

Thoughts of a Fly on the Wall

Kenneth Bruffee

At WPA's invitation, Ken Bruffee spent four days at the 1998 WPA Summer Conference in Tucson, Arizona. He made these closing remarks.

Three days ago Theresa Enos introduced me as "the father of WPA." I appreciate the honor she does me. I feel bound to say, though, that the organization's parentage was somewhat more complex than the title implies. Many people made important contributions to getting us organized twenty-two years ago. Harvey Wiener was actually WPA's originating and driving force. I feel sure that the association will honor Harvey in the near future as it has so kindly honored me.

Being in any case a "father of WPA" makes me the parent of a grown child of twenty-two, and you have asked me to address you in that capacity. What does one tell a child of twenty-two? I have three more children at home. One of them is seventeen. I have yet to discover anything I have to tell him that he doesn't already know.

But twenty-two? It occurs to me that in *Hamlet* Laertes is about twenty-two. He bugs his dad, Polonius, to give him the keys to the family stable so he can canter back to school in Paris. Worn down, Polonius relents. He sends Laertes off with famous advice which I quote in degendered form: "To thine own self be true/And it must follow as the night the day/Thou canst not then be false to anyone." That pretty much sums up what

I have to say to WPA as a result of having been a fly on the wall at this convention. Please take my remarks as personal views. WPA is your club. I am tremendously impressed with what you are doing with it.

I am tremendously impressed also with the crackling conversation I have heard here. It reminded me how intelligent, insightful, vital, and witty the talk among WPAs can be when we get together. And how quickly that talk zeroes in on the important issues. Much of it this week was about the most serious issue we currently face nationally and on our home campuses, the exploitation of faculty. It is a problem that is not going to go away in a hurry, and no one here would claim to have a solution for it. I certainly don't. But everyone, myself included, goes home from this conference with a more detailed, sophisticated understanding of the issue, and of many other issues as well. That's what conferences are for.

It is inevitable that you should be talking about what you see as wrong. But my topic, encouraging WPA to be true to itself, makes me want to remind you for a moment of some things that are right. One thing that's right is the level of your discussion of crucial issues. No dodging. No waffling. No grandstanding. Lots of concerned thought.

Another is the condition of writing programs in North American colleges and universities, for which you, individually and as a group, are primarily responsible. Two decades ago no organized understanding of what a writing program should do existed. Few institutions had a clear, well defined sense of the contribution that writing makes to college and university education. Today, although programs vary widely in size, organization, and focus, most colleges and universities can boast a clearly defined understanding of the importance of writing and a program that promotes it.

Still another thinking that's right is your grasp of the complexity of the jobs you hold. You are aware that no other job in academia offers greater possibilities for personal and professional growth than writing program administration. Elaine Maimon says that everything she needs to know in order to be a good provost she learned as a WPA. Having known Elaine throughout her illustrious career, I know that she does not make that statement lightly.

She means of course that she learned as a WPA the skills she needs to do her job as a Provost at Arizona State. But I would guess that she means something else too. To be a WPA is to be—or aspire to be—an entirely different kind of academic than most of us are used to. It is also to be—or aspire to be—an entirely different kind of administrator than most of us are used to. To be a WPA is to regard administration as a *teaching* job. At every level we need more administrators who understand their jobs as teaching jobs, whatever else those jobs entail.

There is no other academic job except president, provost, or dean that gives the person who holds it the opportunity to understand the whole institution and to deal directly with every element in it. Compare your job in this respect to the job of a department chair. A chair represents one constituency—a discipline, a department. A chair's job is to herd cats and to log-roll for a bigger piece of the pie. Your constituency as a WPA, whatever the size of your piece of the pie, is the whole college. The qualities you develop in order to do that job, in order to represent and address that diverse constituency, are manifold. You have dealt yourselves a rare hand.

