Writing Program Administration

Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators

Council of Writing Program Administrators

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is a national association of college and university faculty who serve or have served as directors of freshman composition or writing programs, coordinators of writing centers and writing workshops, chairpersons and members of writing-program-related committees, or in similar administrative capacities. The Council of Writing Program Administrators is an affiliate of the Association of American Colleges and the Modern Language Association.

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Author's Guide

WPA: Writing Program Administration publishes articles and essays concerning the organization, administration, practices, and aims of college and university writing programs. Possible topics include the education and support of writing teachers; the intellectual and administrative work of WPAs; the situation of writing programs, within both academic institutions and broader contexts; the programmatic implications of current theories, technologies, and research; relationships between WPAs and other administrators, between writing and other academic programs, and among high school, two-year, and four-year college writing programs; placement; assessment; and the professional status of WPAs.

The previous list is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive, but contributions must be appropriate to the interests and concerns of those who administer writing programs. The editor welcomes empirical research (quantitative as well as qualitative), historical research, and more theoretically, essayistically, or reflectively developed pieces.

The length of submissions should be approximately 2000 to 5000 words, although the journal occasionally will publish shorter or longer pieces when the subject matter warrants. Articles should be suitably documented using the current *MLA Style Manual*. Please submit three copies of manuscripts, with the author identified only on a separate cover letter. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope if you would like a copy returned. Submissions are anonymously reviewed by the Editorial Board, and the editor aspires to a response time of approximately ten weeks.

WPA publishes reviews of books related to writing programs and their administration. Publishers are invited to send appropriate professional books to the Editor, who assigns reviews. *WPA* also publishes an annual review of textbooks; publishers should contact the Managing Editor.

Authors whose works are accepted for publication will be asked to submit final versions in both print and electronic form. *WPA* is produced with Pagemaker 4.2 for the Macintosh. (Articles submitted in Word for the Macintosh will greatly facilitate production, although we have the capability to translate among many Macintosh and PC programs.) Authors will also be asked to submit a 100-word biography for inclusion in the "Notes on Contributors" section of the journal.

Article deadlines: Fall/Winter issue, April 1; Spring issue, September 1.

Relevant announcements and calls for papers are also acceptable. Announcement deadlines: Fall/Winter issue, September 1; Spring issue, January 1.

Address articles and editorial correspondence to Douglas Hesse, Editor, *WPA*, 4240 Department of English, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790-4240. E-mail: ddhesse@ilstu.edu.

Address subscription and membership inquiries to Jeffrey Sommers, Secretary-Treasurer, WPA, Department of English, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056. (See subscription and membership form at the back of the journal.)

Address advertising inquiries (until April 1, 1995) to Paige Dayton Smitten, *WPA* Managing Editor, Department of English, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322-3200. After April 1, address them to the Editor, at the address above.

Address inquiries about the WPA consultation/evaluation service to Ben W. McClelland, Department of English, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677.

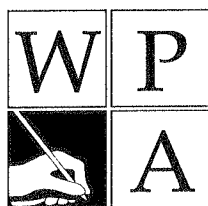# Council of Writing Program Administrators

Call for Research Proposals

The Research Grant Committee of the Council of Writing Program Administrators issues a call for proposals to investigate the intellectual work of the writing program administrator. Topics might include, but are not limited to, making curricular content responsive to diversities of race, gender, and class; responding to budget reductions; dealing with competing models of program evaluation; "going public" with writing program concerns; making the work of the WPA more collaborative or collegial; coping with mandated need to design composition courses that link up with "content" courses in other disciplines.

The Committee asks proposers to send a description of the project that includes the following information: explanation of how the project addresses the theme of the intellectual work of the writing program administrator; outline of how the project will proceed; budget that is realistic, detailed, and specific; account of how the results of the research will be shared professionally (e.g. publication in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, workshop at a WPA summer conference, etc.). This descriptive proposal should be no longer than three double-spaced typed pages. Maximum awards of $2000 may be given.

Four copies of the proposal must be sent to Patricia Bizzell at the address below no later than 1 January 1995. The winners will be announce at the WPA breakfast at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication, and awards can be paid out at any time thereafter. Proposers with questions should not hesitate to contact Pat Bizzell.

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Writing
Program
Administration

Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators

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The Function of *WPA* at the Present Time

Douglas Hesse

It is perhaps foolish to assume the editorship of a journal in 1994. Every morning I read and write messages on the various electronic lists that have added time to my daily work life: WAC-L, H-Rhetor, and, of course, WPA-L. From Ohio a WPA posts a message. He wants to contest his faculty senate's ill-conceived writing exit exam and asks for information and arguments. Colleagues from New York, Texas and, even, San Bernardino, California, send advice. Advice begets advice, messages counter messages, and some sense of the state of the art, or at least of the opinion, forms in a day or two.

We talk about strategies for portfolio assessment, the harassment of teaching assistants, placement, tenure, how we assign teaching times, what qualifies a course as "writing intensive," class size. Some lists have archives and indexes, so that readers can retrieve discussion threads, now made virtual bolts of cloth. With specific information so quickly available, fluid, and free (or so it seems to those connected through institutional means), the journal looks stodgy and slow, inevitably behind. Print itself, as Lester Faigley and Richard Lanham have analyzed in their recent books, wobbles asynchronously against postmodern, digitized times. Indeed, the "Notes on Contributors" page of this issue might better theoretically contain not nine names, but nine times nine thousand, the intertextual symphony.

And yet there remains a place for the professional journal function. Whether it will continue to be performed in paper, which is ultimately a matter of economics, is far less interesting a question than the nature of the function itself. Having to pass the muster of peers may smack something of administrative convenience for those who judge tenure and promotion, a kind of surveillance practice that conserves the academy and discipline. But there are safeguards in the practice for writers, too, in an age when various publics and politicians would dictate the terms of faculty worth. More subtly, we write differently knowing that our work will be judged, and we read differently knowing a piece has met the approval of at least some of our colleagues.

The journal function permits/demands a kind of comprehensiveness, self-sufficiency, and extension. The compact is that journal pieces are finished and full, that they invoke their own contexts and locate themselves within the scholarly landscape with the transit of citation. The physical text will stand for time, changing in its meaning as readers change, but remaining "these words" by "this author." In so doing, the journal function stands against time, slowing writers down, requiring them to rethink and revise texts before they are published, not during the ongoing electronic exchange.

This is not to say that the journal function demands "the last word," ceramic bricks in the wall of knowledge. Readers of the *WPA* "Authors Guide"

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on page 3 will note my call for both articles and essays. With this distinction I hope to signal not some fussy purity of genre distinctions but my belief that contributions to knowledge and practices in writing programs come in many forms. It is important that *WPA* continue to publish status surveys and statistically reasoned arguments, case studies and ethnographies. It is important that the journal also publish work occasioned by the experiences and complex local situations of individual WPA's and institutions, interpreting them in broader contexts, including historical ones. Rhetorical and critical, educational and organizational theories help us interpret what writing programs are doing—or what they should or might. Others' tips and strategies help us get through the next term.

If it might be foolish now to edit a journal, it may be lunacy to work as a WPA. In addition to counseling distressed teachers and short personnel budgets, many of us now work with distressed computer networks and soft technology monies. Our programs teach an ever morphing group of students whose experiences with print language and expectations of education differ radically from their teachers'. Legislative, accrediting association, and institutional demands for assessment and accountability cascade like volcanic ash—with the consolation that fertile new lands may thus be created. The Wyoming Resolution, alas, is hardly superfluous, and the Portland Resolution reminds WPA's that their responsibilities rarely decrease. Writing Across and Within the Disciplines refract old assumptions about the location and administration of writing instruction. Some WPA's, even, have called for scrapping required freshman composition, for reasons intellectual as well as political. The last time I looked, few budgets were doubling.

And yet ours is a time when more people are thinking more seriously about literacy, writing, and the teaching of writing than ever since I began teaching in 1980. We have colleagues, on our campuses and across the country, and a wealth of research, strategies, theories, and good will.

We have a lot to write about.

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Christine Hult did a marvelous job editing WPA for the past six years, and her organization and generosity have made the editorial transition much easier than I had any right to expect. From providing records to providing computer templates to being mainly responsible for the development of all the articles in this volume, Christine acted just as I knew she would: splendidly. I am also grateful to Paige Smitten for continuing as Managing Editor through this volume year. I've had the fine services of my editorial assistant, Kelly Lowe, and the financial support of the English Department at Illinois State at times when it, too, hears the lay of reallocation. The members of the Editorial Board consistently read submissions in ways that are exceptionally thoughtful, articulate, and genuinely constructive. I learn from them and from the many fine manuscripts I'm privileged to read.

Decentering the WPA

Jeanne Gunner

The WPA position is a problematic one, in ways that reach beyond the difficulty of its definition, though definition certainly is a crucial problem. The position's amorphousness often leads higher level administrators to treat it as a catchall service position outside the center of academic power (the topic of recent articles by Lynn Bloom, Joe Janangelo, and Ed White). Responding to the risk of professional diminution inherent in such perceptions, WPAs have issued statements arguing for the professional status and outlining the appropriate tasks of the position. The often-cited Olson and Moxley article, "Directing Freshman Composition: The Limits of Authority," endorses a tenured director with control over program policy; the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards calls for a tenured WPA fully recognized within the department and academy; and the WPA's Portland Resolution details conditions and guidelines to achieve these goals (Hult).

In these documents, the ideal occupant of the WPA's office is defined as a tenured leader in control of program policy and personnel. This new and improved WPA should bring beneficial changes in the status of composition and composition professionals, especially, one assumes, writing teachers, and help the field as a whole move toward normalization and professional equity with traditional English Department faculty.

The question remains whether the model proposed by the various statements on professional status will actually work toward these ends, however, for the model is based on a still unexamined assumption about who should occupy the center and who the periphery in composition programs. The model perpetuates the traditional power relationship that exists between the WPA and writing instructors, especially those who do not hold tenure-track appointments, leading to a troubling degree of division—division by rank, according to the traditional academic hierarchy; often division of authority, separating instructor and curriculum; and division within writing programs themselves—by minimizing the role that all faculty should play in program direction. This centralized model may ironically be itself one possible source of the professional status problems that continue to plague us. In the professionally endorsed WPA job descriptions that currently hold sway, such as the one represented in the Portland Resolution, we see a model that seeks to center writing program authority in a WPA, treating the rights of this one office in isolation from the other aspects of a writing program, focusing on discrete elements of the position and overlooking the larger network that forms the WPA's world—perhaps because the definition of "professional" in the current national conversation on this issue has come to mean "tenured." But this "solution" is a flawed one, for it

reflects a desire to professionalize partially; it ignores the situation of writing instructors who are entitled to professional rights, too, rights that are ignored in this narrow approach to "professionalizing" the WPA position.

The WPA-centric administrative model, in which a tenured WPA controls the writing program, has a troublingly anti-democratic cast and potential. Most writing instructors working under this model are unlikely to have a voice in the WPA's appointment or to participate in establishing program policies. The model includes no provision for the WPA to be reviewed by those who teach in his or her program, despite Olson and Moxley's argument that a department's "compositionists [should] have a major voice in selecting and continually evaluating the director (58), for "compositionist" is a term used to designate a tenurable specialty, in contrast to the term "writing instructor." Nor is the WPA in this model held responsible for working to improve faculty conditions (in such areas, for example, as the Wyoming Resolution issues of salary and security of employment), or for enhancing professionalism through such measures as securing grants for faculty release time and curricular projects, instituting faculty development programs, arranging faculty participation in school-wide committees, and assuring faculty voting rights in departmental business. As a result, the model cannot but fail in meeting the goal of professionalizing the WPA position and the discipline, for the status of each is intimately connected to the working conditions of writing teachers.

If the true goal of reformulating the WPA position is to achieve increased professionalism for all those in the profession, and if "professionalism" is to mean something greater than "tenure," then we need to consider how the position can be linked to faculty conditions and status and to reconsider the role faculty should play in the direction of a writing program. A professional writing instructor, a professional director, our profession—these need to have some shared foundation, for they are necessarily interlaced, and so we must find alternatives to the current model, which deprives the majority of individuals in the field a share in Olson and Moxley's values of authority, control, and power. Although no single model can apply to all institutions, our experience at UCLA, discussed below, may be able to illustrate how one alternative model—a decentering of the WPA—allows for a collaborative structure, one that extends professional status throughout a program.

The WPA-centric Model: One Program's Experience

Our faculty's move to reorganize the UCLA program administratively derived from a shared perception that the Director's position as it had come to exist allowed, even encouraged, the exclusion and silencing of the faculty. The situation we faced over a period of six years exemplifies how faculty exclusion can result not only from specific institutional conditions, nor from the authoritarian tendencies of any one individual occupying the office, but from the perception of the WPA position itself.

Indeed, at UCLA we suffered not from a single monomaniacal WPA ruling over us, but from a plethora of different WPAs—five successive Acting Directors, to be precise, all of whom saw themselves as serving in the stead of some Director-to-Be, some real Director who was to arrive imminently to take over the program. In this *Waiting for Godot* scenario, the faculty found themselves working for a phantom Director who, despite being nonexistent, nevertheless managed to exert extraordinary control over the program. No changes to program structure could be made, we were told, because change requires a Director's approval; no significant curricular innovations could be enacted, because innovations depend on a Director to innovate them. Each of our Acting Directors saw the Director's position as the seat of total program authority. The position itself thus rendered the faculty powerless and brought curricular renewal to a standstill. Faculty efforts to revitalize the program were perceived as a usurping threat to the position's authority. As a result, each Acting Director became responsible for protecting the status quo, which meant assuring the phantom Director that until he or she did arrive, the WPA office would be preserved with all its privileges and powers intact, and no change would ever occur. The simple fact of the Director's nonexistence would not be allowed to become an excuse for the faculty to assert itself. We were being led by the centralized WPA model, if not by a WPA.

As we continued to work under this centralized model, our faculty rights were increasingly curtailed, to the serious detriment of the program. Because (it was then assumed) the new Director would be a tenured professor of composition, the rest of us came to be seen as subordinates whose task it would be to carry out the agenda set by the Director. Under the sway of this perception (and very likely under the actual leadership of such a Director, were he or she to have materialized), we as a faculty continued to find our participation in the program severely restricted. Some of the more destructive effects that can result from this model are evident in our particular situation, but they are problems likely to be familiar to those who teach elsewhere under similar WPA-centric conditions.

Operating under the expectation of a centralized authority (because the new Director would have a tenured position), the program began to change in distressing ways. In the early years of the program, the faculty had an active role in and held real responsibility for the program. Committees were a major structural feature, and faculty members had their say through their committee participation. Faculty were encouraged, in fact required, to contribute to program development in the form of new courses and new curricula, developed through collaborative efforts. Over time, with some power to influence the shape and future of the program, we saw the faculty and the program prosper and grow. With the departure of the original Director and Executive Director and the arrival of the first of the Acting Directors, however, the reign of the bogeyman WPA began, and the flaws in the centralized model became increasingly apparent.

