Shaping Consensus from Difference: Administering Writing Programs in Departments of Writing and English

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In the fall of 1993, eleven MA English instructors and six tenured PhDs in English split from their Department of English at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), forming the Department of Rhetoric and Writing. This split, a radical collaborative act, carried the enthusiastic endorsement of Barry Maid, the former Chair of English and the first Chair of Rhetoric and Writing. Though challenging the old order, the new department also carried the mandate of Provost Joel Anderson, without whom the separation never could have been effected. The provost risked forming the new department because he shared Maid's conviction that a writing department should support the mission of this urban university: studying language to help students grow academically, professionally, and ethically as agents of social change (Lovitt and Young 114). In pursuing that mission, the new department took responsibility for the university writing center and the composition program, as well as the BA and MA programs in technical and expository writing.

Consensus over departmental mission notwithstanding, dissensus in the English department created a climate for change. Those eleven instructors had been hired by the English department to teach first-year composition, a condition they all accepted on employment. Nevertheless, most of those instructors held traditional MAs in English and had taught introductory literature courses in high schools or two-year colleges; consequently, they felt qualified to teach sophomore courses in literature and junior-level courses in writing. Though all eleven instructors held full commitments to teaching composition, their contractual displacement from upper-level courses made most feel like second-class citizens

in the department of English, a feeling exacerbated by a move to deny instructors voting rights in the department on any issues not directly related to composition.

Given these political tensions and this vision for change, splitting seemed as inevitable as it was painful for all concerned. Pain came, of course, to those literature professors who were—and still are—devoted to technical writing; pain came to the writing faculty who had to forsake literature; pain came to faculty in both departments who had been close friends with the those now in a different department.

Over the years, some faculty have rebuilt those friendships, and the two departments have moved from mutual distrust to collaborative ventures, as I will discuss below. However, some English faculty—they have told me so—still consider "The Split" a mistake, particularly the moving of the BA and MA programs in writing to the new department, where MAs often teach junior-level courses, and non-tenure-track EdDs occasionally teach graduate courses, practices the department of English would not condone. In contrast, most Rhetoric and Writing faculty consider the split a liberation. This sense of freedom notwithstanding, these eight years (I have experienced the last six) have taken my department down roads with curricular potholes and political bumps, the consequences of professional displacement and of internal strife borne of a two-class system: tenure- and non-tenure-track.

Yet the new department, Rhetoric and Writing, has endured; indeed, as Faulknerians in the English department might agree, we have prevailed, moving in five years from a talent-heavy but politically tenuous department to the 1998 "Department of Excellence," an award conferred by a national board of seven university presidents and chancellors. Our secret? In spite of our internal insecurities and distrust, we have grown strong through collaboration, a process defined and upheld—especially in the face of squabbles and setbacks—by writing program administrators, a title held here by the director of composition, the graduate coordinator, the director of the writing center, and the chair.

As the Kenneth Bruffee/John Trimbur debate reminded us nearly two decades ago, we must never silence dissent as we work toward consensus in shaping our curriculum and conducting our business. But how, precisely, does a writing department "live and work together with [. . .] differences" (Trimbur 448) without derailing the mission described above?

Though I presume to have no definitive answers, I know this: we earned that award by working together. I also know that we learned to work together—as equals—by *challenging the hierarchies that inform*

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American academe. In this essay, I will describe collaborative work rooted in principles that have sustained not only the department of Rhetoric and Writing at UALR, but also the traditional department of Literature, Languages, and Philosophy at Armstrong Atlantic State University (AASU) in Savannah, Georgia, where I taught from 1983-95 before coming to UALR:

- Sharing responsibility for teaching the department's programs.

- Sharing the work of governance.

- Sharing responsibility for assessment and curricular revision.

- Embracinge the tough questions.

Necessarily, I will offer local instances of collaboration—some from AASU, most from UALR—to explicate these principles. While these site-specific practices cannot guarantee success everywhere, I do contend that these broad principles, followed tenaciously, can help writing programs achieve coherence and authority within departments of English. These collaborative principles will also help writing departments prosper once they choose to secede from English.

Sharing the Teaching Across the Department's Programs

First, let's consider the barriers to collaborative work. That element of pain, alluded to above, seems nearly inescapable in shaping programs when we ponder the formidable obstacles to collaboration in many departments of English or writing. How eagerly, for example, will professors of literature serve on a composition committee charged with revising a first-year writing program to which they have already paid their dues, a program from which they long to escape to focus on other scholarly interests? Many traditional PhDs, of course, enjoy teaching writing, but their load may rarely include composition. Can such faculty focus earnestly on questions of composition pedagogy? What about the current traditionalists and the new hires in rhetoric serving together on such a committee? Given their disparate pedagogies, how will they overcome their mutual distrust?

