

Are We Having Fun Yet? Necessity, Creativity, and Writing Program Administration

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Simply put, everything I do as a WPA is fun. If it wasn't, I wouldn't do it. It's not the same fun as kissing my girlfriend, but it excites me nonetheless. I love the challenge of being a WPA. I love having a say in what a university writing program looks like. I have fun training new teachers. I have fun talking about writing with graduate students. I have fun figuring out how to schedule 136 TAs each semester. I have fun reviewing syllabi. I have fun developing new classes. I have fun leading committees that work with curriculum. I have fun working with other administrators.

Being a WPA requires thinking and challenge. It's not dull. It's the kind of cerebral fun I like to have. Daily tasks require persistence, and sudden, unexpected tasks require quick thinking. If we don't see being a WPA as a fun job, we're in the wrong business. This is what I studied to do, what I want to do. If I didn't love it, I couldn't do it. I come to work every day excited about what might happen that day, about what might get done.

—Survey respondent, seven years a WPA

IN THE MOOD: INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHOD

This essay was prompted, nay provoked, by my recent experience of writing the Foreword to Theresa Enos, Stuart Brown, and Catherine Chapat's *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource*. Thirty solid chapters burst with advice, information, priorities, and strategies to help new WPAs go effectively and efficiently where they have never gone before. These essays convey a strong sense of the intelligence, authority,

and even power that has made their authors leaders in the profession. But perhaps because these essays, on such topics as “The WPA and the Politics of LitComp” and “Writing Programs in the Context of the University Budget,” are driven by the need to convey a great deal of information in a brief compass, they are written in dead earnest. The chapter on “Legal Considerations for WPAs,” which discusses NCTE’s insurance—“up to \$2,000,000 per claim” for a variety of sins, errors, and allegations, including “‘hiring unqualified persons’ and ‘failure to educate’”—is downright scary.

Did the authors really mean to convey a collective sense of “all fun abandon, ye who enter here”? I know most of the authors; so do you. They are not devoid of humor; when you meet them at conferences they twinkle and scintillate. Indeed, it is fair to assume that they hold their jobs by free choice, and that if they didn’t (by and large) find the work satisfying they’d do something else. They must be having fun.

So over Labor Day weekend, when I knew all true WPAs would be in their offices, I emailed fifty of our experienced colleagues around the country to ask them, “What is (or has been) the most fun for you as a WPA? What makes it fun? If the fun is long-term and ongoing, what sustains it? What’s the least fun? If (sigh) you have no fun as a WPA, why is this so? And if so, why do you continue as a WPA—if, in fact, you do?”

The answers came pouring in (“Caught red-handed on this Saturday morning of Labor Day weekend!”). Perhaps this pervasive zest is an artifact of the positive way in which I posed the question. Perhaps it is because my queries were directed to the profession’s movers and shapers—scholars and journal editors, organization officers, grant recipients, holders of fancy titles and endowed chairs—and to some relative newcomers, as well. I received a large number of positive answers from happy, energetic, creative people. This selective sample contradicts the literature of writing directors as housewives (Bloom, 1992) (as an associate dean, Charles Schuster, says he’s a “midwife” [88]), neglected drudges (Enos), and “sad women in the basement” (S. Miller). That my study injects good cheer into the earnestness of the prevailing literature on the subject is congruent with the current orientation of “positive psychology” that regards “hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance” as the normative human condition, rather than as “transformations of more authentic negative impulses” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 5). For, indeed, that is what I have found. To state my conclusion (and my thesis) first: the happiest WPAs are those who have transformed their jobs to emphasize what they do best: work with people, either through mentoring or more formal teaching, and solving problems. Thus, there is a good match between the

job and the person who fills it. These largely upbeat respondents share with their hapless and generally voiceless counterparts—those who may not have been able to effect such transformations—the problems of lack of status and competition for limited resources. Nevertheless, the Florence Nightingales, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and composite of all the noble teachers in *Lives on the Boundary* are on the job.