Throughout the search for a tenured Director, furthermore, it was assumed that the Director would be little involved with actually teaching our

courses because the position was perceived as professional, that is, traditionally academic; a Director's duties would be "above" such a teaching assignment. The Director would set policy and the instructors would carry it out, serving as the objects on which the Director's power would be inscribed. By logical consequence, the duties of a writing instructor were beneath directorial duties, and so involvement in policy issues came to be seen as outside the sphere of the faculty. Under the influence of these perceptions and assumptions, a rift began to develop between our caretaker administrators (the Acting Director and various assistants) and the teaching faculty. The administrators were increasingly caught up in service to the noumenal Director, keeping things on course, assuring that stasis ruled, tending the program's "directorial" issues, with the result that they did not teach, or taught sporadically. As the administrators removed themselves from courses and teaching, a blurring of academic/staff responsibilities ensued; teachers came to be perceived as not much more than undifferentiated units of staffing or objects of personnel decisions, and staffing and personnel decisions became the administrators' central concerns. This in turn allowed administrative assistants to develop an exaggerated importance in the program, usurping the faculty's role and eroding academic quality. The program's center became its administrative work, its purpose for existing to support its administration. Faculty moved to the periphery.

Predictably, faculty morale suffered due to this increasing exclusion from program decisions, the result of the perception of the Director, absent though he or she was, as the single professional voice of the program, bodily represented by the committee of caretaker administrators. Faculty saw little hold placed on administrators' actions, and thus paranoia and a fear of speaking out grew. With diminishing opportunities to speak and be heard, the faculty became cynical in its view of the program and its administrators, with predictably negative results. For one thing, the level of moonlighting increased dramatically, the result of disaffection and a diminished sense of loyalty to and investment in the program. Program development came to a halt; people were uninterested in working for an organization that denied them individual recognition, that seemed both to demean and absorb their labor for its own benefit while forbidding them to have any influence on the program. Motivation for professional involvement, scholarship, or publication decreased. The program's isolation from other campus bodies increased. The result was a deprofessionalizing of the faculty and, so, the discipline they represent.

Generalized Problems: Other Programs, Similar Results

This situation, though localized in its particulars, reflects the situation of many writing faculty nationwide. It is likely to occur wherever the centralized WPA model exists, which in turn is likely to be most schools with even a rudimentary writing program. Certainly non-tenure-track faculty are most often the ones unquestioningly excluded from program participation. But the lack of involvement may exist, with equally destructive effects, even within those

programs where the faculty consists of TAs or tenure-track and tenured profes-
sors.

In the case of a largely TA-staffed program, the problems arise from an
assumption that is seen in the adjunct or temporary faculty situation as well, an
assumption that invokes the "myth of the novice." The WPA is perceived as the
seat not only of program authority but disciplinary authority; this authority
derives from the position itself. Because the TA, like the adjunct and temporary
instructor, does not hold a position of authority—a traditional appointment
within the tenure system—he or she is considered a beginner outside the power
system. In a hierarchy, outsiders are always perceived as both less powerful <u>and</u>
less competent than those within the structure. Thus TAs, adjuncts, and tempo-
rary faculty are perceived as inexperienced and in need of direction, regardless
of their scholarly preparation in the field, regardless of their years of experience
in the classroom. Because they do not a hold a professorial appointment within
the power structure, they are doomed to an unending apprenticeship; since they
are not among the masters, they can only be novices—for as long as their job
titles require them to be seen so. They are thus excluded from full program
participation and denied professional recognition due to their "inferior" status.

Obtaining professional participation and status therefore remains a
struggle for such experienced non-tenure-track writing professionals. Ironically,
however, such recognition (and thus program power) is easily accorded where
the instructors are literature faculty, as in the case of writing programs whose
faculties include tenure-track and tenured professors. In this structure, we see a
reverse assumption of competence, again the result of the position held rather
than any actual preparation in composition studies. William S. Robinson, bluntly
criticizing hiring practices in composition and critiquing the language of the
CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards, identifies the irony of the
Statement's position that "it's fine that literature specialists teach composition
courses; in fact, it's encouraged, though 'ideally' they should have some training
in doing so" (347). The presence of a centralized WPA in departments who
employ literature faculty in writing courses actually validates this very question-
able practice of allowing so-called "professionals" to teach composition, even as
it is the scenario in which WPAs are most likely to have limited authority and
status. As Marcia Dickson points out,

> In most schools, each faculty member possesses the right to determine the
> way they conduct their classes, the manner in which they grade, and to a
> certain extent, the content of their courses. In short, they function under a
> sort of tribal anarchy . . . . [N]either chairs nor WPAs possess the absolute
> power to hire, fire, reward, or punish tenure-track faculty members who
> do not follow their administrative directives." (142)

In such circumstances, the presence of a centralized WPA clearly cannot
guarantee a program's competence. The belief that such a structure enhances
professionalism is a delusion, for it allows writing instruction to remain an
idiosyncratic activity unconnected to a body of knowledge and carried out by

non-specialists, who nonetheless have power equal to the WPA's and greater than any non-tenure-track instructor's.

We continue to accept the wisdom of centering power in a WPA, however, because we assume that a program without a single, permanent director is in a weakened position, open to institutional pressure and lacking in continuity of professional leadership. We assume that a central WPA is necessary so that he or she can serve as a department's resource center for writing issues. In reality, though, this is often the way a department justifies not hiring sufficient writing professionals to staff its writing courses, instead using literature graduate students and faculty to do a composition job. The WPA develops the curriculum, orders the textbook, designs the course, and then hands it over to these typically untrained instructors, in effect dividing instructor from course material. Such a plan is objectionable on at least two counts. First, it abrogates the instructor's prerogative to design his or her own course, as the CCCC Committee on Professional Standards argued in their "Progress Report": "Many teachers of writing are denied a basic right inherent in academic freedom when they are ordered to teach from mandated syllabi and/or required texts" (335). Further, it assumes that disciplinary knowledge can reside in course material alone or in position alone. But one person, one WPA, cannot "give" knowledge to others via a prescribed syllabus, a pre-selected textbook, a set of assignments. Faculty involved in teaching composition should be trained, theoretically informed faculty, working together to develop a unified program that reflects their knowledge.

For these reasons, the tenured WPA model represented in texts such as the Portland Resolution and the Olson and Moxley article is not sufficient to ensure a truly professional writing program. We know that tenure alone cannot in all cases, perhaps not in most cases, endow a WPA with real power; he or she is all too often the only compositionist among an English department's regular faculty. In the ideal program—in a truly professional program—the intellectual agenda and authority would come from a synthesis of informed instructors and the program they develop—it would be a group, or collaborative, entity, in need of a spokesperson or liaison, perhaps, but not a single position assigned total curricular responsibility or autocratic power.

The Decentered WPA

The crisis in faculty rights as we experienced it at UCLA culminated in a call for an entirely different administrative structure and a redefined WPA. We had begun to doubt that the arrival of a tenured professor of composition was necessarily the best thing for our program. Turned down by the candidate we most desired to hire, we recognized that the situation had created an opportunity for an entirely new approach. We designed an administrative structure that de-emphasizes the Director's position and allows the faculty to share program authority. In this system, no one position or person occupies the center, as the

following guidelines outlined in our program plan ("UCLA Writing Programs in the 1990s") describe:

- The administrative structure will consist of both committees and individually held positions.
- The positions will rotate.
- At least some positions will be elected.
- There will be a process of administrative review (of both individual performance and program structure) (29).

These changes have served as steps in a democratizing process that enhances professionalism (the sharing of power, control and authority over the program) and thus program excellence.

Certainly, this decentered model flies in the face of dominant professional opinion. It does provide, however, a system that protects the faculty's voice by assuring administrative flexibility. The WPA holds a renewable position, similar to the chair's position in most departments, where the individual is nominated by the faculty and appointed by the dean, reviewed by all program colleagues, and, depending on review results, then reappointed or replaced. At the end of his or her service, the Director resumes his or her place within the faculty ranks. He or she (along with all other academic administrators) must teach the program's courses (and not the TA training course exclusively, but a range of the program's course offerings). The rift between teaching and administration can thus be avoided (or mended, where needed); the fear that the Director will be uninvolved in the program at its most fundamental level—its courses and students—is allayed. Administrative responsibility is spread out rather than condensed, allowing interested faculty to learn about the mechanics of program operations, debate budgetary decisions, and amend practices that threaten to distort the program's academic interests. Decentering the WPA and democratizing program administration gives all instructors a voice in program governance and professional responsibility for the program.

Conclusion

It seems time to acknowledge that some of the oppressive conditions writing teachers face come not only from the institutional values and practices of higher administration but from the WPA position itself. It seems time to take seriously Trimbur and Cambridge's call for "a revision of the current hierarchy," (17); to ensure, as they have urged, that professionalization does not "increase social distance among writing faculty and within writing programs" (16). We cannot in good faith endorse collaboration as a pedagogy and turn away from it as an administrative model. A model allowing for faculty rights and shared governance is the more promising route to professional excellence.

Finally, though, the strongest argument in defense of a decentered WPA is a political one: it is a democratic model. It places power in the hands of *all* faculty, giving them the means to influence the direction of the program they

form, and it supports continued program vitality by preventing the potentially calcifying effect of the Director-for-life model, where room for change is difficult to ensure.

It may be asking too much of already beleaguered WPAs to engage in such self-criticism and to cede to subordinates a share of whatever power they have attained, no doubt at high cost and through much effort. But we cannot let the struggle for professional status falter in a too-early stage of progress. The current center should not hold: power vested in one office or individual will not only not solve the professional problems that face us, but will actually continue the system of oppression that we ostensibly are trying to overcome. Improved conditions for the WPA is only one goal on the way to professional conditions for all of us.

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A Home of Our Own:
Establishing a Department of
Rhetoric and Writing Studies at
San Diego State University

Sherry Burgus Little and Shirley K. Rose

On May 11, 1993, the Senate of San Diego State University (SDSU) approved a proposal to create a Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies. The university president's subsequent approval of the Senate's actions ended a process of debate, negotiation, and decision-making that took three years and involved ten stages of review, and in Fall 1993, the new department was established as a formal entity. This review process fostered campus-wide discussions of a number of complex questions about the role of writing in the university, appropriate institutional structures for writing programs, and the changing relationship between composition studies and English studies in general. These same questions are being asked at other campuses across the country and are the subject of professional discourse and research for composition specialists across the country (Little, "Separate Writing Departments"; Russell). For faculty and administrators at SDSU, as for those at Colgate University (Howard; Jamieson and Howard), the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and the University of Texas at Austin, the answers have led to establishing fully autonomous writing programs.

Anytime anyone discusses separate writing programs or departments, the inevitable metaphor of "divorce" emerges (Rose, "Metaphors"). This metaphor for separating composition and literature (the metaphorical couple) brings with it all the baggage of a literal divorce, including division of assets (courses and curricular content as intellectual property), battles over child custody (graduate teaching associates), and attempts to assign blame. The choice of this metaphor projects images of painful endings, recriminations, and severed family ties onto a pattern of academic alliances and activities. We prefer another metaphor—one we borrow from Louise Wetherbee Phelps: the grown child (some have said "stepchild") who needs a home of her own.[1] She is still a member of the family, and always will be of course—but as a separate and equal adult, she is now ready to forge relationships with other families within the university community (Little, "Home").

We are not suggesting that all writing programs need department status to forge these relationships, nor do we wish to imply that all writing programs should become separate, autonomous units. Regardless of where (or why) an individual may stand on the issue of autonomy for writing programs, however,

most WPAs are likely to discover at some point in their careers that they must choose and articulate a position on appropriate structures and roles for the writing programs they direct. WPAs must be prepared to consider some of the issues and concerns that we present here. What we have learned from our own experience at SDSU cannot be applied in all cases or to all circumstances, but it can inform planning and decision-making for a great many writing programs across the United States.

What you will find here then is our story: first a description of what our situation was, a description of changes effected by establishing the new department, and a review of the issues raised by the opponents of our proposal and our responses to those issues—that is, our defense for the position we have advocated and won. Now that our proposal has been approved and we have reviewed and reconsidered our experience, we can also offer our reflections about another dimension of our successful argument for a separate department of rhetoric and writing studies. We learned that we needed more than the force of good <u>reasons</u>; we needed the power of good <u>reasoning</u>, the ability to exploit our understanding of campus polity, policy, and politics.

Previous Situation at San Diego State

San Diego State University is a large comprehensive public university serving over 35,000 students. Ordinarily around 120 to 150 sections of basic composition are offered each semester, although several recent budget cuts have resulted in this number shrinking to 90 by the Fall of 1993. If we were to meet the demand for composition classes that we create by requiring two semesters of composition for our general education program, we would have to offer far more sections than our budget has allowed. Judging from what we have heard from colleagues elsewhere, the situation at SDSU is very like the situation at a number of other universities.

As Figure 1 shows, the composition courses at SDSU had been isolated and separated, resulting in a fragmentation of writing instruction among different departments on campus. The general education composition courses had been offered through the English and Comparative Literature Department (which offered the lion's share), the Mexican-American Studies Department, the Africana Studies Department, and the Linguistics and Oriental Languages Department. The English and Comparative Literature Department had also offered several of the advanced general composition courses that satisfy the university's upper division writing requirement, a technical writing certificate program, and an MA emphasis in rhetoric and writing (15 of 30 units). The Academic Skills Center, which had been a separate administrative unit, had offered the developmental or pre-baccalaureate courses, WAC programs, and some of the ESL writing instruction.

