

Cultivating Sensibility in Writing Program Administration

Matthew Heard

ABSTRACT

*Taking up the characteristics of susceptibility that writing scholars have used to describe the unique position of the writing program administrator—characteristics such as vulnerability, suspicion, vigilance, and ethical awareness—this paper explores the potential advantages of reframing WPA work through the concept of sensibility. Sensibility best describes the faculty of focused, attuned, “feeling out” of local contingencies and complexities that WPAs have already learned to adopt in order to negotiate the identity of writing in our different environments. Our common sensibility to conflicts that reshape writing as it filters through the academy gives WPAs a unique opportunity to see writing as an **ethos**—as a living habit that affects all of our thoughts and practices. Cultivating our sensibility to this **ethos** of writing would mean using our positions of vulnerability to reflect back the ways that writing shapes the values and practices that become naturalized in our local situations. Among the most important advantages of this conceptual shift is the opportunity to reposition WPA work at the intellectual center of composition scholarship: by becoming sensible to how writing filters into our lived habits, WPAs can contribute vitally to the project of describing and exploring writing in its greater complexity.*

In this essay, I will explore the possibility that WPAs can help the field of composition studies to develop a writing *sensibility*, a term which I will use here to describe a disposition of ready awareness to how writers negotiate the daily conflicts and tensions that shift and shape the influence of writing on our lives. Sensibility, I argue, is different in kind than other theoretical and methodological habits of action that scholars have adopted. The term itself describes a constant, focused attention to the decisions that we make and the consequences that these decisions generate. By posturing writers to attune to the relevance of their impressions, sensibility offers a provoca-

tive and appealing way to pursue the study of writing in the context of calls for “ethical awareness” (Leverenz 111) and “suspicion” on the part of WPAs (Janangelo 117). In addition to other terms that WPAs have offered to describe our roles—vulnerability (Qualley and Chiseri-Strater 172), disappointment (Micciche 434), wariness (Janangelo 124), and compromise (Schneider and Marback 13)—sensibility helps make evident an important strain in writing scholarship that has tried to come to terms with the vantage point of the WPA role, positioned as it is between “competing ideologies and interests [that] further complicate the WPA’s professional life” (Brown 157). I turn to sensibility as a concept that can help WPAs address the “life” of administration that Brown describes, a “life” that implicates not only the practices of writing instruction we adopt, but also the way that we live out our commitments to writing in our habits of thought and action.

My focus centers on the insights into the nature of writing that WPAs are able to *feel* through our embattled engagements with writing as it moves through us and into our programs. Part of this insight concerns ethical awareness and action: I build on Brown’s and Leverenz’s earlier attention to ethics in writing program administration by suggesting that recognizing our common *sensibility* to the daily contingencies that shape and shift writing helps WPAs to intervene in our local situations with greater awareness of the specific values of writing we put into practice. At the same time, I wish to add another layer of complexity to this argument about ethics by contending that cultivation of this sensibility towards writing positions WPAs to speak out to our colleagues in the field of composition studies about the material and other constraints that shape writing into a lived practice, a compromise between our ideals and the realities of what our students, institutions, and communities need. WPAs have a unique window into the scenes of conflict and contingency where writing becomes a lived habit. By refocusing attention on our common sensibility to this scene of conflict, WPAs can begin to see our very susceptibility to the contingencies of our local circumstances as a strength of our identities. The reality of WPA work is that we are constantly provoked to focus on the complexities of writing as it shapes our lives. I propose that WPAs frame these provocations as opportunities to reflect back the cultural and social values that complicate writing in our local settings. In this way, WPAs can begin to model an intensified awareness of writing as a lived habit, an *ethos* that leaves its imprint on all aspects of our identities.

With this specific argument in mind, I look at what WPAs can do to “unpack” this stance of sensitivity, both by understanding its theoretical and philosophical dimensions more clearly and by taking specific initiatives

to cultivate this sensibility as a positive stance towards action in the field of composition studies.¹ I explore what sensibility means and how adopting a posture of sensibility might alter the ways in which WPAs conceive of our own identities as scholars, teachers, and administrators. This change in conceptualization offers specific, strategic advantages to WPAs, and I describe some of these advantages below before ending with a more pragmatic discussion of how WPAs might begin to cultivate sensibility in practice. In all of these sections, I am interested in pursuing questions of ethical and embodied action that motivate this study: how can WPAs begin to see our susceptibilities and vulnerabilities as opportunities, both in the ways that we take action in our local settings and in the ways we contribute to the larger, ongoing conversation about what writing means and what consequences it has for how we see and act in the world around us?

