

## A Symposium on Diversity and the Intellectual Work of WPAs

With the following invited pieces, we the editors of the *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators* open a forum for exploring issues of concern to WPAs across our wide array of administrative contexts. Within our fall / winter issue, we will offer brief articles, imagining that our readership will follow with critical response and commentary, either on WPA-L or within subsequent issues of *WPA*. Jonathan Alexander and Paul Matsuda graciously accepted our mid-summer invitation to write to our first query, an issue that arose as a WPA-L thread, only to be further engaged in the context of our CCCC's annual business / town meeting in San Francisco and the subsequent blog, likewise hosted by our CCCC organization. We chose to take an administrative turn with the issue of diversity when we asked our contributors: How might the journal more visibly and purposefully engage diversity as an area of intellectual administrative work within our categories of work or beyond them?

Jonathan Alexander offers his provocation as a call for “more expansive discourses, more critical rhetorics” across our programs. Within FYC/R/W and beyond, we might refuse “the easy path” of diversity as inclusion, as celebration, as the seeking of common grounds. Next, Paul Matsuda envisions an intellectual “uptake on the part of the WPA readership.” If we reconstituted the journal's rhetorical context by more deliberately inviting and integrating “language issues into the discourse of the intellectual work of WPAs,” we would promote the “risk-taking” that is concomitant to “embracing linguistic diversity” as integral to program administration.

We expect their brief articles will provoke and inspire our readership. Please continue the discussion by submitting your responses to [journal@wpacouncil.org](mailto:journal@wpacouncil.org) (1,200 word limit).

Your *WPA* Editors

## Literacy and Diversity: A Provocation

Jonathan Alexander, University of California, Irvine

July 31, 2009

As I sit at my desk to write this statement about diversity and the work of writing program administration, I cannot help but turn away at times to refresh CNN.com, among other sites, to see new reports, new editorials, and new rants about the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, distinguished Professor of African-American Studies at Harvard. The story is so widely covered that I will not waste time reiterating details, as sketchy as they inevitably are when recalled by different participants, all with different perspectives. Indeed, whatever happened at his home in Cambridge, whatever words were exchanged, whatever intentions—racist or not—were at play that evening, the response to the incident has clearly incited further discussion (and much needed discussion) about race relations in America. We cannot help but think of Gates' arrest in racial terms, whether we are bemoaning unfair profiling or trying to exonerate the officer who made the arrest. Gates' race seems the pivot around which discussion of the incident turns.

While we may never know *exactly* what happened that night in Cambridge, the incident is lingering in my mind, reverberating with my own projections, my own sense of injustice at stereotyping. And if I offer my own thoughts here, in the context of talking about WPA work, I do so *not* as a commentator on the actual incident involving Professor Gates, but as a professor who, like Gates, has both long been concerned with minority rights and stereotyping and who has, in a variety of contexts, professionally engaged those concerns. I note already the hubris here: “like Gates.” I speak not in terms of level of contribution (hardly!) or impact (even more hardly!), but in terms of sheer phantasmatical projection and identification. I *imagine* Gates' anger. I *imagine* his reaction, whatever it might have been in reality. I have encountered the “gaze” of the institution, of the culture, of the polis—and have found myself wanting at times—and wanting in the many complex dimensions of that term. Certainly, I have been found wanting, found less than capable, found undesirable, found out as queer and hence less than deserving of equal status, full consideration, comparable rights. But also I have found myself wanting to take a greater part, to claim more than I was offered, to assert my rightful place at the table, and *to be angry* about having to make such an assertion.

I remember, shortly after Obama was elected on the same evening that California voters outlawed same-sex marriage, a colleague told me that the ban on gay marriage was unfortunate, but that we should try to think of it as a “necessary sacrifice” to get the nation’s first black president elected. I was momentarily speechless. This straight white married man had sacrificed nothing. And his off-the-cuff analysis itself was profoundly racist in its blanket assumption that black voters in California came out for Obama but necessarily against gay marriage. What did I feel? Outrage. Anger. *Queer* disgust. Who the fuck was this guy to talk to me about sacrifice, about waiting my turn, about being patient? Who was trying to annul *his* marriage?

And I told him so.