Supplemented by various chapters in collections by Diana George, Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen, and selected *WPA* articles, I will identify what makes us happiest, and explain why. To avoid one-upsmanship in my audience, if not among the respondents to my survey (“He’s having more fun than she is.” “Is not.” “Is too.” “She’s not having any fun at all.”), I will not identify the email respondents, only those quoted from published sources, though the inimitable styles of some may be lively giveaways. First, I’ll discuss several essential elements of what’s fun—which overwhelmingly outnumbered the negative components (again, a possible artifact of my survey); then, what’s not fun. I’ll conclude with a brief analysis of the self-portrait of the *WPA* in action, having fun, that serves as the epigraph to this study.

AIN’T WE GOT FUN?

“*On the Street Where You Live*”—*Working with People*: It should come as no surprise that much of the fun that most *WPAs* have relates to their work with people, courses, and curricula. *WPAs* love to mentor *TAs* and other less experienced colleagues. They enjoy providing structures and contexts in which people can learn. They are happy to help faculty, students, and the larger community with “projects and programs that make a difference in their lives”—often on a very large scale and over long periods of time. These pleasures reflect a goodness of fit between the necessary duties of the job and the people who perform them. Although no *WPA* (or anyone else in an educational context) is autonomous, in all of these activities *WPAs* can take the initiative rather than merely react to the exigencies of academia, focusing on “hole-plugging and disaster management [. . .] bouncing from one crisis to the next” (Heilker 32). With (and sometimes in opposition to) colleagues, they can have “cerebral fun” being inventive, imaginative, creative; they can solve some problems and prevent others. Their work in all these areas can, in the best of circumstances, reflect a combination of theory, research, and reflective practice.

Mentoring TAs and Less Experienced Colleagues. *WPAs* expect to teach new teachers how to teach writing and provide composition studies resource materials for more experienced colleagues. The literature is full of ideas on how to do it (see Janangelo and Hansen; George; many

issues of *WPA*), but it rarely addresses the joys of the process that nearly every respondent has commented on. Some of the mentoring comes in formal classes for new teachers, informally conducted; a recurrent theme is the formation of a community with a common love: “Where else do you face a classroom of such engaged, excited, sharp, worried, willing, and at the same time stubborn (because smart, engaged, worried) individuals with whom you’re about to form a community, a team, a cohort centered around the subject you most love to talk about, the teaching of writing, being a writer.” Some of the “best moments” are those that acknowledge the transformations that come when the community has been established, notes a nineteen-year administrator still in love with the job: “A profound silence [. . .] sometimes comes over a class meeting with new TAs or the whole staff because something has just been discovered, understood, felt, and reached deeply into us.”

Another comment addresses the joy that new teachers (and their mentors) experience from understanding “what it means to teach college English” and how to use their new knowledge:

My biggest source of WPA glee comes from those moments in which I can help novice instructors gain confidence in themselves and grow beyond initial misconceptions of what it means to teach college English. In my experience, expressions of ‘Hey, I can do this!’ are prerequisite for a new instructor to sense that this is really important, humane work to be proud of.

Another colleague reflects on a comparable transformation: “Seeing new TAs come in scared and hunched and soon transformed with radiant confidence and love for their teaching.” That confidence, and that new community, provides a buffer against the usual problems of the fiscally challenged WPA; the author continues: “Next thing you know, you’re eavesdropping in the halls, listening to an impressive instructor/student conference as heartwarming insulation against the budget-cut meeting you face in 30 minutes.” The learning, the energy, the excitement are reciprocal. A veteran WPA evokes the “air of excitement about the teaching of writing and beginning of professionalism in the field,” and the fact that she herself learns a great deal, “not so much *from* the TAs but *because* of them.”

Mentoring Senior Faculty and Staff: Many WPAs, or WPAs-turned-department chairs enjoy “convincing senior faculty that teaching writing is an important job that they can actually learn to do,” showing them how to do it, and inviting them into the Burkean parlor. (For resistance to this, see “Stormy Weather” later in this essay.) An extension of this professional collegiality is to “maximize each faculty member’s opportunities

for presenting papers and other professional development.” And a third common form of mentoring is “just paying personal attention to people, knowing their interests in and out of academe” in order to help counteract the sense “of anonymity that many part-timers feel.”