This fragmentation of the writing program was among the factors that, in the Fall of 1990, led seven faculty to draft and send forward to the Paul J. Strand,
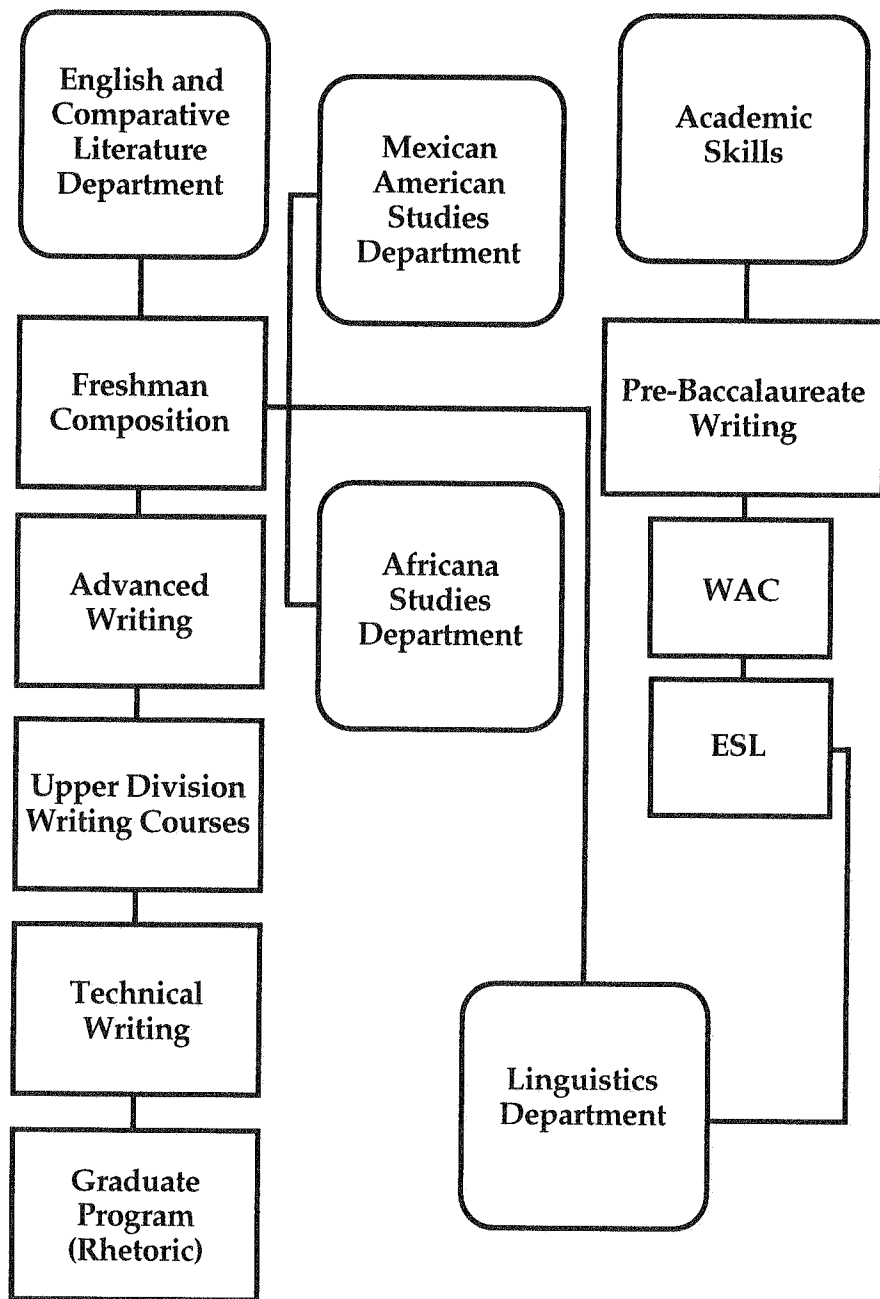
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│ English and │        │             │         │             │
│ Comparative │        │  Mexican    │         │  Academic   │
│ Literature  │        │  American   │         │   Skills    │
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| Freshman Composition | | Pre-Baccalaureate Writing |

| Advanced Writing | Africana Studies Department | WAC |

| Upper Division Writing Courses | | ESL |

| Technical Writing | | Linguistics Department |

| Graduate Program (Rhetoric) | | |

Figure 1: Previous Structure of Writing Programs

Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, a proposal for developing a new department of rhetoric and writing studies.

Description of New Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies

One of the major goals of the new department is to organize into a single entity writing specialists with the shared mission of planning and implementing a comprehensive writing program for the university community. The writing program faculty and courses previously offered within the English and Comparative Literature Department and the writing program faculty and courses offered by Academic Skills have been merged to form the faculty and curriculum of a new Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, creating a department that unifies the study of writing from the pre-baccalaureate to graduate level.

This centralized unit can better articulate courses previously offered by separate departments and resolve problems such as placement and assessment that the separation of the programs had created. However, we have established not merely a centralized writing program, but a separate *academic department*. Our department status acknowledges a disciplinary identity for composition studies, institutionalizes that identity in a familiar organizational structure, and gives the composition program an autonomous budget, curriculum, and faculty. It provides an organizational structure that recognizes an already existing community of specialists—"faculty who are identified by their demonstrated scholarly interest in the act of writing as a complex social activity and medium for intellectual development and who are also united by their commitment to practice education for creative and critical literacy" (Proposal, 19).[2] Such a supportive environment is vital to encouraging the creativity and innovation necessary to transform the present curriculum, to contribute to as well as anticipate and respond to the change in the university community's perceptions and expectations of its writing program.

In the process of review of our proposal, we did encounter resistance. The most formidable resistance came from the Department of English and Comparative Literature. We will focus our discussion on those issues that were first raised by the Department, then raised again at subsequent stages of review.

Issue #1: "Writing has always been in English."

Many faculty objected to the idea of a separate writing department because, they claimed, traditionally composition has always been taught in English departments and for the most part still is throughout the United States. This claim is not true, of course. The historical facts are that composition has not always been taught in English departments. According to William Riley Parker, English Departments have only been around for about 125 years, since the last half of the 19th Century, but the first American professorship in English (the actual title for Ebenezer Kinnersley was Professor of the English Tongue and Oratory) was established in 1755, over 200 years ago, at what was to become the University of Pennsylvania (342). Parker states that the education in the "English

school . . . normally included composition or 'rhetoric' in the mother tongue" rather than in Latin (342). Historically then, when composition was beginning to be taught in the United States, English departments did not yet exist.

The contemporary facts are that in at least twenty institutions, writing is offered by a program outside the English department, although very few include all writing programs from pre-baccalaureate to graduate level as the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at SDSU does. For example, separate departments exist at the University of Minnesota, Colgate University, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and Stonehill College. Some separate departments of more specialized areas, like technical communication at the University of Washington and Clarkson, have also been formed. Teaching composition outside the English department is being done and may be increasingly done if arrangements at these institutions are indicators of the future, for, as Parker notes in his discussion of the historic splintering away of speech and linguistics from English, "Splinter groups form when their founders feel their interests neglected" (340). Such a condition exists now for many writing programs.

Issue #2: "The study and teaching of Writing can't be separated from the teaching of reading Literature."

Some people assert that the teaching of writing and reading should not and indeed cannot be separated, because teaching writing alone has no content or substance. The teaching of writing cannot be separated from the study of literature, so that argument goes, for to do so would relegate it to the teaching of technical skills and would eliminate its humanistic base. However, the logic of this line of reasoning depends upon accepting "study of literature" as equivalent to "teaching of reading," or, as one professor at SDSU wrote in the flurry of memos that has accompanied the proposal's review process: "I abhor and distrust divorcing the forms of language from the content of literary tradition . . . [with] no sense of full literacy as a glorious component of civilization." Clearly, this argument equates reading with reading only the *belles lettres*, assuming that the study of literature alone guarantees full literacy or a humanistic education. This assumption is false and, we suggest, arrogant. In fact, arguments implying that literature faculty and students enjoy a monopoly on humanistic values or have exclusive rights to reading culturally significant texts were not particularly persuasive to faculty from other departments who identified their own disciplines with humanistic values.

As we wrote in our proposal, "Developing writers learn by examining texts from many different writing communities. Rhetoric, the parent discipline of writing studies, is central to humanistic studies; it does not privilege one text (e.g., the literary text) over another (e.g., the scientific essay)" (20). Recent scholarship in the history of composition studies reviews the impact that the writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines movements have had on the teaching of writing in the United States (Russell; Nystrand et al; North). The realization and growing acceptance of the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies has resulted in a questioning of the shape and content of writing classes at all levels.

Students will still be reading when writing is taught in a separate department—but the texts they read need not be so narrowly defined. Creating a separate writing department does not, then, separate reading from writing, but terminates the exclusive relationship between writing studies and literary studies.

Issue #3: "The writing program needs the protection of the English Department."

Other opponents of moving the general education composition program out of the English department feared for the "safety" of the writing program if it lost the protection of the English department. The English department is large; in many institutions, this size gives it both power and prestige. If separated from this power and prestige, the writing program could be viewed as isolated, easy to attack, vulnerable. This is a legitimate if patronizing concern, as the experience of the formerly autonomous Academic Skills Center demonstrates. The Center's independent status made it vulnerable to attack from members of the university community who undervalued the importance of a pre-baccalaureate writing program, considering it unacademic; however, its autonomy allowed its faculty to develop strong relationships with other departments across the university and to pursue innovative instructional programs with those departments. Although a separate writing program might indeed be more vulnerable, the SDSU composition program's former position within English isolated it from the rest of the university and limited its opportunities to explore the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies.

The validity of the argument about the "safety" of the writing program depends, then, on what role such a new department assumes. The new department at SDSU will create new connections similar to those we now share with the English department; thus, instead of being isolated and vulnerable to attack as some fear, our centralized program will develop relationships with other disciplines that ensure a more general awareness and appreciation of writing as an integral part of all disciplines. Creation of this new, highly visible, autonomous academic department will place writing studies in the context of the university at large, not just in relation to one discipline.

Issue #4: "Composition studies is not a legitimate academic discipline."

Underlying the arguments that writing has no content or substance and that a writing program needs the borrowed respectability of literary study to be safe is the assumption that writing is not a discipline. However, no one can refute the signs that the study of composition and rhetoric has been growing as an area of academic inquiry: many institutions are offering advanced degrees in rhetoric and composition; scholarship in composition studies has proliferated; and scholarly conferences and journals have been established, responding to this growth and further encouraging it.

While it is a recognized area of study, there are reasons why faculty have doubts about the "disciplinary" status of composition studies, for the field

cannot be defined within the terms of what is traditionally thought of as a discipline. Traditionally, a discipline has been defined as a community sharing a single methodology to develop a discrete and independent body of knowledge. But, as Stephen M. North has demonstrated, composition studies currently embraces a number of possibly epistemologically incompatible methodologies. And as many have argued, composition studies has interests that are interdisciplinary in nature.[3]

In many ways it is a metadiscipline challenging conventional notions about what actually constitutes a "discipline." Calling composition studies a "metadiscipline" does not imply that we do not consider it an identifiable academic discipline; rather this discipline does not conform to traditional definitions and will not exhibit the familiar distinguishing features that are usually associated with the term "discipline." This metadisciplinary nature of writing studies might seem to argue against establishing a separate department of writing studies. In fact, it calls into question the customary practice of institutionalizing disciplinary communities as academic departments. However, for the time being, the basic organizational unit of the modern university is the department. Until actual university structures change enough to reflect the most recent theorizing about disciplinary borders, only department status for the writing program will guarantee the access to and control of resources necessary for a vital academic program.

Issue #5: "The English Department does not marginalize the writing program."

Many opponents of our proposal objected to our assertion that writing had been marginalized in the English department. They claimed not to see any marginalization of writing programs, no hierarchy at work within the English department that placed the teaching of composition in an inferior position to the teaching of literature. People in this category rarely teach writing where we come from, however. Though they are quick to assert they would if they could, they are "needed" for courses for the majors and minors, the department's primary mission, and those courses are literature courses. These people rarely saw the non sequitur elements in this logic or the irony of this argument, considering the issues they raised about the "non-academic" nature of the writing program and its need for the protection of the English department.

Robert J. Connors' study "Overwork/Underpay: Labor and Status of Composition Teachers Since 1880" and Sue Ellen Holbrook's "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition" among others have begun an historical chronicle of what writing program administrators already know: the teaching of composition holds an inferior position in the hierarchy of English departments. The teaching of composition is regarded as "an academic sweatshop," to use Connors' term, wearing out people until they need to be replaced. It is a task to be disdained as "women's work." If one must teach it, it is regarded as an odious task, to be taken on with expressions of regret and signs of resignation.

Its lack of status is so widely assumed among faculty of English departments that we are not surprised by two stories in Lad Tobin's 1991 *College English*

article. Tobin relates how Toby Fulweiler's English department colleagues find it hard to believe him when "he gloats that Freshman Writing is the 'Best Course in the University to Teach'"; and someone as venerable as Donald Murray suggests that there must be something wrong with him if he can continue to look forward to student conferences (Tobin 339). The message is clear: English teachers are supposed to dislike teaching writing.

Few of our English department colleagues believe that professional WPAs feel genuinely and intensely positive about teaching writing and really would not rather be teaching literature classes; these colleagues would rather believe that we are lying in wait for our real interests (literature) to emerge. This belief helps explain and justify what we all know: generally, if not universally, writing programs are marginalized and under-supported intellectually and materially in our academic institutions. When these same institutions acknowledge, encourage, and even promise to address our society's widespread concern for literacy in the multicultural, global world that is slouching toward the twenty-first century, this marginalization seems especially duplicitous.

As a unified, autonomous writing program, the new Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at SDSU can make composition its primary departmental mission, rather than a secondary "service" dutifully offered by the English department. The autonomous department's concentration on the study of writing will focus the research and teaching efforts of colleagues with the same interests and goals, creating an environment that will allow writing to receive the attention and resources necessary to improve both the students' writing abilities and their understanding of the significance of writing to their studies.

Issue #6: "Money is not an issue."

Very few opponents of the proposal to establish a new department gave voice to concerns about money, though material concerns have been very important to the faculty involved. Because the teaching of composition in many large universities is delegated to graduate teaching assistants and part-time lecturers, departments can generate many full-time equivalent students (FTES) without great expenditures. In a recent academic year at SDSU we calculated that the English department brought in 61% of its enrollment-based allocation through its composition program at an expense of 30% of its total budget. Obviously, concern about money must be taken seriously. Certainly, when negotiating for a separation of composition and literature, knowledgeable faculty and administrators must plan resource allocation so that the most good is done with the least harm.

These negotiations can be complicated, as they were at SDSU, by the faculty's reluctance to address material concerns in open debates and discussions. This reluctance may derive from a number of sources: the faculty's relative ignorance about the mechanics of university budgeting; their desire to be "above" such venal concerns; or their belief that while faculty are best qualified to address the pedagogical and intellectual issues, financial issues are best left to administration.

WPAs need to know that colleagues at their own institutions may likewise be reluctant to openly discuss material resources in specific and concrete detail. Arguments and rationales for change based on financial savings or gains will not, therefore, be particularly persuasive for the faculty involved in making decisions about change.

Issue #7: "Without Teaching Assistants, the English Department will lose its graduate program."

Another serious concern as well is the loss of control over graduate teaching assistantships. Because GTAs are allowed to teach composition, graduate students can be supported with teaching assistantships. When composition is taught in a separate department, English departments cannot fully control to whom or how many assistantships are awarded for teaching composition courses, which may damage their abilities to attract and support graduate students. Indirectly, those who select the staff for composition classes determine who the graduate students will be. And as one English department professor at SDSU wrote in a memo, "What academic department in its right mind would willingly cede supervisory control over its own apprentice scholars to technologues and writing consultants?"

Consider the corollary, however: graduate admissions decisions determine the quality of the faculty for many composition courses, and in some universities this number includes the entire writing program at the lower division level. Here then is another serious concern that must be negotiated. Our solution at SDSU has been to guarantee that for the next five years a certain number of the GTAs assigned to teach composition will be appointed from among applicants who are English department graduate students. This solution won't solve the problem of who chooses them, however; we've established a GTA selection committee with members from both departments to develop selection criteria and procedures for making appointment decisions.

Issue #8: "Without composition to fall back on, faculty will not have anything to teach if the number of English majors decreases."

