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WPA: Writing Program Administration publishes articles and essays concerning the organization, administration, practices, and aims of college and university writing programs. Possible topics include the education and support of writing teachers; the intellectual and administrative work of WPAs; the situation of writing programs within both academic institutions and broader contexts; the programmatic implications of current theories, technologies, and research; relationships between WPAs and other administrators and between writing and other academic programs; placement; assessment; and the professional status of WPAs.

The previous list is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive, but contributions must be appropriate to the interests and concerns of those who administer writing programs. The editors welcome empirical research (quantitative as well as qualitative), historical research, and theoretical, essayistic, or reflective pieces.

The length of submissions should be approximately 2,000 to 5,000 words, although the journal occasionally will publish shorter or longer pieces when the subject matter warrants. Articles should be suitably documented using the current MLA Style Manual. For citations of Internet resources, use the Columbia Guide to Online Style.**

Please submit only electronic versions of manuscripts as WORD or rich text (.rtf) attachments, with the author identified only on a separate cover letter. Submissions are anonymously reviewed by the Editorial Board. The editors aspire to respond within two months after the receipt of the submission.

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**In addition to the general guidelines set forth in the Author’s Guide, book reviewers should include a summary of the text, some discussion regarding the text’s construction, as well as an evaluation of the text’s relevance to the profession. The review should be between 1500-2000 words.
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Once again, we want to use this space to thank those who have contributed time, effort, and expertise to the journal.

We especially thank members of our editorial board (all of whom are listed on the front pages of the journal) for their conscientious work. We also thank you, the readers of WPA, for sending us your interesting and thought-provoking writing. Because of your many strong submissions, we have planned the next few issues, and we are now scheduling essays for publication in the future.

As all of you may recall, the fall 2006 issue will be a special ESL issue, currently being edited by Paul Kei Matsuda of the University of New Hampshire. That issue will go to press this summer and should be available to all of you, early this fall.

Currently we are also planning a special issue focusing on innovative writing programs (currently planned for the spring, 2008 issue). Part of the formal call for papers reads:

WPA: Writing Program Administration, the journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, seeks papers that address new and innovative program design in rhetoric and composition. We welcome articles that explore programs in all aspects of writing administration—first-year writing, undergraduate writing, masters, and doctoral programs, as well as writing centers, writing across the curriculum, and writing in the disciplines. We are especially interested in articles that not only outline new programmatic trends, but also place those trends within both an historical context of the field and within evolving theoretical conversations about the field.
Letter from the Editors

The deadline for submissions is August 1, 2006. For more information, please contact the guest editors, Catherine Chaput (cchaput@georgiasouthern.edu), Danika Brown (redmonkey@mac.com), or MJ Braun (mbraun@uwf.edu). Manuscripts should be documented using the current MLA Style Manual, should be submitted by email attachment, and should be accompanied by a message that includes the author’s relevant affiliations and contact information.

Greg Glau, Duane Roen, and Barry Maid
Arizona State University
Composition as Countermonument: Toward a New Space in Writing Classrooms and Curricula

Paul Butler

**Introduction: Unleashing “Frankenstein’s Monster”**

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau looks out from atop a towering skyscraper where he gets a panoramic—and panoptic—view of New York from the perspective of urban planners, “voyeurs” who wield the strategic power of urban design (“Walking in the City” 27). At street level, however, pedestrians constantly subvert that gaze through their own “rhetoric of walking,” a series of spatial articulations that defy order and authority. In much the same way, writing programs often face tensions in their curricula, as teachers work to locate themselves within the planning of administrative “architects” while simultaneously undoing that very planning through innovative teaching practices. At the classroom level, writing instructor-power brokers become the administrative enforcers, while student-pedestrians challenge their authority in still another new rhetoric of walking. While these tensions may suggest an impasse in the realm of writing program administration, the interdisciplinary idea of the “counter” or “negative-form” monument—what James Young defines as “self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being”—offers a different way to see the opposing forces at work in writing programs: as a process of reinvention through a kind of self-destruction. Indeed, if we assume that writing programs run the risk of becoming monolithic or static in their evolution, the metaphor of the countermonument suggests the productive value in revising program structures through continual self-assessment and change. As Young states, “By resisting its own reason for being, the countermonument paradoxically reinvigorates the very idea of the monument itself” (48).
In adopting the metaphor of the countermonument, I draw principally upon Young’s idea that the very design of such a structure can call into question its purpose for being. For example, a countermonument might gradually sink entirely into the ground, leaving only a remnant or memory of its original form and defying the “relative fixity of location” that underlies most conventional monuments. Conventional monuments, according to Young, conflate time, memory, and location so that “the actual consequence of a memorial’s unyielding fixedness in space is also its death over time” (7). The countermonument, by contrast, challenges the general rigidity of time, memory, and fixed location, becoming instead “a monument against itself [. . .] a self-abnegating monument, literally self-effacing” (Young 28). In his book *The Texture of Memory*, Young features several of these countermonuments. One, a tall cylindrical column reaching six meters into the air, slowly sinks and after several years disappears beneath the surface of the ground; another, a “negative-form” fountain submerged deep in groundwater, projects the mirror image, the antithesis, really, of its formerly visible grandeur.

In making the case for composition as countermonument, I argue that composition programs and curricula by nature demand the same type of self-abnegation: to flourish, that is, they must be willing to stand against themselves. While the basic purpose of the countermonument—to question the general effectiveness of, for instance, traditional Holocaust memorials—is different in nature from my use of this metaphor, both are similar in the sense that they involve the transformation of space through a collision of internal and external forces. Indeed, the countermonument’s function is to rethink the very nature of memorial structures, their origins, influences, purposes, and impacts upon the public. Like a countermonument, I assert, composition programs and curricula must take structural risks, welcome opposing voices, and be willing to examine their fundamental reason for being—even if doing that means giving up some control or stability as they assume a more protean and thus more viable shape. As Young explains, “When it begins to come to life, to grow, shrink, or change form, the [counter]monument may become threatening [. . .] to have a will of its own.” In forming an identity, he adds, countermonuments “become a little like Frankenstein’s monster, a golem out of the maker’s control” (37).

**The Countermonument at SUWP**

To analyze the idea of composition as countermonument—a Frankenstein’s monster with a will of its own—I point to the Syracuse University Writing Program (SUWP), a stand-alone writing program that in 2001 began a major effort to revamp its curriculum to focus on developing skills in analy-
sis, argument, and critical research. The program’s previous emphasis on critical reflection and theorizing continued in some ways under the revised curriculum, but it is safe to say that this new incarnation, designed in part to reflect shifts that had occurred in the discipline, represented a significant change of direction at SUWP. Before (and during) the transition, the writing program was subject to expressions of dissatisfaction from various elements of the campus community. In spring 2002, for example, Undergraduates for Better Education (UBE), a student group ostensibly serving as self-appointed watchdogs for academic quality at Syracuse, released the results of a campus-wide survey that listed the writing program’s two introductory composition courses (Writing 105 and 205) as collectively one of the top three sources of discontent among the university’s students. While members of the University Senate, including then-Chancellor Kenneth Shaw, raised questions about the methodological integrity of UBE’s survey, the results received widespread attention when they appeared on the front page of Syracuse’s student newspaper, The Daily Orange (Capozzoli). Another critique of SUWP—an article by the Daily’s opinion page editor published a year later after changes had been implemented in the writing program—reflects the persistent view of how at least some students perceived composition instruction on campus: “Ask any upperclassman,” wrote Colin Dabkowski, “and chances are you’ll hear a horror story about their WRT 105 experience—fragmented curricula, bogus teaching techniques or pointless exercises in the diverse and bizarre” (Capozzoli). Another critique of SUWP—an article by the Daily’s opinion page editor published a year later after changes had been implemented in the writing program—reflects the persistent view of how at least some students perceived composition instruction on campus: “Ask any upperclassman,” wrote Colin Dabkowski, “and chances are you’ll hear a horror story about their WRT 105 experience—fragmented curricula, bogus teaching techniques or pointless exercises in the diverse and bizarre” (Capozzoli).
several instructors chosen to pilot the new curriculum, I found the attacks disheartening, especially after having developed what I considered a series of rigorous writing assignments for the course.

Against this backdrop of institutional criticism, the writing program made another important turn in its effort at curricular reform. Building upon the campus administration’s focus on the university’s five core values (see “Diversity at Syracuse University”), the program won two grant proposals in Spring 2003 and initiated the process of infusing its curriculum with one of those values—diversity—which the university defines on its Web site as “the ability to genuinely appreciate others for their differences and similarities.” One of these two grant proposals, “Writing and Diversity in a Globalized World,” states that the goal of “[w]riting in a globalized world requires starting from an assumption of difference, of limited knowledge, of perspective.” As part of achieving this goal, the writing program instituted, among other initiatives, a series of diversity forums to which it invited campus representatives (including, for example, experts from disability studies and the university’s LGBT Resource Center); the program also sponsored a diversity film series that took up issues of race, gender, sexuality, and disability; hosted a series of outside speakers on campus, and launched a Web site to begin the process of incorporating diversity as an integral part of the writing program curriculum. In this multifaceted undertaking, participation by several university constituencies inspired a series of dialogues about some of the most divisive issues on campus, including a blackface incident involving an SU fraternity and an antigay hate crime in which a student was beaten close to campus.

In my administrative role as facilitator of a coordinating group for instructors in the writing program, I attended many of these events and found they drew a broad cross-section of the university community. One event in particular, the “No Bull Diversity Summit,” featured discussions among many campus groups—most notably a fraternity that had been disciplined because a former member had instigated the blackface incident. During the session, participants answered a number of questions about the appropriate role of students and teachers in promoting diversity discussions and projects in classrooms and the impact of campus events on the classroom, and of classrooms on campus events. Those attending joined a series of small groups, each comprised of various factions of the campus community and led by a predesignated faculty member. At the end of the breakout groups, a lively discussion ensued during which students spoke passionately about their views of campus life—with black, gay, and female students speaking up alongside white male fraternity students in an often contested and passionate expression of viewpoints. Today, I recall the courage of two students in particular: a gay student who spoke of feeling isolated on campus.
and silenced in the aftermath of the hate crime and a member of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity who, citing concerns with the “tone” of some of the remarks made by audience participants, said he felt his position as the member of a majority group had not been addressed fairly.

In light of No Bull, it seems evident that the writing program’s decision to open itself to discussions of diversity (and, in the process, to critiques of its program and teachers) renders the program to be much like a countermonument, a structure both undone and reshaped by various university constituencies. As Young asserts, “[The countermonument] forces viewers to desanctify the memorial, demystify it, and become its equal. [ . . .] Ultimately, such a monument undermines its own authority by inviting and then incorporating the authority of passersby” (33). How is it that a writing program facing institutional criticism and misunderstanding could actually become stronger by giving up some of its own authority and incorporating others’ ideas—the authority of outsiders and the elements of the countermonument? Perhaps unwittingly, with its traditional structure (the monument) in place, the writing program at Syracuse put itself in flux by inviting the kind of dialogic participation necessary to allow change (the countermonument,) to emerge from the bottom up. This countermonument was created in part through the forums in which students as well as other campus participants became the authors of ideas and, at least on an advisory level, of program- and university-wide policies. Young articulates the importance of the type of creative transformation set in motion by the writing program when he describes the purpose of the countermonument:

[Its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet. (30)]

While on the surface it might appear that the implementation of the new curriculum was the only crucible at work in the transformation of the writing program, I argue, instead, that the program’s willingness to open itself to its own violation—to provoke discussion, demand interaction and, in essence, disappear in one form, only to reappear, stronger, in another—was the process that led to positive change. Put differently, the program allowed itself—perhaps unwittingly—to become Young’s “golem out of the maker’s control.” At the No Bull Summit, with the program’s new emphasis on anal-
ysis and argument intact and diversity thrust to the forefront of future curricular revision, a student commented on the importance of such “desanctification,” noting that the dynamic interactions taking place in the room that night could also reinvigorate college classrooms. That could happen, he stated, if teachers “allow student discussion to open up, even beyond comfort zones. This might involve some periods of silence before students would move in to undertake and push difficult discussions beyond trite levels” (Lipson par. 1). As Carol Lipson, current director of the SU writing program and leader of a group at the forum, reported, “They strongly felt that students needed to be given the space to speak, encouraged to speak” (par. 3).

By inviting criticism of its curricular and classroom practices, the writing program arguably reframed the “burden of memory” that a monument accumulates over time, redirecting once negative perceptions through authors who contributed to the program’s new meaning. Given that some countermonuments, such as the aforementioned cylindrical column, gradually disappear as part of their purpose—or at least change the way people think about their traditional memorial features—it seems clear that the SU writing program reconstituted itself in a new form. Criticisms of it (reflected in cartoons, surveys, and newspaper articles) suggested that SUWP had come to resemble Young’s conventional monument. However, arguably the highly interactive efforts of SU’s diversity initiative in combination with the writing program’s new curricular emphases worked to reconfigure SU’s writing program as a countermonument, thereby rendering its older form obsolete. In characterizing traditional monuments, Young states that “[a]n image created in one time and carried over into a new time suddenly appears archaic, strange, or irrelevant altogether” (47). Rather than becoming irrelevant, SUWP’s diversity curriculum and the investment it demanded from the campus community helped transform a writing program whose image might indeed have seemed archaic to some. Through the process of initiating discussions about curriculum and diversity, however, the program unleashed a Frankenstein’s monster, forcing itself to enter a new disciplinary space through catalysts at least partly “out of the maker’s control.”

Countermonuments in the Classroom

In “Writing Classroom as A & P Parking Lot,” Geoffrey Sirc uncannily evokes a similar counter-monumental space in the composition classroom when he challenges writing instruction that relies too much on the broader discourse conventions of the university. Just as Young contends that adhering too much to a traditional monument can cause its “death over time,” Sirc suggests that mimicking conventions of academic discourse unneces-
sarily fixes those conventions in time and space, creating “straight jackets of formalist grammar and essayist prose, the grammar of the monument that will crush them and bury them” (66; emphasis added). In contrast to the grammar of the monument, Sirc proposes his own version of the countermonument: the palimpsest, or a space in which “allegory [. . .] allows us to speak of the one story written over the other” (67). In Sirc’s view, the various layers of the palimpsest in the writing classroom—the subtexts or stories written underneath—challenge the “monument” to form a complete view of writing classrooms and curricula (67). In effectively calling for a countermonument in the writing classroom—an “A & P parking lot” that “insists on the loss and denies the monument”—Sirc seeks to subvert a panoptic view of writing instruction.

Sirc’s admonition to undo classroom monuments suggests my own response to SUWP’s artifact-based analysis assignment. While first-year instructors in the program were required to assign students this project, as a second-year instructor I was free not to adopt it. Instead, drawing from recent work on architecture, cities, and space, I asked students to analyze a building on the Syracuse campus and the way it invoked questions of authority, ideology, and power. In addition, I challenged them to complicate their analysis with characteristics of a city’s bottom-up evolution (using Steven Johnson’s Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software); modern versus postmodern architecture (described in Mark Taylor’s The Moment of Complexity); and the rhetorical collision of form (modeled after Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain) (Muschamp). Thus, as an instructor in the program, I reinvented some of the SU writing program’s expectations, adding my own subtext to the assignment. But, in Sirc-like fashion, the palimpsest acquired another layer when some students said they wanted to analyze buildings with which they felt a personal connection or “history.” Much like de Certeau’s Wandersmänner, my first-year students were proposing a way to put their own footprints on common university monuments. To address their concerns, I urged them to think about how their personal scripts, like Wendy Hesford’s, could be imprinted on buildings that had existed sometimes for more than a century. One student, Megan Stevenson, discovered the intersections of personal and public scripts when she compared her Syracuse dormitory, Lawrinson Hall, to an isolated structure—a prison in the center of campus. In a paper published in Intertext, the SU writing program’s annual journal of outstanding student writing from its courses, Stevenson writes:
I find it ironic that a building this tall can see so far across the landscape of the city and fail to become a part of it. From my thirteenth floor window, I can see a number of things: the campus and the Carrier Dome on my right, the city straight ahead and to my left, and the countryside beyond it all. As I stare at the many cars speeding down Interstate 81, I realize I am looking at a world in motion. Yet, Lawrinson, like a penal institution, is incorporated into neither the bustling campus nor the city. It remains on the outskirts: a forgotten and ignored structure. As a home to many Syracuse and SUNY-ESF students, the isolation of Lawrinson can dampen the growth of our social circles. (23)

For Stevenson, the social isolation of a cold, impersonal dormitory suggests the ways in which she and others are inhibited from growing as a student and person. Her observation of a “world in motion” from the vantage point of a structure that restricts and restrains her illustrates the dorm functioning as a monument. Stevenson implies, however, that the agency of individual students transforms the dorm itself into a countermonument, especially through acts of reappropriation (23–24). In this light, the panoptic power of the institution is subverted as students co-opt negative space to reinvigorate their lives. Architectural critic Jim Collins states the dilemma somewhat differently when he examines how “actual inhabitants make the landscape into their life-scapes” (39). He asks, “How [do] they develop what de Certeau refers to as the local ‘ways of operating’ in which they take place, developing their own geographies that make their environments legible in their own terms” (39)? Various geographies, according to Collins, “may be learned as they are made meaningful through appropriation by individuals who invest them with intensely personal meanings” (44). This is in fact what happened for Stevenson as she transformed her dorm through her own investment in it. She writes, “I believe we will all flourish in time. Every day I witness more and more students attempting to relate to the people around them in spite of Lawrinson’s predisposition to interfere” (24). In my assignment on analyzing urban space, then, what had started as students’ desire to gain more control over their own work—to etch their personal scripts into the impersonal stone of campus buildings—ultimately resulted in students devising countermonuments, not only writing over the physical spaces they studied, but uncovering new layers in the theoretical palimpsests opened up by de Certeau and others.
Despite the countermonument’s ability to help us reimagine the role of change in the work of writing programs, I am not suggesting that the process requires programs or instructors to yield all authority to outside participants or forces. After all, whether viewed as a memorial entity or as a metaphor for composition programs, the negative-form monument must necessarily be considered in relation to the notion of “monument” itself. It is precisely this inextricable link between monument and countermonument that de Certeau frames in slightly different terms when he discusses “strategies” (the overarching actions associated with power in specific locations (like writing programs), a “place that can be delimited as its own”, and “tactics” (isolated actions taking place outside organized or formal spaces “without any base”)) (35–36; 36–37). De Certeau is most interested in the disciplinary space produced by the intersection of strategies and tactics—what Henri Lefebvre calls “spatial practices” (38). Thus, for de Certeau, the importance of strategies and tactics lies in their collision, resulting in a “contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation” (96). In this sense, de Certeau’s use of “spatial practices” mimics the relationship between urban planner and city walker, writing program administrator and instructor, teacher and student, or anyone who takes part in rewriting established structures:

The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). It creates shadows and ambiguities within them. It inserts multitudinous references and citations into them (social models, cultural mores, personal factors). Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other’s blazon. (101)

If we evaluate de Certeau’s ideas of spatial reorganization in light of writing program administration, it seems clear that the relationship between program and participant, instructor and student, is highly symbiotic. De Certeau’s “long poem of walking” does not obviate the need for strategies, for an overall, top-down plan for administration—either by the program itself or by teachers in individual courses. As de Certeau says, “[W]alking [. . .] can take place only within [spatial organizations].” It is clear, however, that de Certeau considers tactics crucial, acknowledging as he does that the perambulations of passersby have the power to change not only the overall structure, but the
walkers themselves (110). The same can be said of the forces continuously affecting the nature of writing programs. The actual practices of teaching, writing syllabi, or designing curricula are forces that necessarily change the relationship between teachers and students, administrators and instructors, irrespective of the strategies in place program-wide. As an example, I point to my assignment on analyzing urban space, which I see in part as a tactic, an act of reappropriation or manipulation of SUWP’s spatial organization. Still, my emphasis on analysis and my use of certain textual readings owed a great deal to the writing program’s overall philosophy and practices. The urban space assignment, in turn, was interpreted by students who inserted their own “shadows and ambiguities” (de Certeau 101) by developing original analyses, using sources in unexpected ways, or, in Megan Stevenson’s case, inserting a personal script with universal applications. The students’ use of tactics suggests how the process of change can work slowly from the bottom up, interacting with strategies at every stage to exert a push-pull influence on writing classrooms.

The interaction of strategies and tactics relates to the idea of “negative form” at the heart of countermonuments. While negative form may manifest itself in diverse spatial configurations, the overall idea remains remarkably consistent: any antiform, by working against the norm, can awaken a greater understanding of the normalized monument itself. One way in which the negative-form monument achieves this effect is by inviting—in fact, demanding—the participation of passersby. As Young points out, one job of a countermonument is to ensure that the public examines itself as part of the performance: “The viewer, in effect, [is] the subject of the work. Or, in Michael North’s elaboration of this principle, ‘the public becomes the sculpture’” (31). The result, in Young’s words, is to “denaturalize [. . .] an artificial distance between artist and public” (31). Thus, the countermonument, like tactics, calls for a certain reversal: instead of imposing or dictating meaning, it essentially absorbs new meanings; the audience essentially creating a new monument as it reconstitutes the old one. An example of this phenomenon occurred at the No Bull Diversity Summit when students said they wanted teachers to reproduce the same ethos in their classrooms that had emerged from forum participants, one that necessarily made students a part of the diversity process. In a reversal of more typical classroom dynamics, student tactics initiated a dialogic process:

Students expressed a desire for other students to take responsibility for not letting racist/sexist/homophobic remarks “pass” in class discussions. Teachers, they remarked, have the responsibility to facilitate student learning by creating and maintain-
ing the conditions for pointed, respectful discussion. Students in the group advocated for the value of writing in that it provides people the opportunity for reflection on their own words and the words of others; writing provides a critical distance that can give way to a more “reasoned” or “calm” expression of views. However, writing does no good if it remains on the page. Thoughts, feelings, views, arguments, etc., must be voiced in conversation. (Nentwick par. 3)

The shared responsibility of teachers and students is an example of how tactics and strategies can be mutually reinforcing. Instructors are not imposing anything from the top down; the very process of creating a good classroom environment through discussion and other means is negotiated between students and teachers. Clearly, individual tactics are viewed collectively as an overall strategy—the development of practices in specific situations that will eventually create a new ethos in individual classrooms and university-wide.

The integration of strategies and tactics not only alters the traditional hierarchy of relationships in writing programs, but yields an even more important result: changing the nature of writing itself. The process of change begins with the idea that a countermonument, which may disappear gradually into the ground or leave but a trace or memory of its former structure, defies the fixed location that Darsie Bowden suggests underlies our typical notions of texts. Bowden explains that texts are often thought of as “containers” with elements (e.g., paragraphs) that “contain” still other elements (e.g., words and sentences). Bowden writes, “This container-within-a-container concept further reinforces a spatial notion of locatedness, which confines and restricts movement within the text” (72). The countermonument, by contrast, envisions a hybrid space where ideas within texts are continuously negotiated and impermanent rather than rigid and inflexible. Thus, the idea of the countermonument—like the interaction of tactics and strategies—can help students realize that form, arrangement, and grammar are not rigid or a priori structures, but rather are emergent, continually pushing against—and sometimes breaking through—the boundaries of the container.