The range of WPA mentoring is a function of time, energy, institutional size, imagination—and other commitments. Those who have the most fun on the job seem to be able to routinize the mundane so they can concentrate on more creative endeavors that transcend the university’s traditional boundaries and divisions. One long time WAC director says his happiest times are “consulting one-on-one with WAC faculty over lunch,” and “stretching traditional boundaries of WAC to include, for instance, a “poetry across the curriculum” project that involves 25 teachers in disciplines as varied as biology, chemistry, engineering mechanics, and urban tree care (see Merrill). The learning among teachers and students, if not the poetry, is memorable.

What might exhaust mere mortals even to contemplate energizes those WPAs able to leap tall curricula with a single bound. After 15 years on the job a happy WPA explains,

Here’s the real payoff for me in terms of fun. I am recognized on campus as one of the “go-to” people. I love the variety my work offers. On any given day, the range is enormous—a writing workshop for the grad students who work in the business school communications center; a talk to the staff of university disabilities services about what we are doing in freshman English and how our folks can work with the tutors of students who have learning differences; a meeting with the service learning office to incorporate service learning into more of our courses; a meeting with engineering faculty to arrange the details of a grant we have to pair ‘Engineering Concepts’ with ‘Critical Reading and Writing’; phone conversations with the folks who run our living and learning centers about the linked English classes; negotiating with the center for teaching and learning for extra funding to support an electronic portfolio program we will launch this fall, with a one-year director of educational technology (just for freshman English). I get to get out of the department and talk with people from all over campus.

The circle of teaching and learning is ever-widening. In “The Teaching Circle, the WPA, and Writing in the University,” an inspiring account of faculty fun on the job, Kathleen Blake Yancey explains how this energizing process can work. There are two models of “faculty circles,” in which faculty meet to learn about an issue, method, or approach to a

particular aspect of teaching, say “methods of collaborative learning” or “use of the Internet in teaching.” One is university-supported, public, and “highly focused” with designated leaders or teams to help the participants explore a given topic during a limited period of time—similar to a seminar. The other is “informal and self-generating,” proceeding for an indefinite period of time through collaborative discussion. Both represent new models of “cross-curricular faculty leadership” and mentorship designed both to serve as models of good teaching and to enhance the participants’ teaching. Although teaching circles are not restricted to WPA leadership, WPAs become natural leaders because the circles are analogous to their other faculty development work (129-37).

I WANT TO BE HAPPY: TEACHING WRITING, AND OTHER MATTERS OF CURRICULUM

“We care: about writing, writing students, writing teachers, reading and writing connections, writing within and across and outside the university” (Bishop 2). Wendy Bishop’s motto could be every writing teacher’s bumper sticker. Like crack auto mechanics, engaged teachers always have the hood up on even the newest custom-built constructions; they are forever tinkering. “Shaping programs and curriculum is the best part of the job, hands down,” explains a WPA who has

turned one school’s curriculum from weak to really strong, started a graduate training program for a minor in composition studies and begun a community text program for incoming freshmen entitled “Writer as Witness.” All of these programs have affected students’ lives for the better—which I consider the purpose of being a WPA.

Kurt Spellmeyer likewise places considerable faith in the efficacy of freshman English:

While I admit that English 101 is hardly the palace where the tyranny of expertise will face its last stand, I am convinced that the significant changes never happen in a big way, all at once and on an enormous scale, but always moment by moment and one person at a time, which is also how we teach and how we learn. (180)

It is unnecessary to belabor the point that many made in my survey, and which all WPAs understand. After 20 years as a WPA, one says,

I still enjoy creating the structure, the environment in which people can learn. And the learning I inevitably do each year because each student is different, the group is different, I am different. To watch people learn to love language, writ-

ing, and teaching these, to help them become less fearful, less rigid, more open about their teaching is fun to me. Well, what I'm speaking of here is beyond fun. It is rather like learning to swim. The process is not always delightful, but it yields a great deal of pleasure, sense of well-being, accomplishment, and sheer delight in moving through water like silk on the beautiful days.