Another concern we've heard is that, should the number of majors in English start declining as it has done more than once in the past, composition courses won't be there as a back-up for teachers of literature to "retreat to" when too few students are enrolling in their literature classes. Since the English and Comparative Literature department at SDSU is currently straining to accommodate its large number of majors, this concern does not seem to be realistic. However, given the recent uncertainties arising from budget cutbacks at SDSU and other universities across the country, this concern may eventually be a serious one. Even if the anticipated, catastrophic loss of English majors never occurs, the literature faculty's worry over this issue must be acknowledged and taken seriously. Our solution has been to guarantee English and Comparative Literature faculty retreat rights in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies should the number of majors ever drop so low that the literature faculty would have too few students to justify their faculty positions.

Polity, Policies, and Politics

At each stage of the proposal's review, proponents and opponents presented the arguments discussed above—arguments that we expect will have a certain resonance for other WPAs. We're sure there are other issues and concerns that our fellow WPAs could raise about separate, centralized writing departments, but these are the issues, the reasons for and against, that emerged during the debate at SDSU.

Now that the proposal has successfully made its way through the many levels of approval required by SDSU's faculty self-governance system, we can reflect on another dimension of this debate: the process of debate itself and what we've learned about "good reasoning." These are lessons that will be useful to any WPA, whatever project she undertakes.

We can summarize these lessons about the process of debate in three words: *polity, policy,* and *politics*. First, we've learned the value of knowing and understanding university *polity* —the organizational structure and governance of the institution. There is a university out there beyond the English Department, beyond the College of Arts and Letters, beyond even the Division of Academic Affairs. This university is inhabited by people who have values, goals, and information that differ from our own. Representatives from these communities within the university had, at various stages, the power and the responsibility to approve or disapprove our proposal. It was imperative that we discover and understand the interest of these members of the university community and our relationship to them. Only a few of these people were administrators. At SDSU, the Senate includes faculty from all of the colleges and staff from all of the non-academic divisions, as well as student representatives.

In addition to understanding university polity, we've needed to know university *policy*—the principles, procedures, and processes for getting things done. At SDSU, we have a 150-page document called the SDSU Policy File that describes policies and procedures for everything from using university stationery to establishing, eliminating, or merging departments. It was essential for us to study this document to know what we could and could not do and how to do it, because a number of people were ready with bad information and wrong advice about how to proceed. For example, the Policy File clearly specifies that

> Proposals for the creation, merger, transfer, or abolition of departments may be initiated by departments, faculty members, or administrative officers of the University. . . . Every proposal must be reviewed by the dean or deans of the colleges concerned. . . . If the dean or deans feel that the proposal does have merit, the dean or deans shall then form a special ad hoc committee to give the matter full and serious consideration. (226-27)

This procedure explicitly allowed the proponents to advance the proposal without the endorsement or review of the English department. Many opponents

of the proposal assumed that department approval would be required before the proposal could be advanced for review. As a result, they initially miscalculated their need to respond to the proposal in a serious way and were ill-prepared to argue a consistent and coherent position against the proposal at the earliest stages of its review.

In addition to needing to know which committees would review the proposal (polity) and the procedures for getting on a committee's agenda (policy), we needed to be able to identify whom to talk to behind the scenes to ensure, for example, that we were not the last item on that agenda (politics).

Politics includes partisan and factional intrigues, or what one literature professor threatened our dean with: "guerilla tactics." At the university, politics is not a smoke-filled back room activity; it happens over lunch on the Faculty Center patio, in e-mail conversations, or on the campus mall. It often has less to do with the power inherent in governance roles than with the personalities and persuasiveness of the individuals in those roles. We've had to be aware of which committee members sway decisions by asking good questions, which committee members bore their colleagues, which ones have so offended the others in the past that no one will vote for anything they support, and who isn't on a particular committee but has lunch with its chair once a week.

We also had to develop patience and compassion. Though other recent events at SDSU have called our governance system into question and rather painfully brought our decision-making process to the attention of the campus community, most faculty committees had not been accustomed to making really controversial decisions.[4] These committees proceeded very slowly and carefully, for they were certain to make someone unhappy no matter what they decided.

We would have learned none of this if we hadn't ventured beyond the English Department, and we urge other WPAs, whatever their visions for their own writing programs, to get involved in their university's governance system and get to know people in other departments and colleges. If we'd listened only to our literature colleagues, if we'd allowed them to contain the debate as a domestic squabble in the English department family, we never would have begun our project of building a home of our own.

The conceptual and administrative work that project requires has indeed only begun. The Senate's approval and the subsequent formal establishment of the new department were only the first stage of the process of *creating* an autonomous department of rhetoric and writing studies. Our department now includes 119 instructional staff responsible for developing and offering a coherent university writing curriculum. We have 6 tenured/ tenure track faculty, 28 temporary lecturers, 55 graduate teaching assistants, and 30 tutors. Our programs include developmental writing, ESL instruction, general education composition, advanced composition, a certificate in technical and scientific communication, and a graduate specialization in rhetoric and writing studies (12-15 units of an M.A. in English).

It is far too soon to describe and analyze all the issues of transition these faculty and programs now face. As we write this ending, in the middle of our first year as a department, we are struggling to meet competing demands to keep programs going while reinventing them. Existing curricular offerings must continue to be available even as we are reconceptualizing them. Sections must be staffed even as we reconsider past hiring practices. The daily responsibilities of program leadership and administration must be fulfilled at the same time we're creating a new organization. The university community's expectations of us must be reconciled with our own vision and commitments. As a new academic department, we negotiate a difficult path, trying to situate ourselves as an administrative unit in an established bureaucracy at the same time we are finding our footing with one another—working, thinking, and writing together to build intellectual and ethical community.

Notes

1. Louise Wetherbee Phelps suggested this metaphor when she visited the SDSU campus in January 1991 to consult with the proposal's faculty proponents and opponents, and university administration. Paul J. Strand, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, elaborated on this metaphor in a memo which referred to the writing program's separation from English as "leaving the nest."

2. This language is borrowed from the Syracuse University Writing Program's "Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure in the Writing Program." (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1989.)

3. See Nystrand et al for a recent review of discussions of the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies.

4. In June of 1992, 111 tenured faculty and 35 probationary faculty at SDSU received notice they would be laid off effective October 7, 1992. Although these notices were later rescinded, faculty members requested an investigation by the American Association of University Professors. The investigating committee's report questioned the university's governance and consultation process. For a full report, see the March/April 1993 issue of *Academe*, a publication of the American Association of University Professors.

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A Usable Past:
Functions of Stories Among New TAs

Kathleen A. Boardman

Teaching assistants spend a good deal of time telling "teaching stories." Told unofficially, behind office doors or over several beers, these stories allow participants to complain, let off steam, subvert authority, judge others, enforce group standards, reinforce mutual connections, and transmit practical know– how. In short, they fulfill many of the functions of gossip (Jones 242); and like gossip, they are generally marginal, devalued as accretions of lore rather than bodies of disciplined knowledge.

What happens, then, when lore goes official? What are some conse– quences of moving teaching stories out of the margins and into the center of a teacher preparation program? What happens when writing program faculty urge TAs to take stories seriously, not only as a way to store and transmit knowledge but also as a way to generate knowledge, reflect on experience, and transform teaching practice? Once stories are authorized in this way, they should certainly gain credibility, and TAs should therefore be eager to bring them from the private realm into the public sphere. Actually, my research among new TAs suggests something different: authorizing stories in a teacher preparation program introduces difficult new issues of authority and credibility. TAs don't automatically embrace the story as a means to knowledge as soon as they receive permission to do so; they don't always connect with "a usable past" that enlight– ens their teaching. Those TAs who resist have decided that stories don't count enough as knowledge—and that they count too much. It depends on who's telling and who's knowing.

Ruth Ray has described her initial surprise at the "high anxiety" among students in her graduate seminar when they were asked to observe, describe, and analyze their teaching. Ray says, "I did not fully realize the emotional impact of what I was asking them to do: to analyze their teaching when they already felt inadequate in the classroom and to do so in the context of a graduate seminar, where they often felt intimidated and insecure" (107). Like Ray, I was surprised by TAs' anxiety and ambivalence about simply describing their classroom experiences to fellow teachers in an open–ended, ungraded, and apparently non– threatening practicum format. Many TAs' resistance to this process, it seemed, went far beyond their worries about inadequacies in their performance.

During a four–month participant–observation study of new TAs, I saw narratives used extensively in a university writing program that endorsed story as part of teacher preparation. New TAs participated in a week–long presemester orientation, took a one–semester Composition Theory and Practice seminar, and

enrolled in a one–credit practicum. During the orientation, experienced teachers modeled and told stories about their own classroom practice. As part of their work for the seminar, TAs kept weekly journals of their own teaching experiences. In the practicum, they met as a group twice a week with a faculty member to tell stories about what was happening in their classrooms—to discuss practices they had found successful and describe events that had raised questions for them. Story enabled many TAs to share, critique, validate, and transform their experience as practitioners.

Yet many TAs also struggled with at least three problems. 1) Some were skeptical about the validity and reliability of the local knowledge represented by stories; they also had difficulty seeing experience and practical know–how as "true" knowledge. 2) Others became cynical because they perceived that certain kinds of stories were being endorsed over others. 3) Some worried that they lacked control of the meanings and uses of their stories—in particular, they were concerned that storytelling in an institutional setting might become a tool of surveillance. This was in sharp contrast to storytelling as gossip, which could serve as a tool of resistance.

I began to pay attention to these problems because I was seeing what I considered contradictory behavior. For example, TAs eagerly told and discussed stories, then immediately trivialized that activity with the labels "group therapy" or "gossip." They spoke with wonder about insights they had gained from reflecting on the stories they had told, and then dismissed other such "testimonies" as propaganda techniques. But before deciding too quickly that storytelling caused the trouble or that TAs' insecurities were to blame for the problem, we should re–examine our attitudes as academics. We might ask ourselves if we are conveying mixed messages about what counts as knowledge. We should trace the ways we indicate our ambivalence about the value of story and the worth of beginners' experience. We must also recognize the risks and costs of storytelling in an academic setting.

To begin this re–examination, I'd like to look in more detail at the difficulties I mentioned above. First, TAs expressed skepticism about the usefulness of the particular, the doubts that the local knowledge created and passed on through anecdote should count as knowledge at all. Having entered graduate school with some hope of mastering an orderly system of general knowledge, some TAs now struggled with a different conception—knowledge that appeared limited, unsystematic, incoherent. No one was providing a quick overview of the teaching field. It looked as if an unruly mass of stories had replaced a clear list of do's and don't's.

Michael was a new TA who enjoyed telling stories of his adventures in and out of the classroom, but he never came to see story as a respectable source of knowledge about teaching. Michael regarded stories as gossip and entertainment, and he valued storytelling as a way to get attention. But when he wished to understand what was required to be a successful teacher, he wanted to abandon the stories and get down to business. So he hated the practicum. He

told me, "We've got a class—it's TA group therapy . . . you know . . . everybody's saying, 'Oh, I've got little Jimmy, and he's so funny' . . . I don't *care* about everybody's cute little story! . . . We're getting all the exceptions, and not the rules down. Everybody does something different. I want to see the forest, not just the trees." To Michael, each story seemed useful only for the few TAs who were concerned with a specific issue. He wanted explanations by authorities, not the explorations of his peers. He could not locate any basic principles—or, as he put it, any "core of knowledge." At first, he also wished for a "map." Implicitly, he accused the academy of expecting mastery while failing to provide instructions for its achievement. Later, after reading theoretical articles, he decided there wasn't supposed to be a map or set of instructions. Still he insisted that "telling stories" was an ephemeral, egotistical activity, inferior to what he called "talking about ideas."

Like Michael, Jane perceived that storytelling lacked academic status, in spite of its official place in the writing program. It bothered her when faculty and graduate students from outside the program suggested that the practicum was "not rigorous enough" to deserve academic credit. It bothered her when they argued that storytelling was only a confidence–builder, not a source of knowl-edge that counted academically. Teaching stories dealt with practice rather than propositions; such stories had more to do with knowing–how than with know-ing–that; they featured the subjective, not the objective. Influenced by these dichotomies that degraded lore, Jane began to call herself a "theory person," meaning that she relied on abstract principles. Yet when she tried to understand and improve her teaching, she found the exchange of stories more useful than general principles. So she also referred to herself as a practitioner (and "not a theory person," as if she had to make this choice, and make it clear). At the end of the term, Jane was confused. She said about the practicum, "It was only a social hour. It was helpful. Well—I'm fuzzy about it." For her and for others, two views of knowledge had clashed without leading to any synthesis.

The second major difficulty arose from TAs' perception that only certain kinds of stories were implicitly authorized. Some TAs tried to reproduce these story forms; some were pleased that new forms helped them view their teaching in new ways; others resisted what they saw as a subtle indoctrination technique. Jane was in this last group. Although she was confused about the status of stories told by her peers, she resisted stories told by experts—especially those who appeared to be endorsed by the writing program. These included the experi-enced teachers who spoke at orientation and the writing workshop proponents whose books appeared on the seminar reading list. Jane labeled their stories "testimonies," and she believed they were meant to seduce her to buy into a practice without first analyzing it. Jane was not moved by stories as teaching devices, particularly since they often took the form of the conversion narrative: "I used to think . . . but now I know. . . . " Because of her fundamentalist religious background, Jane already knew about testimony as a persuasive device; she considered it anti–intellectual. The presence of this form in an academic setting made her think of orthodoxy and party lines. She and her circle joked about

having to come up with a conversion story before the end of the semester. This cynicism came as a surprise to the program faculty, who had not intended to coerce cloned stories out of anyone but who did believe that learning followed a pattern of dissonance and transformation—something like a conversion narrative.

Jane and other TAs became cynical because they had assumed that storytelling meant complete autonomy—and then felt themselves in a double-bind when they encountered the limitations of story form and practitioner community. Stephen North has said about practitioner lore, "whereas in other communities the greatest authority over what constitutes knowledge resides with the community—lies, in effect, with *public* knowledge—here it lies with the individual Practitioner, and *private* knowledge . . . ; the individual, finally, decides . . . what counts as knowledge" (28). To the extent that TAs and faculty believed in a completely open field for knowledge–making, they were in for some problems. TAs who expected their mentors to be without agendas were soon disillusioned. Faculty who tried to stay out of the way, so that TAs could tell their own stories and make their own discoveries, were startled to hear comments about "party lines" and "in–groups." The community was indeed exerting authority over what constituted knowledge—although each TA retained the power to critique it.

The third problem had to do with new teachers' worries over the ramifications of stories they told about themselves in an institutional setting. TAs were accustomed to thinking of stories as private and personal. When they told stories in class, they felt exposed and vulnerable—like objects of surveillance. Certainly, they expected to be monitored in their first semester of teaching. But now some of them felt like collaborators in an observation process they did not quite understand. Stories introduced a new kind of accountability without providing dependable techniques for distance and control. This anxiety was greatest for TAs who had done academic writing but little or no fiction writing.

Bruce, for example, worried that he lacked control of the stories he was *telling*. As a new teacher, he tried constantly to monitor his public persona; in the presence of those who might evaluate him, he preferred to critique ideas rather than relate his own experiences. Whether his stories were positive or negative, their implicitness bothered him: he knew he could not control their interpretation. Particularly when he wrote teaching stories in his journal, he said, "It feels like there's constantly that evaluation." A story about his classroom practice might inadvertently reveal something he had been unaware of. Of course this would be useful for self–critique, but why should he make himself vulnerable to authorities who had the power to renew his teaching assistantship?