Now, I’m imagining this conversation late at night, in my own home, after a long day’s journey, believing that my house might have been broken into.... No, our two situations are hardly parallel, but I can imagine Gates’ disgust, I believe—some of his disgust at constantly having to defend his rights, constantly having to correct, constantly having to engage the “teachable moment” as a professional. My voice would certainly be raised. And it *should* be raised. When we are called out, again and again, we must raise our voices. When we stand up for our rights only to be pushed around, we must raise our voices. How else can we maintain self-respect?

Sometimes the “teachable moment” might better be met with anger, with a recognition that lives, suffering lives, are in the balance here.

But these are thoughts born out of my own experience, out of my projections, out of my own wounded life. What do they have to do with writing program administration? Quite simply, this is the wounded life I bring to my work. Its experiences shape my approach to writing, to the rhetorical situation. I am always thinking about where my body, about where my *queer* body is in the words that I write, in the lectures I offer, in the classes I teach, in the committee meetings I attend, in the program that I lead. I am waiting to be called out, to be dismissed because I’m queer, to have my ideas disregarded because, frankly, my *rights* are sometimes disregarded in the larger polis. A dense, dark connection between my treatment in the public sphere, my status as a queer man, and my perception of myself as I perform my duties surely *informs my performance and my perception of those duties*.

Positively, at times, I am aware of my colleagues approaching me to talk about readings pertaining to sexuality. *What do you think about including this “coming out” story in the student first-year comp anthology? How can we sensitively address a range of student needs and positions and not assume heterosexuality in our curricula? How do I deal with this queer student’s paper or*

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*this homophobic attack in a class blog?* I can certainly offer advice, reassurance, support.

But I'm also just as aware of the colleague who, meaning well, said in a departmental meeting that we should hire someone in queer studies because Jonathan should have a colleague. Wait, *what?* Am I not already your colleague? Do I need my own ghetto? Do I need my own *queer* ghetto? The suggestion ultimately goes nowhere, but the question was posed. And I wonder about my status in the department. Am I considered a colleague? I *believe* so. I *want* to believe so. But the question was posed. And what perhaps startles me the most, perhaps what may have startled Gates as well (though I'm only projecting here), is a schizoid sense of privilege and under-privilege: here I am, a full professor at a top flight research institution—and I'm the only queer man, the only queer *person*, in my department. And I feel the wound of the questioning, the question posed, the question constantly posed.

I have not conducted a study. I do not have scientific “proof.” But I have a deep-seated, long-term, ever-growing and down-right nagging suspicion that “sensitivity training” doesn't get at the heart of the problem of bigotry and prejudice. Alerting people to the presence of the “other” so as not to offend that “other” often leaves all of our unexamined discourses and ideologies about those “others” intact. (I'm clearly queer in my department, in my program; but am I a colleague?) We don't need to appreciate yet another identity, another group, another community. Sure, in many ways, we *do* need to do those things. But appreciation isn't analysis. Tolerance isn't critique. Adding a reading by a lesbian or a black man or an Asian woman might be nice, but doing so doesn't examine the very real discourses that might tempt one to make such an inclusion in the first place, much less understand how doing so fails to address substantively the discourses of bigotry and “othering” that circulate so widely in our culture. It fails in so many ways to address the *lived and felt* experience of walking around, knowing that others think of you as *less than*.

I am perhaps doing something here that is unpopular, that is certainly not faddish. After all, we want to “celebrate” diversity, honor the multicultural. Sure, I do too. But part of that honoring must be a recognition of the suffering inflicted on people in the processes of othering—however those processes assert themselves legally, institutionally, culturally, or personally, one human to another, and however well-intentioned one is in making seemingly kind and considerate statements.

With such thoughts in mind, I want to propose that the proper subject of composition should be discourse of othering. Not so much, mind you, discourses of the other, but *discourses of othering*—that is, the discurs-

sive and rhetorical strategies through which people are positioned within larger systems of categorization. If we believe that part of literate education is preparing students for thoughtful and critical participation in pluralistic democracy, then we need to teach them how the discourses of identity categorization work—both to enable identities and communities *and to disable* talk and understanding across those identities and communities. If we want our students to be literate, we might invite them—we might *insist*—that a significant part, perhaps the *dominant* part of literacy education focus less on “including” identities and much more on analyzing how dominant discourses contribute to the construction of particular privileged—and underprivileged—identities *in the first place*.