How can non-tenure track and tenure-track faculty work as equals when the former—by university policy—may never receive promotions? At UALR, salaries as well as rankings reinforce our two-class system. Instructors do receive a one-time addition to base salary, $3,000, after completing a doctoral degree, a distinction two have achieved, with three more soon to follow. But even this raise locks instructors

several thousands of dollars below the salary earned by junior assistant professors. Again, given these built-in inequalities, how will such faculty feel full citizenship in the department if the university devalues their teaching?

And what about part-time faculty? At UALR, adjuncts teach 65% of the composition sections. We invite these lecturers—several of whom hold PhDs—to all department meetings; we invite them to composition committee meetings and urge their attendance at the August composition workshop. Our efforts at inclusion notwithstanding, lecturers live—with their sub-professional salaries and their multiple teaching jobs—at the margins of our department. Will such faculty feel invested in the department's curriculum when the department seems unable to secure office space for them?

Given such tensions, as Joseph Harris has recently urged, department administrators must move from commitment to action if they expect collaboration to yield healthy growth in the department (64). Sometimes, such action, like good teaching and scholarship, must risk failure. In the late 1980s at AASU, I introduced programmatic collaboration in my two-year term as composition coordinator by disguising the first meeting as a party, a pot-luck supper from 5:00 to 7:00 on a Sunday evening. Yes, I knew some professors would boycott the meeting, some resisting the intrusion of business on the weekend, others resenting what they assumed would be my effort to hype the collaborative classroom and to condemn traditional lecturing. But many did come: tenured professors, non-tenure-track instructors, part-time instructors, even some undergraduate tutors who worked in the writing center where we met.

After we spent an hour filling our bellies with bean dip and nachos and seven varieties of tuna casserole, we shifted our random table-talk to a focused discussion of Linda Flower's "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision," an article I had copied and billed as our centerpiece for discussion.

It worked. We all left the writing center that night refreshed by old-fashioned fellowship, having shared good food and better conversation with those to whom we rarely had time to speak. Just as important, we left having shared our frustrations, validated our teaching, and stolen lots of great ideas for motivating student writers to revise. Staging this fruitful talk gave me the same satisfaction as having reached an audience in print.

As composition coordinator at AASU, then later as acting department head, I continued these pot-luck meetings once each quarter. Attendance improved, for word spread: the talk focused honestly on

pedagogy, not on party lines, on ways of responding to student writing, ways of managing portfolios, ways of conferring without dominating students. We always grounded our discussions in theory and history, focusing on then-current pieces, such as Stephen Fishman's "Explicating Our Tacit Tradition: John Dewey and Composition Studies" and Robert Connors' "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers." But we always read and talked against the grain, challenging published authority, explaining where we could believe, where we had to doubt.

The Department of Rhetoric and Writing at UALR regularly enjoys such pedagogical talk, as the section on assessment will document. Here, I celebrate the programmatic sharing fostered by our conversations. Having split from the Department of English, we embrace all three of our writing programs and share in their teaching. For example, the director of our composition program teaches composition; he also teaches business writing to majors and to MA students. In addition, following Joseph Harris's recommendation (63), in the Fall 2000 semester five of our ten graduate faculty, including the chair, taught a section of Composition I. Also, all of our instructors—those hired by the English department to teach composition—teach junior-level writing courses each semester; they have also served as readers on MA committees. Additionally, three instructors holding doctorates have taught graduate courses. These multi-program teaching assignments keep all of us fully invested in all phases of our common mission. Each of us owns the department's work. Trudy Smoke recommends that WPAs teach in the programs they administer (92). We have taken her recommendation a step further: Each WPA—the director of composition, the graduate coordinator, the director of the writing center, the chair—teaches in all three of our programs.

Sharing Governance

One might think that such curricular sharing comes easily in a writing department now free of the literature-writing turf wars that plague so many English departments. But one would be wrong. All our graduate faculty, for instance, have endorsed my view that all faculty in Rhetoric and Writing should teach in the composition program; rarely, however, do graduate faculty list Composition I or II when I ask for their teaching preferences for coming semesters. Similarly, non-tenure-track instructors unanimously value the teaching of first-year writing courses; with equal unanimity, however, instructors request upper-division courses as well as composition courses. Indeed, some have complained to me privately when they perceive that other instructors teach upper-division courses more frequently than they do. Behind my closed door, graduate

faculty have also expressed concern that an instructor may not have credentials to teach an upper-level course. Inevitably, too, in the same private venue instructors have complained of the arrogance of graduate faculty who presume to judge their competence.