How is it that the notion of the countermonument, which defies traditional ideas of containment, might change the nature of writing in programs or classrooms? I suggest that it is through a careful interplay of counterand traditional monuments, tactics and strategies. Under Sirc’s configuration, the writing classroom seems to be seen as a Certeauian liberated space (105), one in which antitexts, like negative-form monuments, simply emerge from what de Certeau calls a “nowhere” or a place where words carve out an altered identity (105). Sirc suggests, for example, that a student’s inter-
pretation of critic Allen Bloom as narrow-minded ("ITS (sic) because he was raised in the attic of a cheese factory") (45) reflects the kind of allegorical wordplay that would be impossible in a normal classroom setting. I contend, however, that Sirc’s take on the countermonument is incomplete because the type of writing he advocates cannot simply emerge from “nowhere.” Sirc’s countermonument, in other words, cannot exist without the monument. In fact, if the student’s allusion to the fumes of a cheese factory were linked to a specific phrase by Bloom or to an overall philosophy, it would arguably be more effective. For instance, in the manner of a countermonument, what if the student had started his remarks with a phrase Bloom had written—the “monument”—introduced his own witty aphorism, and then used it to make a larger cultural point, to produce an antitext that included reference to the original monument, the text from which it emerged? While it’s true that the student has drawn a cultural parallel between the dangers of highbrow thinking and the dulled senses that ostensibly come from being raised in the attic of a cheese factory, does his writing ever become strategic? Can it ever be more than a clever rebuke of Bloom’s ostensibly narrow ideas? Put differently, isn’t the text that was once a towering monument or a fountain flowing above ground just as important as the empty space that now replaces it? Or could the cylinder in the ground even be possible without the cultural memory of its once-looming edifice?

This seems to be the challenge for the city walkers in writing programs, where the terrain is often slippery and the boundaries always changing. It is a terrain that negative perceptions about the nature of writing programs seem to carve out. De Certeau’s adoption of “spatial practices” reminds us that the countermonument leaves a suggestion of the monument, taking into account the many views important to writing curricula and classrooms. It suggests that starting from the view on top, there is a great deal of room to navigate, appropriate, and change, while leaving an overall programmatic structure intact. What seems important is that this new hybridity is crucial to the survival of curricula and writing programs. Even though it may be tempting at times either to rigidly adhere to the monument or to abandon it altogether for the countermonument, it seems essential to recognize the role of both in writing programs and classrooms.

**Finding Hybrid Spaces**

Lefebvre suggests that the idea of space as a neutral form or container “designed to receive whatever is poured into it” denies the fact that space is “a social morphology” (94). This concept is important in the context of a writing curriculum’s change over time, just as proper names, in the words of de Certeau, continue to hold meaning even after their initial value changes:
Butler / Composition as Countermonument

“Disposed in constellations that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city, operating chronological arrangements and historical justifications, these words [. . .] slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but the ability to signify outlives its first definition” (104). The phenomenon de Certeau describes is precisely what happened at SUWP to words like “ethnography,” “reflection,” and “theorizing.” Over time, the meaning of the words changed and gradually lost the value that had accompanied their original definition. Like a countermonument or Sirc’s palimpsest, these words ultimately became “liberated spaces that can be occupied” (de Certeau 105). Given manifold interpretations by various instructors, the words acquired a “poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning” (de Certeau 104). In the Syracuse writing program, the indeterminacy of these “liberated” or hybrid spaces invited criticism and may have brought about a lack of direction. In fact, the reason that “urban planners” initially decided to reroute the writing program curriculum is that the monument had acquired too many other geographies, its form moving further and further away from the needs of students and administrators and the meanings the names initially stood for.

Ideally, of course, names—for example, “analysis,” “argument,” “diversity”—should be starting points, and, as functions of the countermonument, they are. De Certeau suggests that “[t]hese constellations of names provide traffic patterns: they are starts directing itineraries” (104). From the structured pages of texts, de Certeau suggests, the names “produce anti-texts, effects of dissimulation and escape, possibilities of moving into other landscapes” (107). It is in this context that social morphology benefits both planners and walkers. In other words, it is arguably the idea that the writing program at Syracuse has created such “liberated spaces” not only program-wide but within individual classrooms. At the same time, it seems clear that SUWP’s countermonuments relate to the overall program monument. There is a certain order within the disorder, a kind of planned chaos. Administrators should see this as part of the very nature of writing classrooms and programs. It can be beneficial to relax rigid constraints and allow ideas to emerge from broad participation. A golem is never that far out of the maker’s control. Letting writing programs evolve through participation at every level helps keep those programs fresh, growing, and changing in positive ways.

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Notes

1 By adopting the idea of the countermonument as a metaphor, I do not intend in any way to diminish the customary affiliation of the countermonument with the Holocaust and the vital memorial purpose it serves. I am using the metaphor because of the function of the countermonument—rethinking the very nature of memorial structures—and the parallels I see in writing program administration and curricula.

2 In my analysis, I am confining myself to curricular work completed during my time at Syracuse University, which ended in August 2004. I am not, for example, drawing upon new WRT 105 and 205 Outcomes enacted after I left.

3 I think it’s important to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of all those involved in the development of the Syracuse University writing program through the years, a process that continues today. While I have worked to ensure the accuracy of the facts presented here, the interpretation of those facts is ultimately my own, as are any inadvertent errors that may remain.

Works Cited


Butler / Composition as Countermonument


A Greenhouse for Writing Program Change

Laura Brady

In the fall of 1998, the provost at my institution invited the English department to take part in a “greenhouse project.” He used a greenhouse metaphor to encourage the department to deliver a strategic plan for its own future within a six-month window. The provost then promised to support viable proposals and to provide seed money to begin the changes. Seven years later, it is clear that the seeds germinated in that greenhouse are bearing fruit for our writing programs, and I hope to show here how other writing programs might use a greenhouse model to initiate or accelerate long-term program planning. Specifically, I offer our local experience as an example of ways the model helped our department accomplish the following goals: to reexamine established ways of working, initiate strategic change, maintain strategic change as a dynamic condition of writing program administration, and fund strategic change.

Reexamining Established Ways of Working

The idea for the provost’s greenhouse project is similar to the corporate “action lab” model of change (Pascale and Miller 64). The action lab model assumes that focused attention over a short time period helps foster an intense environment in which no participant is quite sure what conventions apply. In initial conversations, participants do not feel comfortable—but that is part of the point, since traditional patterns of authority and interaction are often part of what impedes change.

The focus on accelerated experimentation and change in a greenhouse model intends to overcome the inertia created by habit and tradition, elements that so often prevent new growth. To initiate such a program, a greenhouse experiment requires
• an initial challenge that is broad enough to leave the outcomes open to discussion,
• a specific and limited time frame for a report (e.g., six months or less in an academic setting),
• a collective agreement from participants that they are willing to try the experiment and explore new ideas, and
• a commitment from higher administration to support the outcomes of the experiment, whether the greenhouse produces a plan for change or a return to established patterns.

In addition, while a greenhouse or action lab model can be initiated at the program, department, college, or university level, it eventually depends on upper-level support of changes or continuity; the upper-level support fosters a certain security to balance out other risks. While not absolutely essential, an ideal model also includes some financial support for the process, such as short-term funding for a departmental retreat or established start-up funds to launch initiatives that might result from the greenhouse. (It goes with the academic territory that many changes, however, can be initiated within the limits of existing resources.)

**CREATING CHANGE: BUILDING THE GREENHOUSE**

*Building a greenhouse does not need to be expensive or time-consuming.*

[*..*] The final choice of the type of greenhouse will depend on the growing space desired, home architecture, available sites, and costs. *The greenhouse must, however, provide the proper environment.*

—David S. Ross

Even if a greenhouse for programmatic change is a figurative rather than physical space, the advice from David Ross’s planning guide remains relevant: the greenhouse process does not need to be expensive or time consuming. The greenhouse process is, however, time intensive. Instead of meeting once a month for two hours for the entire academic year (a total eighteen hours of meetings), our department accelerated and consolidated the process into three six-hour meetings. This acceleration necessitated several adjustments. First we had to secure faculty time when everyone was available for two or three day-long meetings, which we did by agreeing to meet before the semester began and by canceling a day of classes. Then we had to find a meeting space large enough for break-out groups and full faculty discussion.
Next, we gathered some basic materials such as flip charts, and, finally, we planned to provide food to make it possible for people to work in the same space all day.

The greenhouse meetings were long, but we made significant progress at each—consistent with the greenhouse idea of accelerated growth. At the first meeting, we identified strengths, needs, and goals. At the second meeting, we established priorities and strategies for meeting our goals. At the third meeting, we hammered out a draft of the proposal we would submit to the provost and dean. In addition, we found we needed some short follow-up sessions.

If departments have funds available, they might consider hiring facilitators—those who come highly recommended and who understand the academic (rather than corporate) context. In our case, however, we would have done better without facilitators. The facilitators, recommended and funded by the provost’s office with the intent of helping us adjust to this new model of accelerated discussions, were simply not a good fit for the context. As one colleague put it, “Never hire corporate facilitators who use evangelical models to convince academics of anything. When you explain to them that peer pressure doesn’t work with people who value non-conformity, they don’t believe you.” The facilitators were also not prepared to operate at the level of complexity that academics use to evaluate their circumstances; the facilitators’ unfamiliarity with academic culture created several difficulties for the facilitators. They didn’t comprehend how demands of publication, tenure, teaching, and service all contribute to a department’s goals and identity. It is possible that even poor facilitators can strengthen a community by inspiring a certain collective resistance, but I do not recommend that route. Instead, hired facilitators (or colleagues who have been asked to serve as a steering committee for the accelerated meeting process) should help keep the process focused and on time and to synthesize ideas as participants draft a strategic plan.

Each institution should develop its own process. Based on what we learned from our department’s experience in 1999 and from similar subsequent processes for university-wide accreditation and strategic planning committees, clear steps evolved for the greenhouse model as it is now practiced at our institution (see appendix). The system that worked for our fairly large but congenial department (30 or more members) at a public institution may not work the same way among a more contentious group; likewise, at a small school where colleagues have occasions to chat with each other often and informally, there might be little need for the intense meeting schedule that typifies the accelerated greenhouse environment.
The value of the greenhouse model lies in its potential to germinate ideas. That germination process can occur in a variety of ways, as long as faculty members agree to explore a wide range of ideas, reach consensus, and act collectively in achieving change. In our case, the greenhouse discussions clarified the importance we as a department gave to the writing process and to written texts. This recognition helped us collectively to examine the various writing-centered activities that already existed in the department. We began to discuss questions such as:

- What portion of our FTE and student credit hours depends on writing classes?
- How much do the people who teach writing contribute to departmental decisions?
- How might a new emphasis on writing affect future hiring decisions (especially at a moment when we can no longer assume replacement of lines as faculty retire or resign)?
- How might a new emphasis on writing-program development contribute to the department (especially as our institution asks us to examine how scholarly research and productivity balance with student credit hours and FTE, program enrollments, and placement rates for undergraduate and graduate majors)?

The greenhouse also drew attention to the fact that over 60 percent of our department’s course offerings (and an even larger percent of student credit hours) consisted of writing courses. This surprised, to varying degrees, many of the literature faculty. Some colleagues were surprised to learn also that much of the travel budget for the entire department relied on the income generated by the sale of the course guides written by the writing faculty and graduate students. While these realities had long existed, they represented facts that many colleagues had never paused to consider. Writing had become a quiet set of “service” courses that were almost invisible in terms of their significant financial contribution to the department as a whole.

That is, prior to the greenhouse initiative, the writing program largely served the department’s needs for generating student credit hours and FTE. The greenhouse, however, forced a close analysis of the role and the future of the writing program and of the scholarly and pedagogical contributions of those faculty and graduate students who worked primarily with writing as an academic pursuit. As a result, the department recognized that both faculty writing and the work of writing instructors must have a contributing stake
in the success and future growth of the department. We simply needed the protected (and accelerated) environment of the greenhouse to generate new patterns of interaction.

**Maintaining Change as a Dynamic Condition**

In an essay on curriculum revision as a reflective practice in teaching and writing program administration, E. Shelley Reid advocates change as a crucial component of any writing program’s practices (21). Reid observes that “changing and its benefits are hardly new ideas to writing teachers. We recommend change to our students almost as often as we breathe. [. . .] Moreover, we frequently ask students to change their writing style or approach for the sake of becoming more flexible writers” (14). After reflecting on our profession’s emphasis on change as a model of both process and progress for writing students, Reid speculates about the benefits of encouraging our colleagues and ourselves “simply to try change” (14–15).

Although Reid focuses particularly on the need for curricular change as an ongoing condition, her points are clearly applicable to program administration generally. Faculty members come and go, and institutional factors—such as budget lines, enrollment totals, and policy statements—also shift. The change that was collaborative and innovative just a few years ago quickly becomes routine; the collaboration falters. The process of changing is what keeps systems dynamic. The key, as Reid and others point out, is to keep change purposeful rather than exhaustingly unpredictable.

Change is also a key feature of writing program administration. The major changes in our program that resulted from the greenhouse experiment are no longer new. We have established a new center for writing, added several new colleagues, and developed new courses and degree programs. We now need to plan ways to keep changes occurring so that our programs continually renew themselves. While new faculty contribute to the renewal, they need to have their own stakes in the evolving programs. Doing that requires some strategic planning and some strategic processes.

Just as writing instructors help students become aware of different revision strategies for different purposes, so a department must develop program-change strategies to keep its revisions purposeful rather than random, substantive rather than superficial. In our department, we found that specific change strategies assume four conditions:

1. that the writing program has a sense of its existing strengths and needs;
2. that it has a sense of where it wants to be five years from now (see the section above on “Building the Greenhouse” and the appendix);

3. that its goals are consistent with department, college, and university goals; and

4. that the writing program embraces change as a dynamic condition.

Our program made some major changes based on the greenhouse initiative, but we lost some ground by failing to emphasize continual change. With that goal of implementing consistent strategic and dynamic change in mind, I suggest the following five strategies since different program needs call for different plans of action:

1. Changing to Improve Organization and Focus
   - Create a sentence outline: How would various faculty members describe each part of the program? Does anything seem out of place?
   - Create a flow chart or map of the program: What does the structure look like? Does everyone agree? Does the order make sense? What are some alternatives?
   - Use a one-inch picture frame, which enables you to worry only about what you could see if you restricted your view to a one-inch frame. Anne Lamott, who develops this idea in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, explains: “I [. . .] figure out a one-inch piece of my story to tell, one small scene, one memory, one exchange” (18). Change—in writing, in administration, in life—happens moment by moment. Focus on a moment.

2. Changing to Expand and Amplify
   - Scale up: imagine doubling the current program. Don’t worry about quality or logistics for the moment; for now, just imagine what you would have with twice the faculty, students, fund- ing—twice anything or everything.
   - Change perspective: try shifting the perspective from the vantage point of faculty to that of administrator, to student, to legislator, and even to donor. What does each new perspective require or emphasize in terms of roles, responsibilities, attitudes,
and needs? As with any strategy to amplify, be prepared for seeing complexities.

3. Changing to Create a New Audience
   - What would happen if you addressed a new audience? You might change from a neutral dean to a hostile dean, from an academic audience to a public audience such as legislator or donor as a reader. What other audiences might be imagined? For what purpose?

4. Changing the Program’s Purpose
   - How can the purpose or mission be recast? Who has a stake in the writing program, and why? What changes might occur if any stakeholders change?
   - How might the program emphasize (or renew) research on student writing?
   - Since a writing program’s purpose is often closely tied to its funding, what gets funded and why? What might be cut and why? What other possibilities exist?

5. Changing the Administrative Persona
   - What might be accomplished through a WPA’s change of attitude? Lynn Z. Bloom asks writing program administrators about what makes the job fun. If the job isn’t fun, she suggests a change of attitude, which 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” (68).
   - What might be accomplished with a WPA’s shift in commitments? What changes if an administrator’s primary commitment is to the self? or to the program? to the institution? to the profession?

This list is not meant to be comprehensive but provides a few ways to help other writing program administrators (WPAs) brainstorm change strategies that reflect their own program needs and future plans.
Funding Change

Funding will always be a critical issue in planning and maintaining change. Writing program administrators need to understand the rhetoric of budgets—and that may involve learning a new genre and a new set of conventions. As Terrell Dixon points out, “Getting additional funding is not easy. Deans, provosts, and presidents never have enough, and every department always needs more. Colleagues believe that if the chair [or WPA] were just a little bit tougher with the dean, more money would surely follow” (41). For any WPA who knows the middle ground that Dixon describes—with the administration on one side and colleagues on the other and with both sides asking the WPA to do as much as possible with very finite funds—the budget often seems to be the limiting force. Dixon suggests finding ways to augment limited funds, based on six principles, as summarized below:

1. Know why people should give to your department and frame ideas for gifts in ways that will make the donor see the benefit—especially to students.

2. Identify several colleagues who can represent the department to potential givers and who will understand the need to match donor goals with program needs.

3. Involve alumni cultivated through a newsletter or other networking.

4. Work on getting grants as well as private gifts since grants often inspire gifts.

5. Create a print representation (newsletters, brochures, websites, etc.) of the department for public accessibility.

6. Cultivate a relationship with your development office by educating these colleagues—who are usually not teaching or research faculty members—so that they can interest others in your programs. (41– 42)

Dixon concludes by noting that the ways a department (or writing program) spends its money will establish future funding (43). Common sense tells us that funds need to be well managed, but experience and logical extension tell WPAs to spend funds in support of strategic goals.
A program that squanders its resources—whether those resources take the form of university funds, grants, private funds, or faculty—will lose credibility and, consequently, the program’s lines of credit. Don Bialostosky makes this point, too, underscoring the relationship between budgets, program administration, and strategic planning:

Everything you do as head [or WPA] may affect your ability to get revenue for your department [or writing program]. Your credit with the dean depends on your credibility and effectiveness in everything. [. . .] Budget allocations are really about how well you and your department [or writing program] are meeting the college’s expectations in all areas, not just about whether you are balancing the budget. (20)

Even a small deficit does not damage credibility to the degree that a lack of strategic planning does. Bialostosky cautions that the worst budgetary move a program administrator can make is to ignore strategic priorities (22). While Bialostosky is quick to note that program administrators risk their reputations as good stewards of funds if they go too far in the red without good reason and a practical plan to cover the overage, he argues that a small deficit might be forgiven if it is one that occurs while aggressively pursuing and achieving some larger strategic goals. He gives the example of buying out a course to allow a faculty member to complete a major book, or choosing to recruit a stellar graduate student beyond the quota set for the department (20). Small deficits such as these allow a program to pursue larger strategic goals such as developing its graduate programs or increasing its research profile. These small deficits (if done strategically and with certainty of alternative funds), might be more productive than showing a year-end surplus, which, as every seasoned WPA knows, is likely to be swept back into the college coffers or applied to next year’s budget. What matters most is the ways the program administrator’s “credibility and effectiveness in everything” align with strategic plans (Bialostosky 20).

Most WPAs know how to establish credibility through responsiveness to student and university needs, curricular and faculty development, research and publications, and through commitments to their colleagues, their institutions, and the profession. Knowing where to seek budgetary lines of credit is much more difficult. A good place to start is with the department or program budget. The biggest expense in any department or program is usually the amount devoted to salaries and benefits, while the biggest source of income is likely to be the student credit hours generated from multiple-section courses such as first-year composition. For instance, say a large English
department runs 500 courses each year with an average enrollment across all sections of 20 students per course and each course worth three credit hours. Those courses generate 30,000 student credit hours. If each student paid a resident tuition rate of only $150 per credit hour, this hypothetical department would generate about $4.5 million in tuition dollars. Departments do not, of course, get millions of dollars in direct revenues from their earned student credit hours; instead, those tuition dollars necessarily cover institutional expenses ranging from salaries and benefits to support services to materials and maintenance. It is, however, still useful to know what a program generates and what it costs in relation to the larger college or university budget.

To understand a department or program’s income-expense ratios, start with enrollment numbers. If enrollments have recently increased, as they have at so many universities, a program is probably generating more student credit hours than in previous years. If increased enrollments (and the revenues they generate) allow departments to hire new full-time faculty, the income-expense ratio remains stable or rises in terms of faculty expenses. In a more common scenario, however, schools who need additional tuition revenues to balance budgets that have lost state and federal support ask departments to staff new sections with graduate teaching associates, adjuncts, and/or visiting professors, all of whom cost less than full-time, tenure-line faculty. Thus, for most programs using part-time instructors to cover additional sections, the income-expense ratio changes to reflect greater income and lower expenses. In an article on institutional budgets, Barry Chabot explains that knowing these data is crucial: they allow programs to weigh the consequences of an increased reliance on per-course hires and other economies (larger classes, static or reduced stipends and fee waivers for graduate students, etc.) in terms of ethical working conditions, faculty loyalty, and morale (13–14). These data also allow WPAs to discuss these problems in specific terms with deans and provosts.

Know your numbers. Have your program’s enrollments increased? Increased or decreased by how much over the last one, three, or five years? Who is staffing additional sections? If your income-expense ratio is better than another department of similar size, it might help you justify hiring additional tutors or assistant administrators, or it might be the evidence you need to maintain small class sizes. It might also provide early evidence of patterns that your program wants to resist before they create adverse effects in terms of hiring practices and the teaching and learning environment. For instance, has your program established a limit on the number of course sections that should be taught by per-course hires in proportion to the number taught by full-time, tenure-line faculty members? Knowing your numbers can help establish such goals.
In addition to the large income and expense ratios related to student credit hours and salaries, knowing about other sources of revenue and expense can also be valuable. For instance, at our institution summer school and extended learning credit hours are calculated differently, with a large portion of those revenues returned directly to the department to encourage “entrepreneurial” initiatives. These internally generated funds are more flexible in their usage than the funds we receive from the college. In our institution at the moment, they help support curriculum and professional development programs. For example, one initiative issuing from the greenhouse experiment was a commitment to integrating technology, but the provost specifically hoped to see us develop online versions of our required writing courses. Our program resisted offering distance versions of these courses because most of our students fit a very traditional age profile (18–22 years of age) and live within a five-mile radius of campus. Our compromise was to design a program for the non-traditional adult learners who would benefit from instruction freed from the constraints of time and place. Adult learners represent a small but growing portion of the university’s total enrollment. While we offer only a few distance sections for adult learners each semester, the course is well-suited to this population’s needs, the students have the maturity to meet the challenges of an online curriculum, and our retention rates are high. Moreover, the revenues make the program self-sustaining. In this instance, the entrepreneurial model worked, but we made our case for limiting the distance writing offerings by emphasizing the income-expense ratios in addition to pedagogical arguments.

