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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.



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.