Given such tensions between and among our "classes" of faculty, we would have strangled on our own grapevine long ago were it not for our shared governance. Our governance document, approved by the entire faculty, mandates shared responsibility for our administrative and curricular work. In so doing, our governance revises, so far as possible, the hierarchies mandated by the university and helps us to find unity in our differences.

For example, the governance committee itself consists of three tenure-track faculty and three non-tenure-track faculty. In contrast, in the English department, these same instructors had no vote, except on issues relating to composition. Undercutting the old hierarchy, our governance has given instructors an equal voice in shaping not only our mission statement and our rules and procedures, but also our criteria for merit raises, for tenure, and for promotion. Ironically, as noted above, the university governance bars instructors from promotion to professorial ranks, regardless of earned doctorates. Though our department cannot change such university policies, we have signaled their inequity by empowering instructors to share in forming all policy, including criteria for post-tenure review. Illustrating the power of this collaborative model, this year we readily passed our revised governance document, the members of that committee having spent two years Boyerizing the document and submitting it to faculty for review and comment. This achievement grew, then, from what Katherine L. Keller has called the "decentering of authority" (43).

This principle of shared responsibility informs all our committee work. The administrative committee, for example, includes everyone who holds an administrative position: the department chair, the graduate coordinator, the director of composition, and the director of the writing center; it also includes an elected at-large member. Elements of the traditional academic hierarchy manifest themselves in our restricting the chair position, except "under extraordinary conditions," to tenured faculty, and in our requiring the graduate coordinator to be a member of the graduate faculty. These restrictions seem sensible to us, given the vulnerability of those whose contracts require them to take final responsibility for personnel decisions. However, no such restrictions apply to the director positions or to the at-large position. For the last six years, non-tenure-track instructors have held these three positions. With equal votes on all budgetary issues that come before that committee,

members make recommendations to the faculty; the faculty, in turn, makes policy. As Lynn Meeks and Christine Hult might put it, we work as "co-mentoring" WPAs (9).

Showing the same balance in structure, our annual review committee consists of three instructors and three tenure-track faculty, with the department chair serving as convener and facilitator. Each year, the membership of the committee changes, not only to share the work but to prevent accumulations of power on this politically sensitive committee, whose members read annual professional activity reports submitted by all faculty, then advise the chair on merit rankings. The chair then writes annual review letters to each faculty member, stating the ranking, describing strengths, and suggesting areas for improvement. While the chair may not agree with the committee's ranking—no merit, merit, merit plus, exceptional merit—the chair must report the committee's views as well as his or her own, especially if disagreement exists. Faculty then meet individually with the chair to discuss the letter, which then goes to the dean. Because these letters determine raises for each year and help to build the paper trail toward tenure and promotion, faculty have the right to protest in writing any perceived injustice in the ranking. To date, none has seen the need for such protest. Our harmony grows not from my Solomon-like wisdom but rather from the fairness ensured by our shared governance.

Our sharing of responsibility and authority also manifests itself on two committees that exclude non-tenure-track instructors. Reflecting the traditional hierarchy, the graduate committee consists of tenure-track faculty hired to teach primarily graduate courses. Making procedural and curricular decisions concerning the MA program, this committee also chooses the graduate coordinator. Even more exclusive, the promotion and tenure committee consists of tenured faculty; they read the portfolios of those seeking tenure or promotion, then make recommendations to the chair. However, the work of the graduate committee—new course proposals, selection of the graduate coordinator, policy changes—must be sanctioned by the entire faculty. In like manner, without the supporting vote of the entire faculty, no recommendation for tenure or promotion can move from the promotion and tenure committee and the chair to our dean. Once again, then, our governance has challenged the hierarchy, giving voice to instructors in choosing our leaders and in developing our curriculum.

Sharing Responsibility for Assessment and Curricular Revision

As citizens of the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, we also speak with equal voices in developing and revising our curricula, a right we earn by embracing the assessment of all our programs. The following faculty groups conduct our ongoing assessment activities:

- The senior portfolio committee rates BA portfolios, conducts exit interviews, and administers exit surveys. Members also analyze and interpret data from these assessment activities, thereby assisting the department chair (also a member of this committee), who must write the annual assessment progress report submitted to the dean each spring.

