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Letter from the Editor

Last Friday at 8:10 a.m., thirteen English 101 students visited my office. Their teacher gone that day, ill, the students wanted to voice concerns. We found an empty classroom, and I spent an hour listening to issues ranging from the teacher not being clear enough (“Would *you* please tell us what ‘discourse conventions’ are?”) to the teacher expecting too much (“We work harder for this class than any other class, and no one is getting A’s).

They had some legitimate concerns and some unreasonable ones. I drew from my stock of analogies to deal with the latter. (Suppose I practiced basketball 16 hours a day for months, no one disputing my efforts; would the Chicago Bulls be “expecting too much” in not giving me a contract?) And I promised to address those problems that I agreed did exist. The atmosphere of this class had clearly gone south with the robins.

Three days later I learned that my university had proposed a meager, even insulting pay raise for our Graduate Teaching Assistants, a group that had gone over ten years without an increase. We had done all the right things in building our argument, collecting comparative data on assistantships within the university, within the state, and at like institutions, raising ethical arguments and quality of instruction arguments and quality of program arguments. Then this.

As a child I was fascinated to learn that, in addition to the four main points on a compass and even in addition to the four secondary points, there were ones more exotic: north-northwest, west-northwest, and so on. Such subtleties of direction. Most of the time, the WPA compass has predictable major points: student needs, teacher needs, institution needs, profession needs. But when the job blows us between lands like those I described above, even sixteen points cannot describe where we are. In “An Expedition to the Pole,” Annie Dillard notes that old sea navigational charts often included the letters “P.D.” next to symbols for shoals. Position Doubtful. ☹

This issue contains a resource article by Todd Taylor and a ruminative essay by Deb Holdstein, both about computers. Dave Healy and Irene Clark prod the conventional wisdom regarding writing centers, plagiarism, and what it means to help students. Hildy Miller explores feminist and masculinist tensions in program administration, and Mark Long, Jennifer Holberg, and Marcy Taylor view a related issue but through the lens of preparing future WPAs. Greg Glau explains a strategy for working with basic writers, and Kirsti Sandy’s review discusses a book that challenges the very notion of general required writing courses—Glau’s and all of ours. Finally, readers will find a draft copy of the Executive Committee statement on “The Intellectual Work of the WPA.” Please note the call for responses included in its headnote.

Doug Hesse