Most programs have other revenue sources to consider, ranging from sales of course guides that accompany required writing courses to specific endowments. If you have not identified those incomes, it is important to do so. Think strategically about whether you see opportunities to develop funds; also think strategically about where your program stands and what segments of it you are not willing to economize on. In terms of economizing, it is worth understanding your program’s costs in relation to your return on investment. Program administrators need reasons for investing in faculty but they also need strategies for how to make a persuasive case to the dean. This balance of specific program knowledge and flexible strategies is something our program continues to develop—and one of the areas that can be advanced by maintaining change as a dynamic condition.

It is clear that WPAs need to think about multi-year budget planning in relation to multi-year career plans and expectations for faculty. Strategic planning that includes budget and career expectations for faculty may warrant investments in pre-tenure, mid-career, or senior faculty. As a recent article in *New Directions in Higher Education* points out, “strategic plan-
ning must recognize investing in faculty as a priority of the institution, not merely an item on the cost side of the budget” (“Investing in Faculty” 55). Ways to measure long-term return on faculty investments include continuity and growth, and they often depend on retaining strong faculty members. In turn, national recognition of quality programs increases the institution’s visibility and reputation. Such visibility attracts and retains present and future faculty and students while also attracting support from alumni, foundations, extramural funding agencies, and others (56).

Whether a WPA is looking at ways to augment limited funds or analyzing income-expense ratios and investment returns, all funding issues are based on the common theme of strategic planning. Universities need to have (and usually do have) a long term plan, and programs need to understand how they contribute to that long term plan. What income-expense ratios currently exist? How do these compare to other units, and how do they fit with strategic goals? What are the department, college, and university expectations for teaching, research, and service for the program? Are they realistic? What takes priority? Are priorities supported with salary? What other types of investments are possible (such as teaching loads, mentoring opportunities, internal grants or endowments, travel funds, classrooms, offices, technology, etc.)? What programs are (or should be) most visible?

That list of administrative questions is long because the process of strategic planning is complex and ongoing. It is a process, however, that periodically requires intense focus and reasonable, deliberate change. A greenhouse environment is one strategy for a program’s achieving that type of focused attention when writing program administrators and faculty everywhere are juggling multiple responsibilities.

**Conclusion**

As a result of their early start in the greenhouse, the writing programs at my institution have developed with relative speed. The growth we have seen in the past five years has been a direct result of concentrated and collective efforts that responded to our institutional and departmental environments. Only a few years ago I would have described the writing program at my institution in terms of its potential; the program was in no danger of disappearing, but neither was it thriving. In a decade that saw the number of tenure-line English faculty drop from 50 to 33, the hardiest elements of the department survived; but there was little new growth, and the writing program had suffered the effects of long-term resource budget cuts. The challenge we faced at the beginning of this new decade was one that other writing programs might find familiar: we
needed to build community and visibility; improve working conditions; increase enrollments; and somehow nurture new growth. Five years later, we’ve made some significant changes, and we now need to do another round of planning to recognize new or continuing strengths, identify new or continuing needs, and establish goals for a new five-year plan. It’s understood that changes will occur, but will our writing program be able to anticipate and initiate change? I am confident that it will.

Despite the many advantages of the greenhouse model that my institution used to encourage change, I want to emphasize that the greenhouse is an oddly hybrid model: it draws upon a garden metaphor that originated in a corporate management context dedicated to increasing the production of tangible goods or profits. While a greenhouse used in an academic setting is not likely to nurture a writing program’s ability to become self-funding, it can offer a useful space for cultivating change—whether the program changes and challenges result from retirements and budget cuts or from a desire to renew or expand an established program. The greenhouse creates a controlled climate of experimentation and support that recognizes that continuity and change are both parts of the growth process. Even a greenhouse that affirms continuity rather than initiates change has benefits: the greenhouse process forces immediate collective reflection on how and why certain traditions exist and work within our institutions.

In our case, the greenhouse experiment provided an interesting, innovative mechanism for stimulating programmatic reflection and change. It helped our department to focus on planning, design, and regeneration based on a realistic sense of working conditions, environment, and available resources. Our next five-year strategic plan (which we are drafting this year) will benefit from the lessons we learned as a department.

APPENDIX

A SAMPLE OUTLINE FOR GREENHOUSE MEETINGS

GREENHOUSE MEETING 1: IDENTIFY STRENGTHS, NEEDS, AND GOALS

Before the first meeting:

1. Identify a steering committee or find an academically-savvy team of facilitators.

2. Complete a self-study prior to the first departmental meeting. Departments might use or adapt the “ADE Checklist and Guide for
Reviewing Departments of English” or the “Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede a Writing Program Evaluation.” At the university level, an accreditation review can serve a similar purpose since most accreditation reviews begin with a self-study.

3. Have a brief meeting so the faculty may agree on an approach and a schedule (e.g., agreeing to a series of three six-hour meetings over as short a time as possible).

4. Ask each faculty member to read the self-study and identify three strengths and three needs as the basis for departmental brainstorming at the first meeting.

At the first meeting:

1. Identify a recorder and time keeper. If your faculty is not large, you can probably work as one large group; otherwise, break into groups of 10–12.

2. Identify strengths and needs by recording everyone’s ideas onto flip charts.

3. Establish consensus by letting everyone vote for the top five strengths and top five needs (perhaps with a different colored adhesive dot for each vote) to see where the consensus lies. In theory, an individual can cast all their votes for one item.

4. Brainstorm a limited number of goals for extending strengths and addressing needs. (A limited number, say five or fewer, helps keep the discussion focused.)

**Greenhouse Meeting 2: Establish Priorities and Strategies for Change**

*Before the second meeting*

1. Ask each faculty member to reflect on the list of strengths, needs, and tentative goals that emerged from the first meeting.

2. Ask each faculty member to brainstorm three or more strategies for meeting each of the tentative goals already identified.

*At the second meeting*

1. Identify a recorder and time keeper.
2. Proceeding deliberately through each goal, identify possible strategies for achieving each; record all ideas on flip charts.

3. Establish consensus by letting everyone vote for the top three strategies for each goal; this allows the department to see where the consensus lies. Again, an individual could cast all three (or five or six . . .) votes for one item.

4. If your department has more than one working group going through the process, allow a comment period that is led by facilitators or a steering committee. Ask each group to present its strengths, needs, goals, and strategies, allowing time for discussion.

**Greenhouse Meeting 3: Hammer out a Proposal for Programmatic Change**

**Before the third meeting**

1. Create a clean copy of the work that emerged from the first two sessions of the greenhouse process. What are the most important strengths to maintain or extend? What are the greatest needs? What are the agreed goals and strategies to achieve them?

2. If your program has multiple groups working through the first parts of the process, this is a good time to see if those involved can combine lists, either through some online voting or discussion; if the group agrees, a facilitator or peer steering committee may identify patterns that emerge between and among groups, thereby creating “essential item” lists.

3. Ask each faculty member to read the clean copy of the draft to identify any final questions, comments, suggestions, additions or deletions to discuss before presenting the information to the dean and provost.

**At the third meeting**

1. Revise or edit the draft as necessary. Discuss the specific audience and purpose for the document. What does the faculty want the dean and provost to do or think after reading this document? How does the writing program want to present itself? Will the dean and provost need any additional background information or factual support? For instance, what enrollment data or budget information might they want to see?
2. Establish a timeline for the final revisions, faculty review, and submission to the dean and provost.

**Acknowledgement**

I want to thank my colleagues Catherine Gouge, Patrick Conner, Timothy Dow Adams, and Timothy Sweet for their helpful comments on an early draft of this essay.

**Notes**

1. For a detailed account of the necessarily larger, departmental curricular revisions that resulted from our greenhouse experiment, please see my colleague Marilyn Francus’s essay, “Design and Consent: Notes on Curriculum Revision” in Profession 2001. In terms of the work that initially established West Virginia University’s Center for Writing Excellence, I would like to recognize the contributions of Gerald Lang, Provost; M. Duane Nellis, former Dean of the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences; Patrick Conner and Timothy Dow Adams, past and current Chairs of the English Department; and colleagues Margaret Racin, Thomas Miles, Winston Fuller, James Harms, Kevin Oderman, and Timothy Sweet.

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Extra-Institutional Agency and the Public Value of the WPA

Kelly Ritter

First-year composition is a public enterprise historically. It’s no secret to WPAs that their necessary public defense of student writing—and the myths that require such defenses to be launched—are a result of this perceived communal ownership. Composition, unlike other academic disciplines, is perpetually at the mercy of cultural conceptions of literacy, whether through various levels of community “sponsorship” and that sponsorship’s accompanying costs (Brandt, “Sponsors of Literacy”) or complicit institutional structures, fueled by culturally skewed notions of “correctness” in discourse, all of which keep composition at the bottom of the academic hierarchy (Crowley). The multitudes who claim ownership of first-year composition and its pedagogy on their own make the WPA a necessary figure. Were it not for the inside vs. outside, academic vs. public conflict over writing and literacy, the WPA would have less need to prove him- or herself as an intellectual authority while building a scholar-teacher agency that battles to establish and maintain a program that in the aggregate resembles a meaningful curriculum rooted in responsible theory and practice.

In search of how writing “means” to students and to the workforce that those students will enter, writing programs increasingly stand to be measured by criteria emanating from outside their walls—by external assessment mandates, state proficiency policies, and other such extra-institutional systems. Consequently, the WPA, as the public face of his or her program, stands to be either a passive instrument of that measurement or an active participant in its delivery, particularly in relation to the external assessment and classification of at-risk courses such as basic writing. Such positions comprise a complicated place to stand, when WPAs are themselves already physical sites of evaluation, both in terms of their labor (i.e., their “work value” to the institution) and their intellectual capital (or their scholarly production as represented outside the institution, as a component of its larger public pro-
file). Such constant scrutiny is professionally taxing, as Laura Micciche has recently noted: “the WPA’s authority and power are challenged, belittled, and seriously compromised nearly every step of the way [. . . thus] WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment” (434). Because such feelings are valid—and surely widespread—I think it is important to further parse the terms authority and power—alongside the labels of WPA work as “task” versus tangible “position” (Schwalm 10)—while we look to alternate sites of better professional satisfaction for WPAs, namely sites of negotiation that exist outside the WPA’s home institution.

Ed White reminds us, in his famous article “Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA,” that academics “[pretend . . .] that everyone is powerless,” especially within the context of departmental administrative politics (106). He urges the WPA to “assert that you have power (even if you don’t)” (106) to seek out powerful connections with the administrative positions on one’s campus, such as college deans, to find allies regarding program funding and curricular endeavors. However, because as White asserts, “WPAs generally live schizophrenically, hating power yet wielding it” (108), such a charge is easy to make, but difficult to enact. WPAs are, according to White, self-limiting in their roles as powerful, authoritative administrative entities. Accepting White’s argument in full, however, requires an acceptance of two key assumptions.

The first of these assumptions is that all WPAs really hate power. Our assuming that this is true for all WPAs already puts us at a power disadvantage because such a statement implies that all authoritative endeavors must necessarily result only after a WPA’s inner turmoil is overcome. While it’s recognized that in many ways White makes this statement precisely to question its legitimacy, I would argue that, collectively, WPAs tend to accept this assumption because it suits us professionally as faculty in English departments. If we are powerless, we are not “in charge,” and thus we may not be distinguished from “regular” faculty. In fact, we are not responsible for what happens to our programs—there are always those around us who have “power” that’s greater in substance and scope when compared to our own. And we do not have final say on many curricular or programmatic issues—and do not want it, in some cases—because we are faculty first and management second.

The second of these assumptions, and the one that I wish to address in this article, stems from these feelings of inadequacy, of limited authority at the local level. This assumption rests on the notion that the only outlet for power negotiations is the internal administrative structure—that no other external avenues whereby WPAs might find support, or even collaborative power sources, reasonably exist. I do not discount that White’s stance regard-
ing resources is generally true: WPAs should first look inward for avenues of opportunity where their programs are concerned. But we rarely, if ever, talk about what happens when even those avenues are shut down, or unavailable, or simply insufficient for our program’s needs. Where do we then turn, and in what ways might we exercise our own authority when we go looking for assistance outside the walls of our home institution?

I argue that extending the public role of the WPA to negotiations and even collaboration with these other power sources—upper-level administration—may be of equal, or even greater, value as compared to the local, institutional work that the WPA already sees as her or his primary professional domain. Positioning my experience in the context of theories of administration, especially those that examine the dichotomy of public versus private models of leadership, what follows is rooted in a story about my own developing agency as an administrator, resulting from my negotiations with our state offices over common system rubrics for basic writers and basic writing placement. When WPAs work cooperatively with upper-level administrators to develop mutually beneficial initiatives, there are many positive implications. In my case, these initiatives lead to the negotiation of common course objectives for students in basic writing through a board-mandated common rubric for basic writing placement and assessment (given course goals and objectives). Such negotiations could also have positive implications for future collaboration for other individual composition programs and thus I believe other programs might work to enact similar negotiations, specifically in the context of articulation agreements and alignments designed to “streamline” student economic and intellectual mobility between high schools, community colleges, and universities.

Leading in Public: WPAs and Theories of Administration

If we conceive of the WPA’s primary role as residing outside his or her home institution, we can begin to theorize the reified “power” and “authority” that such a position might afford. In problem-solution advisory pieces such as Barry Maid’s “How WPAs can Learn to Use Power to Their Own Advantage,” such a reification is articulated at the programmatic level. In the context of a departmental issue over exit exams, Maid declares that “power exists always as an abstraction waiting to be concretized. It is not [. . .] by definition, finite and tangible. Therefore, it cannot be easily systematized, hierarchized, and distributed. Most important, power is not something which can be given or assigned. It must be taken and used” (209–210). This assertion by Maid is an important one, as it positions the amount and direction of power in the hands of the WPA him or herself, rather than as a variable, dependent upon departmental or institutional limitations.
Such power allows for opportunities that go to the core of the WPA’s vexing dual-definition as faculty and administrator. Barbara Schneider and Richard Marback have rightly argued that assessing WPA work as “an activity that is [. . .] neither merely administrative nor simply scholarly [. . .] eludes appropriate description and evades appropriate evaluative criteria” (8). Schneider and Marback assert that WPA work may be more appropriately categorized as “guided institutional action” (9), given its daily interactions with upper-level administration and subsequent policy decisions that are outgrowths not just of knowledge of the field but also of “a kind of acumen or flair [. . .] that is more than bureaucratic functionalism or scholarly productivity” (10). Similarly, Louise Wetherbee Phelps laments that academic leadership is undervalued and politically marginalized, considered “the refuge of those less talented” or of those essentially finished with teaching and scholarship (3). She argues that the WPA position can serve as a model for academic leadership training, promoting “equal partners in reform, rather than futile resisters or passive objects of it” (4). This equality model may serve WPAs better as public rather than private, local figures if we consider the public status of composition in our culture.

I highlight these arguments regarding the proactive and powerful WPA because they can be easily be extended in discussing the WPA as a primarily public figure who can collaborate with higher administration when such collaboration benefits one’s program—the local “good”—here the academic well-being of students, especially those participating in basic writing courses. While Schneider and Marback have argued that WPAs should embrace and even extend their innate political power to others in their home programs, I want to take that call for power one step further and assert that the WPA can characterize his or her work—and, important, his or her public value—outside the boundaries of the program or institution. Following Joseph Harris’ lead, I agree that the WPA, in the face of the misuse of and over-reliance on contingent labor, the rising costs of higher education, and the prospect of “outsourcing” literacy instruction, must indeed “press for more direct control over our curricula and staffing—within departments of English or, if need be, outside them” (Harris 58).

I contend that the WPA’s public value when exercised in the extra-institutional setting in this move for “direct control” can be more than simply a move made against higher administration and its accompanying measurement initiatives, or it may be concomitantly separatist in its view of writing instruction as situated in a faculty versus administration dichotomy. We already know this dichotomy to be largely false, because WPA work is inherently fraught with management narratives that belie our assertion that we are always and only “faculty” in our points of view and programmatic
decision-making. As Marc Bosquet argues in “Composition as Management Science,” establishing his idea of the “heroic WPA,” the WPA’s life as teacher and administrator is characterized by influences and issues irrelevant to many instructional-only faculty, even those in composition studies, including the “ethos of struggle” that characterizes WPA work (15).

I fundamentally disagree, however, with Bosquet’s assertion that, like upper administration (deans, vice-presidents) who are also faculty, all WPAs (which Bosquet labels “professional and managerial compositionists”) should—or could—“shed the desire for control and embrace the reality of collective agency” by becoming “colleague[s] among colleagues” (31), as if collegiality and administrative work were always mutually exclusive. This inability to see WPAs as aligned in any way with higher administration is particularly problematic at smaller state institutions, such as my own, which lack graduate students and the common hierarchical structure of the WPA/TA/undergraduate student system of Research I in the new Carnegie system composition programs, in which authority is more easily claimed as part of the inherent mentor–mentee relationship.

But the role of the WPA as manager is always fraught with anxieties, pitfalls, and workforce implications. As Donna Strickland has pointed out, “It is not [. . .] that composition professionals never think of themselves as administrators. It is the case, however, that composition professionals who have sought to tell the story of composition for the most part have avoided framing the story as a tale of the rise of management” (47). Strickland goes on to argue that “unlike most other faculty [. . .] composition professionals [. . .] have an overt bureaucratic function that they cannot overlook in the way that traditional faculty can overlook their own bureaucratic functioning” (53). Strickland’s important assertions, put in the context of her charge to explore the “managerial unconscious” in WPA studies, expose the reluctance of many WPAs to occupy and understand the managerial function of their positions.

Because of these further interrogations of the WPA-as-manager quandary, I reject Bosquet’s belief that “composition’s best chance to contribute to a better world and to achieve disciplinary status [. . . is] predicated on working toward a university without a WPA” (32). I recognize the historical truth that the hierarchical structure of composition studies is predicated upon the exploitation of contingent labor, graduate students, and, in some universities, a universal requirement that is far from “universal” in its benefits or outcomes, and thus the WPA becomes the figurehead (willingly or not) in this hierarchy. Indeed, writers such as David Schwalm have pointed out that “faculty are almost countertrained for administrative roles [. . . yet must] think institutionally and [. . .] look beyond the institution to the larger uni-
verse of higher education” (22). I agree with Schwalm that as WPAs we need to look *outside* our local hierarchical structure (if, indeed, the programs we run even fit this model) and consider the benefits that the WPA position may bring to collaborative administration functions that lie beyond the program, the department, or even the university.

The roles of the WPA and the department chair, one could argue, are ideologically and functionally identical—and similarly powerful—when viewed in the context of labor-management or faculty-administration paradigms. Yet the prevailing discourse about English department chairs is similarly construed as a faculty-management binary, and thus it is similarly problematic. As Cathy Davidson explains in her appropriately titled article “Them Versus Us (and Which One of ‘Them’ is Me?),” the job of the chair is “based on a hierarchical organizational model. The chair is the go-between for the central administration and the faculty” (97). She characterizes the chair as “psychologically” neither faculty nor administrator, yet also emphasizes that English departments, led by chair-administrators, “must be willing to show the ways that they are capable of thinking through their role and function within the academy and within society” (100). But Davidson’s most salient point about the use of administrative power comes when she connects that power to the forces which control academia, yet live outside its institutional walls. Davidson argues that the rhetoric of “us” versus “them” implies that

> administrators are monolithic sources of power, an ominous, foreboding they. Yet to ascribe so much power to them is to forget the precarious role that all of us in higher education play, vis-à-vis the public, state legislators, the federal government, or (for those in private universities) prospective donors and boards of trustees. However beleaguered we are or feel, the binaric language of power [. . .] serves to make us even more beleaguered. The tired division of them versus us no amendments in original is a binary that ultimately reiterates our position as powerless and thus worthy of disrespect. (98)¹

Davidson’s argument is directly applicable to the administrative function of the WPA: the more powerless we seek to become, the more we feel the push-pull of our positions, situated sometimes uncomfortably between private-local and public-universal initiatives, or between faculty and administrative loyalties, to put it in Ed White’s terms. Such a rejection of power certainly may encourage the notion that the WPA is always the “Velcro-pro-
fessor [. . . wherein] all the negative effects of the requirement stick to her though she gets little credit or reward for holding it all together” (Crowley 227). To accept her assertion that WPAs have “enormous responsibility and no power” (227), we must also accept that our power is limited to the local institution itself, rather than potentially available and useful in the extra-institutional setting, which is not always the case.

**Seeking a Public Presence: Basic Writing and Extra-Institutional Perceptions**

Basic writers are a priority group for WPAs, as they are certainly more the rule than the exception at today’s university, especially at comprehensive, regional institutions such as my own. As such, these writers have as much right to valuable academic resources as do all other student groups. As reported by the Stanford University Bridge Project, in the fall of 1995, of the approximately 70% of students who attend college within two years of graduating from high school, 29% were enrolled in at least one “remedial” reading, writing, or math course upon entering post-secondary education (www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/#problem). A more recent study, “Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College,” reports that in 2001, 40% of students attending four-year institutions were enrolled in courses labeled remedial (2). The Stanford study points out that issues such as “inequalities throughout education systems in college preparation, course offerings, and connections with local postsecondary institutions; sporadic and vague student knowledge regarding college curricular and placement policies [. . .] and an inequitable distribution of college information to parents” are among the social and institutional factors leading to students’ enrollment in such courses (www.stanford.edu/group/bridgeproject/execsummary.html).

While the figure for basic writing placement at my institution is, at about 10%, far below either the Greater Expectations report or the Stanford figure, my work as WPA certainly involves both internal and external decision-making about the future of such students. My self-imposed charge as a WPA has thus been to make that student population’s academic agency public and visible, and at the highest level available. In policies from placement to exit exams, to “standard” composition course sequences, to faculty assignments in basic writing sections (with questions regarding dilemmas such as assigning seasoned full-time faculty or the new adjuncts or graduate students? assigning the most radical teachers or the most traditional ones?), no WPA’s work, including my own, is without its intersections with the educational life of the basic writer. From my own experience, these students are literally the
foundation of the public, comprehensive university; it is for this reason that our department has made it a priority, during my tenure as program director, to staff our basic writing sections with full-time faculty whenever possible.2

Certainly basic writing is a historical site of contention between writing faculty who see its value in a comprehensive curriculum that seeks to create opportunities for students, and upper administrators who fear the trend toward “lowered standards” for admissions that lead to “unqualified” (or other such labeled) groups of students who populate basic writing and drain valuable resources. Bruce Horner has pointed out that “like college composition generally, basic writing has long been perceived as marginal at best: expendable, temporary, properly the responsibility of the high schools” (200) and that in some public documents about basic writing, such as the 1969 New York City Board of Higher Education open admissions policy statement, the language of action, states Horner, “either explicitly or implicitly opposes ethnic integration to academic excellence, the academically prepared and those needing remediation [. . .] the socio-political interests of the ‘city and society’ and academic interests” (204).