As I listened to you talk with one another this week, however, a few issues did arise that cast WPA in a somewhat different light. They too may be relevant to my topic: encouraging WPA to be true to itself. At one point in drafting this address I was tempted to give it a title something like "Professionalizing Ourselves? Whatever Happened to WPA as a Subversive Organization?" I thought better of it, because the most challenging issues raised at this convention are far broader, more significant, and more interesting than any such title allows. But you may find of some interest the following three points that I might have made under such a rubric.

(1) You are deeply concerned with your identity as WPAs. That is natural and healthy. But as you pursue that issue, I would suggest that you keep in mind that human beings form their identity on a matrix of metaphor. Among the identity-related metaphors I have heard this week, most tend to be dichotomous or dualistic: discipline/service, teaching/administration, and, most frequently, labor/management. Some might argue that these dichotomies must be read as categories of concrete instances, not metaphors. But if so, it seems to me, they pose alternatives that are difficult

to instantiate and, if instantiated, do not reveal much that's useful about the current identity of WPAs. Read as metaphors, however, the dichotomies are vehicles bearing messages that reveal a lot about the current identity of WPAs. What struck me as odd is that they seem in most cases to be messages from an earlier age.

I suggest therefore that we give some thought to updating and recontextualizing our self-defining metaphors by way of revising our understanding of the professional identity of WPAs. Writing program administration has internal contradictions, as most jobs do. But what identifies it and makes it unique is its inherent focal unity, its centripetal force. WPAing tends to replace the slash that separates alternatives with hyphens that ally them.

This tendency is stronger today than ever. I have already suggested that WPAs regard administration as a mode of teaching. As for trying to balance the alternative discipline/service we are at least no longer alone. Even graduate faculties have begun to discover, as they are at last forced to cut back on the supply of PhDs in the face of decelerating demand, that they too are a service industry purveying instructors to undergraduate colleges. As for labor/management, every time you sit down as a laboring manager to tackle the stack of tasks on your desk, you know you are the very self and image of a managerial laborer.

(2) When I suggest that these dualities strike me as metaphors carrying a message from an earlier age, the age I have in mind is not some dim distant past. It's just yesterday, although it does seem dim and distant to some of us and especially to our students. Some of you were in high school when we turned that corner. Some of our children had not yet been born.

What corner? The cultural historians among us know that few "centuries" begin and end punctually with double naughts. Culturally, "the 20th century" didn't begin in 1900. It began in 1917. And culturally, "the 20th century" came to an abrupt and inglorious end in 1989.

The Cold War—already a decade in the past—was a period of entrenched metaphorical dualities. Gorbachev told us, "We are going to take away your Enemy," capital E, and that's exactly what they did. As a result, since the fall of the Berlin Wall American civil discourse, including

the discourse of higher education and of academic disciplines, has been undergoing a reacculturative process of recentering and redefinition.

No doubt, many Americans are scrambling desperately to replace our old Enemy with a new one. But the de-dualizing direction we are headed, gradual and halting as our progress may be, seems clear. In the concrete, we feel it in the shift in the goal of the United States military missions from armed conflict to peace keeping, in replacing Fifties mommy/daddy family roles with gender peership, in dismantling police SWAT teams and their replacement with an emphasis on community relations and collaboration, in the successful employee ownership of the airline that flew me out here, even in the shift from stand-alone desktop PCs to the Internet. In more general terms, we feel it in a shift from disciplines to interdisciplines, from parochial, local ways of thinking to the encompassingly global, from referential thinking to relational thinking, from preoccupation with "teaching the conflicts" to preoccupation with conflict resolution.

These changes affect every nook and cranny of our lives, personal and professional. Many of the stresses that WPAs now experience are part of that reacculturation. It affects profoundly how we interpret and evaluate many of the issues that concern us.

Take for example the feeling that legislatures are pushing us around about assessment. You feel it. I feel it. We want to say "Get off our backs!" But in the Outcomes Assessment session yesterday, at least one school region reported that, prompted by an outside force to confront a supremely knotty issue, they made a startling discovery. They expected to be, as they often had been in the past, at each other's throats, locked in an endless, futile harangue. Turns out they agreed, quickly and painlessly, about what teachers should be teaching in elementary level college writing courses.