Sara, on the other hand, lacked control of the stories she was *hearing*. If her stories were officially so important, she reasoned, then her students' stories were vital too. As a result, she was soon engulfed in particulars. In a few months she collected a mountain of stories: classroom lore from every experienced teacher willing to share it and "trauma stories" (her phrase) from her students—

stories about rape, abuse, money troubles, addiction, failure. She felt obliged to respond to everyone's stories. The result was stress. "I get so worked up I have to talk myself down from it," she told me. "All I do is talk about my students. . . . they're emotional vampires." She had no distance, and she suspected that "distancing" was probably immoral anyway. Sara faced a world of stories with no protection.

Not surprisingly, fiction writers were least threatened by the use of story in their teaching preparation. They knew how to use stories to achieve distance and control. One TA, Alan, spoke often about using fiction as a "backdoor to truth": "Whatever truth I think I have to offer, or whatever I want to explore, it's always natural for me to try to explore that through fiction," he explained. Alan used anecdotes as examples of what he wanted to avoid in teaching, as evidence of classroom success, and as analogies for certain teaching practices. "In writing a story," he said, "you have an idea of what you're going to do with it . . . where you're going to go with it. But often the process itself dictates where that's going to go, what's going to happen. I think it's the same with classes and teaching." Alan did not share any true confessions or tell about any unsolved problems: his expertise in storytelling allowed him to maintain the private/public boundary that he wanted.

If stories are a source of important knowledge, if TAs have stories to tell, and if this storytelling is authorized and encouraged within a program, why do so much stress and ambivalence remain? One reason may be that TAs are confused about whether they are subjects or objects of their own stories. That is, by telling and listening to stories, are they doing something or having something done to them? Are they constructing themselves as knowers and transforming themselves as learners? Or are they only letting themselves be molded, allowing themselves to be known? Can authorized teaching stories resist and transform cultural patterns, or only reproduce them? Story as part of teacher preparation makes a welcome connection between private and public spheres of experience but in so doing it removes the protection of privacy. These are some reasons it is necessary for a seminar or practicum to discuss not only the interpretations of teaching stories, but also the implications of telling these stories.

A second reason for TAs' stress over this matter of storytelling has to do with our own confusion, in the field of composition, over what counts as disciplinary knowledge. These questions don't have to be settled, but they should be explicitly discussed with TAs. Recent articles by Thomas Newkirk, Patricia Harkin, Linda Brodkey, and others can be helpful starting points for such discussions. Not only researchers, but also new TAs and experienced teachers must (in Newkirk's words) "face the traditional academic bias against the particular" (129). As Brodkey puts it, "the academy has traditionally demonstrated a limited tolerance for lived experience, which it easily dismisses as 'anecdotes' or 'stories'" (41).

Students need to know that, like the case study in research, the teaching narrative "gains generalizability through particularity—if it provides insight"

(Newkirk 130) and enough specific information to allow teachers to judge whether it does provide insight. It is not unreasonable or unrigorous for TAs to view their stories as research—and not *only* as gossip, group therapy, or testimonial, however valuable these other functions may be. As Newkirk says, "In telling their tale, teachers need to recognize that the source of their authority comes from their intimate knowledge of the classroom and students . . . . It does not come through deference to expert opinion or through suppressing intuitive resources in favor of more distanced and more academically respectable means of observation" (133). Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff, who explore the epistemological status of practical and experiential knowledge, also suggest that more than a sense of well–being can emerge from storytelling sessions: "The conversation between people who have shared a type of experience has a richer quality to it that may not be observable by a simple recounting of their statements. . . . [T]here is *content* to an 'empathic' conversation, which is what makes it richer (informationally) than a mere objective discourse" (240).

Even though we may be convinced of the authority of practitioners and the importance of teaching stories as sources of valid knowledge, we still have to deal with the matter of expertise among *new* TAs. Ironically, the same focus on story that many see as *not* demanding academically can appear *too* demanding in terms of practical expertise. Most new TAs are used to being students, not teachers; they may find it easier to continue pursuing "knowledge–that" rather than to tell stories which reveal their lack of "knowledge–how." New teachers do not have much lore—if we define lore as practitioner knowledge of teaching. But they have plenty of experience. Obviously, they have experience as students. *Lives on the Boundary* provides a valuable model for the use of stories of early educational experiences. Mike Rose shows how his experiences as a student and as a boy growing up continue to shape and inform his teaching. A story that turns out to be useful for teaching practice may have little connection with teaching or the classroom. Alan, for example, told me a story about his father who constantly issued orders, thus inadvertently showing his son one way not to teach. Lynn Z. Bloom's autobiographical "Teaching College English as a Woman" shows that teaching experience cannot be separated from what we call "life experience." An emphasis on such stories in teacher preparation validates new TAs' experiences as sources of knowledge that will help them transform their inexperience.

Still, we should not expect that TAs, through a naturally unfolding process, will arrive at a position more or less matching a particular program's philosophy: that is, that their own teaching stories will cause them to perceive some truths about writing and teaching that their mentors had known all along. Often these truths do not appear self–evident, and no sooner have TAs responded to an invitation to validate experience as a source of new knowledge, than they feel that knowledge being undercut. Nancy Welch has described her experiences in a writing program where TAs who expressed certain views of their teaching were "named" by instructors and peers as naive, resistant, or intolerant (392). In such a program, the pressure to convert is explicit. My

observations of new TAs in a less coercive setting indicate that implicit pressures may also be strong. Some of these pressures come from the narrative modes of the stories themselves: "conversion stories" implicitly urge conversion.

Rather than simply waiting, or pushing, for new teachers to come around to their way of thinking, mentors, too, must come to terms with a multiplicity of knowledges and stories. Carolyn Ericksen Hill provides one model as she verbalizes her own "hidden agenda" as a teacher of teachers. Hill explains that as long as she had been content to live a story of academic life without telling that story, she had remained "unaware that I was acting out two poles, my soft–stanced mindset and the harder one of the system in which it was embedded" (78). By taking story seriously as a means to knowledge, Hill found it possible to analyze the conflict between her own "soft story" of "needy writers nourished by community" and a new TA's "hard story" of "independent writers taking authority for their own writing" (72).

Patricia Harkin suggests a postmodern way to view knowledges by superimposing them and concentrating on selected intersections. Lore needn't be a rattletrap unattended house nor knowledge a busy one–way street; narrative need not be linear or static. Harkin proposes two analogies—the transcontinental simulcast interview and the collaboratively drawn "cognitive map" made up of superimposed transparencies. Recently published groups of teacher stories, told in multiple voices, show that stories can accrete in a different ways to generate knowledge about teaching. For example, the Feminist Sophistics Group (Eichhorn, et al.) provides several stories, each told by a different author, but all closely focused on gender issues in the classroom. In contrast, Peter Elbow records stories collected at the English Coalition Conference without insisting on any central theme or focus for them. Attention to these alternative ways of viewing and using story would challenge TAs who are concerned about starting out in teaching with a map of worthwhile knowledge and those who have difficulty trusting the map they are beginning to compose for themselves.

Yes, the problems encountered by the TAs I studied may indicate inadequacies of lore as knowledge that counts. But it is more likely that there are inadequacies in our attitudes toward lore and toward the stories that constitute much of it. We fail to authorize teaching stories or fail to treat them adequately when we do authorize them. In addition to modeling and endorsing the teaching story, TAs and their mentors must discuss explicitly how it participates in what we call knowledge. Lore might also be redefined to include not only stories of what worked and didn't work in the classroom, but also critical discussions of why something worked, why it makes a difference, and who benefits. This is a most demanding approach to knowledge that counts: it is not only *assented to* as truth but *put to use*—as teaching that counts.

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An Examination of Writing Program Administrators' Options for the Placement of ESL Students in First Year Writing Classes

Tony Silva

How can writing program administrators best serve ESL students in first year composition programs? What special instructional options, if any, should they make available for these students? Such questions are being asked with increasing urgency at colleges and universities in the USA, many of which enroll substantial and steadily growing numbers of ESL students. These questions are not new. Discussions of instructional needs of and options for ESL writers in the literature on writing instruction appear as early as the beginning of the 1950's (Gibian; Ives) and have continued to appear, somewhat sporadically, up to the present. Most offer their perceptions of the similarities and differences of ESL and native English speaking (NES) writers and their suggestions for dealing with the differences, primarily in classrooms dominated by ESL writers (Benson, Deming, Denzer, and Valeri-Gold; Chirinos, Rundquist, and Washburn; Clark; England; Land and Whitley; Macha; Ostler; Schlumberger and Clymer; Scull). Some (Hafernik; McKay) go further and argue that salient differences between ESL and NES writers warrant separate sections of first year writing classes; others (Howard; Roy, "Alliance," "ESL"), seeing similarities between the two groups as more important, argue against separate sections.

It is my aim in this article to build on and broaden the scope of the aforementioned discussion. I propose to do this by (1) taking a more in depth look at the fairly large body of scholarship involving comparisons of ESL and NES writing, or more generally, comparisons of first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing; and (2) considering, in light of this scholarship, four placement options for ESL writers. My primary purpose is not to argue for or against any particular option, but to explore each in terms of its implications for students, teachers, administrators, and graduate education programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition.

The Research

The scholarship suggests that L1 and L2 writing are similar in their broad outlines; that is, it has been shown that both L1 and L2 writers employ recursive composing processes, involving planning, writing, and revising, to generate and develop their ideas and to find appropriate rhetorical and linguistic means to

express them. However, a close examination of L1 and L2 writing, in my view, reveals salient and important differences. This belief is supported by the intuitions of ESL writers' (Silva, "L1") and ESL writing practitioners' (Raimes) and by the results of comparative empirical research, which I will briefly review below. (See Silva ("Toward") for documentation and a fuller account of this research).

The findings from this research paint a picture of L2 writing as distinct from and simpler and less effective than L1 writing (in the eyes of L1 readers, at least). Though general composing patterns are similar in L1 and L2, it seems that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective. In the research, L2 writers did less planning (global and local) and had more difficulty with setting goals and generating and organizing material. Their transcribing was more laborious, less fluent, and less productive—reflecting a lack of lexical resources. They reviewed, reread, and reflected on their written texts less, revised more—but with more difficulty—and, were less able to revise intuitively, that is, on the basis of what "sounded" good.

At the global level, L2 writers' texts were less fluent (contained fewer words), less accurate (had more errors), and less effective (received lower holistic ratings). In terms of structure, their texts often exhibited distinct patterns of exposition, argumentation, and narration; their responses to two particular types of academic writing tasks—answering essay exam questions and using background reading texts—were different and less effective. Their orientation of readers was deemed less appropriate and acceptable.

At the local level, L2 writers' texts were stylistically distinct and simpler in structure. Their sentences included more but shorter t-units, fewer but longer clauses, more coordination, less subordination, less noun modification, and less passivization. They evidenced distinct patterns in the use of cohesive devices; particularly they used more conjunctive and fewer lexical ties. They also exhibited less lexical control, variety, and sophistication overall.

In essence, the findings of this comparative research suggest that ESL writers and their NES counterparts can differ in important ways and that, consequently, these differences—strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic—indicate a need for a careful consideration of placement options for ESL students in first year writing programs.

The Options

Mainstreaming

One option is to "mainstream" ESL writers, that is, to place them into first year composition courses designed for and dominated by NES writers—the sink or swim option. On the surface, this would seem to be the easiest route—the path of least resistance—for the administrator; no new course would need to be created, staffed, or supervised. In theory, mainstreamed ESL and NES students would profit from their interaction in such classes, gaining new cultural and linguistic insights. However, given their heavy teaching loads and large class

enrollments, teachers of such classes will probably not be able to devote the extra time and attention ESL writers may require. Furthermore, even if these teachers can spare the time, they may not be prepared to deal with ESL students' cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences, to meet their special needs. ESL students might inadvertently be held to unrealistic NES standards. They might be expected to have an NES student's familiarity with American culture, history, conventions, and rhetorical patterns. They might be expected to have native speaker intuitions about English and be penalized for making errors—for example, having problems with articles, prepositions, verb forms, etc.—that represent a natural stage in second language development. They may be asked to adopt strategies and work under time constraints that do not make sense for L2 writers. In short, mainstreamed ESL writers could be put at a severe disadvantage; their differences might be seen and treated as intellectual deficiencies. This, in turn, could result in resentment, alienation, loss of self confidence, poor grades, and, ultimately, academic failure.

Basic Writing

A second option is placing ESL students in basic or developmental writing classes designed primarily for inexperienced NES writers. The potential advantages for this course of action are, in part, the same as for the first option— no new classes are needed (assuming that basic writing classes are already provided) and ESL and NES writers are in a position to interact with and learn from each other on a variety of levels. A further potential advantage is that basic writing teachers are likely to be more sensitive to the needs of "different" students and—if their classes are smaller—be in a better position to give ESL writers some extra attention. However, basic writing teachers are typically prepared to teach inexperienced and/or educationally disadvantaged native English speakers and may not have any more insight into the characteristics and needs of ESL writers than those who teach mainstream classes; thus they may have the same unrealistic expectations and, consequently, the same problems. Furthermore, it must be recognized that ESL writers are not necessarily basic writers. Many are, in fact, very skilled and experienced in writing in their native language (and sometimes in English too). Therefore, curricula, syllabi, methods, and techniques designed for NES basic writers may not be appropriate for this group of ESL writers. Moreover, even if ESL writers are unskilled and inexperienced in writing (in their L1 and/or L2), their difficulties in writing, though superficially similar to those of NES basic writers, may have different underlying causes. For example, a linguistic problem for an NES basic writer might result from the transfer of oral language patterns and/or unfamiliarity with the written code; the same problem in an ESL writer might be a result of transfer of L1 linguistic patterns and/or an incomplete understanding of a particular grammar rule in English. Similarly, an organizational problem of a basic writer could spring from a lack of exposure to academic texts, whereas the same problem in an ESL student's writing might be a result of transfer of culturally conditioned rhetorical patterns (examples from McKay). The central point here is that a common response to seemingly similar problems in the writing of ESL and NES

basic writers could be wholly inappropriate. Finally, putting ESL writers into NES oriented basic writing classes could alienate both groups of students involved. NES basic writing students could infer that they are viewed as being somehow outside of their own culture, as non-native speakers of their own language. ESL students who are skilled and experienced writers could infer that they are being penalized for being culturally and/or linguistically different, that to be different is to be deficient. (See the third chapter of Leki for an extensive treatment of the ESL vs basic writer issue.)

ESL Writing

A third option is to offer credit bearing, requirement fulfilling first year writing classes especially designed and designated for ESL students. Given teachers knowledgeable about and curricula informed by research in both second language and composition studies, this option could prove to be an efficient and effective means for meeting the special needs of ESL writers. Additionally, on many campuses, such classes might constitute the only sheltered academic environments available to nonnative English speakers and thus provide at least one context in which ESL students are not isolated, where they are in a position to meet, work, and develop a sense of community with those in a similar situation. Furthermore, providing such courses and/or contexts for ESL students indicates that a writing program is willing to give more than lip service to efforts to support and retain nonnative English speaking students on campus.