This summary says it all—the sense of growth, transformation, change, invention, flexibility born of competence, confidence, conviction.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC: THE PLEASURES OF PROBLEM SOLVING, AND MORE

Given that much of any administrator's day is devoted to solving problems, I was surprised that few surveyed said it was fun. (The fun may be modest, as in the satisfaction of crossing off an item from a list of things to do: "Aha, done!") Although as associate dean, Charles Schuster works endlessly and frustratingly "on unsolvable problems, the ones that defy solution" (86), WPAs—the happy ones, anyway—report more solutions and, therefore, greater success. Rather than discussing problem solving in general, respondents referred to specific issues to resolve, derived from, as one WPA says,

a perverse compulsion to organize people and fix things—maybe mixed in with a desire to meddle in other people's lives. I love to spruce things up in the department, metaphorically speaking. Yesterday I spent all day on the jigsaw puzzle of the spring schedule of classes—trying to figure out which of our 80+ staff would teach what. To me that's fun.

Another likes "talking about integrity and character" to students "who have downloaded papers off the internet and will [otherwise] automatically fail the course." A third hates "adjudicating plagiarism cases," loves "redesigning our assessment procedures and curriculum. I got rid of a high-stakes exit exam and instituted portfolios."

In "Critique's the Easy Part," Richard Miller summarizes his satisfying life as a WPA, the best part of which is problem solving:

This work. [. . .] Learning from others. [. . .] Making contact. Solving Problems. Especially this business of solving problems and all that it entails: talking to students, teachers, and administrators, studying the known parameters, imagining alternatives, pushing back against necessity, finding a way out, joining the discussion, learning again and again

that there are other ways of thinking. This work, with its frustrations and rewards, has turned out to be much better suited to my needs and my abilities than my first choice [“nurturing that cold gemlike flame” by writing poetry (3)]. This work. It sure beats writing in isolation hoping to be heard. (13)

Many aspects of this work are embedded in the activities of the WPA quoted above whose problem solving ranges from disabilities services to service learning to engineering and educational technology.

HAIL, HAIL, THE GANG’S ALL HERE: PROFESSIONAL COLLEGIALLY

WPAs, organization mavens all, have fun organizing each other: “My first piece of advice [to new WPAs] is to join WPA,” says Mara Holt (39- 40). In the past 15 years, composition conferences have sprung up like mushrooms, devoted to composition studies, rhetoric, teaching writing, computers and composition, and peer tutoring—not to mention writing program administration. Although many of those I surveyed are among the major movers and shapers in professional organizations, the pleasures they identified were local rather than global. “When I’d go to WPA conferences,” explains one leader,

I loved the ‘aha’ feel of suddenly being among ‘my kind’ who had the same worries, pleasures, obsessions (reading student papers, helping writing teachers read those student papers); the release was giddy at the time, and certainly manic depressive to a degree: a place where you could let your highs and lows show and not feel you had to stiff-upper-lip it.

It is no secret that beleaguered WPAs find sustenance, stimulation, and solace from colleagues at professional meetings and through consulting trips to—as one very happy WAC director commented—“Romania, Korea, China, South Africa, and Thailand.” Such extramural contacts, indeed friendships, validate WPAs’ work, its intellectual and pedagogical dimensions, in ways often absent at our home institution. Contexts in which we can talk in code—and be understood, meet and greet new friends and old, share the same jokes (“How many WPAs does it take to change a lightbulb?”¹), and relax may be as close to professional heaven as we can come.

MOOD INDIGO: NOT FUN

“Stormy Weather”: Fathers, Recalcitrant TAs, Martyrs, and Second Class Citizens

Fathers. Sometimes the estrangement from colleagues is voluntary. Douglas Hesse, the only person who has fulfilled two focal roles in WPA as journal editor and president, is a self-acknowledged overachiever. In “The WPA as Father, Husband, Ex,” he confesses that as Writing Program Director at Illinois State in the late 1980s, he unilaterally assumed the role of “father” to the program, “self-reliant and taking care of others.” He chose to “handle most of the writing program business,” even though several other colleagues could have shared the innumerable duties conceptually as well as administratively. “I knew it would be more efficient” to do it myself, he says, and “I didn’t want to trouble my colleagues. After all, they were busy people working toward tenure and promotion, teaching their own classes.” As was he. “I did this. I did that,” he says, working “stupidly long hours, nearly every night and one day per weekend for six or seven years.” This paternalistic style cost him his marriage, producing “a crippling kind of alienation from both self and those others (wife, children, colleagues, friends)” who could have healed the breach. In time Hesse, who assumes all the blame, “divorced the writing program” (48-53). Not fun.