Horner’s study highlights the reality of course curricula at the university level, which often require students to take “remedial” courses but fail to recognize how integral those marginalized students are to the very fabric of the institution. Additionally, Horner’s observations show opposing views, by the New York City Board, of a “public” versus private (academic) good in educating students. These views are reflected in broad trends beyond City University of New York (CUNY), toward the typical budgetary place of basic writing in the university, accurately characterized by Joseph Harris. He contends that English has “abandoned” teaching this portion of the core curriculum and, as a result, has allowed it to be undervalued and marginalized (59). I contend that WPAs have the unique ability to build the bridge between those worlds of perceived good—both economic and social—if they make a greater effort to “go public,” as it were, to challenge these perceptions about basic writing in their capacity as program leaders.

Despite the public presence of composition in general, and basic writers in particular, since long before my WPA work began in 2000, the larger community within my institution had very little knowledge of our program past the limited course descriptions in our university catalog and the various feedback from alumni, often subjective and always the kind of information upon which no one could truly act in any responsible manner. Our program is niched within a public, comprehensive university in which first-year writing is taught by full- and part-time faculty; the program is primarily sustained by part-timers whose institutional employment histories extend as much as twenty years. Working in this milieu, I found myself negotiating a
variety of teacher agencies within a relatively private, self-contained program that had long ago accepted its traditional “service” function and had, consequently, made few changes—or movements toward change—in curriculum or design. Past WPAs, for reasons that were temporally and spatially logical and that were validated by a departmental lack of interest in their work, kept to themselves, limiting their scope of influence to part-time faculty, committee work, and textbook selection. No WPA had experienced a university-wide presence or had made any public gestures to indicate how and why our program was designed as it was.

Susan Miller, in her discussion of the figure of the WPA and his or her role in guiding departmental policy or shaping departmental opinion regarding the teaching of writing, recognizes the complex issues behind identification with and attitudes toward first-year composition as a subcomponent of an English department (Miller 162). In this context it is difficult for me to judge how “public” my predecessor(s) should have been, since structurally they were bound (as am I) to identity issues that were guided largely by those who lacked such “symbolic association” with writing and which linked the WPA figure to certain roles and functions irrespective of his or her personal identity.

Resulting from this perhaps unconscious disassociation by previous WPAs, the larger public, including the system office, was blind to our program’s pedagogical and intellectual mission. This finally came to serious consequences in July 2003. The discussion that prompted our system office to zero in on basic writing as a financial and educational liability began among the board of trustees and the various community members on that board who had had experience as students in first-year writing. In a discussion of what “proficiency” should mean to our universities, responses were split: for every board member who claimed that first-year composition (and in some cases basic writing) allowed him or her to be an articulate professional later in life, another board member saw such courses as important but “too expensive” and “remedial,” or, typically, “make-up high school work.” Indeed, when asked about this most widely misunderstood and marginalized course in the curriculum, basic writing, WPAs must answer to such familiar concerns, including points of instruction (Aren’t you teaching them to diagram sentences anymore?), student progress (Why can’t my seminar student Billy write a sentence? He took your composition class! He took your composition class!), and competing budgetary issues (Can’t you just use unqualified Mr. X to cover these classes? I mean, anyone can teach writing, right?).

No board member, I believe, was aware of our college-level course expectations in basic writing, which had been developed in direct response to popular misconceptions that basic writing was (or should be) the “dummy”
or “grammar drill” course. Thus, a solution, borne of some ignorance about these curricular issues and genuine student need, was proposed: because basic writers apparently weren’t going to go away—what if the system required that all students who needed the course were mandated to take it in their first year, or else be banned from the system, relegated to community colleges (or no college at all)? This hypothetical strategy might provide an influx of cash into our budget, because, it seemed, many of our students were “remedial” and thus unlikely to finish their degree programs unless they completed these courses early in their college years. That’s when I got the call.

In August 2003, my dean asked that I meet with the vice-chancellor as a representative WPA of our system (four regional campuses) to discuss the board of trustees’ mandate. I knew that I was now to be responsible for directing the development of a system-wide rubric that would allow the campuses to implement the plan on our own terms. Amazingly, the vice-chancellor was trained in the curricular principles of WAC/WID and thus found the money argument a bit unseemly in the light of her belief that composition is a crucial, valuable requirement in general, with basic writing in particular as a critical point of access for our at-risk student population. The vice-chancellor wanted to know what our department’s stance on basic writing was, how we defined such a course (was it our first course? Our first two courses? All three courses?), and how we felt we could handle a mandate that required this course to be completed within all students’ first year of study. In short, she was unwilling to say how the system’s composition programs would implement this somewhat vague mandate specifically until the programs themselves—or somebody speaking for them—helped to define the terms. In this case, I happened to be that somebody.

I should say here that had the vice-chancellor not been so enlightened, one of two things would have become potential outcomes. Either we would have been given a personal tour of the new policy and given a concomitant list of implementation methods or no such meeting would have taken place; I wasn’t at the trustees’ meeting, after all, so I doubt that anyone would have known to invite me. The WPA as a literally invisible cog in management comes most to bear in these situations, as few people outside academia—and perhaps outside English—even understand the existence for any faculty-administrative role other than department chair, which is the position that faculty take for granted as truly public in department hierarchies. We assume that WPAs necessarily cannot have a public presence, or extra-institutional value, and so we frequently accept these out-of-earshot negotiations as impossible sites of entry and consequent contribution. So the alternate article, the one I’m not writing here, would necessarily discuss what strate-
gies a WPA should employ when a decision comes down from the system office without notice or consultation. I recognize that this is the case most of the time. But I’m posing the notion that perhaps we sometimes allow that to be the default, instead of focusing on a less-considered question regarding a WPA’s public agency: What if your system office has an enlightened vice-chancellor? Are you ready to help her craft a rubric?

Most likely WPAs are not ready for such a working arrangement, because we are rarely advised about ways such a meeting might be implemented and would take place, or what exactly are the parameters of its execution, should it occur. Much advisory scholarship exists regarding intra-university perceptions of first-year composition programs and how program administrators (WPAs) can best handle such overarching influence and daily interference. This advice is represented in well-known and practically-oriented collections such as Linda Myers-Breslin’s Administrative Problem Solving for Writing Programs, Stuart Brown, Theresa Enos, and Catherine Chaput’s The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource, and Irene Ward and Bill Carpenter’s Sourcebook for Writing Program Administrators; indeed, work from each of these anthologies is cited in this article. These collections, aimed at both WPAs in practice and, significantly, WPAs-to-be in training, highlight why and how program administrators must situate themselves as professionals in the field as well as becoming program “problem solvers” in the world of university administrators and faculty. As such, they are invaluable collections that many of us have put to great use. However, perhaps because composition studies as a field has historically valued collaboration, these anthologies emphasize how cooperative strategizing at the program level best serves the WPA. Typically WPA literature situates—or, more colloquially, pits—WPAs against higher administration in an exclusively adversarial relationship by sad default; it does not adequately address how a WPA might work significantly at the extra-institutional level, or how such negotiations and collaboration may be differently valuable than those done within one’s program.

Some scholarship has made gestures toward where the WPA “fits into” the larger administrative structure, but with varying emphases. Doug Hesse’s “Understanding Larger Discourses in Higher Education” makes the important argument that WPAs need to understand the larger professional issues that administrators and other faculty face outside composition studies; he suggests that WPAs make themselves aware of conferences, research questions, and the professional literature that is of importance to deans, provosts, and other leaders outside of English studies (310). He contends that “WPAs ought to perceive more opportunities than pitfalls when trying to think like academicians other than English or composition faculty” (311) to
become less insular in their educational world view. As critical as this advice is—and WPAs would do well to take it—it does not fully address how such a position might reconfigure the WPA as a public administrator who might see the bulk of her work as speaking to these larger institutional attitudes and directives.

Similarly focused on how WPAs might integrate themselves into the mechanisms of upper-level administration in higher education, Joyce Kinkead and Jeanne Simpson’s influential article “The Administrative Audience: A Rhetorical Problem” seeks to outline how WPAs might do “admin speak” and how they might train their assistant directors to do the same. Kinkead and Simpson “encourage WPAs to find the common ground they share with other administrators—to reckon with them” (68) and advise WPAs to understand the rationale for decisions made by upper-level officials such as vice-presidents and deans. But articles such as theirs still appear to keep WPA-administrative relationships at the level of linguistic trickery, if you will, where we learn how they (the upper administration) “speak” to get what we (WPAs) want.

Simpson and Kinkead make a valid point about the importance of acknowledging these linguistic differences between writing faculty and higher education officials; in our work as teachers and program administrators, we rarely recognize the insulation such a career affords us, and how this “head in the sand” approach to the work of running a program, including our labor in guiding first-year students through the difficult maze of college literacy, complicates our efforts to secure more public recognition for and understanding of writing pedagogy and program operations. So while I do not aim to critique Simpson and Kinkead’s argument, I wish to point out how little has been written in this type of advisory context that extends their general argument, linking collaborative WPA work to the common “problems” presented by those in the upper echelons of administration, such as system offices for public universities.4

I understand that given rising pressures to become a professional force in one’s own right, the perception that all central administrators are WPAs’ adversaries is a common one, especially in relation to faculty governance and intra-institutional authority. No one wants the powers-that-be to sweep in and alter or commandeer our curricula, and, frankly, no one really wants to admit that she is working with those powers in any “official” capacity. As Libby Falk-Jones has argued, academics typically “[view] power as primarily destructive or oppressive. Such a perception of power typically underlies common metaphors for power derived from war, violence, explosions, and even games (winners and losers)” (77). Especially on unionized campuses such as mine, where the division between “administration” and “faculty”
is drawn along collective bargaining lines and where administrative faculty such as I am continually straddle this division, this notion of power-as-oppression is omnipresent.5

To view this from a reverse perspective, however, consider Falk-Jones’ other contention that “[. . . WPAs’] lack of reward power” can be crippling to programs, and thus WPAs may help their programs by working with upper-level administration to “make rewards—stipends, course release time—available to participating faculty” (78). These agreements are important to composition professionals and cannot be struck in isolation (at least at my institution). But I would add to this list of “rewards” those bargained for students, as relevant to course credit, program design, and system-wide perceptions of the value of these students’ writing, particularly at the basic writing level. These student-centered agreements are critical bridges between high schools and colleges, between public perception and public support of higher education, and for better or worse, they frequently start at the top and work their way down to the institutional level. Rather than resist our power to influence these discussions and shape public perception, I submit that we do seize it and use it to help system offices help us to define and thus provide institutional agency for basic writers in the FYC curriculum.

**Being Public: WPAs, System Offices, and Implications for Writing Programs**

WPAs must accept and even embrace their own potential for power and must do so in the service of a truly public authority, which works for a public, student-centered good. I began this effort to use power publicly in Summer and Fall 2003, during several meetings with our vice-chancellor to discuss the fundamentals of the plan that would affect basic writers on our campus and on the other three sister campuses in our system. In response to her questions, I was first grateful for the rare opportunity to define the culturally loaded term “basic” (which replaces other subjective terms such as “remedial” or “precollege,” terms I had worked to phase out of our admission office’s informational literature and high school recruiting visits); I assured her that basic writing was one of our three courses only and that not all composition courses were “remedial” simply because they focus on first-year literacy. This was a way to cut off any existing limited perceptions of the sequence coming from within the institution itself.

Second, in terms of gathering WPAs to standardize that definition for student and faculty benefit (especially helpful to frequent transfer students, a population that equals 30% of our annual enrollments), I agreed that we had a collective stake in having that dialogue, and that even if it took a number of meetings (and it did), we’d decide on language rather than have
it decided for us. Finally, to make such standards public—especially to community colleges and high schools—so they might better understand what basic writing is, and, plainly, what they could do to meet these goals themselves, I agreed to craft a rubric, with the input of my fellow system WPAs, that would be truly public. This would necessitate follow-up on an annual basis, in some cases, to assure that the entire system (K–12 to postgrad) understood what we meant by “basic writing” and why it was so important for our students.

Again, the benefits of this collaboration were targeted for the “public good” of students, even as they were simultaneously in the service of the central administration. Yes, a common rubric allowed the system office to more clearly “categorize” basic writers in our curriculum (and in the curricula of the other campuses). Certainly this could have been read as a top-down approach to labeling our students as deficient in skills, i.e., lacking in college-level literacies. However, the invitation to work with the vice-chancellor on this project told me that local expertise, in this case, had some public value. Had our program not worked to make itself publicly visible (and had my dean not been assured of our local expertise such that she set up this collaborative relationship when the vice-chancellor sought assistance), such a rubric could have easily been crafted without our involvement.

If that had happened, the ways “preparatory” curricula were to be defined would have been beyond our control. Certainly that definition could have spread to our entire course sequence, rather than being focused only on our basic writing course. The result would have been an increased public perception that all writing at the 100-number level is of lower intellectual rigor than other courses in English or other disciplines, resulting in an increased burden on our students to complete both of these courses in their first year of study. While such course completion is the ideal, financial and other significant human realities often make such completion impossible. So it was important to me to highlight the basic writing course as not only unique in its definition, but also in its design (including a defense of its classroom capacity—twelve students per section—and its individualized pedagogy, rooted in student-professor conferences and final portfolios). This dialogue gave me the opportunity to articulate publicly and, in doing so, ultimately validate why we taught basic writing as we did, so as to solidify that approach in public documentation at the system level. Again, I could not have made that happen—and had not been able to do it previously—at the local level alone.6

My story has many intertwined conclusions, but some of them were these:
1. In the context of our discussions, I shared with the vice-chancellor our plan to make basic writing a credit-bearing course. While this proposal was not specific to my charge, it gave me the opportunity to seek higher-level support for such an initiative and to put this support into the final proposal. Linking system policy with local needs, discussing our for-credit proposal with the vice-chancellor also allowed me to make the case that if basic writers would be required to take their course within twenty-four credits of enrollment, then it really ought to be credit-bearing. In financial terms, money spent deserved some actual credits earned. Perhaps because of the vice-chancellor’s support and the general visibility given to our basic writing course as a result of her collaboration with our program, our course is credit-bearing as of Fall 2005, for the first time in its local institutional history.

2. I used this public opportunity to make contacts with the other WPAs at the three other campuses, as previously mentioned; I had known only one of these directors well, but now we had a common discussion point as a group. I regretted my not having done this much sooner, before any system office plan went into action. Why not consolidate WPA power extra-institutionally? While each of our work had a local context, across sister campuses we shared common objectives. Our meetings allowed us to craft a common rubric for the vice-chancellor and to plan strategies, should further initiatives (whether positive or negative) occur. Our rubric went to the system office as the template for further discussions about basic writing, including those at the community colleges. While I certainly don’t mean to imply that four-year colleges should lead the system’s relationship with the community colleges, I also will admit that if offered to take that curricular lead as a WPA, I would gladly do it.

3. I used the rubric charge to put into writing what we, as system WPAs, felt that our area high schools should be doing if curricular and pedagogical circumstances allowed. This consensus-based attitude was built on my other “public” work, existing outreach to the high schools in my community, which was related to placement and course completion rates for recent enrollees. I welcomed the opportunity to put at the system level some ideas for high school-college writing initiatives, which are so often ignored in today’s cash-poor educational systems.

4. Finally—and admittedly—I used this opportunity to build a contact in the system office; that person is now willing to support fur-
ther initiatives at my institution that will work to bring the branch campuses together. I can call the vice-chancellor and talk frankly about programmatic concerns; I can seek her advice about the profile of our writing programs as they are discussed at the board of trustees meetings. This relationship does not supersede the administrative relationship I have with my department chair, or even my dean, but this extra-institutional contact who knows the work that I do and values it gives our program a presence—and future opportunities—that didn’t exist before.

Nevertheless, what can other WPAs do on their own campuses to enhance their own extra-institutional power and show it in positive, meaningful ways? Is my experience a realistic model upon which to base other WPAs’ efforts to “go public” with their own programmatic authority?

Here’s a list of possible starting advisory points that I hope other WPAs might find useful:

1. **Make your program truly “public.”** Find out what other local campuses and, if applicable, your central office or board of trustees knows about your program. How do other institutions, as well as those officials controlling your campus funds from outside the institution itself, talk about your course sequence, or your basic or preparatory courses? How do they talk to their constituents and to their children and neighbors about your courses? Is your program accurately represented to the public? If not, find ways to give your program some positive public relations visibility. Consider sending some e-mail, or some copies of program documents (goals and objectives, sample syllabi, a list of program achievements and statistics, such as placement trends and curricular improvements) to those in power, possibly your board or central administrators. Send these materials to feeder institutions and sister campuses as well, and don’t forget local high schools. You may be surprised at how many of these participants in public discourse about higher education want to speak with—and learn from—you, because you are a public representative of your program.

2. **Ask for money from sources you may not think are listening (or watching).** To extend Ed White’s good advice about going beyond the “local” avenues of department chair or dean, when faced with funding roadblocks (“Use it or Lose it”), try some unexplored avenues of support. Using the same public program information that you have already distributed to the higher-ups, ask if these officials would
be willing to fund some large-scale initiatives, like assessment (we have an assessment grant program that comes from our system office—not surprisingly, perhaps, spearheaded by our enlightened vice-chancellor) or establishment of articulation conferences between high school, community college, and four-year college representatives. Again, you may be surprised at how forthcoming the funds are when composition is put in the context of statewide educational concerns, especially as state boards of higher education continue to talk about “alignment.” A savvy WPA will translate “alignment” into “cooperation” or even “(two-way) communication,” and get out in front of these negotiations, taking the power lead.

3. Along these lines, start to think of your program as one that serves a larger community beyond your home institution. As much as WPAs sometimes cringe at the thought that we are in the “service” business, we really are directing a program that is one of the largest money-makers on campus and, more to the point, one of the most important educational initiatives within the university (my opinion). I believe that WPAs have for too long been invested primarily—or exclusively—in what goes on in their own departments and among their own writing faculty. If you believe, in true humanities fashion, that your program and faculty serve a public good and not just an institutional need, you can better see how the resources that exist outside the institution itself may be more interested in—and appreciative of—your WPA power than are the local folks. This is one way to address Micciche’s valid “disappointment” with WPA work: take your show on the road and see the spectators out there as your primary audience, and don’t forget to see them as the benefactors of your own hard-fought intellectual authority.

What happened at my institution may not be possible everywhere. I agree that many institutions’ WPAs collectively have a long way to go before we find true agency inside our own universities, let alone outside, our programs. So many WPAs out there work under so many differing conditions—and within all kinds of departments at complicated universities of diverse types. But I do want to stress that unless and until we accept our ability to be extra-institutional negotiators, or a positive, public version of Bosquet’s “hero WPA,” we can’t hope to affect with any significance the way writing is taught in the university or perceived by the general public. For those of us who administer in programs that include basic writing, in particular, I think it’s time we took the role of “manager” to mean something more: we are managing not only faculty and curriculum but student agencies as well, agencies at risk and susceptible to outside definition and control. To fol-
low Phelps’s lead, as WPAs we surely can “lead with integrity, based on the ethical premise that infuses academic enterprises in their attempt to realize the ideals of professionalism” (25). If reaching out to higher administration improves that agency and that continual desire for true professionalism, we should not fear making that connection—nor should we disregard the chances for true public power that such a connection may bring.

Notes

1 I realize that Phelps uses this identical passage in her discussion of “the rhetoric of humanities” regarding academic leadership, and I do not aim to duplicate her efforts or her reading of Davidson’s influential work. However, because I seek to compare Davidson’s rhetorical construction of the department chair specifically to characterizations of the WPA as an allied leadership figure, I employ it in this context. Phelps’ full introductory remarks in her article, which lead into this extended Davidson quote are that “potential for collective influence from leaders ‘all the way down’ is both endangered and enhanced by today’s situations of crisis, transition, restructuring, and rethinking, which break up frozen power arrangements and reveal hidden information” (24).

2 For Fall 2005, I’m proud to say that eight of the nine sections of our newly credit-bearing basic writing course were taught by full-time tenured faculty. We are thus enacting Harris’ call that “tenure-stream faculty in composition and English” teach not only first-year but also basic writing (63), toward revaluing this course within the department and the university.

3 As other WPAs have noted—particularly women working in departments that are predominantly male, or junior faculty working in departments consisting of mostly senior professors who teach literature but not writing—it is easy for the WPA’s voice to be silenced, even if that silence is implicitly rather than explicitly reinforced at the department level. In addition to the myriad narratives written by these disenfranchised WPAs (some of whom are victims of negative tenure decisions as a result of that status, created by a misunderstanding of WPA work as research and scholarship), Susan Miller has argued regarding women and the teaching of composition, “individuals are ‘placed,’ or given the status of subjects, by ideological constructions that tie them to fantasized functions and activities, not their actual situations. These ideological constructions mask very real needs to organize societies in particular ways” (Textual Carnivals 123). In other words, the psychic slots into which composition faculty are placed are as much a result of what faculty think these individuals do, culturally speaking, as what they do, in fact, do. Human group structures do this categorizing automatically; lesser-represented groups within structures are the least powerful to resist such slotting.

4 I am deeply grateful for Jeanne Simpson’s thoughtful and encouraging comments to me regarding a draft version of this manuscript, presented at the Thomas R. Watson Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, in October 2004. I want
to specifically note the groundbreaking work of Simpson and Kinkead’s article and acknowledge it as a primary influence here.

5 See Rita Malencyzk’s recent article, “Doin’ The Managerial Exclusion: What WPAs Might Need to Know about Collective Bargaining” (WPA: Writing Program Administration 27.3, Spring 2004) for a more complete discussion of this issue.

6 At this point, recognizing the great deal of scholarship on collaborative program administration in WPA and in edited collections, I add here that while I am the sole composition program director on my campus (another colleague directs our placement sequence, and yet another colleague has directed our faculty development initiatives), I do not think that even an army of me clones, so to speak—i.e., a deeply collaborative infrastructure consisting of multiple individuals working as WPAs—would have any greater opportunity to exercise power without “going public” and being public in their daily operations. In other words, a collaborative program administration could do this same public work, and if that structure benefits the program itself, all the more power to it. But I do not think that having a collaborative program administration alone means that a program is automatically more able to exercise extra-institutional power unless an effort is made to seek out that agency, beyond the confines of the program and institution.

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Turning Placement into Practice

Irvin Peckham

The history of writing assessment begins with composition: the first exams to weed out the rabble were oral; then came quizzes with questions like this one from an 1870 entrance exam: “He said that that that that pupil parsed was not that that he should have parsed. Parse the that’s in this sentence” (qtd. in Crowley 65). Our professional predecessors seem first to have moved from indirect to direct assessment of writing in the academic year 1872-1873 with writing tasks such as “Write a short composition on. [. . .] The Style of ‘Henry Esmond’” (qtd. in Crowley 67–68). Although replacing with short essays the early equivalent of bubbled-in test answers, the examiners’ responses (see Crowley 68) make clear they were looking for evidence of literary knowledge and mastery of spelling, punctuation, and grammar—and that the vast majority of high school graduates were sadly lacking in both.