What might this kind of pedagogy look like? I only have space here to refer to one example. In my invited blog posting for CCCC’s “Conversation on Diversity,”<sup>1</sup> I described what I call the “flattening effect,” or the tendency to be “inclusive” of various voices, various positions, while really only focusing on “common ground,” on what makes us comparable. In the process, material differences are often elided. We of various races, creeds, sexualities, genders, and class positions share a “common humanity,” want the “same things.” But do we? Yes, our humanity may be shared, but our positioning *within* the hierarchies of that humanity is most definitely *not* shared. As such, I advocated for assignments that asked students not to discuss “difference” in ways that flattened it out, but rather that called out obvious and, after some further investigation, perhaps some not so obvious differences. I want further to provoke students to consider how those differences are constructed and maintained, even how our very *language use* supports such. For instance, I’ve worked with students on the word “gay”—a word with an intriguing history. It was used by mid-to late-twentieth-century gay and lesbian activists to combat the negativity of other words used to describe men loving men and women loving women. It was the positive, prideful assertion against derogatory taunts. Curiously, the word is now used by many youth in our culture as a put down, an insult, a critique (“Don’t be so gay!”). Many students assert it’s not intended to shame homosexuals. Some of my best friends are gay, after all! So why use it all then? And how did this discursive turn of events arise? Who does it benefit? Who does it harm? How is intent to use words not always equivalent to the *effect* of using them? Working at this level of language refuses the easy path, the *flattened* path; rather, it shows us the rough edges in our culture, the rough spots poking us to think through our differences—not to erase them, but to sense the imposition of hierarchies, the development of differentially positioned subjectivities, the construction of bias, bigotry, and prejudice.

What could you do as WPAs? How are YOU professionally or intellectually implicated? As Writing Program Administrators, you have the opportunity to consider such curricula. I hope you will. In my blog, I note that “creat[ing] opportunities to understand one another . . . may require that we risk substantive discomfort.” It might, indeed. But when incidents such as the arrest of Henry Louis Gates saturate the media—and such events dealing with questions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class are all too common in the media—we can at the very least be thinking about how to talk about them *at the level of discourse, of rhetorical power, of narrative thrust*. Discourses shape lives. Rhetorics condition our ways of thinking. It’s past time that we consider more expansive discourses, more critical rhetorics. It’s past time that we move beyond including, to understanding.

#### NOTE

1. See <http://cccc-blog.blogspot.com/> for the complete blog text, entitled “Queer Pedagogy: Critical Multiculturalism Must Avoid the ‘Flattening Effect.’”

## Embracing Linguistic Diversity in the Intellectual Work of WPAs

Paul Kei Matsuda, Arizona State University

Recently, during the process of reconstituting the editorial board of *Writing Program Administration*, the current editors asked each potential board member to choose two or three areas of interest or expertise from the following list:

- Organizational issues within programs
- Administrative interaction
- Education and support of writing teachers
- Intellectual aspects of WPA work
- WAC / WID
- Extra-institutional relationships
- Program implications of current technology
- Placement
- Assessment
- Professional status of WPAs
- Historical issues and insights
- Institutional size / type issues and problems

The list gave me a pause. It was not because the categories did not include anything specifically related to issues of linguistic diversity—the central concern of my intellectual work as a WPA. If that were the case, I could easily have asked the editors to create an additional category. That was not the case, however; my reaction would probably have been the same even if the editors gave me an entirely different list of topics, such as the one listed in the Author Guidelines, which is also being used to stimulate this “Symposium on Diversity and the Intellectual Work of WPAs.” It took me a while to understand why I was having such a hard time choosing a few areas of interest or suggesting additional items, but it finally dawned on me: issues surrounding linguistic diversity in the writing program permeate all of these categories.

One of the hallmarks of the modern university is specialization. With the accumulation of old knowledge and the expansion of new knowledge, it has become difficult, if not impossible, for any one person to keep up with all the developments in various areas even within a single subfield. The field of Writing Program Administration is no exception. Even though WPAs are involved in various administrative tasks that require their knowledge of a wide range of issues, our intellectual work often must focus on one or two established topics that are recognized among fellow WPAs. Unfortunately, linguistic diversity is seldom included as one of those categories, perhaps because it is a broad-based issue that applies to various aspects of WPAs’ intellectual work—a situation resembling Phaedrus’ dilemma in justifying rhetoric as an area of expertise.