However, this option does not come without a price. It requires that a new program component be created and administered and that present staff be reoriented or new staff hired—assuming that qualified individuals are available on campus or in the community. Moreover, pursuing this option could, for some, raise the specter of segregation, of putting ESL students in a separate but unequal position, of depriving them of the opportunity to interact with and learn from their NES peers and vice versa. (However, this argument pales a bit in light of the fact that ESL and NES students will be together in virtually all of their other (non-composition) classes.) Finally, ESL writing classes will probably be seen by some on campus as "remedial" in some sense (though these same individuals would probably not see foreign language classes as remedial—classes where NES students rarely attain the levels of proficiency in the L2 that ESL students have in English). Consequently, these ESL writing classes might be devalued, given second class status—as is also regrettably the case with basic writing courses for NES students.

Cross Cultural Composition

A fourth option is to offer first year writing classes designed to include more or less equal numbers of ESL and NES students: The goal in such arrangements is to meet the instructional needs of both groups and, as a dividend, to foster crosscultural understanding, communication, and collaboration. Assuming the availability of practitioners with a background in designing and teaching courses for ESL and NES writers, this option has the potential to enrich both groups involved, culturally and linguistically, as well as to enhance their writing

abilities. Offering such classes could help to assuage concerns about segregation of ESL students and about ESL writing instruction as remediation, and, at the same time, cast the writing program in a leadership role in multicultural and international initiatives on campus.

While this option might offer the most benefits, it could also be the most challenging to implement. As with the third (exclusively ESL) option, a new program component would need to be created, staffed, and supervised. However, staffing this option—finding and/or preparing substantial numbers of practitioners equally qualified for and comfortable dealing with ESL and NES writers—could be particularly problematic. This option could also give rise to some logistical concerns; for example, how would the enrollment of more or less equal numbers of ESL and NES students in particular classes be accomplished?

Discussion

In light of the foregoing then, which of the options, as presented here, would seem to be in the best interest of ESL students, that is, which one would be least likely to disadvantage them and most likely to successfully address their needs? For me, the mainstream option seems the least desirable, and the basic writing option, not much better; the ESL writing option seems more promising and the crosscultural option most.

However, asking which one option is the best may not be the most constructive way of approaching this problem. An optimal response to this problem might be to offer ESL students as many of these options (and more) as resources permit. After all, there are many types of ESL students. Some of the more proficient and confident ESL students might welcome the challenge of the mainstream classroom. Some ESL students may fit the basic writer profile and be well served by the basic writing option. Some—and I would suspect, the majority—would be most comfortable with the ESL and crosscultural options, where curricula and instruction are, by design, sensitive to L2 writers' needs.

Is offering ESL students such a range of options profligate and unrealistic, especially in these times of fiscal restraint? I don't believe so. These students will all need to be enrolled in first year writing classes, regardless of how many options they are given. The problem would seem to be one of human rather than financial resources, of finding enough teachers knowledgeable about and experienced in working with ESL writers or with ESL and NES writers. In the short run, writing program administrators, alone or perhaps with the aid of an ESL specialist, will need to scramble to find those rare individuals with the requisite qualifications or reorient teachers of mainstream classes. Ultimately, this is a problem that needs to be addressed in graduate programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition. ESL teacher educators need to acknowledge that writing instruction is becoming a central, if not the central, element of ESL teaching in colleges and universities in the USA, and they need to adjust their programs accordingly, that is, to provide their students with or refer them to

courses that deal with the theory and practice of writing and writing instruction, in L1 and in L2. Graduate programs in rhetoric and composition need to acknowledge that their teachers will, in all likelihood, be involved with classes and/or programs that include substantial and growing numbers of nonnative English speakers and should provide their students with or refer them to courses that deal with the theory and practice of second language learning and teaching, including L2 writing. Clearly then, a need for enhanced articulation and cooperation between graduate programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition in the preparation of writing practitioners is indicated.

Is this too ambitious an agenda? Can writing programs afford to accommodate ESL writers? Given the reality of multiculturalism and the goal of providing equal opportunity for a quality education, can they afford not to?

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Shooting Niagara:
Making Portfolio Assessment Serve
Instruction at a State University

Richard Haswell, Lisa Johnson-Shull and Susan Wyche-Smith

Can portfolios possibly work for competency assessment at a large, public university? It is hard enough working with just one student and one portfolio: all that minding and reminding, reading for revision, reading for re-vision, checking and double-checking, gathering in, evaluating out. Multiply that by 25 and you have the difficulty of managing portfolios with a whole class. Multiply that by the number of classes in a multi-section course, and you begin to see the problems Elbow and Belanoff talk about. Multiply that by the number of courses involved in a four-year curriculum, and you begin to see the mind-boggling challenges Alverno College (a small, private institution) has been struggling with for years in its general-education portfolio assessment . Multiply the complexity of that program by the greater size of, say, the University of Minnesota, and you are likely to end up with a portfolio system so formidable that it never gets past the proposal stage (Anson and Brown). Just thinking about creating an institution-wide portfolio assessment for a state university leaves you, as William Condon and Liz Hamp-Lyons say it left them at the University of Michigan, "poised on the edge of an abyss."

This is where we are at Washington State University. Last year officially began the testing of the writing competence of all undergraduates, about 14,500 of them, by portfolio. The three of us and Robin Magnuson, Director of the Writing Center, have designed and implemented this new system and are, consequently, responsible for its possible bust. For us, "poised on the edge of an abyss" seems a pretty tame image. We think our present position more like shooting Niagara, which adds, to the picture of hitting bottom, the thought of being ground on the rocks below by several thousand tons of water per minute.

Three years ago at WSU there was no thought about portfolios as part of the revision of the undergraduate general education program. Today, our portfolio system is in place, or rather, on its way (writing assessment, like curricular reform, is never still). During the last three years, we have learned some things, found some answers to the questions that arise with large-scale portfolio assessment. Obviously, they are answers to our local problems, but they may help others contemplating the ride. In shooting our Niagara, we don't know exactly where we are—within sight of the steam rising from the abyss, at the lip, in mid-air? We are inside the barrel and can't see very well. Our account takes us only to the precarious position we find ourselves in now; not yet safely to the

bottom, we want to talk instead about *building our barrel*—the junior-level portfolio and how we went about constructing it—*launching the barrel*—how we navigated the project around treacherous committee and administrative snags—and finally, *guiding the barrel over the falls*—how we plan to deal with the logistical problems, including adjustments that we may be able to make as we go along, even in mid-air.

But, as with most daredevil stunts these days, first we had to *secure permission*. Three years ago, two of us were appointed to a subcommittee on testing and assessment, reporting to the university-wide committee on writing. We had been asked to develop an alternative to the earlier proposed impromptu examination, which we had torpedoed through a series of letters and interviews with high-ranking administrators. The creation of the subcommittee was our chance to persuade the main committee of the feasability of portfolio assessment.

Because no other school of our size had made it past the planning stage, good arguments were difficult to come by. Lacking viable models, we used current research to claim that the other assessment alternative—a single impromptu writing test—could not be trusted as the sole indicator of ability (for a summary, see Ruth and Murphy). After identifying the potential failure of the traditional impromptu plan, we were ready with a well-sketched plan of our own—the portfolio (see Appendix A, "WSU Writing Qualifying Examination: Rationale for Using Portfolios," which became the written version of our arguments). We also made strategic use of deadlines to get our plan accepted. Because the faculty senate had mandated implementation of a junior-level writing assessment within less than a year, the committee needed to begin piloting something in the next semester. Some members of the committee were already supportive of portfolio assessment, but for those who weren't, the deadline helped get us the nod.

To gain administrative sanction we had to anticipate two problems, both having to do with the labor intensive nature of portfolios: cost effectiveness for administrators and time investment on the part of teachers. We knew our administration would be concerned about the cost of evaluating portfolios. To offset that, we decided to use teacher approval of prior coursework to complete a substantial portion of the portfolio: an original paper with a teacher's signature on an attached cover sheet would qualify as an already evaluated submission. A completed portfolio would require three such coursework submissions, along with two samples of timed and proctored writing, evaluated by trained readers. Of course, we also anticipated faculty concern that the portfolio would require them to assign more writing or writing of a different kind in their courses. To allay resistance on this point, we kept the number of course submissions low (only three), kept guidelines flexible (no page-length or genre requirements), and included a cover sheet so that teachers could sign off on clean copies of student submissions if they did not wish to have portfolio readers perusing comments written with only the student in mind. We should note that time and again these concerns were raised, and each time we could point to these charted features; ultimately, the fact that we had considered the perspectives of both non-compo-

sition faculty and budget-wise adminstrators gained us support at critical junctures of the political process.

Testing the Waters

Although some of the work designing the portfolio took place while seeking permission to pilot it, much took place beforehand, and we continue to make adjustments as we go along. The portfolio is one part of an integrated program of writing instruction, writing assessment, and general education at WSU. All entering students are placed into an appropriate writing course by essay examination. To pass their required writing course, students submit at the tenth week a folder of writings which, in effect, serves as practice for the junior portfolio. During their freshman and sophomore years, students must complete extended writing assignments in all their general education courses, including research papers in a required two-semester World Civilizations course. By the end of the semester after which they achieve junior standing, students must establish competence on the junior portfolio. They are then qualified to take required writing-intensive upper-division courses in their major. Thus our portfolio is not a one-time assessment, but a midpoint check in an institution-wide emphasis on writing.

In constructing the junior portfolio, every feature was born in a give-and-take struggle between theory and research on the one hand, and local needs and the constraints of a large-scale assessment on the other. We learned that constraints of size often, rightfully, win the day. For starters, take the theoretical issue of validity. How many samples of a student's writing are needed to make a portfolio valid, to show a student's true writing competence? No one really knows, but theoretically, the more, the better. Obviously, with our large student population, the fewer, the better. Here size won out, and we went with as few as we thought we could defend theoretically (three pieces from courses, and two impromptu writings consisting of a traditional essay and a self-reflective piece on the student's writing experience). We noted that portfolio assessment shifts the emphasis from this question of construct validity to the question of instructional validity. Does our test let students show skills and knowledge that have been taught them, or does it unfairly examine them for outcomes that have never come out in their coursework (Feldhusen, et al.)? Here we listened to theory, asking that the majority of portfolio submissions be actual products of the courses themselves, signed off as acceptable by the teachers themselves.

Along with theory, research findings in assessment also battled our size constraints. Given the endless torrent of writers pouring through this competency gate, we knew that we had to have some kind of impromptu writing to convince everybody—faculty and students—that no one would be able to cheat. Recent research has discouraged the use of impromptu timed essays, because that kind of testing tends to undervalue already weak writers (Bernhardt; Morante; and Johns). But coupled with the submission of revised pieces from course work, the impromptu could help us with the first level of competency

assessment—most writers who are able to produce articulate prose under time pressures can *generally* be expected to write well, given time for formal revision. The research also indicates that two separate writing tasks, even if timed, add considerable validity, and that weak writers make good use of extra time to write (beyond a 20-minute minimum) if they have "warmed up" by already writing a piece (Livingston). There also exists a good deal of anecdotal testimony that self-reflective pieces add diagnostic information, but as yet there is little research to confirm it (Allen and Roswell; Faigley, et al.; Camp; and Wolf).

The mixed messages from research gave our size constraints greater voice. We decided to design the main impromptu piece as a repeat of our freshman placement exam, giving students a familiar format and thereby reducing the number of questions they might have about it.[1] The second, self-reflective piece serves primarily as additional information in portfolios difficult to diagnose, much like the "reflective letter" assigned in portfolios for Miami University (Sommers, et al.). Furthermore, by design, the two impromptu pieces double as outcomes assessment pieces for our general education program (also mandated by the state).[2] These multiple uses added credibility to the portfolio as a cost-effective measure and garnered further administrative support for portfolio assessment.

Finally, in designing the portfolio there was some characteristic negotiation between the constraints of size and the local situation. As we have noted, students at WSU prepare a portfolio-like folder in freshman composition. Were we to give in to efficiency totally, we would simply let students submit that folder again at the junior level, or as many pieces from it as they wished. However, as composition teachers trying to give our WAC program further leverage at the lower-division level, we would prefer that none of the junior submissions be from composition classes. Our compromise was to allow one paper from a composition course. For our colleagues across the disciplines, two papers from non-composition courses turned out to be well calculated—at least several key people, including the president of the faculty senate, nodded their heads at the right time and uttered the magic phrase, "looks doable."

If our decisions appeared calculated, then in this case appearance matched reality. We were aware that the banks of "cutting-edge assessment" were littered with the debris of projects that crossed the jagged line separating "doable" from "disastrous." Minnesota's ill-fated junior-level portfolio proposal stipulated four pieces of writing from the freshman year, a long piece from the sophomore, and an extensive research paper from the junior—to our minds perfectly doable, but not so to Minnesota administrators, one of whom helped kill the proposal by calculating that each year's output of portfolios would take up to 330 feet of shelf space. We encourage others in the planning stage to be mindful of such details: we anticipated the question from our administration and decided to let students be responsible for preparing and storing their portfolios before they were assessed. And yes, questions about filing cabinets were raised more than once.

Taking the Plunge

Having gained permission to ply the waters, designed the barrel and, finally launched it, the question is still: can we guide it safely over the falls? Fortunately, our Writing Center, which was delegated headquarters for the portfolio project, has an established reputation for serving, with minimal resources, the writing support needs of dozens of departments. The director, assistant directors and numerous tutors (many from disciplines other than English) spend hours each semester doing volunteer outreach—going to classes across the campus to discuss Writing Center services for both students and teachers. In the last few years, the staff has visited 73 different classes within 37 degree departments as well as providing over 3,000 contact hours of tutorials per semester.

We situated the portfolio *administratively* in the Center rather than, say, our campus Testing Office, because we believed that its service to students and faculty would make it instrumental in establishing a climate conducive to *instructional* implementation of the portfolio. Sustaining that climate, however, depended on incorporating administrative functions which had not been responsibilities of the Center before. Space, equipment, and clerical help existed only minimally for its services; tutors and students handled all registration issues on a single computer. The increased paperwork and student traffic resulting from a portfolio assessment presented challenges for Writing Center staff that could not be adequately met unless the budgetary waters were deepened, not diminished. Because permanent funding was not available at the time of implementation (though requests were in the pipeline), the program relied heavily on a student fee of $12.00 which was tentatively projected to cover maintenance costs once the program was underway. However, the risk of using a writing center that existed on soft funds proved strategically successful: permanent funding, a long overdue raise for the director, support for summer hours, new equipment, a secretary, and preferential ranking on the university's building list—all came through on the next budget.