We have come a way since then but hardly by leaps and bounds. I was teaching high school in California in 1974 when the minimum competency movement swept through the nation’s high schools. In Santa Clara County, the early response to demands for testing sixth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade mastery of writing was to adopt one of several versions of an objective assessment of editing skills—not far from the clever parsing question in 1870. I was a member of the Santa Clara County Committee on Writing that eventually persuaded most school districts in our county to recommend versions of the holistic model for assessing writing in place of the objective exams. The effort sparked acrimonious arguments about our translating a formative assessment model, popularized by the Bay Area Writing Project, into an exit exam.
Involvement in this controversy was my introduction to the concept of assessment and its link with instruction. For ten years, I directed the minimum competency exams in the Morgan Hill Unified School District, where we discovered ways to turn the requirement for minimum competency exams to our advantage. Through our scoring sessions, teachers at the elementary, middle, and high-school levels talked with each other about the elements of good writing, the kind of writing tasks we should set for the next year, and how we might reshape our classes to help failing students, for whom we then developed an intensive individualized writing program. Through our common experience focused on serious discussions about writing, we all learned much about teaching writing and significantly reshaped writing instruction in our district. Most notably, it helped us resist the five-paragraph and power-writing models that were becoming the rage in California.

I have been involved in assessment since then, mostly as a consequence of three assumptions that emerged from my experience in Morgan Hill: first, it’s better to have writing teachers take charge of assessment than to let outside forces tell them how to do it (see White, “Language”); second, if teachers are clear about what they are teaching, they should be able to develop some way of assessing performance; and third, good assessment practices improve teaching performance.

Assessment theory and practice in colleges have largely been connected with placement: deciding whether the student is placed in a developmental, first semester, or second semester course or exempted. To the uninitiated, sorting students into poor, adequate, good, and excellent writers might not seem difficult, assuming that the sorters acknowledge the possibility of error when the essays lie near the boundaries of the categories. But anyone who has thought seriously about the link between writing and writers knows how complicated such sorting can be. We know that students who write well in one genre may not be equally successful in another (one only need look at Henry James’ career as a dramatist to understand that). We know that writing situations and methods of scoring affect who will be placed where. In sum, placement is a messy business. We do not look for perfect answers; we look for better practices.

Although our deans may disagree, we know that placing students on the basis of their ACT or SAT scores is notoriously unreliable. Research on the correlation between indirect and direct methods of assessment is consistently negative, ranging from a low of .2 (Bamberg) to a high of .63 (Breland and Gaynor, cited in Stiggins). Richard Haswell, one of our field’s most indefatigable collectors of information, summarized this research in the WPA listserver Archives of WPA-L@ASU.EDU posting (“RE: SAT Quote about Writing”). Edward White summarized on WPA-L his unpublished report of the
correlation between the SAT and the California State University English Placement Test; he also confirmed these weak correlations, with an exception that at the lower and higher score levels, White found, the SAT was a reasonably accurate predictor of writing performance (“RE: SAT/ACT Very-High/low Score”), an exception that seems predictable.

A common alternative to the objective assessment for placement purposes has been the so-called “diagnostic,” usually administered during the first week of classes. Other systems are the single-draft timed essay, the multiple-draft timed essay, samples in different genres (Stitt-Bergh), portfolios (Condon and Hamp-Lyons; Willard-Traub, Decker, Reed, and Johnston; Yancey Portfolios), directed self-placement (Gilles and Royer), and informed self-placement (Bedore and Rossen-Knill). A few people have also experimented with untimed essays (Myers; Stitt-Bergh) and online assessments. There are, in addition, two general methods of evaluating essays for placement: variations of holistic scoring and the “expert reader” model (Calpus and Smith; Smith; Haswell and Wyche-Smith).

In “Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment,” Brian Huot set these methods against each other, the former being marginalized as decontextualized, positivistic, and current-traditional, the latter being privileged as contextualized and postmodern. Huot’s argument for an “emergent” theory of assessment provides an important critique of assessment specialists: he sees them as people who get so bound up in statistics and terminology that they seem to forget they are assessing writing. But his argument is based on a false dichotomy. Those (like me) who have used variations of the holistic model are set up as strawpeople who hold beliefs that few would ascribe to; notably, that “student ability in writing, as in anything else, is a fixed, consistent, and a contextual human trait”(549–50). Huot imagines positivists who claim that if one can look carefully, one will discover a fixed point defining a person’s writing ability. Maybe some people in various industries believe this notion, but I doubt that anyone who has paid attention to genre and assessment theory would imagine that writing ability is a fixed point. Rather than use an “old-Europe/new-Europe” rhetoric to set the holistic model and the “emergent” theory of assessment against, it’s more useful to imagine ways the two models can amend and complement each other. Unlike Haswell and Wyche-Smith, Huot, and more lately, White (“Re: Synopsis”), I think writing teachers can look at writing samples written in situations comparable to the ones we create in our classrooms and, through comparing them and discussing their evaluations, arrive at some reasonable inferences about the writers’ abilities to meet other kinds of writing demands—always acknowledging that boundaries and immediately surrounding areas are at best fuzzy and that we are dealing with probability, not certainty. Rather than give
up on holistic models of assessment, we have to entertain broader notions of ways we can adapt those models in the process of generating responsible assessment practices. If we *must* sort (and that’s always a question), our job is, then, to develop good means of doing it.

Citing the University of Pittsburgh (Calpus and Smith; Smith) and Washington State University (Haswell and Wyche-Smith) placements as prototypes, Huot stands on stronger ground when he claims that assessment has to be developed locally and designed to provide answers to specific questions. Assessment needs to be tied to the local curriculum and always linked to the knowledge that when writing instructors examine specific pieces of writing produced in specific rhetorical situations and in specific genres, they are looking at only the tip of the iceberg, guessing about the vast geography that lies underneath. Haswell points out that there are many ways of looking at the tip, and that it is a serious mistake to rely on one glance, particularly when, as a result of a single score, students may be placed in the stigmatized developmental writing courses (“Post-secondary,” par. 7). But the question is always one of time and money—at least for the WPA, who must negotiate competing interests. And one must always question the purpose of sorting, which has become a question so freighted with ideological overtones that it can provoke shouting matches between professors who claim to be teaching critical thinking in their classes.

If new WPAs are lucky enough to stumble into universities with sophisticated programs for placement and assessment, they won’t have to worry about these issues, but I suspect many of us take positions in academic arenas where placement and assessment processes need revision. This article focuses on a placement strategy at Louisiana State University that had outgrown its use and on our attempts to revise it. I will describe the limits we faced while trying to imagine a responsible placement program and how we inadvertently turned the limits into assets through a hybrid strategy that combined direct assessment, indirect assessment, and self-placement in an online environment. The success of our Online Challenge led us to extend the procedure to assess student achievement at the end of the semester. Our purpose in the semester assessment was to improve course coherence, motivate student and teacher performance, and respond to the perennial charge of grade inflation.

**Placement: Our Online Challenge**

In the writing program at Louisiana State University, the need for a required writing program is an article of faith. So is the assumption that we need to structure our sequence of writing tasks in two courses so that less accomplished writers will take both courses, the more accomplished will take only
the second course, and the most accomplished will take neither. Although I question these assumptions (see also Elbow 87–88), this is the belief system within which I operate as the WPA. Part of my job, then, is to determine the most effective method—within constraints particular to the institution—of classifying students on the basis of their writing ability and then linking that classification to what is being taught in the first and second courses.

The existing placement protocol at Louisiana State University had been developed in the early 1970s to operate as a check on the classification of writing ability by indirect measures. Students were initially placed in English 1000 (a no-credit course), 1001, 1002, and 1003 (the honors version of 1002), or students were exempted on the basis of their ACT, SAT, or AP scores. The former director of the program designed the “diagnostic” to check on placement via indirect assessment. During the first week of classes, students wrote an in-class essay and were either kept in the same class category or kicked up- or downstairson the basis of these essays.

Several problems arose, however, in using the diagnostic as a check on the ACT/SAT/AP for placement. The procedure was clearly physically disruptive during the first two weeks of classes, creating chaos in our first-year writing office as essays and students were shuffled around. It certainly created an unsettling environment for students just entering the university. It wasted human resources as a consequence of the need to juggle class maximums to assure that “re-placed” students could then enter sections held at the same hours as their original class. In addition, the evaluation was uncontrolled, relying primarily on individual instructors’ sense of whether a student belonged in one of our four courses or should be exempted.\5

And finally, although an improvement over indirect measures, timed, in-class, single-draft essays are the least valid of direct measures of a student’s ability to write.

White has suggested a hierarchy of testing methods according to what he calls “testing validity” based on the appropriateness of the testing instrument to what is being tested. In order from least to most valid, the methods are as follows: indirect measures (ACT or SAT); timed writing samples; un-timed writing samples; portfolios with samples of student writing in several genres (“Apologia”). The logic governing this hierarchy is commonsensical: the closer the structure of the assessment instrument to the structure of what is being assessed, the more valid the assessment. If we want to assess students’ editing skills, ACT or SAT tests might do the job. If we want to assess students’ abilities to respond to a generic topic within announced time limits, then the timed writing sample works. If we want to approximate the kind of writing situations most of us set up in our first-year writing classes—with time for invention, discussion, outlining, drafting, revision, peer responses,
and rewriting—then untimed writing samples are the way to go. If by “writing proficiency,” instructors mean the student writer’s ability to respond to a variety of writing situations in a variety of genres, then a portfolio assessment certainly makes more sense than a twenty-minute response to a generic topic like “creativity.”

In response to the problems with the diagnostic, we developed the Online Challenge for three reasons:

1. We wanted to have the placement completed by the time students entered classes, but we did not have enough money to pay readers to score 5,000 (the average number of students entering LSU) essays in the summer.

2. We wanted the writing situation to resemble as closely as possible the writing situations we created in our first-year writing courses.

3. We knew we could not ask students to come to LSU in the summer to write an essay. We might have managed to squeeze in a twenty-minute session for delivering such a writing sample, but we weren’t convinced that a twenty-minute impromptu would be significantly more reliable than indirect assessments.

We structured the Online Challenge like this: Students receive an initial placement on the basis of the ACT, SAT, or AP scores. After they are admitted, we send them a letter in which we invite them to challenge their placement by submitting an essay online. We run the assessment three times in the summer (in June, July, and August). The student chooses one of those assessments. The student goes online to download eight to ten articles we have selected on a particular subject. We give the student three days to read the articles and make notes. On the fourth day, the student goes back online to access the writing task. The student then has seventy-two hours to write the essay. He or she then returns to the online URL in order to upload the essay.

Several experienced teachers and I score these essays in a controlled reading with explicit descriptions of score points, sample papers for each score point, and at least two readers for each essay. A third reader adjudicates when the two readers disagree by more than one point. We developed the descriptions by sorting 150 essays into low, medium, and high stacks, subdividing each stack into low and high to get six stacks. From each stack, we selected representative papers we thought were central examples of each stack, and then described them, developing our criteria along with our
descriptions. With every reading, we have followed this practice, building on our previous year’s description, adapting the new description to the current year’s specific writing task, and choosing sample papers for each score point from the new essays. Because we do not have a large number of essays to read (about 260), we read them carefully and break frequently to discuss problematic papers that we put on the LCD overhead, a procedure simplified by having all essays online. While acknowledging the probability of error, we know that through our collective reading and discussions we arrive at more valid judgments than any of us would make if we were to rank these essays alone.

Our assumption behind the Online Challenge is that students who think they should be in a different course or exempted are the students whose writing we should review. We preferred to look at everyone’s writing, but scoring 5,000 essays was not economically feasible. In effect, we were creating a type of self-directed placement with the students determining whether they believed in their writing abilities and whether they were willing to do the extra work required to challenge their ACT/SAT/AP placements.

Assuming that most writers who participated in the Challenge would be on the upper end of the range of scores defining each category and would have a higher sense of self-efficacy than those in the middle or lower end of the categories (Reynolds), we expected a higher exemption rate than we had solely on the basis of the ACT/SAT/AP scores—in spite of the fact that the students with high ACT/SAT/AP scores had already been exempted. In line with prior research, we also predicted a low correlation between the ACT/SAT/AP scores and our scores for the students’ essays.

Over the past two years, we have had 5% of the incoming students take up the Challenge. We have exempted between 7% to 8% of those (in contrast to the .8% that we exempt by virtue of ACT/SAT/AP scores). Our correlation coefficient with the ACT/SAT/AP scores was very low (.5). Below is a table of the reassignments on the basis of the Online Challenge:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year, with Annual Student Reassignment</th>
<th>1001 Students Reassigned to 1002</th>
<th>1001 to Exempt</th>
<th>1002 to Exempt</th>
<th>1003 to Exempt</th>
<th>1003 to 1001</th>
<th>1002 to 1001</th>
<th>Students Staying in Same Sections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003–04</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>56.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–05</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: We had dropped English 1000 by 2003. In 2003–04, the program had 267 students reassigned; in 2004–05, 264 were reassigned.
Roughly, then, the students would have received the same placement with ACT/SAT/AP and essay scores a little over half of the time. That amounts to a flip of the coin. Two years of placement does not give us enough data to claim trends, but the percentages of “1001 to 1002” (9.4 and 10.6) and the percentages of “1003 to 1001” (5.2 and 5.7) and “1002 to 1001” (19.9 and 16.7) seem consistent. The percentages in “1001 to Exempt” (3.4 to 1.9) and “1002 to Exempt” (3.7 to 1.5) indicate that in 2004–05, the readers were less generous in their scoring, but the increase in the percentages of “1001 Students Reassigned to 1002” (9.4 to 10.6) and the lower percentages of “1002 to 1001” (19.9 to 16.7) argue against that interpretation. In any case, with the exception of “1001 to 1002,” the promotion between categories is between 1.5 (2003–04 “1003 to Exempt”) and 3.7% (2003–04 “1002 to Exempt”).

The dramatic bounce in the category “1001 to 1002” (9.4 and 10.6%) implies that the border between 1001 and 1002 is improperly drawn. But if we lowered the ACT/SAT/AP boundary to place more of the “1001 to 1002” students in 1002 on the basis of their ACT/SAT/AP scores, we would probably see an increase in the percentage of “1002 to 1001” students who would be demoted on the basis of their Online Challenge scores; the reverse might also true—if we raised the ACT/SAT/AP boundary between 1001 and 1002, we will increase the “1001 to 1002” category while decreasing the “1002 to 1001” category. Essentially, the ACT/SAT/AP is an unreliable indicator of a distinction between 1001 and 1002 students. This volatility at the mid-levels reinforces the results of White’s study cited above (“Re: SAT/ACT Very High/low Score”).

Two other statistics are striking: that more than 5 percent of the 1003 students should have been, according to my readers, placed in 1001 sections; and that 17 to 20 percent of 1002 students should have been placed in 1001. The demotion of student writers placed in 1003 was surprising because of the high ACT English threshold (31) for that group of students. Regardless of the verbal skills of student writers place in 1003 on the basis of their ACT’s English exams, my readers thought that more than 5 percent of these writers should take both semesters of first-year writing! The disproportionate percentage of English 1002 students (those with a threshold score of 26 for ACT English) who, my readers thought, should have been placed in 1001 was equally surprising.

Initially, I thought my readers had been off-base in their scoring. But when I did some random checks on their scoring, I usually agreed within a one-point range on the assigned score. I found support for the disproportionate demotion of students in a essay by Russell Meyers. When comparing rankings based on take-home essays to rankings by indirect placement,
Meyers found that 44 percent of the students should have been assigned a lower placement. My readers, by comparison, had been too easy on student writers.

Two factors may account for this disproportionate downward movement: First, readers are notably more inclined to give lower scores to anonymous writers than to students in their own classes. Second, the standards that teachers insist on for exemption from courses are higher than the standards they use for assigning grades in their classes. This latter logic conflicts with the common assumption in proficiency testing that if the placement score indicates a student will receive a passing grade in a course, then the student should receive exemption from that course (see Calpus and Smith; Haswell, “Post-secondary”; McKendy). In fact, of the forty-one students in 1002 for whom we recommended demotion but who decided to stay in 1002, 51 percent of them received As, 43 percent received Bs, and 5 percent received Cs. Of the eight students who decided to follow our advice and took 1001, 65 percent of them received As and 37 percent received Bs.

One can reasonably conclude from these data that our bark is worse than our bite. More charitably, we can say that in placement, we assess writing ability to determine who obviously does not need one or two semesters of writing. We exempt those either from 1001 or from 1001 and 1002. But students who we think might benefit from further instruction are required to take either one or both courses. At the end of the semester, we graduate them from the course with some hope that they have learned about as much as they could, knowing that most students would not be able to come up to the level we had established as the threshold for exemption. Put another way: we place as idealists and grade as realists. Add to this some element of grade inflation.

**Semester Assessment**

As a consequence of the many discussions we had in our scoring session, we decided to use the strategy we had established with the Online Challenge to assess student writing ability at the end of the semester. We had several purposes:

1. To address the issue of grade inflation. We believe there is some link between high grade distributions and high student evaluations, but we wanted to include in any assessment of grade distribution an evaluation of student achievement. We assume there will be some classes with higher student achievement and consequently a higher grade distribution; the converse is probably also true. We wanted to be able to give guidance to teachers for assigning grades on the basis of a controlled assessment of student performance.
2. To involve more teachers in workshops in which they would discuss evaluation practices and learn to evaluate student achievement with greater consistency.

3. To use the assessment to promote greater coherence in the program. We wanted some evidence that teachers were teaching a common curriculum in English 1001.

4. To assess overall student achievement so that we could measure any program changes against changes in student achievement.

5. To introduce in the classroom situation an additional motivation for teachers and students to improve performance. We wanted to have teachers strive for high scores for their students in the semester assessment; we also wanted to motivate student achievement by exempting them from English 1002 if they achieved high scores in the assessment.

For three years, we have been piloting the semester assessment in our English 1001 classes. We focused on English 1001 because we could expect greater course coherence among all the new GTAs, who follow a common curriculum, than in 1002, taught largely by instructors, who follow varied curricula. We could also use the assessment of student writing in 1001 to determine which students we could reasonably exempt from 1002 after a semester of instruction.

All new GTAs are required to participate in this project; in addition, I invite instructors to participate. For the last two fall semesters, an average of thirty teachers (including GTAs and instructors) and one thousand students have participated in each semester assessment.

Teachers reserve the last week of classes for this assessment. During that time, students participate in the semester assessment in exactly the same way as students have done in the Online Challenge. They have six days in which to complete the reading and the writing task. The writing task is in the same genre as the tasks with the Online Challenge. During finals week, teachers meet with me on Monday morning for four hours of training about scoring. We score for four hours on Tuesday morning and four hours on Wednesday morning. As with the Online Challenge, two readers read each essay with a third reading required if there is greater than a one-point difference between the scores the two readers assign.

By Wednesday afternoon, teachers can go online to access scores for their students. They receive individual scores, a graph showing students’ score distribution, their students’ mean scores, and the mean score for all students in the assessment. Figure 1 is a sample of data available for one teacher. The students in this class did well.
Figure 1.
Student Score Distribution in One Class for Semester Assessment, Louisiana State University Writing Program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department of English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean: 5.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor mean: 7.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Student Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nichols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jameson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scores represent the sum of scores by two readers with less than two point difference on a 6 point scale. Scores for four students are shown as a sample. The teacher would see scores for the entire class. All names are pseudonyms.

These graphs and the comparison of the mean of the instructor’s class to the mean for all students participating in the assessment give instructors significant data on their students’ achievement. We do not claim this one score should definitively represent a student’s ability to write, but it does tell instructors, with some degree of objectivity, how well a student can write in a genre and in a writing situation that we feature in English 1001. In addition, the scores are contextualized by the instructors’ experiences in the scoring process. By having participated in the scoring, instructors know both the strengths and weaknesses of the process. They know the judgment is more objective than it would have been if they had evaluated their own students’ essays. They know we have discussed at length criteria that are central to the genre and essays that represent scores from one to six. They know that two readers had to agree on a score within one score point and that if there were
a disagreement, the essay would be read by a table leader, who would adjudicate the score, often by discussing the essay with the first two readers. But they also know that there are holes in the process—that in spite of our four-hour training sessions, two low-scoring readers or two high-scoring readers may have read a particular paper. To check on the possibility of egregiously inaccurate scores, we ask the instructors to read any of their students’ essays that received scores not matching the instructors’ expectations of the student’s achievement (in fact, most instructors read all of them). If instructors challenge a score received in the assessment, they frequently ask one or two other instructors to read the essay as an additional check.

To be exempted from English 1002, students have to receive either an eleven or twelve on the assessment or a ten with their instructor’s recommendation. Beyond those restrictions, the instructors decide how they will use the scores to determine final grades. But in order to mitigate erratic grade distribution patterns, we ask the instructors to pay attention to the distribution of scores and to the mean in their classes. If the mean of a particular class is higher than the overall mean, we can understand a higher than average grade distribution, but if a mean is significantly lower, we do not expect to see a disproportionate number of As and Bs. Because we know this method of evaluating writing ability is far from infallible, we expect exceptions, but we do not expect the exceptions to become the rule—e.g., a teacher who awards As to sixty percent of students receiving combined scores of 6 or lower.16

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of students at each score point in our Fall 2004 assessment at LSU.

Table 2.
Score Distribution of LSU Student Scores’ for Semester Assessment, Fall 2004 (n = 1,056)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of Essays per Score</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Scores represent the sum of scores by two readers with less than two point difference.

There are several points of interest in this distribution: First, we exempt roughly 80 students out of the 1,056 who took part in this assessment. It is worth noting that when combined with the twenty or more students exempted from the Online Challenge, that exemption represents an instructional-cost savings of more than $17,000 dollars. If this score distribution is
repeated when we assess all students in English 1001 in the fall of 2005, our program will save approximately $51,000 in instructional cost (see Appendix).17

Second, approximately 30% of the students scored eight or better, with an additional 18.8% scoring at seven. In the Online Challenge, we consider a seven score to be on the border of capacity to give an acceptable performance in English 1002 courses. The 301 students who received scores of five or six may pass 1002 but not do well in the course. We could argue that students who received scores of two, three, and four should repeat 1001, but more than 130 students would have to repeat, which would dramatically increase instructor cost and obviously call teachers’ grading practices into question. We would have to address quite a few other controversial issues if we were to switch this assessment into an exit exam, but this is a minefield we are not interested in crossing right now.

We have identified students who have taken both the Online Challenge and participated in the semester assessment. We tracked the difference in their scores in the challenge and the semester assessment to see whether overall growth in their skills existed, a phenomenon which we could then attribute to their 1001 experience. Figure 2 shows the difference in scores.

**Figure 2.**
Score Differences among Students Accepting the Online Challenge and Participating in LSU’s Fall 2004 Semester Assessment. (n = 42 students)
Figure 2 shows that five students had the same score in the Online Challenge and semester assessment. Six students’ scores dropped by one point. One student’s dropped by three points, and another, by four. The figure shows, however, that most students received higher scores at the end of the semester than they received in the Online Challenge before they began the semester. Admittedly, forty-two students is a small sample and therefore likely to be idiosyncratic; nevertheless, we see a pattern of growth.