One reason they could reach agreement so effortlessly, I suggest, is that today, with the end of the Cold War almost a decade behind us, much of the *compulsion* to disagree that in the past dominated our culture has dissipated. Notice, I do not say that reasons to disagree have dissipated or that we will never again go at each other hammer and tongs. When necessary we disagree, and there is always plenty of room for disagreement. But the Cold-War-bred knee-jerk impulse to draw a line in the sand seems

for many of us somehow to have evaporated. And (in my opinion) good riddance.

Another example of this change is what appears to be a growing consensus in the profession and evidenced here this week about the kind of writing college students most need to learn. Many writing teachers and program administrators used to believe that “position writing”—taking a position and explaining or defending it coherently—is necessarily a contentious, argumentative, macho enterprise designed to decimate opposition or put other people down. Some of us may still feel that way. But today there is a tendency among us to regard position writing instead as an intrinsically valuable shift from emphasis on self-involved expressive writing to emphasis on reasoning publicly, whether the goal be civil discourse or fulfilling the needs of private enterprise. In both instances, displaced conversation aligns us with others, engages us collaboratively, and preserves alternative ways of thinking.

(3) These shifts in the center of discourse in higher education raise questions about professional identity for all academics, not just WPAs. They leave many at this conference in particular wondering whether WPAs are becoming professionally marginalized. In many instances WPAs are no longer forced to choose to be one thing or another (disciplinarians *or* servants, teachers *or* administrators, labor *or* management). WPAs most places no longer expect themselves to be out there manning the barricades. It’s acceptable now to teach students how to decide what they think and explain or defend it in writing. Some WPAs want to define themselves as self-certified professionals as other self-certified professionals feel compelled to do, but many others feel they have more important tasks to tackle.

If concerns such as these are no longer compelling, aren’t WPAs and what concerns WPAs, writing, what many of our colleagues long ago convinced themselves that WPAs and writing are, professionally marginal? Aren’t WPAs after all little more than back office schedule fillers and bean counters?

It’s a serious concern and I sympathize with it. But I invite you to consider the difference between margins and boundaries. It is surely the

case that centers define margins. For example, historians define genealogy as marginal. The American Medical Association defines homeopathy and chiropractic as marginal. High profile environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club define garden clubs and urban mulchers as marginal.

But margins are not boundaries. Margins are lesser, dilute, or trivial versions of what goes on at the center. In contrast, boundaries are where the center becomes what it is not. So, although centers define margins, boundaries define centers. What demarcates the discourse that happens to be going on currently at the center of any knowledge community is discourse that has one foot *outside* the community. Marginal discourse may come and go without affecting the center. But when boundaries shift, the center *must* shift or become marginalized itself.

This is what happened during the 80s and early 90s, for example, when local movements against placing dumps and incinerators in working class and minority neighborhoods refocused the discourse of major environmental groups by drawing largely white, middle class Sierra Club members into embarrassing confrontation with working class and minority leaders. The old center, back-packing Sierra Club types, had to change its policies or follow the Daughters of the American Revolution into musty irrelevance. Similarly, public interest in herbal treatments and acupuncture has drawn the old medical center, professional associations and the federal government, into a discussion of alternative medicine and raised questions about efficacy of medical technology. Even historians, buffeted by the winds of feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial thought, have now begun to acknowledge the validity and value of multiple understandings of the past.

College and university teachers in the disciplines have argued for decades that teaching composition is a lesser, dilute, or trivial version of disciplinary teaching—that is, teaching composition is disciplinarily marginal. But that argument has become increasingly costly to support. It is costly to academic departments because writing is often the budgetary tail that wags the disciplinary dog. It is costly to the disciplines because to condescend to writing risks intellectual deterioration: bad writers make bad thinkers. And it is costly to colleges and universities that slight writing because they tend to turn out unemployable graduates.

