Collaborating with Power: Contradictions of Working as a WPA

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A recent exchange took place in *College English* between James Sledd and Lynn Z. Bloom that disturbed me. In describing "the subgroup of compositionists," Sledd was reminded of the metaphor of the old Southern plantation, which he termed "Pomocompo," surely his comment on the world of postmodern composition studies. He decried the administrators of writing programs as overseers or slavemasters over the part-timers whom he termed "slaveys down in the quarters" of this pomocompo plantation (713). Bloom responded by stating that she "never bought into the academic caste system" and that in her many years of serving as a writing program administrator, she "had worked hard to change exploitative systems and to improve the working conditions and lives of those whose status is 'On the Floor with the Kitty Litter'"(714).

Although I have great respect for both Sledd and Bloom, I am concerned about the binary nature of the either/or positions they present. My perception is that the WPA position is much more contradictory than their descriptions imply and much less in our power to define or control in any stable way. Unlike the master/slave relationship Sledd describes, I not only administer but also teach in the writing program in my college. I have my own students who look to me to prepare them for the necessary tests and to help them improve their abilities to write and understand academic texts. Yet daily I face enormous pressures in trying to maintain a good program in an institution under tremendous political pressure to cut back, downsize, and tighten standards. At the same time, I am immersed in the conflicts of faculty members, students, and administrators trying to function as rules and regulations shift. Moreover, unlike Bloom's WPA, although I too have never bought into it, I must be honest and admit that my work as a WPA has in some ways facilitated the "academic caste system" in which part-timers and full-timers have different teaching loads and academic benefits.

In trying to understand these contradictions, I have found it helpful to reject an "either/or" perspective in favor of a "both/and" approach in which individuals are viewed not as essential and fixed in nature, but instead as "diverse, contradictory, and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered" (Pierce 15). 1 think that this description is appropriate not only for individuals but also for the institutions that individuals create, especially in light of colleges becoming more diverse, policies within them more contradictory, and internal structures more dynamic.

As higher education evolves, new levels of authority develop to cope with the rapid internal changes and external pressures. As writing ability becomes a more significant indicator of college success, the WPA role takes on a

new significance too. This is ironic because, increasingly, the WPA role contains within it the paradox of powerless power: having responsibility and little authority, having insider knowledge and being institutionally ignorant, and needing to cooperate and wanting to resist. This is power defined by its negations and limits. Judith Butler writes provocatively about the affirmations and subjection processes of power in her recent book, *The Psychic Life of Power*. She writes, "'Assuming' power is no simple process, however, for power is not mechanically reproduced when it is assumed. Instead, on being assumed, power runs the risk of assuming another form and direction" (21). What happens when one assumes power is unpredictable; the assumption of power is an act in process, a constant gain, loss, and redefinition.

The Particularities of the Position

The City University of New York (CUNY), serving more than 200,000 students, has been under attack in the media lately for not enforcing writing standards in some of its community colleges. At Hunter, a senior college in the CUNY system with 19,800 students, our freshman composition, developmental, and ESL writing courses are taught in the English Department, a department that in the past year has had to increase dramatically the number of courses that we offer because of a new one-semester remediation policy requiring students to take any necessary developmental writing, reading, and math courses during their first semester in the college. Entering students are also strongly advised to take all their freshman writing courses in their first year. The one-semester policy was initially opposed by many faculty members because it appeared to be creating a revolving door for students who may have been poorly prepared in high school or who are still in the process of acquiring English and therefore may need more than one semester. In response to faculty concerns, the President promised that sufficient sections of these courses would be made available for all students needing them. Newly entering students are also strongly advised to take the free summer immersion program before entering the college in the fall. Students are no longer forced onto waiting lists for courses as they had been in the past. As a result, there have been record numbers of courses, part-time teachers to teach them, interviews on hot August days, and observations this fall. Negotiating the new policy to meet the needs of our students while also meeting the requirements of college administrators also meant meetings throughout the summer for the English Department chair, deputy chair, and myself as director of the Freshman English Program.

We were able to do all of this because of the generally egalitarian administrative structure of our program. Our developmental and freshman English courses are governed by an administrative committee made up of the department chair, the deputy chair, the director of the Freshman English Program, and the coordinators of Developmental Reading, Developmental Writing, Composition I, and Expository Writing. Each individual has one vote and equal status. The director position is a new one and was created not with the intention of imposing a top-down hierarchical structure but instead to make sure that the program would have representation and therefore a voice at college-wide

meetings and committees. It was created so that students would have someone to go to when there were problems, so that administrators in the college would have one person to call when there were questions, and so that representation from the college would be guaranteed at all CUNY-wide meetings. The position was also created to simplify the process for obtaining grants. In intention, it is similar to the "decentering" model for writing administration Gunner described, which needs "a spokesperson or liaison, perhaps, but not a single position assigned total curricular responsibility or autocratic power" (13).