Recalcitrant TAs. Intellectual segregation starts early, often in graduate school. The bane of all WPAs is, as one says, “the occasional graduate student who arrives fully formed, sheathed in his cloak of arrogance,” unreceptive to either the theory or practice of teaching writing. Another says that the “graduate teaching fellows who are working just to collect a paycheck, who do the least amount of work to get by, who never manage to care about the community they belong to” turn into—if they last that long—faculty “with negative attitudes, who don’t want to join in the fun.” Although such contemptuous faculty often lament long and loud the quality of student writing, “it is always an uphill battle,” and often a losing one, to try to enlist them in the cause. This (among many other frustrations) can lead to burnout, and that is no fun. As Toby Fulwiler explains, “At times I burn out and tire of being a traveling salesman for writing across the curriculum, organizer of collaborative publication projects, director of first-year composition, and minority voice for hiring a colleague with a PhD in composition.” Fulwiler’s antidote is the solution—and the solace—of nearly everyone surveyed: “But then I teach my classes, meet my students, and read their writing—and discover, much to my relief, that I love my work and have the best job in the world” (“The Writing Committee at Work,” Fulwiler et al. 145).

Martyrs. Often, however, WPAs are isolated from their colleagues in ways far more problematic than those either Hesse or Fulwiler—both

tenured professors in their home departments—identify. One respondent made the deliberate choice to eschew the “self-indulgent” professorial model that would allow him to “teach my classes, concentrate on my writing, take summers off.” He decided instead to sacrifice peer collegiality and considerable research time “to work as a WPA for political reasons—I want to see if I can’t make things a little better for undergrads and their teachers [primarily TAs, adjuncts, and lecturers] whose job situations are so much worse than that of most tenure stream faculty.” Although “the WPA job is not much fun, it is important and possibly transformative work. I like the feeling of being useful.” Even after eight years on the job, with a superb support staff, he feels alienated from “other tenure-stream faculty. I’ve never felt very comfortable in the culture of the university, with its myriad pecking-orders and attendant anxieties over status and prestige.”

Second Class Citizens. As the above comment indicates, “second class citizenship” for WPAs, a status commonly attributed to women (see Bloom, 1992; Enos; S. Miller), is not exclusively a female complaint. It is no secret that many WPAs, including senior composition scholars and leaders of national organizations, are made to feel, by their critically oriented English departments, that they are left sitting on the porch of the House of Lore. This can be fine on good days, but threatening weather always looms on the horizon.

There is no need to rehearse here the myriad of handmaid’s duties that many WPAs routinely perform; some have even included these among the pleasures of the job. Whether or not WPAs choose, as Hesse did, to insulate their departments from the nature of their work—which is “never done. Autonomy has its price” (51)—critical colleagues can and do dismiss the work as “service,” and, therefore, by definition as unintellectual, not deserving of respect, or—in some instances—tenure. Research I institutions are particularly notorious in segregating WPAs from tenure-track literature faculty, either by keeping them off the tenure track entirely or refusing to evaluate those with academic status for tenure and promotion. In some notably egregious cases, nationally and internationally known WPAs were either fired or remain untenured assistant professors, if not lecturers, for unconscionably long times, with chances for tenure and advancement at other schools impeded by the lowly status at home. It is an understatement to say that the failure to be respected and rewarded by one’s home department is the source of anger and bitterness, even by people who otherwise love their jobs.

In fairness it should be acknowledged that in other instances, the directors of free-standing writing centers and WAC programs benefit from their marginalization, which is usually from English departments.

As Rebecca Moore Howard explains in “Power Revisited: Or, How We Became a Department,” some even lobby for it. They have, as one director said in my survey, “freedom to innovate that is fun,” and also freedom (and budget) to initiate programs, hire tutors and technicians, and expand their services around and beyond campus. “We don’t have to go through zillions of bureaucratic layers to get permission to do something. We can just do it. That’s fun too.” Yet Howard’s recommended divorce is not generically applicable; no single solution fits all.