We expect that this assessment will help us approach the problems of erratic grade distribution patterns as well as improve student writing. Teachers will have concrete evidence of student achievement, evidence that should guide them in their grading practices. In addition, we will provide them with a correlation coefficient linking their students’ assessment scores with the grades assigned. We understand that factors other than writing achievement contribute to the course grade; nevertheless, an extremely low correlation, say of .6, should be cause for reviewing one’s grading practices. By linking grade distribution to student achievement, we expect to improve both individual and class performance because students will know that by achieving a high class average, they will give their teachers a rationale for a higher grade distribution. For higher achievement, both teachers and students will have to pay attention to the explicit objectives for the course. And finally, teachers will learn how to evaluate essays using the same benchmarks and scoring criteria that their colleagues use. They will no longer be grading in the dark.

WHERE FROM HERE?

Although an improvement over placement by indirect measurement, the extant practice of a check by the diagnostic was clearly flawed, leading us to replace it with our Online Challenge. We originally designed this process as a concession to limitations of time and money, but we were able to turn the limitations to our advantage. By going online, we could approach the writing situations characteristic of our classroom assignments; by allowing students to challenge their placement by indirect measurement, we allowed them some sense of agency, dramatically cutting our scoring costs and focusing on students most likely to have been misplaced. The success of Online Challenge led us to adopt it as a method of assessing student achievement at the end of the semester. The Semester Assessment allowed us to focus more accurately on what we were teaching, normalize teacher evaluation, and respond to the overly simplistic linkage of higher grade averages with higher student evaluations.
These tandem processes have opened new possibilities for research we have yet to pursue. We need more data on student growth, measured by student scores on the Online Challenge and the semester assessment. We need to track student achievement, measured by grades, correlated with their scores on the Online Challenge. We can also develop a more coherent understanding of the relationship between placement and grading, which I have reframed as the idealist standards for placement measured against the realistic standards for grading. It’s interesting, to put it mildly, that nearly 50% of the students that we pass with Cs or better in 1001 would not score high enough to be exempt from 1001 on the basis of our Challenge scores.

Finally, we believe we have barely opened the possibilities of online placement and assessment. By moving from the timed to the untimed writing sample, we have improved testing validity, but to get closer to an accurate assessment of students’ writing abilities, we have to look at samples from several genres. We also know that this move increases writing time and scoring costs and decreases interrater reliability (Willard-Traub et al. 70–72). Making this move, however, is our direction; we will progress slowly, incrementally training our teachers to measure their scores against explicit criteria, and thereby normalizing their responses to student writing. The practical instructional effect will be our program’s use of assessment as a reflective practice, measuring our pedagogy against student achievement, and then using both to move our assessment progressively toward a more accurate measure of what we claim to be teaching.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Charles Cooper, who has been my mentor in many ways, but particularly in assessment. I have learned a good deal from the WPA listserv, which periodically erupts in assessment-centered conversations. I have also learned from specialists in the field—most notably, Edward White and Richard Haswell, who have generously and patiently responded to my inquiries. Finally, I have had the help of several colleagues around the country—Elizabeth Coughlin from DePaul University, Marlene Minor from the University of Cincinnati, and Steven Youra from California Institute of Technology—who have worked with me under the leadership of Les Perelman from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop a strategy for large-scale, online assessments, obviating the need for student presence. The five of us are deeply indebted to Shannon Larkin, from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who kept us moving forward on the project.
Appendix

Table 3. Score Distribution of LSU Student Scores for Semester Assessment, Fall 2005 (n = 2,414)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essays per Score</td>
<td>No. of Essays</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the score distributions in Fall 2005 followed a pattern similar to the one for Fall 2004, the overall distribution was shifted to the left—more low and middle scores and fewer higher scores. This shifted distribution resulted in a lower mean (6.94% for Fall 2004 versus 6.18% for Fall 2005). Our exemption rate was also consequently lower (7.5% for Fall 2004 versus 6.0% for Fall 2005). We suspect the lower exemption rate was the consequence of two factors: a more difficult writing task and a larger group of readers. The construction of the writing task was made more difficult by our decision to link the subject of the writing task to our summer reading program. The larger group of readers was not as well-trained as previous groups of readers who had volunteered to participate in the pilot program. A more careful analysis of scoring patterns will, we believe, at least partially answer the causes of the lower score distribution.

Notes

1. I don’t want to take the delight from this puzzle by naming the functions of the sequence of that’s. The key lies in accenting the second, third, and fifth that’s and pausing between the third and fourth. The examiner might have embellished the puzzle by writing three rather than two that’s in the second sequence.

2. This is hardly my insight. Edward White has hammered this point home on the WPA listserv. We could consider it his mantra, without suggesting that he thinks linking assessment to instruction is easy to do.


4. I use scare quotes because calling a quick reading with a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down judgment a diagnostic seems mostly an act of rhetoric to professionalize the process.

5. On a superficial level, the system of scoring the diagnostic resembles the “expert reader” model pioneered by teachers at the University of Pittsburg (see Smith; Calpas and Smith) and later refined at Washington State University (Haswell and Wyche-Smith), but both of these practices relied on a small set of expert teachers reading in a semi-controlled environment with negotiations between read-
ers over disputed classifications. At LSU, we were relying on 60 instructors and 56 graduate students with significantly different degrees of expertise and experience to determine whether a writer belonged in one of the four categories. We had no reader training program, no sample papers, no genre-specific criteria.

6 For the letter, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/documents/letter.doc. For the description of the Online Challenge, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/documents/description.doc. Also, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/place-

7 We are frequently asked how we know we are reading the student’s writing. Admittedly, we can’t guarantee that the essays represent the students’ writing—no more than we can guarantee that out-of-class essays during the semester represent the students’ writing. In designing this placement strategy, we wanted to reproduce as nearly as possible the writing situations we present in our first-year writing classes. A characteristic of those situations is that students might cheat. We do have students write a statement of authenticity. In addition, we make the writing situation demanding so that it will be a good friend indeed who will read all the articles and write an essay to get his or her friend out of English 1001 or English 1002.

8 For our matrix describing the characteristics of essays at each score point, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/documents/matrix-

9 For essays representing each score point, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/documents/anchors.htm.

10 I was drawn to variations of guided self-placement (Gilles and Royer), but the belief system at Louisiana State University directly opposed notions of student agency underwriting any guided self-placement. As an incoming WPA, I thought that challenging the program’s existing belief systems directly would be bad judgment.

11 Because percentages are rounded off, the totals may not equal 100.

12 We did not promote students to 1003 because we felt we would be distinguishing differences that were more hypothetical than real. Thus, if a 1001 student achieved a high score, we either put her in 1002 or exempted her, depending on how high that score was.

13 We don’t have a “1003 to 1002” category because in translating scores to classes, we blurred the distinctions between 1002 and 1003. Scores of 8–9 were designated 1002. Scores of 10, 11, and 12 were “exempt.” We could have designated 10 as the characterizing score for 1003, but such a distinction was pointless because we are not pretending that we can accurately tell the difference between essays separated by one point on a twelve-point scale.
14 We let students whom we recommended for a lower-level course decide for themselves whether they want to stay in 1002 or 1003, in order to encourage students to take the Challenge: obviously, we believed, far fewer would challenge if they thought they might lose rather than gain from the exercise.

15 We don’t ask our faculty for more unremunerated work. Instead, we trade time off for hours spent: instructors are released from teaching duties during the last week of school while their students participate in the online assessment. In exchange, they work on the scoring for three half-days during finals.

16 For an online description of our process, see http://www.english.lsu.edu/dept/programs/ugrad/firstyear/documents/outlinepilot.htm. We make this description available to both students and instructors. The last item, “Score Reports,” addresses the issue of grade distribution and provides explicit motivation for improved performance. Please note that we have hedged a bit under the item, “Exemption from 1002.” To save the director and associate director from having to read all the 10s, we ask instructors to recommend whether we should exempt students in their classes who received 10s.

17 We have just completed the Fall 2005 assessment with seventy-four teachers and 2,414 students participating. Appendix, Table 3, shows the results.

Works Cited


Communicative Strategies for Administrative Practices:
Evaluating Weblogs, Their Benefits, and Uses

William Endres

What makes the Internet special is not the technology per se but the social interactions it is inspiring.

—Sara Kiesler

I once heard Donald Murray, an early and prominent member of the writing as process movement, make a distinction between having problems and having difficulties. I admired it and have carried these notions with me for some years now: problems, he claimed, can be solved once and for all, whereas difficulties require individual approaches and are always simply a part of life (Murray). Communicative issues fall very much into Murray’s category of difficulties. Unlike a problem, such as how to calculate cumulative grade-point average, in which the correct mathematical equation simply needs to be applied, communicative strategies and practices constantly offer challenges and difficulties for WPAs. How these communicative challenges are faced varies from program to program because writing programs are situated so differently. Variants include the size of the institute (large state universities to small liberal arts or community college), an institutional commitment to the teaching of writing, the hierarchical placement of the writing program within the institution, a writing program’s administrative structure (collaborative, top down or, most likely, some unique hybrid), and the personality and disposition of writing program director and instructors. All of these factors and more create diverse communities and cultures that
shape the way the professional challenges and difficulties of writing program administration will be resolved. Each writing program must find approaches that speak to the salient features of its unique culture and community.

For WPAs, as with any administrators, establishing and maintaining good channels of communication are perpetual and ongoing tasks. With the proliferation and rapid, continual development of computers and their communicative possibilities, these difficulties become even more complex. This essay, therefore, examines Weblogs (blogs) as a way to help with these communicative difficulties. Blogs, through their ease of learning and use, simplify to some extent the complexity of these choices while offering dynamic solutions to communicative difficulties that make good use of some of the best communicative features of the World Wide Web (www). This essay offers a brief history of blogs, and their potential uses, particularly for disseminating information, encouraging reflective practices, and collaborating for committee and curriculum development work. The uses of blogs, however, will be (and need to be) shaped by and around a given writing program's practices and culture to be successful. Given that, the second half of this essay discusses, first, research in media richness for structuring communicative tasks, particularly for committee work and curricular development, and then diffusion theory, which investigates the successful and not so successful spread of new ideas and innovations, for approaching the integration of blogs into a writing program’s practices. The appendices contain information about setting up blogs, including helpful links.

**Brief History of Blogs**

“Weblogs,” since John Barger named them such in December 1997 (see Rebecca Blood’s “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” par. 1), have become known simply as “blogs.” Originally, blogs were a collection of dated entries consisting of links to Web sites and articles, accompanied by commentary. The commentary, most definitely brief (usually a sentence or two), evaluated the information, explained its importance or interest, or added further information about the topic; in many ways early blogs worked as do entries in an annotated bibliography. Blogs were ways for Web enthusiasts to communicate their thoughts and draw attention to items discovered while surfing items Web surfers viewed as important, unusual, interesting, or noteworthy.

In early 1999, as Rebecca Blood explains, only twenty-three known blogs existed (par. 1). That number, however, soon changed. With blog writers like Jesse James Garret and Cameron Barrett publishing lists of known blogs (par. 1) and with the release of free software that no longer required someone to know Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) to create and maintain
a blog—particularly, the release of *Pitas* in July 1999 and *Blogger* in August of that year—the number of blogs on the Web increased at such a rapid pace that it was impossible to keep track of them (par. 4). In early 1999, one could have read and kept current with every blog on the Web. By late 1999, it was impossible.

The ease of creating and maintaining a blog through *Pitas* or *Blogger* truly revolutionized blog use on the www. Without the need to know HTML and FTP (File Transfer Protocol) programs, publishing on the www took little, if any, time to learn or do. The publishing of a blog, just as with its viewing, could now happen through a Web browser—such as Netscape Navigator, Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox—and could take place from any computer with Internet access. To create and publish a blog, once a Web browser is directed toward the blog site, an entry is typed into a text box and, by a simple click of the submit button, the entry is published. Each entry is automatically arranged on the blog Web site, with the most recent entry appearing at the top of the page. Publishing a blog, therefore, is not nearly as difficult as, say, working through the formatting possibilities for a typical word processing program. In addition, free hosting services—like those offered by *Blogger* (www.blogger.com) and *Pitas* (www.pitas.com)—allow anyone to set up an account for a blog in five to ten minutes and be ready to start publishing.

The release of *Pitas* and *Blogger* also marked a further effect. As Sarah Kiesler points out, a technological change can be “primarily amplifying, making possible for people to do what they have done before, but more accurately, quickly, or cheaply,” or it can be “transformative: it leads to qualitative change in how people think about the world, in their social roles and institutions” (xii–xiii). Around the release time of *Pitas* and *Blogger*, blog use began to be transformative. Groups of blog writers began focusing more on breaking national and international news, than on interesting and unusual Web sites. Using the work of Greg Ruggerio, Blood explains that these blog writers began to challenge the notion of a passive audience, one encouraged by the standard practices of the corporate-controlled media. By juxtaposing articles, searching out alternative sources, and commenting on the information, blog writers presented an alternative to the corporate-controlled news, albeit in a small way. They discouraged people from being part of a passive audience, instead encouraging them to become a part of an active public (par. 8–10). As Blood states, “By writing a few lines each day, Weblog editors beg[a]in to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor” (par. 10). This transformative use of blogs to challenge corporate control of the news and offer alternative perspectives on world events came to the forefront particularly during the Iraqi war, with blogs like that of Joshua Kucera (www.seren-

Additionally, with the introduction of Pitas and Blogger, people further transformed the concept of a blog, that is, in the words of Kiesler, they “alter[ed] what the technology [could] accomplish” (xiii). People began using blogs to record thoughts, insights, and the happenings of their day, often recording more than one entry in a single day, thus using a blog like a journal. Others began to use blogs to express ideas and opinions, with blog writers quoting each other, linking to each other’s sites, and carrying on extended conversations. These blogs were different in substance and nature from the pithy one- or two-sentence commentary and links that previously constituted a blog. As Kiesler reminds us, it’s “[p]eople's behaviors, not just the attributes of the technology, [that] determine” how people ultimately use a technology (xiii). Blog practices, then, began to be transformative and to evolve to meet the communicative needs, wishes, and potentials of their users.

BLOGS, DISSEMINATING INFORMATION, AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

Disseminating information and making certain that it is timely, pertinent, and readily available to instructors—for everything from changes in writing program policies and procedures to the date on which the college or university is celebrating Presidents’ Day—is a constant challenge and essential for a writing program’s smooth operation. However, if information is constantly disseminated, and other channels of communication are not readily visible and available for participation and dialogue, a WPA encourages a passive audience versus an active public (as discussed above through Greg Ruggerio’s work)—and the members of a passive audience may not only fail to concern themselves with fully understanding the disseminated information, they may not take the time to read it. When considered in light of community building and the dynamics of active learning in student-centered models of education, newsletters resemble the lecture mode in classroom delivery. Newsletters and memos, once the favored form for disseminating information and extremely effective at bundling it, have given way to Web sites and e-mail lists. These Internet-related technologies have gained advantage over newsletters and memos because they are easier to distribute and cheaper to produce, eliminating the cost of duplication (Kiesler’s earlier discussed sense of a technological change being primarily amplifying).

Rarely, if ever, however, is one technological innovation simply cheaper and easier than its predecessor. A change in technologies is almost always balanced against a complex of advantages and disadvantages. Examining
paper versions of weekly and monthly memos and newsletters, for example, shows that they hold some advantages when compared to electronic media. Faced with a communicative task, as Christina Haas points out in her essay “On the Relationship between Old and New Technologies,” one finds many competing old and new technologies to choose from. A simple replacement model of technology—that is, where one technology, usually a new technology, is viewed as merely replacing an older technology—represents for Haas an “oversimplified, bifurcated model” (210), a model that does not speak to the various competing and sometimes complementary technologies, both old and new, from which one can choose (222). A paper newsletter, as we know from experience, is highly portable—we can pull it from our mailboxes and read it during lunch or while walking to teach a class. Makers of computerized technologies know we appreciate paper’s portability and are attempting—particularly with laptops, notebooks and wireless technologies—to make computerized technologies portable in ways similar to paper. In addition, a page of print can normally be scanned quickly, especially if formatting techniques and conventions are effectively used—like headings, indentations, underlines, boldfaced words, and bulleted lists. Allowing the reader to scan a page quickly for important information and to move between pages quickly is an advantage of print. A screen of text, normally, is not as easily scannable, and it requires the use of a mouse and scroll bar or the click of the mouse on hyperlinks to move between “pages” of information.

Furthermore, for instructors, a newsletter has the advantage of showing up in a mailbox like an e-mail in an inbox, initiating a physically palpable alert (or notification) that information is available, whereas a Web site initiates no alert or notification when new information is added, available, and most likely needed to be known. On the other hand, a Web site has all information organized in one centralized location—newsletters and e-mails have to be stored and filed away in an organized system, forcing instructors to take time filing and organizing if their incoming information is to be retrievable to be used at a later time. Additional disadvantages are that a physical page of information can be lost, and an e-mail can be easily deleted—then the information might as well not have been sent in the first place. Recently, e-mail has run into further difficulties: with the glut of e-mail messages now being sent (legitimate and spam), and with the proliferation of viruses and the growing threat of identity theft via computers, e-mail requires a higher level of protection and expertise, resulting in more time- and labor-intensive effort for users. Therefore, in determining the best means for accomplishing a communicative task or for establishing a communicative practice, all these factors must be considered.
Beyond the comparison of the technologies, a WPA needs to consider feedback loops and interactivity. As Stanley Deetz and Devon Brown point out, communication is “a formative process,” and, therefore, communicative spaces need to be interactive and collaborative to encourage relations that are “open and productive” rather than “closed and reproductive” (184)—supporting Ruggerio’s notion, mentioned earlier, that interactive communicative practices promote an active public. Sometimes information needs simply and directly to be known. But in the knowing of the information, communication as a “formative process” leads—sometimes in what might seem small and mundane ways—to changes in users’ behavior and perspective. Individuality and the context of messages, however, constantly bring about the potential for readers to need to clarify information. An evident and actual possibility to do so in any communicative act is therefore necessary. If no such possibility exists, a passive audience is implied (or has been assumed) and clarifying information might be perceived by members of this audience as too time-consuming or too troublesome to worry about, leading to passivity. In a communicative act, as Deetz and Brown explain, space for individuality and for relating that individuality to what is being communicated, through interactivity and feedback loops, allows a better chance for information to have significance for the individual and consequence for all parties involved through collaborate interaction (184–5).

If a blog is used for disseminating writing program information, one of its advantages over e-mail, as with Web pages, is that it organizes information for instructors in its centralized location. The most current blog entry appears first on the opening page, with past entries accessed either through links on the blog’s monthly calendar or as a list of titled entries by date, depending upon the option the blogger chooses in setting up the blog. Additionally, information can be found through a blog’s search feature. A blog, therefore, eliminates the need for all instructors to maintain a filing system to organize writing program information—although a blog does not initiate an alert (or notification) when new information is available. Most important, a blog’s comment feature allows instructors to pose questions, make suggestions, or raise issues connected to any blog entry, possibly leading to blog information or policies being clarified for all users. Additionally, the comment feature for a blog can be set up so that when someone makes a comment, an e-mail message is automatically sent, notifying the blog’s author that a comment has been made.

If a WPA decides to use a blog to disseminate writing program information, a listserv can continue to operate along with a blog, with the benefits of each communicative means complementing the other. A listserv can function advantageously to communicate last-minute information, or
simply notify instructors that important information is now posted to the writing program’s blog (the Web address of the blog conveniently included in the e-mail message). In addition, listservs may better facilitate certain types of discussions (see Kraus 2004) and exchanges between instructors than blogs, such as sharing information about how certain texts work in the classroom, inquiring about articles, stories and poems that might help students to explore a certain course theme, or exchanging writing exercises. Writing programs would do well to take advantage of the benefits of both technologies.

Purdue University’s Introductory Composition at Purdue (a blog created and maintained by Shirley Rose while she was the WPA at Purdue) serves as an example of a blog’s being used for programmatic information (visit www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/ICaP/instructor_resources/ICaPBlog/blogger.html). Additionally, an excellent library blog for disseminating information is LISNews (lisnews.com), written and maintained collaboratively; it is a way to consider maintaining a blog. For further information, see Laurel A. Clyde’s Weblogs and Libraries, which also includes many exemplary blogs.

Traditionally a function of newsletters, blogs can be used to build community, accomplished through inclusion of photographs from a recent writing program get-together, recognition of instructors for their accomplishments, inclusion of short profiles or other personal interest stories, among others. Depending on the nature of the local writing program community, knowing its strengths and needs can reveal different opportunities for building community through a blog and can also reveal whether or not a blog can be helpful with fostering the community. Space limitation, particularly for photos, is always an issue with a print publication. Blogs, on the other hand, are fairly limitless in physical-spatial terms. For an example of a blog having the specific goal of community building, visit Humboldt State’s Comp Profs: The Blog for Teacher’s of Writing at Humboldt State (compprofs.blogspot.com). For blogs that integrate pictures into their sites, see Clotilde Dusoulier’s Chocolate & Zucchini (chocolateandzucchini.com), Mark Friesen’s News-Designer.com (www.newsdesigner.com/blog), and Wooster Collective’s A Celebration of Street Art (www.woostercollective.com).

Blogs for Modeling and for Gaining from Reflective Practices

Blogs offer the opportunity for WPAs to communicate with instructors and members of their writing programs as a forum to reflect upon current practices, curriculum or issues within the program. Reflective practices have begun to be studied more extensively in education and in composition in the
last ten years. Kathleen Blake Yancey, in her book *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*, reminds us that “reflection is a critical component of learning” (7), one with the “power to transform” (12). For Yancey,

When we reflect, we thus *project and review*, often putting the projections and the reviews in *dialogue* with each other, working dialectically as we seek to *discover* what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand. When we reflect, we call upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive aspects of ourselves, putting these into play with each other. These help us understand how something completed looks later, how it compares with what has come before, and how it meets stated or implicit criteria, whether of our own or of others. Moreover, we can use those processes to theorize from and about our own practices, making knowledge and coming to understandings that will themselves be revised through reflection. (6)

Blogs used for reflection by WPAs, then, can make explicit certain reflective practices that in all likelihood are already in play as WPAs go about their work, whether those practices involve teaching their own composition classes, working on curriculum revision, instructing new graduate teaching assistants, interacting with instructors, dealing with issues from students, articulating curriculum, writing instruction practices and program policies, or the like. This modeling of reflective practice by a WPA encourages the habit of reflection in instructors who read and perhaps comment on those blog postings, particularly instructors new to the field of composition and to teaching, and those postings become aids in their professional development. As Yancey points out, drawing from John Dewey’s *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educatve Process*, reflection is “habitual and learned” (9). This is of particular importance because, as Dewey states, “While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well,” which includes “acquir[ing] the general habit of reflecting” (qtd. in Yancey 9). A reflective blog, therefore, can encourage habits of reflection that are indispensable for clear thinking.