Interrogating the Role

When I accepted the position of director, I knew some of the problems that would arise, but I could not have conceived the self-altering nature of the WPA position. To understand some of the challenges I have been facing in trying to "become" my new role, I have begun to interrogate the role of WPA itself. Butler led me to this avenue of exploration when she referred to Foucault's idea "that the point of modern politics is no longer to liberate a subject, but rather to interrogate the regulatory mechanisms through which 'subjects' are produced and maintained" (32).

In interrogating the WPA role, just as Sledd and Bloom, I, too, have come up against the complexities involved in my work with part-timers. Although it sounds very simple and obvious, an important first step in coping with the contradictions inherent in being a full-timer working largely with part-timers is to talk with the teachers in the program and find out more about their situations. What I quickly discovered is that teachers had different needs. While some of the teachers in the program seemed satisfied with their positions, many others felt used and burned out. Several were worried about losing their jobs; several felt that their students were not making enough of an effort to succeed; and several lamented that their jobs did not seem to be the stepping stones to full-time positions they had hoped for. Many of them felt personally unheard and institutionally ignored.

I wanted to do something to better meet their needs, but, once again, I faced the limitations of my job and the political situation of teaching writing in a large American university today. Talking, however, was a start. I wanted them to know how much our program meant to me, and how powerless I too felt when I identified with their feeling that the institution was changing rapidly and that faculty were often not consulted about the changes. Yet I also wanted them to know that my sense of agency came from the belief that all was not futile and that we could do something together. With this in mind, we have made small inroads in bringing about changes for some of the teachers.

Those individuals identifying themselves as used-up and burned-out teachers were for the most part creative individuals who had been teaching the same courses for too many semesters. Together, we looked at our course offerings and discussed their various abilities and interests. Soon after one of our meetings, I was in the process of applying for a grant to link writing classes with other classes in the college. Some of these teachers wanted to get involved with

the grant because it gave them a chance to attend, with pay, other teachers' classes, to teach to a theme they found stimulating, and to become more integrated in the college as a whole.

The grant we received was announced in December, at the end of the fall semester, making it difficult to plan, to notify the registrar, and to make sure that all classes had sufficient students. But we were able to do it because of the combined efforts of the participating teachers. Those who were interested in linking their classes and the Freshman English Program office manager made posters and flyers notifying students of the new "linked" courses. Despite the fact that these were placed all over the college, someone had to be there to assist students in getting information about the courses, to make sure they were eligible for them, and then to get them registered. This job fell to me and led to many hours of advisement and consultation with faculty in several disciplines. Classes were eventually filled and all the grant money was used, which benefited our students and faculty members. One of our part-timers who had thought about quitting teaching participated in the grant and refound her commitment in the linking of ESL writing and women's studies courses. Others involved with the grant felt more valued, intellectually and emotionally, because someone had listened to them and responded to their needs.

For the teachers who were worried about losing their jobs, there was less I could do. Our chair tried to assure them that their jobs were as safe as possible in our uncertain times, and they all remained. Several of these teachers still feel insecure about their jobs despite our efforts to make sure they get their schedules early and are given forms to make requests for their teaching choices at least a semester in advance. These are teachers who work in several institutions, have very little time, and are unable to attend meetings, so their awareness of the college's shifting policies is minimal.

The frustration of the third group of teachers, regarding students who do not make enough effort, has become a subject of discussion at several of our meetings. Many of these teachers make enormous personal sacrifices to attend graduate school, work as part-timers, and set aside time for their students only to find that too many of their students seem interested solely in passing their tests, getting through their courses, and completing their college requirements and are less concerned with improving their writing and reading abilities. In our meetings, we have discussed the fact that these students are attending college in a time of decreased educational benefits and increased pressure to complete college rapidly and get a job. The concept of education for knowledge itself may be vanishing as students are forced by societal pressures to identify career choices early, "get through" required courses, and start to take the courses that will prepare them for their future careers. Students and teachers alike are living with these kinds of dilemmas which cannot be simply resolved. However, meeting to discuss them at least gives frustrated teachers a voice in these issues.

The best results occurred for those teachers seeking full-time positions. Posting job openings and writing recommendation letters may have played some role in the fact that four of our part-time faculty did get full-time jobs beginning

this past fall. This semester I have made it a policy to meet with available part-time faculty and graduate assistants to talk about our field and to make suggestions for future full-time work.