Can rapprochement be effected between, as some say, the MLA-types and the compositionists? WPAs tend to discuss the problems with each other—a practice that guarantees a sympathetic hearing but does not change the academic culture unless there is a critical mass (and how many is that?) of composition studies faculty in a given department. Often, as numerous enthusiastic WAC publications indicate (Fulwiler, “Quiet”; McLeod; Phelps) WPAs find a much warmer reception in other areas of the university and the wider world beyond the English departments that continue to determine their rank and tenure.

CHEAPSKATES AND CHEATIN’ HEARTS

Two other types of problems bedevil WPAs in contemporary college culture. One is the cumulative effect of cost-cutting, which too often creates a large cadre of part-time and unrewarded teachers, and undermines the teaching of writing, support services, and administrative efforts in general. And that is “why I have given up being a WPA,” writes one former WPA, who has given up hope. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss solutions to this pervasive problem in American higher education, although they abound in Susan McLeod et al.’s encouraging overview of the state-of-the-art *WAC for the New Millennium*.

Another problem is lawsuits. The *Writing Program Administrator’s Handbook* addresses a number of the innumerable types of potential lawsuits lurking beneath the academic minefield; I will identify here only the one that occupies an undue amount of the WPA’s attention. The threat stems from, as one WPA says, “the ‘customer’ attitude that a number of students and their parents have these days. ‘I paid my tuition so I get an A; never mind that I didn’t attend class or do the work.’”

Such threats require a lot of investigative effort—and a firm response, which gave one seasoned WPA a major triumph:

Once a TA found that a student had cheated—copied a paper written by a student during a previous semester. We had the student cold. Not a fun thing to deal with, as all WPAs know. But what was fun was what happened when the defiant student showed up to fight the ruling with his

father and family lawyer. After seeing the evidence, the father, also determined to resist, explained very firmly that the ruling might damage the student's future and that he would unfortunately have to sue to recover such damages in court. The TA's eyes got bigger, but I felt confident enough to say, "Well, this is America, and you certainly have the right to sue. But please know that the university and its lawyers will back us and not permit the case to be settled out of court. And if any damage to the reputation of this teaching assistant results from the suit, any damage at all, we will also sue for those damages." At that point the lawyer stepped in and said, "I don't think this is something that we want to see adjudicated through the courts." The TA looked at me like I had done something really well. That was fun.

"SUPERCALLIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIDOCIOUS": IN CONCLUSION

The above example emphatically illustrates the truth of Wendy Bishop's observation, "All of us make a difference, moment by moment, one person at a time, in how we teach and learn. Follow and lead. Read and understand. Write and change—ourselves and others" (3). The particularly happy WPA quoted at the beginning of this essay sums up the pleasures of the role, and thereby implies a formula for success, if not a theory. He is fully engaged with the university, the program, and the people in it—teachers, students, administrators. He loves to teach, formally and informally; to develop courses and curricula; to solve problems. The sense of intellectual challenge, the opportunity for creativity, coupled with his own energy, commitment, perseverance, and resilience in handling the unexpected, make every day new and exciting. Whatever drawbacks there may be—and he does not acknowledge any—are subsumed in the positive aspects of the work and the successes he obviously enjoys. WPAs who want to have this much fun can seek such a job ready made or reconfigure their existing job into one that resembles this model. A change of attitude rather than a change of duties may provide the jump start to make this possible. In my own experience, this includes a willingness to be unconventional, to challenge authority, to take risks, and to get into trouble—particularly when there are creative ways to get back out. If we are not having fun yet, fun is nevertheless within our reach. Advice is at hand, paraphrased from that immortal mentor, Yogi Berra. Having fun as a WPA is ninety-percent mental. The other half is physical.

NOTE

¹ “Or ‘a student’s grade?’ Or, ‘a curriculum?’” The answer—though I’m sure you already know this—can only be “One”—the single individual responsible for everything, and to whom a plethora of tasks cling as lint to velcro” (Bloom, “Moving” x).

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