- The undergraduate studies committee reviews the BA assessment progress report and recommends curricular changes supported by data from our assessment process.

- The graduate committee does likewise with the MA assessment progress report, written by the graduate coordinator.

- Focus groups serve as subcommittees to the undergraduate studies committee and the graduate committee. Using recent theory as well as results from our assessment activities, such as the department's retreat, members propose new courses and revise course descriptions to help us meet the needs of our students.

- The composition committee addresses the needs of adjuncts and teaching assistants. This group has also designed and implemented a portfolio approach to assessing our first-year composition program.

With the exception of the graduate committee, as explained earlier, instructors and tenure-track faculty do the work of all these committees and groups. As James F. Slevin would likely agree, our faculty deserves praise for taking "ownership" of our writing programs (301). Such ownership grows from their "sense of responsibility not only for the teaching of writing but for the continuing study and review of its quality," Slevin's definition of intellectual work (299).

Such intellectual work can renew a department, as the AASU examples above suggest. At UALR, this shared curricular work has also generated exciting programmatic change, a claim not often made for committee work. In November of 1998, for example, having secured

500 curricular-development dollars from our generous dean, I led our department on a day-long retreat at a lake-side conference center. That kind of money secured us morning coffee and donuts, a full lunch, and afternoon cookies and Coke—enough to keep us talking from 8:00 AM until 5:00 PM. But our talk remained focused; we had done our homework.

Two weeks before the retreat, we had a two-hour meeting focusing on the work of the 1997-98 senior exit portfolio committee and the assessment progress report from the previous spring. That discussion generated a question that we would explore fully at the retreat: how could we realign our major in professional and technical writing to give students more experience in editing and technical communication?

Before we tackled this question at the retreat, our director of the writing center, the director of composition, and the graduate coordinator reviewed our departmental mission. We also discussed the theoretical assumptions underlying our mission.

After lunch, we divided into our focus groups—technical communication, expository writing, and persuasive writing—to explore better ways of aligning our curriculum and our praxis with our mission and our theories. We then reconvened as a faculty and shared the results of each focus group.

Following that day of retreat, one marked by a depth of fellowship impossible to achieve at a typical one-hour committee meeting on campus, we began the process of crafting curricular change. Naturally, plenty of conflicts arose in the process. For example, when the undergraduate studies committee recommended including our editing course among required courses in the major, some voices challenged the proposal, noting the possibility of driving off majors with our expanded core. But the recommendation passed unanimously, not because the protesters were silenced, but rather because committee members came prepared to stress the importance of the editing course and the integrity of the core.

Such discussions before, during, and after the retreat led to significant revisions in our BA program—all sanctioned by three years of data generated by our assessment processes:

- A required junior-level course in editing

- A new course in theories of rhetoric and writing

- A division of our course in technical writing, one focusing on "workplace writing" for our majors as well as majors in manage-

> ment and nursing, another focusing on technical communication in systems engineering and information technology.

Though the university approved these changes in 1999, we have of course continued gathering assessment data and processing that data through our committee structure. To encourage faculty to continue the process of folding the data into discussions of our curriculum and staffing, in the fall of 2000 I broached the idea of a second retreat, outlining its two-day structure, and suggesting points of focus. Specifically, I asked our director of composition and the composition committee to consider addressing one of these issues central to our programmatic growth:

- Progress on the portfolio assessment program

- Conditions for lecturers in our department

- Outcomes and objectives

- Expanding full-time faculty

- Training for teaching assistants

Similarly, I asked the director of the writing center, the chair of the undergraduate studies committee, and the graduate coordinator to meet with their committees to select a theoretical, pedagogical, or curricular issue that most concerns them and the achievement of our shared mission. Significantly, the faculty *owned* this retreat, determining the issues we explored and the readings we completed to prepare for each day, one devoted to the composition program and the writing center, the other to the degree programs.

Specifically, on September 29, the first day of the retreat, the director of composition and his composition committee discussed their progress in implementing an assessment plan for the first-year writing program. Our plan now centers on portfolios and on the work of the "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition" (59-70), a piece that Huey Crisp, our director of composition, had asked us all to read. More a workshop than a lecture, the session engaged us in testing our rubric for portfolio assessment. That same day, our writing center director, Allison Holland, reviewed the history of the writing center and the dual challenges of maintaining computers and training majors in the procedures and ethics of one-on-one teaching.