In addition, this semester, for the first time, the coordinator of one of our courses is a part-time adjunct. She has been with our department for a number of years, knows the program well, and has taught several courses in the developmental writing component. She has aspirations to work in administration in our college writing center, and she expressed an interest in gaining administrative experience. We now work together two or three times a week; she has written memos to other teachers, has presided over meetings, and has been introduced in our departmental meeting. For her, it is an opportunity for growth. For me, it is another chance to collaborate with a colleague.

Since she has taken on the role of coordinator this semester, several other part-timers have spoken to me about doing this some time in the future. In the past, part-timers only did occasional program coordination in the summer program, so this individual's success may open the way for other part-timers to gain such experience. The fact that interested individuals have come to speak to me could indicate the existence of a hierarchical structure, yet it also suggests that they see possibilities for themselves to become more involved in our program. This simple act of collaboration is but a small correction to the long history of exploitation inherent in the system, in the misuse of power and authority in academia, and in the complex relationships between somewhat privileged full-timers and somewhat exploited part-timers.

While taking all these steps, I still know that I am directing a program in which part-timers suffer and feel disempowered, not as the slaves to which Sledd refers but as professionals caught in a trap. Many of these are individuals with Master's degrees who find themselves competing with better-credentialed, although perhaps less experienced, persons when they do go for jobs. Some of them are also getting older and are finding ageism to be a factor as well. These are realities in the academic world today.

In addition to the personal needs of faculty, there is the serious concern that excessive demands are being made on students. The one-semester policy puts disempowered part-time faculty in the unenviable position of having to fail students who will then be dismissed from the college. Many teachers are conflicted about whether or not to push forward less prepared students in the hope that, with additional semesters of reading and writing in a variety of courses, students will improve sufficiently by the time of graduation. They do not want to tell hard-working students that they have not made enough progress to exit writing courses.

Because I also teach in the program, I am very cognizant of the problems teachers face in making these decisions. This semester, I am teaching English 110, our Composition I course. Recently I talked with another teacher of 110 who is a graduate assistant teaching with us for the first time, about how we respond to ESL students' papers in our classes. He was concerned about what would

happen to some of the weaker ESL students in his mainstreamed writing class. I made some suggestions and got him copies of the students' placement essays, but more importantly we shared our concerns about our students and their futures in our college.

Beyond the complex needs of the faculty and students in the Freshman English Program at Hunter are the myriad needs of the rest of the college community and the future work community of these students. I am a member of the Task Force on Teacher Education in the college where I hear about what happens when students progress academically in the college without having progressed in their writing abilities. Here, my experience as a teacher enables me to bring to the committee the ambivalence felt by teachers conflicted about whether to pass or fail weak students in their courses. I also can bring back to the teachers in the program the reality that when students are pushed ahead, but then do not pass statewide exams, the value of our degree is diminished. The frustrations and anxieties of these dilemmas are enormous.

Reciprocal Effects of the WPA Role

In a sense I am being re-constructed by my role as a WPA. While I entered the position of WPA freely, I feel that the position has now entered me. Butler writes that "we are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside," but expanding on Foucault's notion that power forms the subject, she states that power "assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (3). In this sense, the power of the WPA position has psychically constructed or modified my self-identity.

I initially thought that having the characteristics of a feminist teacher—"cooperation, collaboration, shared leadership, and the integration of the cognitive and affective" (Schniedewind; qtd. in Miller)—would be enough. But in the complex, somewhat corporate world of education today, these characteristics are only part of the whole picture. I quickly learned that I needed to know as much about budgets and about keeping statistics, about writing clear, readable memos and reports, as about being collaborative. Overcoming my shyness was only one aspect of my personality that I had to alter as I forced myself to speak up for students and for our program in meetings with administrators inside and outside of my college. In my own department, I also have had to cope with the discomfort of giving negative evaluations and observations to faculty I like and negative results to students I want to see succeed.

Learning to live with policies that I do not support, I have also found that the power of the WPA enables me to assist students in need. Few events feel better than being able to retest a student who failed an exam because of a serious personal or health problem and then being able to call that student the next day and tell her she passed the exam. While I have always identified with the frustrations of students and writing faculty in the college, now, however, I also identify with my colleagues outside of our program and with the administrators in my college.

Feminist author Chris Weedon writes that "recognizing contradictions and the power relations and interests which inhere in specific definitions of women's nature and social role is only the first stage in the process of change both for individual women and in the struggle to transform social institutions" (5). Using the contradictory power relations to forge a collaborative structure that has the potential to transform an institution while realizing that at the same time a self-transformation is occurring is one of the critical challenges faced by many WPAs these days.

