* reader.

Indeed, *ComPost* is read. I get feedback from people throughout the university who are no longer surprised at the work our people are doing and who have a better idea of what we are about and how we are going about it. While most of the response is positive, I also get some anxious inquiries and complaints, which suggest that in some quarters more than passing attention is paid; and that is a step in the right direction. These responses also allow me to explain further or defend our practice long before something might develop into formal controversy. Everyone, it seems, has at least a curiosity about the composition program, although too seldom is it founded on real knowledge or active interest. One "subscriber," a professor of Music History, has started attending some of our staff development workshops. For *ComPost* to prompt exchanges of this kind is a useful start.

Some few of our secondary readers even get involved by contributing an article on good writing, a cartoon or a squib, or by asking that we run an announcement of an event they are interested in promoting. *ComPost* has become in effect the principal source of information about the Department of English as well as the composition program. Tenure-track faculty members are just as pleased to have public notice taken of their conference presentations or the printing of their articles as are GTAs and PTLs.

The principal motive for maintaining this secondary audience, however, is to serve the primary audience of composition instructors because it is vital to their sense of community to know that the larger academic community is aware of their work. Given the current hierarchical organization and economic reward structures of universities, the place of writing teachers in them, and the slow pace of the evolution of those structures, members of a composition program, who know the value of their work in teaching, research, and service, need to know that others in the university community are aware of it. *ComPost* can contribute to a sense of collegiality by presenting their contributions as colleagues to colleagues.

A full sense of collegiality and genuine program consensus in writing programs are long-term goals, and the barriers to realizing these conditions are substantial. A composition program newsletter alone cannot achieve these goals, nor should it serve as a salve to hide underlying sores. But a vehicle like *ComPost* can promote the communications that contribute to accomplishing these ends, as well as the cohesiveness and stability any complex program needs. That is no mean thing and something well worth doing.