Because students are asked to take most of the risks in this journey, and pay for it as well, we launch them into this process by providing them with all the information and support necessary to compile their portfolios. As students complete their freshman writing class, which is the prerequisite for submitting a portfolio, they are given information about the procedure, and reminded that they may already have one of their three required course papers completed. They are also encouraged to visit or call the Writing Center if they need help. Transfer students (who make up fifty percent of WSU's upper-division student body) may submit work from other institutions and are given additional time (the equivalent of one semester at full-time enrollment) to collect the required pieces; because they do not usually take a writing course at our campus, the Writing Center plays an even greater role in advising and helping them to prepare their coursework pieces.

Throughout the semester, the Writing Center advertises times for students to check-in with their portfolios, and once we determine that they are eligible—that is, that they have three course papers complete with signed cover sheets—students are charged the fee, with the receipt indicating the time and place for the writing session and serving as the "ticket" for admission. We feel this checking-in step is crucial to the success of the portfolio—it allows us to talk with the students and help them take care of any problems before they show up to do the supervised writing component of their portfolio, and it enables us to schedule students in an orderly manner so we are not overwhelmed by too many students at any writing session. We also offer students the option of writing the main impromptu essay on a word processor, so we must know in advance how many students to expect.

Once the portfolios are complete, they are submitted to a multidisciplinary faculty reading committee. Readers are recruited to join if they have established a history of commitment to writing instruction at our institution, usually from earlier attendance at WAC seminars or repeated contact with the Writing Center. To encourage continued interest in the program and to recognize their special service, we pay readers a respectable hourly wage. We divide our pool of readers into two tiers: those new to the process (Tier 2) and those with extensive experience with writing assessment (Tier 3). (Tier 1 is the faculty signing off on course papers.) Tier 2 readers read only the impromptu portions of the portfolio and their task is relatively simple. We begin training Tier-2 readers using facsimiles of previously-assessed pieces until their responses are consistent with those of the more experienced Tier-3 readers. Then they participate in the regular training and rating sessions. Eventually, and as the numbers of portfolios grow, we will promote Tier-3 readers from the Tier-2 group. Having the two levels allows us to slowly build an experienced, well-trained group of faculty from across the disciplines to participate in the more difficult task of portfolio assessment.

Although theory recommends at least two independent readings for valid rating of essays, we decided to challenge theory (and tradition) in order to streamline the reading of portfolios. We begin by separating the process of evaluation into two steps: reading and rating the impromptu pieces and reading and rating portfolios as a whole. After a regular norming session, in which all readers participate, Tier-2 readers read and sort impromptu essays as *acceptably proficient* , *not proficient* (or even questionably proficient), and *exceptional*. Essentially, their task is to identify the middle group of proficiently written essays—all others, strong or weak, are read by Tier-3 readers, often in conjunction with the other submissions in the portfolio. Based on earlier pilot studies, we anticipate a majority of the impromptu essays being "acceptable" and therefore requiring only one reading. All problematic or exceptional impromptu essays are read by the more experienced Tier-3 readers who either verify or nullify the non-proficient or exceptional determination and, if necessary, discuss the essays with other Tier-3 readers until a consensus is reached. Although a borderline essay may receive several readings (the initial Tier-2 reading and one or more Tier-3

readings), the percentage of essays that need that attention is relatively small. Consequently, essays that most readers agree on receive less attention and essays which are difficult to assess receive considerably more. Our follow-up studies of this process suggest that it is as accurate as the more traditional holistic approach, but more labor efficient.[3] *That difference is the most important reason that an institution of our size can undertake a portfolio assessment.*

After Tier-2 and Tier-3 readers determine whether impromptu essays are "exceptional," "acceptable" or "need work," the process of reviewing the three revised pieces begins. In cases where students have written exceptionally on the impromptu exam and all three of the revised pieces have been designated "exceptional" by classroom teachers, then the portfolio is deemed "exceptional" overall. These require no further reading. In cases where a discrepancy exists between coursework and the impromptu writing (e.g., where the classroom teachers have designated the pieces "exceptional" but the impromptu pieces were deemed "need work"), further reading of the portfolio by Tier-3 readers is required. Again, we have streamlined our process by looking only at problematic portfolios, those in which some differences exist in the ratings of Tier-2 (in the case of revised pieces, classroom teachers) and Tier-3 raters. Of the 3500 or so students whose work we will evaluate each year, we anticipate between ten and twenty percent being reviewed for exceptional merit, and between twenty and thirty percent being reviewed for possibly needing further instruction. In other words, we anticipate fifty percent of our students receiving a "pass" on their portfolio based on a single reading of the two impromptu essays. The remaining fifty percent will receive a second reading of the impromptu essays, and perhaps fifty percent of those will require a review of the full portfolio—either to award merit or to determine need. In real numbers, that means we will read 875 portfolios instead of 3500.

Students whose entire portfolio package demonstrates exceptional writing skill receive acknowledgement on their offical transcripts. Using the portfolios to recognize more than minimal competency gained us support from faculty in other disciplines, administrators, even our university regents. Students whose impromptu pieces suggest more instruction is needed are required to complete whatever work has been indicated by the Tier-3 readers, ranging from a few hours in a topical workshop to a 1-credit tutorial course offered by the Writing Center (taken concurrently with upper-division writing-in-the-major courses), to an additional 3-credit lower-division writing course. Other options may become apparent once the program provides us with more information about student needs. Notably, most options are instructional (that is, further coursework or tutorials); the experience of other institutions tells us that using retesting as a regular option would create a pool of students caught between lower and upper-division status. Although retesting is one possibility, especially for cases where students wish to appeal the decision, we believe that the use of portfolios argues against it. Even though the impromptu essay is the first level of assessment, the three revised pieces in the portfolio carry the greatest weight in the assessment outcome, and students whose writing has been designated

"needs work" have demonstrated consistent problems throughout their portfolio.

Are we assessing something that truly merits the name "portfolio"? We believe so. It is true that a large number of our students will have only their impromptu essays read by the reading committee. However, all of our students will have had all five of their essays assessed at some point, all students whose qualification is questionable will have all five of their pieces judged as a unit, all students will benefit from the process of building portfolios, all students will reflect on their writing process, and all students will be able to choose their best work for the readers to consult, if necessary. In another way, our assessment process has already achieved an outcome traditionally awarded to portfolio systems: it has had an impact on classroom instruction and institutional awareness of assessment issues that a simple impromptu examination would never have had. Our barrel may look strange compared to those used by other, smaller institutions and to writing folders used by teachers in the classroom; nevertheless it meets our particular needs and resources in a way that matches the multi-sampled shape of a true portfolio more nearly than that of any single-sampled assessment.

On the Edge

As we write, submissions have not reached full force; stronger currents will catch us next year. If our portfolio works, it will be because we designed for large numbers from the start, because we kept past failures in mind, integrated all necessary elements (politics, design, and infrastructure) and, finally, because we are personally committed to the concept, perhaps foolishly so as the barrel-over-Niagara metaphor suggests. Although it takes a level of foolish nerve to believe we can pull this off, thus far the signs are good: several departments are implementing portfolios at the senior level; faculty are calling the Writing Center for help integrating writing into their curriculum; we have the support of our administrators; and most of the students who have submitted already have responded positively. With any luck, the ride will be easier than anticipated and we can think ahead to our next project: jumping Hell's canyon on a motorcycle.

Notes

1. For a description of the design for our freshman placement exam, including a copy of the exam itself, see Haswell and Wyche-Smith.

2. We keep copies of both the placement examination and the impromptu portion of the junior portfolio for a period of five years. This allows faculty involved in assessing the general education program to draw samples at a later date, separate from the evaluation of individual students. The placement examination provides baseline data and, in conjunction with the junior-level writing, supplies for longitudinal studies. The samples of writing also can be used by faculty and graduate students for purposes of research. If students are willing to release their writing for research, we ask them to indicate this on the information sheet they fill out when the take the exams. Eighty-two percent are willing.

3. We have used this unorthodox system now for two years in reading freshman essays for placement. Follow-up studies show that placements generated through only one reading under this system have high reliability and validity. Of once-read essays that were recirculated (unmarked), 96.3 percent received the same placement. Of 100 randomly chosen students placed into regular freshman composition through one reading, only five did not pass the course and only one left evidence that the failure to earn credit was due to inability to meet course standards. Of these 100, only one was judged by the regular-composition teacher as better placed in the basic course. A little over 65 percent of placement essays had to be read only once. This represents a sizeable savings in time and money. Compared to our system, the most efficient holistic readings, where all essays are initially read by two independent readers and then about 15 percent are read a third time, requires 40 to 45 percent more readings (we recently learned that comparable figures were achieved at University of Pittsburg by William Smith, using a similar process which he refers to as the "Expert Model" of assessing writing). For a description of the two-tier system used for placement in our freshman writing program, see Haswell and Wyche-Smith.

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Appendix A

WSU Writing Qualifying Examination: Rationale for Using Portfolios

Washington State University will soon require all undergraduates at the "rising junior" level to take a **Writing Qualifying Examination**. It will be first offered in spring 1993. Students admitted as freshmen in the fall of 1991 or thereafter must pass the Writing Qualifying Examination to be eligible for graduation (see WSU 91-93 *Bulletin*, p. iii). Students must take the examination after completing English 101 or its equivalent and before the end of the first semester after attaining 60 credit hours; transfer students are allowed to post-pone taking it until their second semester of full-time enrollment at WSU or until completing a total of 15 additional credit hours.

Students who are unsuccessful on the Writing Qualifying Examination will be required to complete additional preparation. Such preparation might include a tutorial program in the WSU Writing Center or completion of an appropriate composition course. These requirements should be satisfied as quickly as possible, since one purpose of the examination is to qualify students to take the required upper-division writing-intensive [M] courses in their majors.

The Senate gave the All University Writing Committee the task of designing and implementing the examination, and the first part of that task is done. The examination will consist of a portfolio of the student's writings. The portfolio will contain (1) a selection of the student's papers from previous coursework, and (2) a timed writing examination.

The All University Writing Committee has chosen to define the Writing Qualifying Examination as a portfolio for several reasons. There is a large body of evidence that a single, timed, impromptu test is a very unreliable measure of writing ability. Fluency under pressure will be tested, but as only one of the skills needed by WSU students. Using a student writing portfolio containing examples of several kinds of assignments provides both a larger sample and a broader range of student abilities for the examiners to evaluate and thereby greatly increases the validity of the examination. The portfolio, consisting of papers from previous course work certified as such by the instructor, also establishes a useful relationship between the examination and the undergraduate curriculum. Ideally, the Writing Qualifying Examination can become a form of writing assessment that supports curriculum as well as assesses student progress through it.

Although a portfolio system presents problems of implementation that are more complex than those involved in a single, timed, essay examination, experience at other institutions suggests that these problems can be solved. More importantly, there will be positive outcomes that easily compensate for the additional effort. With a student writing portfolio, the university acquires a fairer, more accurate measure of students' writing abilities at approximately the mid-point of their academic careers; simultaneously, students with problems are identified and can be given assistance in a timely fashion, while there is still

opportunity for improvement. Through use of the portfolio, the institutional emphasis on good writing can extend through nearly the entire curriculum rather than confine itself to English composition courses. Once approved, the individual student's portfolio will continue to be of use for departmental advising and for the student's later job searching. Statistical results from the Writing Qualifying Examination will also form part of the university's program of assessment of educational outcomes, and efforts will be made to convert those results into program improvements.

What changes will the Examination require of individual teachers in their undergraduate courses? Preparing a portfolio requires students to ask teachers to certify papers that have been submitted as part of a course; in most cases, this certification will require no more time than it takes to sign off on a form provided by the student.

How much more time and energy will teachers have to commit to writing instruction? The Writing Portfolio does not *require* instructors to add writing assignments to courses. It may, however, encourage some instructors to ask more formal writing from students, particularly in general education courses, and thus it may bring about changes in writing assignments that are already part of a course. The portfolio portion of the examination may also encourage instructors to assign and respond to early drafts of papers, as this is one way of increasing the likelihood that students' work is their own.

Call for Papers: Hypertext and Composition

Scott Lloyd DeWitt and Kip Strasma invite submissions for a collection of essays that explores the issues of hypertext, empirical research, and writing pedagogy entitled, *Empirical Inquiry into Hypertextualizing Composition.* Submissions should describe empirical research studies that investigate the influence of hypertext on students' writing processes. We are especially interested in submissions that represent diverse teaching strategies and sites (K-12, two-year college, university, etc.). Writers should prepare a two-page, single spaced proposal that reveals the study's focus, its research methodology, and its current status. Submit two copies of your proposal by 1 February 1995 to Scott Lloyd DeWitt, The Ohio State University-Marion Campus, 1465 Mt. Vernon Ave., Morrill Hall, Marion, OH, 43302-5695, or e-mail one copy to dewitt.18@osu.edu and to kstrasma@heartland.bradley.edu.

Teach, Not Test:
A Look at a New Writing Placement Procedure

Alice Robertson

A number of years ago I helped evaluate the writing placement procedure conducted during summer orientation by a large public university. I observed hundreds of students packed into a hollow auditorium and wedged into too small row seats, all diligently attempting to write a prompted essay in traditional blue books supported on eight by eleven and a half inch lapboards. The room was poorly lighted, overcrowded and un-air-conditioned in the middle of a very hot July. I was horrified. What kind of an essay could you or I write under such constricting physical conditions?

This scene reappeared vividly when the Writing Program staff at Stony Brook was asked in 1989 to re-examine the effectiveness of their summer placement test. We were asked to do so for all the wrong reasons—the University wanted to cut fiscal corners by scrapping the writing exam and using standardized scores instead. No one in the program agreed with this agenda, but, knowing that we would have to justify our summer budgets and testing expenses, we scrutinized our procedures carefully. What we found was unsettling indeed.

At the time our procedure, like that of the school I had evaluated, consisted of one two-hour essay exam: a three-part writing procedure consisting of freewriting, composing an essay derived from that freewriting, and then producing a metacommentary on the writing processes involved. For our test, the lapboards had vanished, the lighting was much improved and the air-conditioning worked. Students were still in a large lecture hall, but here there were large curved writing counters and individual chairs behind them instead of rows of seats. Still, both counters and chairs were bolted to the floor to prevent any movement by individual students or any interaction between groups of students. In other words, the physical conditions had improved somewhat but the atmosphere was still stiff, impersonal and uninviting, not a place at all conducive to engendering writing.

While these stark, unwelcoming conditions disturbed us, we were far more concerned with the exam itself. Although we had struggled for years to design a fair and non-traditional process for placing students, we realized that, under these "test taking" conditions, we hadn't really changed much at all.While ours was not a traditional exam, it was still a test, an essay that supposedly measured a student's writing ability by the evaluation of product only. Now we

were, and still are, a process-oriented program, emphasizing an holistic approach to language, collaborative learning, individual step-by-step development of student-generated papers and continuous revision based on peer and teacher responses to ongoing drafts. Yet our own placement procedure ignored most of these integral aspects of our program, though the metacommentary did provide some space for students to acknowledge and discuss their writing processes. If we truly believed that "the instructor acts as a guide and evaluator, responding to students' work at each stage, commending, advising and encouraging during the process, rather than merely criticizing the finished product" (Lauer 64), then why were our process-trained writing instructors acting as monitors for a product-oriented exam? Why weren't we practicing in placement what we so ardently advocated in our classrooms and courses? However unconsciously, we were obviously violating our own dicta about the teaching of writing by asking students to write under these circumstances. Fortunately, the solution here was equally obvious once we became aware of the discrepancy. We do believe in process; therefore, if we are to judge products for placement, we should observe, guide and evaluate the processes that produce them.