The WPA position is a complex one made more difficult by the shifting expectations, policies, and perceptions of higher education today. Teachers, WPAs, and administrators need to collaborate inside and outside our own systems. Within the system, these collaborations enable us to maintain the support that programs must get from our departments, colleges, and the university system. We need to cooperate with one another to present ourselves well in public forums in our schools and in our communities. From without, WPAs benefit from collaborating at conferences and via on-line chat groups such as the WPA listserv. These collaborations help us not only to maintain and develop programs, courses, and better serve students but also to deal with the "multiplicity of power vectors" inherent in our position (Butler referring to Foucault's term, 99), the complex forces that impinge on higher education across the country and the dilemmas we individually face.

Limitations of Collaboration

One of the ironies of the WPA position is how much our jobs depend on public perceptions of our students and of our colleges in general and, therefore, how limited our power actually is. This is especially true in a public university such as CUNY that is constantly under public scrutiny. Our best efforts to ensure good programming and a cohesive course structure can all be compromised by a public outcry stating that graduating students are unable to write, read, think critically, or whatever is the focus of the current public hue and cry against education.

This past May, for example, one of the community colleges in the CUNY system was accused of graduating students who had not passed the CUNY Writing Assessment Test (WAT). Much of the research on the WAT over the years has suggested that it is not a fair, good, or even valid test of students' writing abilities. This, coupled with the revelation that passing the WAT had not in fact been a legal requirement for graduation from the community colleges, had little impact. The negative media attack waged on CUNY about this exam resulted in internal pressure being brought upon all CUNY colleges to make the WAT an exit requirement from developmental writing courses. At Hunter, I and other available members of the administrative committee met with the college administration over the summer and struggled to maintain our courses and assessment procedures. Ultimately, we agreed to adjust our requirements so that our students would have to pass the CUNY WAT by the end of Composition I. We did this at a time when another test was being presented to the Board of Trustees that governs CUNY. This one had been approved by the English

Discipline Council, a group of English Department chairs that had met for more than six months to develop a new and improved writing assessment measure. Although the decision to require the passing of the WAT had been made by the administrative committee, I, as WPA, had to present our new and somewhat contradictory policy—requiring students to pass the WAT to exit developmental writing until the new test was created and approved—to the teachers of our various reading and writing courses. By the time teachers and subsequently students found out about the new policy, it was a fait accompli—there had been no time or possibility for faculty-wide discussion.

It was with much ambivalence that I spoke to the teachers whose classes would be affected by the changes. My efforts at collaborative administration seemed to be failed ones. Many teachers were angry, and some blamed me for acquiescing to the administration. I told them what my position had been and explained the compromises that had been made to ensure that we lost no courses, no teachers, and few students. I left the meeting feeling ineffective about my capabilities as a WPA. Again, Butler sheds light on this dilemma when she writes, "The power imposed upon one is the power that animates one's emergence, and there appears to be no escaping this ambivalence. Indeed, there appears to be no 'one' without ambivalence . . . " (198).

Conclusion

Recently, I had a conversation with a WPA in another CUNY college and we talked about the fact that neither of us had wanted to enter college administration, yet we both accepted the role of WPA. Why? He explained that being a WPA was different from any other type of administration because one could be an advocate for teachers and for students, could work to hold together programs, and could create a collaborative community centered around writing. All of this is true, yet I have to reflect on what happened during a recent observation conference with a young teacher who had gotten an unfavorable evaluation and who said in a sad monotone that she had tried and that she had failed. I identify with her in relation to all the battles I have lost and all the ways I have failed in my position, too. The power that we wield to hire, evaluate, and fire individuals, as well as to counsel, place and register students, is coupled with the powerlessness we face when our programs are defunded, devalued, and downsized. Collaboration becomes a shifting field of power in which the WPA's power sometimes diminishes us when we are used to carry out institutional agendas, and sometimes gives us greater agency such as when, for example, we share the identity of powerlessness with colleagues. I agree with Butler when she describes power as "formative or productive, malleable, multiple, proliferative, and conflictual" (99).

Power is not unilateral. In fact, Butler points out that the individual "is produced, paradoxically, though the withdrawal of power . . . " (198). We are constructed by what we have lost as much as by what we have gained. Many of us accept the WPA position focusing on our abilities to effect change and develop our programs. This is only a part of the seductiveness of power. To gain

a better picture, we also need to reflect on the pain of feeling powerless or disempowered. This paradox of simultaneous loss and gain is essential to an understanding of the nature of power and the value of collaboration in WPA work. The WPA does not function unilaterally as a master or as a savior; it is not an either/or position. As Miller writes, a collaborative WPA does not seek "to dominate but rather to facilitate, to share power and to enable both self and others to contribute" (52). This seems to me to be the best response to Sledd and to Bloom.

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