Equally important, a reflective blog can serve to aid instructors in understanding local instructional practices and curriculum for writing courses within the national conversation in the field of composition. Again, Yancey’s work on reflection is helpful. Drawing from Joseph Harris and his *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*, Yancey quotes Harris to explain her main interest in reflection “as a means of go[ing] beyond the text to include a sense of the ongo[ing] conversations that texts enter into” (qtd. in Yancey 5).
Placing local practices in the context of “the ongoing conversations” in the field of composition—the context in which practices and curriculum are shaped—is a service that WPAs can perform for instructors and particularly graduate students—that is, reflecting upon curriculum as it relates to current trends and theories in rhetoric and composition. Understanding how a certain writing program’s practices are situated within the national conversation will benefit not only rhetoric and composition students but also students of literature, creative writing, and linguistics, making them more informed about composition theory and helping them to articulate their own practices within this larger conversation, particularly when they need to do so to apply and compete for future teaching experiences and positions.

One of the struggles that WPAs have faced, which has motivated the crafting and adoption of the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ 1998 document, “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration,” is their gaining recognition for the intellectual work performed by WPAs and the problem of evaluating that work by colleges and universities. A blog used for reflective purposes, allowing instructors to gain from a WPA’s experiences and knowledge, highlights and documents the intellectual work necessary for a WPA to administer a writing program. Such use of a blog may not make a large difference, particularly if a college or university is slow to accept the merits of new technologies, but it presents an opportunity to help educate others in the college and university about the field-specific knowledge and the intellectual work necessary for a WPA to run a successful writing program.\(^2\)

A reflective blog, therefore, can offer many benefits, from encouraging reflective practices, to helping instructors understand how their curriculum is shaped by the conversations in the fields of rhetoric and composition, to documenting the intellectual work of a WPA—all of these with the prospect of encouraging intellectual exchange between instructors and building a dynamic environment in which instructors teach. As Yancey points out, using the research of scholars such as Arthur Applebee, Stephen Brookfield, and George Hillocks, “Teachers come to reflection as a means of enhancing their teaching” (15). “Teachers’ practice,” Yancey continues, “is known, reviewed, understood and enhanced through reflection” (15). Blogs offer a way to integrate this helpful and necessary activity of reflection into a writing program’s practices and culture.
BLOGS, MEDIA RICHNESS, AND COMMITTEE AND CURRICULAR DEVELOPMENT WORK

Administrative blogs can also be quite useful for committee work and curricular development. When choosing a means of communication, we have many competing technologies from which to choose. To understand crucial considerations for making choices between communicative technologies—that is when choosing a communicative means and structuring the communicative task—the essay “Communication without Frontiers: The Impact of Technology upon Organizations” by Paula O’Kane, Owen Hargie, and Dennis Tourish is most helpful. As an important beginning point toward understanding the effects of various means of communication on the communicative task, the authors review the notion of media richness and its origins in the concept of social presence as set forth in The Social Psychology of Telecommunications by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. In essence, their theory of social presence states that “the more we are aware of the other person’s actual presence the more likely it is that interpersonal relationship will result,” with interpersonal relations leading more likely than not to better communication (O’Kane 88). Knowing the importance of social presence for a communicative task opens up a way to begin assessing the differing available means of communication and the challenges faced in their use. Drawing from the research of Stephanie Westmyer, Rachel DiCioccio, and Rebecca Rubin and that of Janet Fulk and Lori Collins-Javis, O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish point out that when various means of communication are examined through this theory, not surprisingly, face-to-face offers the greatest social presence—the greatest number of audio and visual communicative clues—while other communicative means offer less and less social presence, including the range from video conferencing to, ultimately, e-mail (88).

The importance of the research into social presence is twofold: first, by offering less social presence, various technologies decrease the possibility that interpersonal relationships will result—which may or may not be important to a particular communicative task, that is, if committee members already know each other well or committee members strike up immediate rapport, which can happen even between relative strangers on e-mail; and, second, most importantly, because various media project different levels of social presence, they have different capacities to carry information, with some communicative tasks, such as conflict resolution, requiring wide channels of information. O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish explain that this capacity to carry information has become known through the work of Richard Daft and Robert Lengel in the early and mid 1980s as media richness (88).
Media richness, as set forth by O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish—drawing heavily from the more recent work of K. S. Suh, particularly his “Impact of Communication Medium on Task Performance and Satisfaction: An Examination of Media-Richness Theory”—consists of these salient features:

- availability and speed of feedback
- ability to communicate many clues simultaneously, including voice tone and nonverbal behaviors
- use of language rather than statistics
- ability to transmit affective components of messages (88)

Face-to-face communication, when examined through these criteria, can easily be seen as possessing high media richness, with the physical presence of face-to-face contact offering (1) quick and available feedback on what is communicated through the immediacy of the physical presence of the individuals involved in the communication; (2) opportunities for simultaneous clues in a message through facial expressions, tone of voice, eye-contact, body language, etc.; (3) the obvious possibility of language use, and (4) various ways to portray the affective aspects of a message through facial expressions, tone of voice, eye-contact, body language, etc. (as in simultaneous clues above).

Different communicative tasks, therefore—because they depend on and need various levels of media richness if the communication is to be efficient and effective—are more or less successfully enacted when performed through various media. As O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish point out, face-to-face communication, the richest medium, tends to be the most effective means of interacting when “issues are inherently complex; conflict is involved; uncertainty reduction is a priority; and building interpersonal relationships is an urgent requirement” (88).

In determining the best means of communication for a communicative task—including when and how best to use blogs for committee and curricular development work—O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish offer three main features of a communicative task as fundamental considerations:

- Determine the informational purpose behind communication episodes—for example, is the primary purpose to transmit uncomplicated information, reduce uncertainty, or resolve interpersonal conflicts?
- Consider the logistical issues involved in bringing parties together for face-to-face encounters. Often, this is just not possible.
• Evaluate the familiarity of the individuals concerned with the technological options available. (89)

When these considerations are applied to the use of blogs for committee and curricular development work—and to other communicative tasks, for that matter—WPAs are more likely to structure and manage the use of blogs more effectively and efficiently, leading to better outcomes. For instance, if a writing program suffers a sudden budget cut or presents a new curriculum to instructors for the first time, face-to-face interaction will most likely be warranted and most effective to reduce or help people manage the uncertainties that these situations pose and, further, to deal with the complexities that both situations involve—not to mention handling the potential conflicts that might arise. On the other hand, if a group of people who know each other well is reviewing handbooks for new adoption by a writing program, a blog could work quite well. A blog offers members the opportunity to work within their own time constraints and post their reviews of handbooks and read fellow members’ reviews and responses when their schedules allow; however, the complexity of the communicative tasks to be completed on the blog would need to be limited appropriately. Limiting the complexity of these tasks can be accomplished through a face-to-face meeting aimed to come to consensus on the more complex tasks of deciding which handbooks the committee will review, the criteria for their assessment, and agreeing upon a time framework and order for reviewing handbooks. In this scenario, members would use the blog to post and read assessments of the various handbooks and comment upon them—following the agreed-upon list of handbooks, the criteria, and the time frame. Future face-to-face meetings, then, might be necessary only when serious disagreement exists on a particular handbook’s merit and in the final stages of the selection, when differing opinions and conflicts need to be resolved for the committee to come to consensus on the final choice.

Blogs, therefore, can be used to replace some meetings and to prepare for others. Additionally, for preparation, a blog can be used to disseminate agendas for meetings, offering an opportunity for participants to comment upon, revise, and refine an agenda before a meeting happens. In this way, a blog can help committee members to prepare for a meeting in a thoughtful and reflective manner. The gathering of early responses and exchanges through a blog allows the physical meeting discussion itself to begin at a more significant level: participants gain from the ideas already circulated and have a sense of the arguments and positions of fellow committee members, through what could be considered a rough draft of a meeting.
In the case of curricular development, blogs can be used for posting proposals and curriculum, and garnering input from committee members. A draft, then, can be revised from the committee’s comments, and then reposted and revised, repeating this process as long as it continues to be productive. The comments on a draft presented on a blog are centralized, with each comment automatically linked to the entry of the draft and therefore conveniently organized. In addition, because it is on the Web, a blog’s universal ease of access to drafts and revisions by committee members also allows for ease of access by WPAs. Therefore, a WPA can acquire a quick sense of the progress a committee is making or how its work might affect other aspects of a writing program without needing updates from a committee member; thus, a WPA may stay informed, organized, and able to gain quick access to information that he or she might need at the last minute for other work within the writing program. As etiquette, a WPA should always inform committee members that he or she will be accessing their blog to acquire these quick updates before the committee begins its work.

In “The WPA as Researcher and Archivist,” Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser offer strong arguments for WPAs archiving important writing program work so that this information can serve later research. Particularly those blogs used for curriculum development, committee work, and in conjunction with meetings can be of great assistance in this area. Blogs offer a transcript of reasonings, concerns, debates, considerations, and arguments, that is, a record of the paths to certain outcomes possibly invaluable to research. Drafts, final versions of documents, and minutes from meetings are certainly helpful for research, but these documents normally do not supply the richness of the discussion and deliberation surrounding them. Blogs fill in this much-needed context. Blogs are also easy to archive. They can be stored on a computer as an archive or burned onto a CD. If a paper archive is desired, they can be printed out.

An important caveat when doing curriculum development and committee work via blogs is that the information not be accessible to everyone with access to the World Wide Web. Blogs can and should be password-protected for this type of work. Committee members should feel certain that their deliberations and comments will not have a wider audience than the one they expect. If a wider, more general audience has access to committee deliberations, comments may be misunderstood and taken out of context. Password-protecting a blog reduces concerns about an unintended audience and will control access to the blog to those who can best contribute to the deliberations.
Evaluating the use of blogs and all means and tasks of communication in light of the findings presented by O’Kane, Hargie, and Tourish can help a WPA to refine communicative practices within a writing program. For more extensive reading about strategies for assessing communicative practices and developing an overall strategy for communicative tasks, see Cal Downs and Allyson Adrian’s *Assessing Organizational Communication: Strategic Communication Audits*.

**Integration of Blogs into Communicative Practices: Diffusion of Innovation Theory**

Integrating a blog into a writing program’s communicative practices will require a slight shift in a writing program’s cultural habits. To aid a WPA in working through this transition effectively and efficiently, Everett Rogers’ *Diffusion of Innovations* (in its fourth edition) is most helpful. Here, Rogers draws from the interdisciplinary research into the diffusion of innovations, a tradition that includes archeology, sociology, communications, and education. Research in diffusion of innovations led to five adopter categories:

- **Innovators:** “venturesome,” “able to cope with a high degree of uncertainty about an innovation at the time [they] adopt,” and “willing to accept an occasional setback when a new idea proves unsuccessful” (282–3).
- **Early Adopters:** “respected by [their] peers and the embodiment of successful, discrete use of new ideas” (283).
- **Early Majority:** “follow with deliberate willingness in adopting innovations but seldom lead,” “interact frequently with their peers but seldom hold position of opinion leadership in a system,” and “deliberate for some time before completely adopting a new idea” (283–4).
- **Late Majority:** approach innovations “with a skeptical and cautious air,” “do not adopt until most others in their systems have already done so,” and many times adopt out of “an economic necessity” and/or “the result of increasing peer pressures” (284).
- **Traditionalists:** regularly make decisions “in terms of what has been done previously” and “interact primarily with others who also have relatively traditional values” (284).

The importance of these adopter categories, as Rogers explains, is not so much as categories in and of themselves but as a means to lead to the mapping of the diffusion process. If an innovation is to be adopted, the uncer
Uncertainty concerning the innovation must be reduced. This is accomplished through the flow of evaluative information within a community. By understanding the channels of communication between adopter groups, “[t]he structure of who relays messages to whom,” the flow of evaluative information, and therefore the diffusion process, becomes evident and accessible (Diffusion 300–5).

Interpersonal networks are the channels of communication that are most important to the diffusion process and the flow of evaluative information. As Rogers explains, “Mass communication channels are primarily knowledge creators, whereas interpersonal networks are more important in persuading individuals to adopt or reject [an innovation]” (Diffusion 305). But Rogers warns that we must also be aware of a fundamental principle of communication: “that the exchange of ideas occurs most frequently between individuals who are alike, or homophilous” (Diffusion 305). In considering the adopter categories in light of this fundamental principle, the innovators, surprisingly, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the traditionalists are normally least like the majority of the community and, therefore, have fewer channels of communication available to them through which to promote a change in community practices. The early adopters, by contrast, are the crucial group in the diffusion process. As Rogers explains, they have attitudes and values that closely resemble the majority of the community, particularly the early majority, the next group in the diffusion process (who make up approximately one-third of the community) and the late majority (who make up approximately another one-third of the community) (Diffusion 283). Early adopters normally have multiple interpersonal connections to people in these two categories. Early adopters, Rogers continues, “[b]ecause [they] are not too far ahead of the average individual in innovativeness, serve as a role model for many other members of a social system,” with “[p]otential adopters [both early and late majority]looking to early adopters for advice and information about an innovation” (Diffusion 283).

Additionally, early adopters tend to be the opinion leaders5 in a community rather than the innovators, who may even be looked upon with suspicion (Diffusion 318). Early adopters make natural opinion leaders because for a community early adopters are “the embodiment of successful and discrete use of new ideas,” thus they are “respected by [their] peers” and the individuals that other community members look to for advice and as models (Diffusion 283). Innovators, because of their ability “to cope with a high degree of uncertainty” (Diffusion 282) and, as Rogers explains in Communication of Innovations, their “eager[ness] to try new ideas” (183), can normally be counted upon to experiment with a new innovation, like a blog, quickly and easily, without much convincing, and be counted upon as resources for
understanding a new technology, because, in all likelihood, someone within the innovator group will have already tried it. For the diffusion of an innovation within a community, however, the early adopters are the vital target group to establish change.

The attitude of early adopters towards an innovation and its adoption, therefore, is critical. A WPA, then, will need to identify the early adopters, particularly those who operate as strong opinion leaders in a writing program community; the WPA must then involve them early in the work of integrating any new technology, such as a blog, into current practices. Monitoring their reaction to an innovation will offer insights into the possibilities of the success of an innovation in the community and will offer the opportunity to cultivate in early adopters an understanding of an innovation's advantages, increasing the chances of a successful and speedy diffusion. In addition, working with early adopters and opinion leaders early in the process will allow for a thorough assessment of the merit of the innovation and a thorough working through of various ways to integrate an innovation into practices. Drawing from the research of George Homans, Rogers explains that opinion leaders tend to adhere to community norms and values—one way that they obtained and maintain their status in the community—and therefore perform “a valuable service to the system in that the leader[s] thus provide a living model of the norms for [their] followers” (Communication 219). Opinion leaders, therefore, will be most adept at understanding community norms—after all, they tend to be the exemplars of community standards—and will recognize ways that the integration of a new technology might violate community values and norms.

Early involvement of the opinion leaders and early adopters in planning an integration of any innovation helps to get these individuals invested in the particular innovation at hand and offers them time to become comfortable with the change. Additionally, it offers them enough time and space to understand ways to integrate the new practices into their own behaviors and habits. As diffusion research shows, having time and the opportunity to experiment with an innovation generally leads to more rapid adoption of an innovation (Diffusion 258). Early adopters need to determine how best to use an innovation, given the local community’s values and practices, because they typically do not have extensive models to follow. Later adopters, particularly the late majority and traditionalists, will have plenty of peers around them already using an innovation who function as models, reducing their need to experiment with an innovation (Diffusion 258). Therefore, including influential early adopters in the initial planning of an innovation is extremely helpful. Having some opportunity to experiment with an innovation is also important to the early majority, who tend to deliberate more
than early adopters when faced with the possibility of an innovation; the early majority, too, benefits specifically from time to experiment (Diffusion 284). If it is possible, therefore, to work with early adopters in developing a blog’s uses for a writing program and then to institute the use of a blog for a short time while retaining familiar communicative practices (say, a newsletter or listserv), the innovation has a greater chance to be adopted and adopted more quickly since it offers community members a less risky trial of the innovation. But if the initial work and planning with a group of opinion leaders and early adopters has been done, it will more generally assure the integration of a blog into community practices in ways that benefit the writing program community.


Concluding Thoughts

Wireless technologies are the latest development in the area of computers and communications. Blogs work quite well with existing technologies but are particularly complementary to the new wireless technologies being developed. Personal digital assistants (PDAs), or handhelds, like the Palm Pilot and Spring Visor, once functioned simply as schedule planners and address books and for jotting brief notes. Now, through wireless technologies, they can connect to the Web and allow their users access to email and Web sites. Additionally, with the development of the BlackBerry—a PDA that also functions as a cellular phone—a new line of handheld devices, known as mobile managers, is being developed and marketed. Because of the limited screen-size of handheld devices, blogs offer an efficient way to arrange data and navigate it on these screens—while offering, of course, the ease of access to the information that the wireless technologies and the Web make possible. Blogs, therefore, have reason to become even more prevalent.

Establishing and maintaining good channels of communication, however, will continue to be perpetual tasks, at once a “difficulty,” in Donald Murray’s sense of the word, and one of the challenges of WPA work. New technologies, like blogs, offer new and exciting possibilities for meeting these difficulties and challenges, while offering as well some inherent difficulties and challenges. Integrating a new technology into a culture always takes time. The current strengths and weaknesses within a particular writing program will determine how blogs might best benefit, or not, the writing program’s culture and communicative needs. The elements contained in this
essay will supply a good starting point from which to begin evaluating and reflecting on the aptness of using blogs to assist and support the administrative work of a writing program.

APPENDIX A

Setting Up a Blog on www.blogger.com

2) Click Create Your Blog Now (middle right of page, under “Create a blog in 3 easy steps”).
3) Create a user name, password, and display name. Enter them in the appropriate boxes. Also, click to check the box to confirm that you will abide by Blogger’s “Terms of Service.”
4) Create a title for your blog and a name to be part of your blog’s address; these will identify your blog—you can simply use the title (but for ease of typing the address, eliminate the spaces).
5) Choose a template for the appearance of your blog.
6) Click Start Posting to create your first blog entry.

APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL BLOG RESOURCES

—Compiled from We Blog: Publishing Online with Weblogs.

Blog Hosting Services (Free)

Big Blog Tool (www.bigblogtool.com)
Blogger (www.blogger.com)
GrokSoup (www.groksoup.com)
LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com)
Pitas (www.pitas.com)
we::blog (www.danchan.com/weblog)
Xanga (www.xanga.com)
Commenting Services (Free)

aspComments (www.sneaker.org/projects/aspcomments.shtml)
Reblogger (jsoft.ca/reblogger)

Searches for Blogs (Free)

Atomz (www.atomz.com)
blogSearch (markpasc.org/code/radio/blogSearch)
Google (www.google.com/services/free.html)

Blog Server Software (Free)

BlogWork (www.blogworks.com)
Greymatter (www.noahgrey.com/greysoft)
Movable Type (www.movabletype.org)

Notes

1 Many people use the find feature in their email program to locate needed email messages. The find feature can search for specific words in the title or the content of email messages and generate a list of emails that match the criteria. This cuts down on the need to file and move messages into various folders. Additionally, email programs can be set up to sort incoming email into specific folders by the sender’s email address, which works well particularly for listservs. Even with these automated features, however, I still find that sorting and filing some email messages helps with speedy retrieval of needed information, helping me to avoid waiting forever for my find feature to finish searching a folder of email messages or for me to work through the long list of emails that the find feature generates.

2 As reported in the Oct. 21, 2005 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, two assistant professors who maintain or contribute to well-known blogs were denied tenure at the University of Chicago: Daniel Drezner, in political science, and Sean Carrol, in physics. The effect of their blogging activity on the tenure decision has led to much speculation. Concurrently, Gary Becker, 1992 Nobel Laureate in Economics and Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, maintains a well-known blog with Richard Posner, Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago and former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit (www.becker-posner-blog.com). Interestingly, Becker began his academic career as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago, left and earned tenure
at Columbia University, only to return to the University of Chicago. Furthermore, the Law School at the University of Chicago maintains a faculty blog (uchicagolaw.typepad.com). Clearly, how blogs are viewed within universities and colleges is a complex matter. Two additional articles of interest in The Chronicle of Higher Education are Ian Tribble’s “Bloggers Need Not Apply,” 8 July 2005: C3 and Henry Farrell’s “The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas,” 7 Oct. 2005: B14.

3 Rogers uses the term Laggards for this group; however, I prefer the term Traditionalists to avoid the negative connotations of Rogers’ term.

4 WPAs can fit into any one of these adopter categories. These categories, as Rogers warns, must be thought of as “ideal types” and are “concepts based on observations of reality that are designed to make comparisons possible” (Diffusion 282). As Rogers explains, these categories, as conceptualizations, have exceptions and deviations within any local community (Diffusion 282).

5 In rare circumstances, community norms can alter the tendency for opinion leaders to be part of the early adopter category. For example, if a community adheres strictly to traditional standards, like the Amish, the strongest opinion leaders tend to be part of the traditionalist adopter category.

Works Cited


Review


Susan H. McLeod

Twenty years ago, in her chair’s address to CCCC (“Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections”), Maxine Hairston exhorted those of us in composition studies to declare our intellectual and in some cases actual independence from literature. Since that time, Kathleen Yancey noted in her 2004 CCCC chair’s address that a move toward the latter sort of independence had materialized; she pointed out that the number of departments that identify themselves as “English” in the *MLA Directory* has declined, and increasing numbers of separate departments or programs are evidently devoted to writing as a serious arena of academic study. The essays in O’Neill, Crow, and Burton’s *A Field of Dreams* focus on the formation of such academic units. The book’s three sections—“Local Scenes: Stories of Independent Writing Programs,” “Beyond the Local: Connections among Communities,” and “The Big Picture: Implications for Composition, English Studies, and Literacy Education”—are followed by an afterword by editor Larry Burton. The editors’ purpose in collecting these essays, he states, was “not only to document various institutional changes related to composition, but also to provide information to others who may find themselves in similar circumstances” (1–2).

For several years I was chair of an English department at a mid-size research university, trying my best to hold its disparate programs and interest groups together; I now find myself the director of an independent writing program that divorced from traditional “English” a decade ago, and I work dedicatedly to keep the two as separate as possible (a process that’s not always easy when we have shared custody of the TAs). So I read *Field’s* essays from two points of view, one sympathetic to the move toward independence, and the other mindful of the possible outcomes, not all of them intended. The Angela Crow and Peggy O’Neill introduction to the book is subtitled “Cau-
tionary Tales about Change” — and so they are indeed. Change invariably involves conflict, and as the various essays show, such conflicts are necessarily site-specific functions of the particular institutions and situations in which they arose. The book raises some important questions: If writing programs break away from English, how can they work out their own disciplinary or inter-disciplinary traditions (as, for example, women’s studies has done)? If writing programs form alliances with other disciplines or departments, how can they ensure equal footing with those disciplines in a new combined unit? Seen more broadly, A Field of Dreams is part of the national discussion of a larger question: Where do writing programs belong in the university?