This realization led to the initiating of an unusual and new method of obtaining writing samples for placement purposes—unusual because we replaced a testing procedure with a teaching procedure that reflects our program's philosophy and new because we believe this is the first time such a procedure has been implemented on the post-secondary level. In our new design, model English 101 classrooms replaced the old lecture hall sites, and writing instruction replaced former essay tests. Students attending summer orientation were divided into groups of twenty-five each (our standard 101 size) and for an hour participated in workshop activities that encapsulated the teaching that occurs daily in our composition classes during the regular semester. These classrooms were small, brightly lit, air-conditioned and furnished with movable individual desks for student-centered group activities. In short, they were writing classrooms, not testing sites. Interestingly, while we had started out just trying to accomplish our required placements for university writing courses without succumbing to accepting standardized test scores, we had inadvertently produced a format that introduced incoming students to a mini version of our writing courses. Although that was not our original goal, it was an invaluable by-product of our new design.

In brief, the new design encompassed all the aspects of writing our program emphasized: students in each class freewrote, shared and responded to the writings and then talked in small groups about topics generated within the class before putting pen to blue book and actually composing individual essays. A typical placement class began as all our writing workshops begin—with writing. As Donald Murray so aptly points out,

> The first day of the writing unit should begin with writing, not talking [translation for talking: lecturing]. The student writes and the teacher writes.This information is, of course, a symbolic gesture. It demonstrates that the information in the course will come from the students. The students produce the principal text in the writing course. (14)

We believe that and, because we believe it, the placement opens with a private freewriting exercise of 5-10 minutes that allows students to relax (they have just arrived a few hours earlier and have already been subjected to dormitory assignments, a math exam and mass lunch), settle down, and flex their writing muscles. Here they can start to generate ideas on paper, their own ideas that will expand later in the class and eventually lead to an essay on a topic the students in each session choose.

Early on we had experimented with a number of topics and prompts; none had worked very well or satisfied the students or the teachers. The students had often detested a particular topic; the teachers had detested the resulting boring papers. We had forgotten a basic dictum: "The best student writing is motivated by personal feeling and experience" (Judy 38).

Encouraging such writing was something we had long practiced in our classes, but we had neglected to incorporate it into our placement procedure. To remedy this oversight, each placement class is allowed to choose a general topic. Individual students then narrow the topic and focus it to suit their own feelings and experiences. The result has been less complaining about the writing task from the students (after all, they chose the task) and more interesting essays for readers to evaluate.

That choosing occurs halfway through the class after a focused freewriting (15-20 minutes) on a topic the student considers appropriate for the day's essay. The source of the focus varies. Some teachers suggest a memorable experience associated with learning, others list very general topics on the board, and some just throw out common interest subjects to the class as a whole. However, the classes are not bound by any of these suggestions. The students are told up front that this second freewriting is not private but will be shared with their peers in small groups. Knowing this, they usually write more slowly and pause more often, obviously concerned about the reactions of the readers who will see this text.

Those readers, the small groups of five each, constitute the third stage of the model class, collaborative group work composed of sharing and responding. Because, "all writers need to know how readers react to what they have written," sharing and responding to student texts are integral parts of our writing workshops and placement classes (Lunsford 107). Here individual students talk with their peers in a comfortable, non-threatening setting and receive helpful feedback that can flesh out and enrich the essay they will eventually write. This sharing also incorporates the holistic elements of speaking/listening/reading/writing into our mini class. Each student in turn reads and receives oral feedback on his/her writing and then listens and comments on his/her peers' texts. As Stephen Judy points out, all these interlinked processes are essential to the creation of language:

> The person creates language about his or her ideas that both displays them for self examination and allows them to be communicated to others. What gives this process its drive—its energy—is, first, that humans have

an intrinsic need to sort through and understand their experiences, and second, that they need to share their perceptions with others (Judy 38).

Both these needs are being met in our sample class: the two freewritings display knowledge to the students for self examination while the group sharing enriches and expands that knowledge through language interchange with others. After each group has discussed the topics generated by the freewriting, has chosen one to nominate as the topic for the placement essay, and has selected a speaker, the class reassembles as a whole. The speaker from each group reports on their topic and the reasons for choosing it. The teacher acts as scribe, listing the topics on the board and, after further discussion, the class votes to select a single topic. During this process, we have introduced them to another aspect of our 101 workshop, whole class dialogue. In orientation, this stage is usually less lively than the small group work (they are more uncomfortable and therefore more shy speaking in a larger setting) but it, too, is an essential part of our overall program.

At this point, before we take a five minute break and return to write the actual placement essay, teachers usually ask for student reaction (sometimes verbal, sometimes written) to the freewriting and group work and, surprisingly, such response is almost always positive. Individual opinions vary, but most feel the hour long class with its casual format, group interaction and class conversation reduces "test anxiety" considerably. Students like the social component of talking with other students, sharing ideas with peers and having a teacher available to answer questions and provide individual attention and general writing guidance. The freewriting rates as a positive experience, and a majority think this model class is a "fairer" (their word) way to place people, more personal and less stressful than a test with hundreds of people in a large auditorium. Others mention that actually being in a college classroom for the first time with a "real" teacher (again, their word) is a valuable orientation experience. Almost all feel that they write better essays in these circumstances.

These reactions all surfaced in the students' own words during the first trial year (1990) when we actually collected written responses from the 1500 freshmen experiencing the new placement procedure; with minor variations on a theme, those reactions have been echoed and expanded by other students in subsequent years. One anonymous student response that first summer effectively summed up our entire process and purpose:

> I thought the class was interesting. I never took time to just sit there and write freely about anything. It showed me that I could write decently. It also took a lot of pressure off from a regular two hour exam. This gave time to breathe, relax and actually almost enjoy it. It also gave room for the student to make errors since forty five minutes was given to the final paper. It also gave the chance to see what others thought of your writing.

The teachers too prefer this new method. One TA with four years of teaching experience in our program outlined the general reaction to the new procedure when she wrote me this informal note:

Let me see how I can put it best — it was the best of times, it was . . . ? It was definitely different. Interesting, to meet with students and then never see them again. An interesting twist to the whole teacher-student relationship experience and concept. I prefer this because I get to know some people for a couple of hours, they get to know one another, etc., and then we're on our way. I found that I was full of pep and excited, describing [and] explaining the program to them and seeing their faces light up or look puzzled at notions like "owning one's writing," sharing one's ideas, using or discarding feedback, all the things I really appreciate about our program. Overall, I'd say they got a good sense of what we do here, how, and why, which is more than we ever gave them before . . . it's nice to de-mystify ourselves this way.[1]

Is it possible that we have discovered a best of all possible solutions—a procedure that produces required placement results that is also preferred by the students, endorsed by the teachers and approved by the university-wide orientation program and undergraduate admissions? In fact, undergraduate admissions advisors are delighted with the orientation "class" and its positive effect on incoming freshmen. They feel the small class atmosphere and personal attention from teachers sends a very positive message to new students about the university and its commitment to undergraduate education. We think it sends an equally positive and up front message about the importance of writing in the college curriculum.

After four years, our new process is still developing, changing slightly from summer to summer as we evaluate student and teacher responses and try to incorporate their suggestions into our procedures. As for evaluating the "products" students in our model classes write, that procedure has been modified to better fit our program goals. Originally two experienced 101 teachers read each essay and placed students into ESL, Basic Writing (EGC 100), Writing Workshop (EGC 101) or advanced Writing Workshop (EGC 202) respectively. If both agreed, the placement stood. If they disagreed, a third reader was called in to settle the dispute. The modification of this process is simple: we still use two readers (and a third when disputes arise) but the classroom teachers comprise the reading committee; therefore, each teacher reads her class pieces and those of one other teacher. Thus the students are being placed by a somewhat objective reading (from the teacher who did not have them in class) and a somewhat subjective one (from the teacher who did and can add to the evaluation her observations about the student's processes as well). This subjective/objective balance and knowledge from personal observation help the committee to identify and place students with special problems or special abilities who might not have been spotted in a standard essay format. Importantly, this committee is always composed of ten to twelve teaching assistants who have all taught EGC 101 for at least four semesters (often five or six) before qualifying for these summer placement positions. Thus all are familiar with 101 writing and can accurately recognize students' levels and abilities. Additionally, these teachers participate in mandatory training sessions before placement begins. Their training includes a

review of classroom procedures and formats but basically concentrates on their practicing reading, scoring and discussing sample essays from previous placements. The criteria they apply are simple: Can these students pass 101? Or do they need extra help, another semester of writing, before they take 101? Or should they go beyond 10l into 202? Our practice sessions help reclarify our general standards every year.

Teachers participating in actual placement reading and evaluating interchanges each summer also comment on how this process improves their own classroom performance because these placement discussions give them a clearer sense of their colleagues' goals and standards. By integrating teaching, testing and evaluating into a single day procedure, we have also strengthened our own community of writing teachers.

Fortunately, we were able to do all this within our existing operating budget. We had already been allocated $20,000/year by the University for placement under our old system; we simply used that allocation to pay the placement committee for teaching the sample classes and reading the essays. True, the TAs are working harder now—but not longer—actually teaching a class rather than only monitoring a two hour test. Most prefer it that way. Simple monitoring, they say, is just too boring.

But nothing is or ever has been perfect. Everything has a downside and our placement is no exception. Sometimes there are real logistical nightmares involved in our impromptu dividing up three hundred students into individual classes of twenty five each—including teachers shifting desks from room to room, the supervisor staggering beginning class times to accommodate last minute stragglers and our making sure each class has sufficient materials (blue books, pencils, scratch paper) for the constantly changing numbers of students in each room. But these are minor problems. The most serious downside is our inability to administer the procedure at times other than the formally scheduled placements. Under the old test format, a student who missed the scheduled exams could come into the Writing Center and take the test under monitored conditions anytime during the semester when we had space available and a tutor to act as monitor. Because the new procedure requires a student to participate in a class before writing the essay, it is no longer possible to let students do this on an ad hoc basis. Even though there were never more than six or eight students a semester involved in these special schedulings, our current format cannot accomodate them. We strongly feel that to ask them to write without benefit of the instruction and feedback of a class would be unfair; yet delaying their placements until a scheduled exam sometimes means—in the worst case scenario—that they have to put off taking their writing course for a semester. This not only delays their progress in their degree programs but also deprives them of a badly needed semester of writing instruction at the beginning of their college careers.

Overall, however, our current process seems to be working well on all other levels. We still consider possible modifications; ideally, our placement procedure will ctinue to change as our program does. Nothing here is etched in

stone. But the model class continues to emphasize collaborative learning, peer feedback, freewriting and writing as a cognitive process—all the elements that we feel are important to and inseparable from the teaching of writing. This makes the process much more than a placement procedure; it is also an honest encapsulated introduction to our program and its courses.[2]

While writing placement has always been a key factor in the failure or success of any writing program, over the past decade that placement has become more and more important as the programs themselves increase in number, size, variety and comprehensiveness. I am not suggesting that other programs adopt our specific procedure wholesale. If a program does not use freewriting or sharing/responding in its classrooms, it would be illogical to incorporate these tactics into a placement process. What I am suggesting is that individual writing programs consider developing their own placement procedures that accurately reflect their own writing classes. In other words, Stony Brook's experiment provides a general paradigm for future placement processes based on representative sample classes that emphasize the teaching of writing over the testing of writers. Whatever procedures individual programs develop can reflect their own pedagogy and philosophy. The essential point is that such a process should accent teaching, not testing, and provide incoming students with a realistic introduction to that school's writing program. The bonus is pedagogically sounder placement determined by writing samples obtained under college classroom conditions. One incoming freshman that first summer said it far more eloquently and concisely than I ever could:

> Some people didn't like what we did—all the writing and talking and sharing. They wanted the teacher to tell them exactly what to do—how many pages, what kind of essay, how to write it. But the teacher didn't do that. Instead, she asked us what we thought, what we wanted to say. Nobody ever asked me that before and it's pretty scary, thinking on your own for the first time. But I liked it. I hope this is what college will be like.

For her sake and ours, I hope so too because that is our writing philosophy. We are here to help students discover what they think and how to express those thoughts their way. And our placement, like our classes, should always reflect that philosophy.

Notes

1. Then a TA in our program, Rita Kranidas, is a Stony Brook Ph.D now teaching at Virginia Polytechnical Institute in Blacksburg, Va. Her articulate letter, quoted in part here, is typical of other teachers' responses.

2. Satistics over the past four years reveal a noticeable shift in our actual placement percentages: Under the old system 82% went into 101, 8% into 100, 6% into 202 and 4% into ESL. Today 73% go into 101, 12% into 100, 10% into 202 and 5% into ESL. Although we have obviously trimmed off either end of the writing spectrum and placed more students into our basic and advanced courses, there has been no significant pass/fail percentage change in those courses.

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Announcement: 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference

The National Writing Centers Association (NWCA), in conjunction with the Midwest Writing Centers Association, is pleased to announce the 2nd (Inter)National Writing Centers Conference, on September 27-30, 1995, in St. Louis, Missouri.

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All interested parties are invited to submit proposals for the conference. Specific proposal guidelines and other relevant information are listed in the proposal form.

Deadline: February 1, 1995 (notification by March 1, 1995). For proposal forms and further information, contact Eric Hobson, Conference Chair, St. Louis College of Pharmacy, 4588 Parkview Pl., St. Louis, MO 63110. Phone 314/367-8700, ext. 244. E-mail: ehobson@medicine.wustl.edu.

Notes on Contributors

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Jeanne Gunner is Assistant Director of UCLA Writing Programs, where she teaches basic writing and advanced composition courses. Her most recent articles have appeared in the Journal of Basic Writing and Fontaine and Hunter's Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Compos*ition Studies* (Southern Illinois). Her current work examines the WPA position and the literature-composition tension from a postcolonial perspective.

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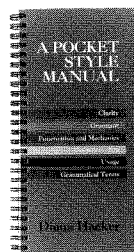
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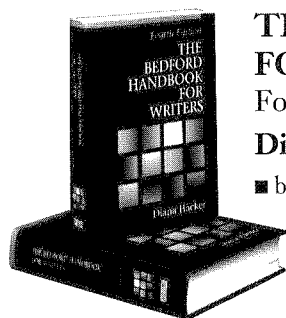
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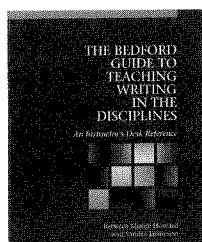
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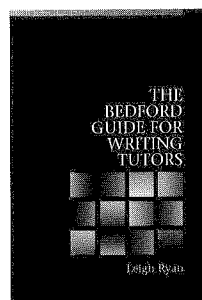
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