This situation puts me in a bind. On one hand, it is possible to suggest leaving the categories provided by the editors as they are with the caveat that language issues permeate these categories and therefore need to be integrated into every category. My experience in discussing these issues at various conferences suggests that it would generate sympathetic nods from many conscientious WPAs. Yet, the caveat would soon be forgotten as people go back to their own specialized intellectual work, the discourse of which has not traditionally integrated language issues. On the other hand, creating a separate category dealing with language diversity would only reinforce the tendency to see it as a concern for specialists and specialists only, further reinforcing the invisibility of the language diversity layer. Damned if you do; damned if you don’t. Taxonomies are often problematic, but revising a problematic taxonomy does not necessarily solve the problem—especially when taxonomies are but symptoms of larger problems.

A more pragmatic solution would be to institute a mechanism for monitoring how language issues are discussed in the manuscripts. In fact, my immediate response to the editors was to offer to read manuscripts in any

of these areas as long as they are related to language issues. I also suggested that the editors consider having a few board members who are familiar with language issues—people who are not only sympathetic to the presence and needs of diverse groups of multilingual writers in writing programs but also knowledgeable enough to point out well-intended but possibly problematic ideas and practices. While this approach would help the *WPA* journal address issues of linguistic diversity systemically, I was also aware that it was only a partial solution—this mechanism can function only with manuscripts that deal with those issues explicitly. What about those manuscripts that have implications for multilingual writers but do not address them because they are “beyond the scope” of the project? A more serious challenge, then, is that language issues are often not dealt with explicitly in many WPAs’ intellectual work.

This does not mean that WPAs who do not address language issues in their intellectual work are oblivious to the issues of language diversity. On the contrary, many would acknowledge and even try to respond to the presence of a growing number of multilingual writers in their own programs. The problem, however, is that such awareness does not necessarily carry over to their scholarship. That is, language diversity is often considered to be a practical administrative concern, as was the case in the formative years of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, when WPAs were concerned about how to respond to the presence of multilingual writers; yet, it is not something that WPAs with various specialized interests would embrace as an integral part of their intellectual work.

How can the *WPA* journal address this larger problem? One theoretical possibility would be to create a linguistic-diversity layer in the review process—to have a knowledgeable reviewer (or editor) review every single manuscript and suggest ways in which the authors might address issues related to language diversity. This approach, however, is neither practical nor productive. First, finding a sufficient number of willing reviewers who have experience and expertise in language diversity in the context of writing programs is going to be a challenge. Although the field of second language writing is growing rapidly, and although there is a growing number of WPAs who have expertise in language issues, the number is still relatively small. Even if it were possible to find enough reviewers for this purpose, the idea of creating a “language-diversity police” may be seen as an overzealous imposition, resulting in resentment rather than awareness and change. That would be counterproductive.

A better approach, it seems to me, would be to integrate language issues into the discourse of the intellectual work of WPAs. While it would be difficult to directly change the discourse of the field itself, it is possible to

A Symposium on Diversity and the Intellectual Work of WPAs

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shape the discourse by changing the rhetorical context. As a leading journal in the field of Writing Program Administration, the *WPA* journal is well positioned to make those changes. A few years ago, I tried to contribute to this effort by editing a special issue focusing on second language writing. This Symposium on Diversity is another excellent attempt at integrating issues of diversity, including linguistic diversity, into the discourse of the field. These attempts, however, would not have long-term effects unless there is an uptake on the part of the WPA readership—unless future contributors to the journal respond to the rhetorical situations created by these efforts. I hope many people will.

There are additional ways in which the *WPA* journal can encourage a sustained engagement with issues of diversity. The most obvious place to start is the Author Guidelines. In addition to the procedural information and a list of suggested topic areas, the Guidelines could include a paragraph or two about the importance of integrating issues of diversity into the intellectual work of WPAs—to encourage all authors to consider implications of their intellectual work on diversity. Creating a reward structure is also important; one way to accomplish this goal would be to establish an award for outstanding articles that integrate issues of diversity. Engaging in the discussion of diversity involves intellectual risk-taking. To facilitate further conversations on diversity, it is important to create an environment in which intellectual risk-taking is not only encouraged but rewarded.