Several pieces provide contrasting stories of writing programs moving toward independence. Dan Royer and Roger Gilles describe the bottom-up transformation of their traditional English department into two separate departments, an evolution that resulted in the creation of Grand Valley State University’s Department of Academic, Creative, and Professional Writing. It was worked out with what strikes me as great tact, diplomacy, and rhetorical skill. By contrast, Eleanor Agnew and Phyllis Surrency Dallas describe the results of a top-down process that created the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University. Difficulties arose there because of a mismatch between the mission of the new unit and the literature backgrounds and teaching experience of most of the faculty assigned to it—the traditional faculty felt demoted in the new situation. The resulting conflict between the literature faculty and those with composition PhDs became so great that conflict resolution specialists had to be called in. Barry Maid’s essay in A Field of Dreams describes the formation of two new academic units. The first was formed in 1993 at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (this was a banner year for divorces of writing from literature: the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas Austin were also founded in 1993). Little Rock’s writing department came about because of what seem common difficulties—the self-destructive nature of many English departments, whose literature faculty either fail to understand the important general education mission of the department as embodied by and imbedded in composition courses or who are contemptuous of this mission and of those who teach those courses because some assume that composition smacks of “vocationalism.” Maid talks of a key meeting as “probably one of the ugliest meetings I’ve ever attended” (143); in it faculty expressed outrage that the nontenure-track writing faculty had any rights, let alone the right to vote. Maid calls this attitude “academic fundamentalism,” the sort of snobbery that one bystander thought “had died along with the last person who said ‘But his father, you know, was in trade’ and meant it to sting” (35).
In his contribution to the book, Chris Anson discusses the same snobbery’s leading to the dissolution of the program he had headed at the University of Minnesota. Maid goes on to describe a department so dysfunctional that the provost, not the faculty, made the decision to split it into two departments. Maid’s recounting is parallel in many ways to the story of the split at San Diego State University, commented upon in Jane E. Hindman’s contribution to the book. Little Rock’s new writing department started amid chaos and had a rocky beginning, going into receivership almost immediately. Nevertheless, Maid states, five new tenure-track hires and the installing of an outside chair ultimately lent more stability, boding well for the new department. Maid goes on to describe the new unit he is developing from the ground up at Arizona State University East, one that has the advantage of being planned from the beginning.

I have focused on these essays here because they exemplify the “cautionary tales” of this volume’s introduction, warnings that we should be careful what we wish for when we dream after our independence from literature. Other stories are, quite naturally, framed more positively: Anne Aronson and Craig Hansen describe the writing department at Metropolitan State University, an institution with a culture that facilitated the development of an independent department; Louise Rehling describes the technical and professional writing program at San Francisco State; Elizabeth Deiss and colleagues describe the independent rhetoric program at Hampden-Sydney College; and Brian Turner and Judith Kearns describe an independent writing program at the University of Winnipeg. Peggy O’Neill and Ellen Schendel’s thought-provoking piece on the place of writing programs in research universities reports on the results of a survey of such institutions and provides a close examination of two different programs, one at Harvard, the other at Syracuse University. The book concludes with thoughtful reflective essays about the implications of separate writing programs or departments by some of the leading lights in our field, Wendy Bishop, Theresa Enos, Thomas Miller, Cynthia Selfe and her colleagues Gail Hawisher and Patricia Ericsson, and Kurt Spellmeyer.

There is insufficient space in a short review to discuss all the essays in this valuable book. Collectively, they present a picture of profound change in the discipline of what used to be called “English Studies” as our new discipline of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies emerges. Change is precarious, as some of the essays demonstrate in riveting detail. Further, these essays demonstrate quite clearly that the answer to the question of where writing programs belong in any university is indeed site-specific and dependent on all sorts of contextual variables. I tend to agree, however, with the sentiments expressed in the final essay by Field’s third editor Burton, who had been act-
ing chair at Georgia Southern during the difficult first period of that university’s independent writing program. The title of Burton’s essay is “Countering the Naysayers—Independent Writing Programs as Successful Experiments in American Education.” Burton points out that all programs and departments have intrinsic difficulties, writing departments not excepted, and that independent writing departments “have already given faculty a fresh way of thinking about what it means to teach writing, and they have given students increased opportunities for developing themselves as writers” (297). Pointing to the relative youth of many of these new departments, he counsels us to remember that we are still in the experimental stage in developing free-standing writing programs or departments. Certainly labor issues, resources, and leadership are the key issues when thinking about separation. When these are satisfactorily addressed, “members of independent departments of writing will have discovered a new mentality—a refreshing mentality—out of which they conduct their professional lives” (300). To this sentiment, I would add one more issue: the development of a departmental major. Some independent writing departments remain service units, offering general education courses and perhaps also graduate courses in the teaching of writing. Such units are anomalous in the university, and often find themselves at the bottom of the list when an influx of resources becomes possible. Yancey’s chair’s address was (and continues to be) a call to action. Independent writing programs may develop, but they will achieve equal footing with other disciplinary units in the university only when they offer a major. I share the optimism suggested by the title of this book: if we build it, they will come.

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Review


Edward M. White

It is no news to readers of this journal that writing is both a process and a product. The process by which the WPA Outcomes Statement (OS) developed and then grew into the book at hand are among the most remarkable in the field of rhetoric and composition, and I am glad to have the opportunity to comment on both the process and the product. I am not quite neutral in this regard: a simple post by me on the WPA listserv in March, 1996, in response to a query, was the spark that led, some years later, first to the (OS) and then to The Outcomes Book examining the OS’s use in various contexts and its implications for the profession. But I quickly became one of many participants in the process and later an observer as Susanmarie Harrington, Keith Rhodes, Ruth Overman Fischer, and Rita Malenczyk pulled this book together and persevered to its publication.

Has such an important book ever had such an odd genesis? The original listserv discussion led to an informal collective of interested volunteers that produced a multitude of draft documents that shaped a series of conference workshops. The Outcomes Book’s editors point out that “as many as twenty-five people spearheaded the writing and over forty contributed phrases and ideas” (13). The outcomes statement that emerged was adopted by the WPA Executive Committee in 2000 and printed first in this journal (23.1–2, Fall/Winter 1999, 59–70) and again in College English (64.3, January 2001, 321–25); it now forms the two opening pages of this Harrington, et al., volume. Here we have some 240 pages of text stimulated by the first two, the OS; in it, more than twenty leaders of the profession discuss the impact of WPA’s OS on their thinking and institutional practice. No one can claim ownership of the document, yet it seems to have struck a chord that resonates throughout the profession—perhaps because its origins so fully expressed the general consensus of our colleagues about the goals of our writing courses, and, by implication, what we are not trying to do. After all
these years of listening impatiently while outsiders defined or even attempted to mandate what we do, we now have a statement that is ours. *The Outcomes Book* shows how such a statement can at once help define our purposes and open the way to expanded and revised definitions.

To say that is not to suggest that the volume is a set of encomia for the OS; quite the reverse. Peter Elbow’s chapter offers “A Friendly Challenge to Push the Outcomes Statement Further”; the brief chapter by Cynthia L. Selfe and Patricia Freitag Ericsson, “Expanding Our Understanding of Composing Outcomes,” mourns the text-based nature of the OS, which has relatively little to say about technology; both Rich Haswell and the late Marilyn Sternglass emphasize the importance of student development over time, a point mentioned in the OS but not, as they see it, stressed sufficiently. Haswell points to the cryptic nature of the OS, “which does not exist outside the interpretations of it” (199). The collective origin of the document urges its critics to be, in Elbow’s term, “friendly,” but at the same time to see the OS as inadequate from particular points of view. In response, Katherine Blake Yancey points out in her afterword that the document can and should be adapted to the needs of local campuses, not seen as a sacred text.

The editors have grouped the essays into four sections, in addition to Harrington’s introduction and Yancey’s afterword. Part One, “Contextualizing the Outcomes Statement,” includes five chapters looking at the development of the document and the distinction between outcomes, its focus, and standards, which the document explicitly does not attempt to deal with. Part Two, “The Outcomes Statement and First-Year Writing,” contains powerful chapters on the OS in high school (by Stephen Wilhoit) and community college (by J. L. McLure) as well as reports from a number of campuses that have used the OS to revise their first-year composition programs. In these chapters we begin to notice, first, the dominant perspective of appreciation for the document as a means to initiate and focus discussion and, later, a certain disappointment that the OS does not do justice to such concerns as critical thinking, critical reading, and genre theory. Part Three, “The Outcomes Statement beyond First-Year Writing,” relates the OS to writing across the curriculum and other upper-level writing programs, technical communication, the Alverno College outcomes-based curriculum, and, in a bold extension by Rita Malenczyk, to “general education reform as exemplified in a report issued in 1998 by the Boyer Commission.” The last section, “Theorizing Outcomes,” suggests several directions for deepening and revising the OS. The afterword details the extraordinary success and influence the OS has already achieved and anticipates future development, revision, and usefulness.
It is a relief to see that some of the concerns from the early discussions about outcomes have not claimed space in the book. Fears then existed that a statement about outcomes would narrow the field, force all teachers into the same curriculum, ignore the vast diversity of American education, homogenize textbooks, or otherwise harm a fragile enterprise; these complaints have given way to informed and critical consideration of the goals for writing instruction. Far from being defensive, the book seems confident that the purpose and importance of writing programs have been established and that the field can move ahead from a strong consensus about basic goals.

While it is probable that most teachers of writing know little or nothing about the OS at this writing, it is also clear that this extraordinary book about the unusual impact of a small but astonishingly powerful document will demand the attention of every WPA. It represents a major move toward professionalizing the first-year writing course, hence protecting it and its teachers. It is also an important move toward expanding the responsibility for student writing and its outcomes to the entire curriculum and the entire faculty of any college or university.
Review


Mark Wiley

I have used previous editions of James Williams’s *Preparing to Teach Writing* in classes with students who are Williams’s primary audience: future teachers of writing from elementary school through first year of college. For the most part, I have found both of those editions useful because Williams provided clear and thorough discussions of topics that usually create anxiety among new teachers (and no doubt among many experienced ones as well), topics such as the relationship between grammar and writing, English as a second language, bilingualism, and writing assessment. However, I am not certain I would use this third edition of *Preparing to Teach Writing*. Most of the key elements I liked from previous editions remain, and have, for the most part, been expanded; however, the polemical elements in this third edition as well as key elements either only touched upon or ignored create significant flaws which, although not fatal, certainly diminish the book’s overall value, particularly for the readers he seeks to instruct.

Although Williams’s ostensible purpose is to help prepare students to be effective writing teachers, his secondary purpose is to argue aggressively that the field of rhetoric and composition has, well, gone afield. He claims in the preface that in the first edition of *Preparing* published in 1989, the cognitive approach “dominated” composition and was likewise the approach he took. By 1998 when he was asked to develop a second edition, the field, in his view, had become more political “[…] and less concerned about the pragmatics of instruction” (xiv). This was a significant shift, one influenced by postmodernism, the ramifications of which Williams explored to a limited degree in that 1998 text. In this third edition, however, the field is in what...
Williams refers to as a post-postmodern period, which for him means that no single theory dominates and that theory and practice have gone their separate ways with “few points of contact between them.” Nevertheless, despite the seeming chaos reigning in the field, Williams offers help to future writing teachers and argues that we can still claim that there is an effective way to teach writing, and that way is to use a process approach in a workshop environment grounded in a social-theoretic model of writing.

I will expand on what this social-theoretic model entails later in this review and then consider Williams’s criticisms of the state of the field. Nevertheless, while it is easy to find fault with what is not in his book, still in a text aimed at preparing future writing teachers, there are some obvious subjects of which our students should at least be made aware if they are to have a chance at being effective in their own classrooms. Yet these subjects Williams either glosses over or completely ignores. Let me first, though, summarize the elements that remain from the previous two editions and comment on their usefulness in helping to prepare future writing teachers.

Successive editions of Preparing to Teach Writing have gotten substantially longer, yet the basic structure of the text has remained fairly consistent throughout. Key elements that reappear include an overview of the history of rhetoric from ancient Greece to the emergence of the first composition courses in the 19th century, critical discussions of contemporary approaches to writing instruction, and informative discussions of the relationship between reading and writing and grammar and writing. Williams also includes informative chapters on English as a second language, the psychology of writing, assessment, and developing writing assignments. In two appendices, Williams identifies and corrects some “writing myths” which take the form of sentence-level advice, such as it’s okay to begin a sentence with a conjunction or with because, and he also includes samples of senior high school student essays.

The new elements in this third edition are, as Williams writes in the preface, a broader discussion of the history of rhetoric, extensively revised discussions of contemporary rhetoric and approaches to teaching writing, and a chapter called “Best Practices” in which Williams weighs in on the elements for effective writing instruction. The phonics-whole language debate that has been a recurring feature in successive editions receives some additional elaboration, and in the chapter on grammar and writing, a detailed discussion on why teaching grammar does not improve students’ writing replaces much of the grammatical analysis found in the previous edition. Chapter 7 provides additional description of Chicano English and a brief discussion of Spanglish, “[...] a combination of Spanish and English” (250). Chapter 9 focuses on developing writing assignments that are aligned with “outcome
objectives” and includes Williams’s summary of the WPA Outcomes Statement. As in previous editions, the final chapter addresses writing assessment but in this edition provides a broader overview of the topic, including discussions of validity and reliability, the use of holistic scoring and portfolios, the politics of assessment, and the effects of state-mandated testing, among others.

Since Williams’s stated primary purpose is to help future teachers prepare to teach writing, there is much less of the “how to do” something and more emphasis on reasons why the process approach, the workshop, a focus on usage (rather than grammar instruction) and the use of holistic scoring are best practices for teaching writing. The extended discussions on grammar and usage, dialects, and the reciprocity between thought and language reflects Williams’s expertise in linguistics and relationships between cognitive psychology and the production of written discourse. Future teachers will certainly benefit from his informed and highly readable explanations as well as from his practical suggestions for conducting writing workshops and holistic scoring sessions.

Williams admits that his book is “[…] challenging in some parts, […]. Nevertheless, those who accept the challenge will come out on the other end with the knowledge necessary to take the first steps toward becoming a first-rate writing teacher” (xvi–xvii). Besides the detailed explanations of theory and research underlying some of the practices Williams advocates, another “challenging” aspect of his text is that Preparing to Teach Writing is also an argument not only about what best practices should be and why but also about what is currently wrong with the field of rhetoric and composition. Williams argues for what he calls a “social-theoretic” model of writing. In his words, this “[…]model of composition recognizes that people belong to a variety of discourse communities, each with its own requirements for membership and participation, its own core body of knowledge, and its own values and ways of looking at the world” (81). He prefers the social-theoretic over social construction and social constructivism. The latter two terms are closely linked and easily confused with one another, and both indicate that society heavily influences, or “constructs,” who we are and what we think. Additionally, Williams wants to avoid “[…] the Marxist connotations that adhere to ‘social construction.’” In contrast, Williams uses the social-theoretic to offer an interactionist perspective whereby writers retain more control over the texts produced in response to social exigencies. The social-theoretic model is pragmatic: when composing texts, students must assume a rhetorical stance of some kind, and these texts’ features, likewise, are constrained by writers’ membership in a specific discourse community (80–1). Using this model as
justification, Williams privileges writing across the curriculum, particularly writing classes linked with content area courses and writing that will help students be successful in school and beyond (see 67–79).

In advocating for this social-theoretic model, Williams is equally clear about what he opposes in rhetoric and composition. As might be expected, he is against romantic rhetoric and the attendant forms of writing linked with it, i.e., self-expressive/personal writing and narratives (58–67). He is also adamantly opposed to postmodern and to post-postmodern rhetoric. Postmodern rhetoric emerged in the field in 1985 and is defined in its opposition to modernism. For Williams, postmodern rhetoric is responsible for helping to maintain the structures of traditional English departments in which literature (and the faculty who teach and produce scholarship about it) retain a higher status and authority than those who teach and study composition. Postmodern rhetoric also abandoned “the goal of improving student writing […]and] drove much deeper the wedge that already separated theory and practice in rhetoric and composition, leaving them essentially separate enterprises” (92). This postmodern condition affecting rhetoric and composition is exacerbated further by post-postmodernism’s focus on consumerism and sociopolitical analyses at the expense of any meaningful research being done that might help us improve the teaching of writing. In this regard, Williams argues that much of the recent research in “[…] rhetoric has become all about theorizing and dissecting sociopolitical contexts, whereas composition has lapsed once again into anecdotes separated from real research and meaningful theory” (96). (See Williams’s recent book review essay in College English for more on this last point.) Williams is outraged that the current work in rhetoric and composition is ignoring the “[…] decline in students’ writing […]” (reported by the NAEP), and likewise ignoring the plight of public school teachers who each year are often individually responsible for the literacy development of over 150 students (96–7).

While some readers will find Williams’s candid assessments of the field refreshing, others will find them reductive in how he represents what he opposes. More troubling for me are subjects Williams either glosses over or ignores subjects that to my mind public school teachers must understand. Williams says little about technology. There are two pages (out of over 400) describing how students can use computers as word processors, for e-mail correspondence, and for using the Internet for research. Is the “world” Williams sees our students entering one where technology plays such a minimal role? I recommend that future teachers (and present ones) read Cynthia Selfe’s Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century to understand what is at stake if we don’t pay attention to technology, how it is used, and who has access to it. And, except for some brief discussion on the politics
of assessment (five pages), Williams ignores the political realities and working conditions of teaching in public schools, that is how decisions are made regarding textbooks and curriculum, how resources are distributed (or not), what professional development opportunities might be worth exploring, and how individual teachers might join together to mitigate existing classroom conditions. True, Williams should not be expected to cover all of these subjects, but in a book aimed at preparing future writing teachers to be effective in the K–12 arena, I question how useful it is for these students to learn the details about how the field of rhetoric and composition has failed them while his text is silent regarding some of the fundamental realities of teaching in these public environments. Although I agree with Williams’s general argument that rhetoric and composition should do more to help our colleagues in K–12, I do not find a book like Preparing the appropriate place to plead this case. Moreover, the general goal of Williams’s book, to help each student become a “first-rate writing teacher,” depending on how one defines “first-rate,” is potentially undermined because the subjects his text ignores could help future teachers be at the least, a little more informed and a little more reflective and critical about their own and their institution’s practices.

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Paul Butler is an assistant professor in the English department at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in composition and rhetoric. He served as acting director of Montclair’s Writing Center in spring 2005 and is involved in developing courses for the department’s Writing Studies curriculum. Butler has published articles in JAC, the Journal of College Writing, and in Authorship in Composition Studies. His current scholarship focuses on the study of style in composition theory and pedagogy.

William Endres is completing a Ph.D. in rhetoric, composition and linguistics at Arizona State University, studying visual rhetoric and computer-mediated instruction. For the past eight years, he has worked with new and experienced graduate students in the writing program at The University of Arizona, with his work focused on teaching in computer-mediated classrooms. He holds master’s degrees from the Ohio State University and the University of New Hampshire. Between them, he performed computer support work in Antarctica for the National Science Foundation and managed computer networks.

Susan McLeod is professor of writing and director of the writing program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her publications include Strengthening Programs for Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Across the Curriculum: A Guide to Developing Programs; a multi-cultural textbook for composition entitled Writing about the World; Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom; and WAC for the New Millennium: Strategies for Continuing Writing Across the Curriculum Programs, as well as numerous articles on writing across the curriculum and writing program administration. Her latest projects are a collection of essays by pioneers in the WAC movement about the early histories of their programs, tentatively entitled Creating a Community, and a reference text for writing program administrators.
Irvin Peckham is an associate professor at Louisiana State University, where he directs the University Writing Program. He has published articles in *Composition Studies, Computers and Writing, English Journal, Pedagogy,* and in several collections of essays. He, Sherry Linkon, and Ben Lanier-Nabors have recently coedited a special edition for *College English* on working-class writing and literature. He is currently working on a Web-based rhetoric for McGraw-Hill and a book on the problematic role of activist teaching in first-year writing instruction.

Kelly Ritter is associate professor of English and coordinator of first-year composition at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut. Her articles have appeared in *College English, College Composition and Communication, Composition Studies,* and *Pedagogy.* With Stephanie Vanderslice, she is the co-editor of *This is (Not) Just to Say: Lore and Creative Writing Pedagogy,* forthcoming from Heinemann-Boynton/Cook.

Edward M. White has written or edited eleven books and about one hundred articles or book chapters on writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. This year, he is completing his fifth textbook for college writing students and the fourth edition of one of his books for teachers, *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating.* For ten years, he was coordinator of the Writing Improvement Program for the California State University system, with statewide oversight for entry-level and mid-career assessment of the 330,000 students in that system. After taking early retirement in 1997 as an emeritus professor of English at the CSU San Bernardino campus, he joined the University of Arizona English department, teaching graduate courses in writing assessment, writing research, and writing program administration.

Mark Wiley is a professor of English and currently the associate dean of curriculum and personnel in the College of Liberal Arts at California State University, Long Beach. Before assuming his current position, he directed the Faculty Center for Professional Development at Long Beach and before that was the coordinator of the composition program there. Mark has worked on K–12 reform and on K–16 partnerships in the Long Beach area as well as on general education reform at Cal State Long Beach. Much of his research and publications have been in rhetoric and composition. His most recent publication appears in *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement* (Utah UP, 2005).
Announcements

New Board Members

The Council of Writing Program Administrators is happy to announce the new members of the Executive Board are Joe Marshall Hardin, Rita Malenczyk, and Carol Rutz.


Beginning September 1, 2006, the Writing Centers Research Project (WCRP) will conduct its fourth biennial survey to collect benchmark data on writing centers. The WCRP requests that all writing center directors visit its web site, www.wcrp.louisville.edu and either complete the survey online or download a printable version to complete by hand. Participants may also request a hard copy of the survey.

Questions about the survey or requests for hard copies should be directed to Stephen Neaderhiser, senead01@louisville.edu or The Writing Centers Research Project, 312 Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292. Please complete the survey by Friday, October 20, 2006.
Discord & Direction
The Postmodern WPA
ED. SHARON JAMES McGee &
CAROLYN HANDA
Each chapter tackles a problem local to its author’s writing program and responds to existing discord in ways that move toward rebuilding and redirection.
228 pages
0-87421-617-6

First Time Up
An Insider’s Guide for New Composition Teachers
BROCK DETHIER
This is a book that graduate students especially will enjoy.--Bruce Ballenger
A great help for adjuncts, and a great candidate for the TA practicum.
218 pages
0-87421-620-6

Machine-Scoring of Student Essays
Truth and Consequences
ED. PATRICIA FREITAG ERICSSON &
RICH HASWELL
A critical resource to help you evaluate software you might be considering, and to more fully envision the instructional consequences of adopting it.
274 pages
0-87421-632-X

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Announcements

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