Then on October 27, the second day of the retreat, we spent the morning reviewing our work on developing a capstone course,

expanding our service learning offerings, and revising the technical communication track in our major. That afternoon, the graduate coordinator, Julia Ferganchick, and her graduate committee put us to work reading MA portfolios to test our new rubric for that program.

In the semester since this second retreat, we have pursued these follow-up activities:

- Implementing a portfolio program for assessing our first-year composition program

- Writing a proposal for a capstone course

- Planning a certificate program and a new degree program in technical communication.

At UALR, then, we collaborate as teachers, theorists, and governors, thereby meeting what Patricia Meyer Spacks calls our "collective responsibility" for the functioning of our department (95). In doing so, we enjoy the sense of community that Barbara Walvoord says provides the "backbone" for any strong writing program (63). Over time, such talk identifies programmatic strengths as well as problems; such talk, that is, begins the assessment process, without which no writing program can grow with students' needs. Such talk also persuades participants of their "efficacy" as teachers, providing the "helpful feedback on how we are doing" that Susan McLeod identifies as crucial to improving teachers as well as programs (380).

Embracing the Tough Questions

Such discussion, of course, also increases tension. When department leaders call meetings to effect change in pedagogy, governance, or curriculum, those who refuse to come and those who come in full battle dress, ear plugs included, never cease resenting discussion that seems to threaten their autonomy. Yet we must never let fear of tension derail such discussions, for, as Patricia Meyer Spacks has written, our programs can prosper only if we "get factions to work together" (95). "It's possible," Spacks continues, for leaders "to demand that faculty members seek and discover what they hold in common—and what they can learn from one another. It's possible to focus attention on the work we need to do as teachers and how best to do it" (95).

But how can we "demand" collaboration? We know that stirring creative tension can yield curricular changes that justify the risk. However, we also know that bad timing and autocratic tones can stifle creativity. For instance, when I came to UALR as chair in 1995, I

foolishly demanded that the faculty address—immediately—a tough question: "Is our Comp program serving our students well?" The question seemed warranted by the countless comments I had heard in my first several weeks on campus—comments coming from faculty in other departments: "What are you people in Rhetoric doing?" "My students' writing is appalling." "Can't you get your faculty to uphold college standards?" Of course, I dismissed the more militant remarks of those who equate 'good grammar' with learning and who prefer whining to accepting responsibility for writing across the curriculum. Nevertheless, I thought it reasonable to ask the faculty to show their accountability by assessing the "rigor" of our composition program. Naturally, they found my diction offensive, an indictment of their unprofessional standards. Just as predictably, I received cold stares instead of cooperation.

Realizing my error, I dropped "rigor" from my vocabulary and demanded nothing—except that all committees review our mission statement, then begin to phrase *their own* tough questions on pedagogy, governance, and curriculum (Kinkead and Simpson 72). The results of this shift in strategy can be found in the narrative above—and in our receiving that Department of Excellence Award, which brought us a handsome plaque, campus-wide respect, and $35,000.

I will close by describing one more tough question that the Department of Rhetoric and Writing has embraced: how can we mend our relationship with our colleagues in the Department of English and enrich the curriculum for majors in both departments? Once again, we have begun to find an answer in collaboration. In 1999, I worked with two English professors in writing a new degree plan: a major in English literature for students who want to teach English in high schools. With a sense of common ground that surprised and pleased all three of us, we wrote a program that includes an undiluted literature major, the obligatory education minor, and two upper-division courses offered by my department. The first, expository writing, ensures that these English majors learn to write nonfiction, not just literary analysis. The second, teaching literature and writing in high schools," prepares English majors to walk into their first classrooms with solid pedagogical strategies for teaching literature and writing. In the fall of 2000, English and Rhetoric majors enrolled for the first time in this new course. On the first day, these students were greeted by Paul Yoder, a professor of English, and by me, a professor of Rhetoric. We team-taught the course. In doing so, we taught our students and ourselves that collaboration draws creative energy from difference.

I remain committed to collaboration as the principle that governs departments of writing and departments of English, knowing that autocratic leadership can alienate faculty and retard the evolution of a coherent writing curriculum. More to the point, I remain committed to the collaborative principle because I have seen the often painful but always healthy growth it generates in writing programs. As Donald Bushman recently urged, writing program leaders must claim "opportunities for reflection" for themselves and for faculty so that, together, they can take purposeful "action" in shaping their department and the curriculum (36). In pursuing such collaborative work, we join Tom Recchio in eschewing the "masterful" stance as administrator; instead, we live our administrative work as "relational and receptive" (160)—the same way we try to live as scholars and teachers of writing.

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