As you and I well know, defining writing as marginal, and therefore defining writing program administration as marginal, is so very costly because it misconstrues the role of writing in disciplinary research and teaching. Every member of an academic discipline must be a writer; good disciplinarians are good writers. The advent of computers increases this requirement because, as every study of computer use demonstrates, we use them far more for exchanging, interpreting, and evaluating information than for processing it.

As you and I also know well, writing forces members of every academic discipline to place one foot outside whatever center they occupy. We writing types call it "writing to your audience." Like teaching, writing is inherently a boundary-negotiating enterprise. Writing is therefore a classic instance of centers being defined by what they are not.

Similarly, because WPAs always have at least one foot outside whichever community they are addressing, writing program administration is inherently a boundary negotiating job. WPAing is a job where divisions are marked not by slashes but by hyphens. I suggest that you reconsider your identity as writing program administrators and the identity of this fine organization on the matrix of these metaphors, the boundary and the hyphen.

The boundary and the hyphen are where I believe the focal unity of writing program administration lies and what make it educationally and institutionally unique. However many schedules you may fill out, however many beans you may count, you can never—as a WPA—be professionally marginal. WPAs cannot help but work at the boundaries, drawing the many academic centers toward them.

That observation brings me back to the title I did not give this talk: Is the most important organizational issue at this moment in the development of this association how to professionalize WPAs in order to resist becoming marginal? I hope not. Is the most important organizational issue to find ways for WPAs to continue to be agents of positive, progressive change in the institutions they serve? I dearly hope it is.

WPA began twenty-two years ago as a subversive organization in this very benign and progressive sense, and I'd like to see it remain one. In

accord with that wish, let me leave you with five very personal thoughts.

First, keep in mind as you confront the multitude of everyday problems you face in your home institutions that you may be one of the most intelligent people on campus. Intelligence, someone once said, is best measured by the ability to think about many things at one time—by the number of balls you can keep in the air. You probably keep more balls in the air than the shop steward. You may even be able to keep more up there than the dean can, or the provost, or the president. Unless of course they started out as WPAs, in which case you're in real trouble.

Second, since boundaries are where the action is, enjoy them.

Third, when you are tempted to "theorize" WPAing, keep in mind that theorizing any boundary practice is different from theorizing a disciplinary art or craft such as literary studies, sociology, medicine, or law. A lesson taught by deconstruction, maybe the only lesson that deconstruction taught worth remembering, is that "theory" is just another way of saying something. Theorizing a disciplinary art or craft says something about it in a way that may be worth considering. To theorize a boundary practice like WPAing is not likely to say much about it worth considering. Theorizing a boundary practice like WPAing is more likely to cauterize that practice, codify it, and conceptualize it—in short, bureaucratize it.

Fourth, respect rhetoric and literature, but resist their undertow in what is really a profoundly *pragmatic* occupation. WPAing is as WPAing does.

Fifth, take care of yourself. Keep asking yourself, Where do I want to be and what do I want to be doing five years from now? There are all sorts of legitimate answers to that question. Your answers are bound to change from time to time. All that matters is that you keep asking yourself the question.

That about wraps up what I have to say to WPA on the occasion of its becoming twenty-two. Polonius puts it well: To thine own self be true.

Come to think of it, though, Polonius is a pompous old windbag. You know what happens to him. He's exceeded. When the king asks Hamlet Where's Polonius? Hamlet says he's at dinner down the back stairs, where a certain collocation of politic worms is eating at him.

Sounds to me like an appropriate end for a garrulous, querulous, superannuated writing program administrator like me. Thanks for inviting me here. I've had a wonderful time.

Note

Ken Bruffee thanks Dennis Lynch for suggesting much needed, much valued revisions in this text, which was drafted first in a refrigerated Tucson hotel room one moon-drenched, hundred-and-one degree July night, while out-of-doors sweet, succulent, sun-ripened grapefruit plopped softly from manicured trees to manicured turf and the thirsty desert earth.