DEFINING SENSIBILITY

Sensibility, I should acknowledge from the start, is not a term that we see often in composition studies or in WPA scholarship. While we have often used “sensitivity” to describe a heightened awareness to social interactions such as listening and preserving silence (see, for instance, Anson 21, 25), sensibility defines a more nuanced habit of awareness that has been used less frequently in our scholarship. By definition, sensibility is a faculty of attuned perception to our sensual impressions, and is distinguished in this way from other faculties of cognition or willpower (OED).² In contrast to theory, which has been privileged in composition studies and in the academy in general (see Miller 209), sensibility describes a more physical, immediate, and intimate awareness of how we are positioned in our environments. To develop this awareness requires becoming more attuned to “the alterity and singularity of each event” that affects us (Smith 94). Sensibility is a posture—it describes readiness and adjustment rather than knowledge and belief. From this definition, sensibility takes shape as a special quality of an embodied, lived-out attunement to our own susceptibilities and vulnerabilities. Where cognition and willpower act out on the world around us, sensibility heightens our senses to the ways that the world and its others act upon us.

Within the field of composition studies, sensibility is a unique attunement to the costs and consequences of writing that is different from both theoretical savvy and methodological knowledge. Sensibility shows up rarely in composition scholarship, but its revisionary potential as an alternative posture towards writing has been explored recently in Helen Foster’s *Networked Process*. Foster uses sensibility to describe the stance of post-pro-

cess theorists who have become “disaffected” by the field’s commitment to process methods (5). As she argues, this sensibility cannot be “translated” into a publishing focus: it does not manifest itself in “tangible scholarship” because it is a disposition, a lived habit of feeling out writing in new ways (5). Composition studies to date has reacted negatively towards this idea of sensibility, as Foster describes (29-30). But I will argue here that WPAs have strong reasons to reinvest in sensibility—not as an aesthetics of taste or an avoidance of theory, as it has been defined in the past, but as a positive and relevant way to foster an intimate awareness of the conflicts and tensions that reflect a much more complicated *ethos* of writing than our field often recognizes.

Defined as a living awareness of outside pressures and tensions that press upon us, sensibility postures WPAs to take in new insights about the identity of writing in our culture that other scholars are not positioned to see. Sensibility is unique in that it does not bend us towards theories, logics, or other ideas formed prior to experience, but rather inclines us towards more immediate impressions that these logics and far-reaching theories might miss. In this way, the idea of becoming sensible to writing describes an attentiveness to how we *feel* about the situations in which we find ourselves, drawing out the affective and emotional aspects of our decisions that are missed by other habits of our field, habits which Laura Micciche argues have “feminize[d] emotion, constructing it as an ‘irrational’ discourse and so an unworthy one for the practice of theory” (Micciche 438; see also Beason 149-150). Cultivating sensibility thus offers WPAs an important opportunity to contribute to composition studies by offering up a different perspective of the local, contingent ways that writing impresses itself upon our lives: when we reflect back the tensions that push and pull writing into shape in our local situations, WPAs contribute an account of writing that is at once theoretically-invested and at the same time sensitive to the costs and consequences of the values we put into practice.

But describing what sensibility means and how it defines a different posture of attentiveness for WPAs is only half of the argument I want to make for why sensibility is important to WPAs and could become more vital to composition studies in general. In addition to asking what sensibility does for us, we also must ask what we are supposed to be attentive *to*. Addressing this second question, I suggest that our senses can draw us to the traces of a writing *ethos*, a place of identity and familiarity that writing creates. As *ethos*, writing becomes a force of being that not only shapes our communicative abilities, but also more profoundly impacts the way we see the world, interrelate with others, and find personal and social meaning. This concept of *ethos* helps us to perceive the wide-reaching impact of writing on the very

values, beliefs, and expectations that influence our various practices of composing. I draw this idea of writing as an *ethos*, a living habit of being, from philosopher Carlo Sini, who describes writing in *The Ethics of Writing* as an “event” that conditions every aspect of our habits, thoughts, and actions (9). Sini argues that writing is not merely a skill that assists in reasonable discourse, but a more primary force of influence which shifts how we learn to see the questions of our lives as meaningful and relevant. As a technology that supports abstraction, generalization, and reason, writing makes possible an entirely different civilization from that which characterized pre-alphabetic societies, Sini argues: writing shifts our habits of thought and action towards logical methods and away from what Sini calls the impressions of a lived, experiential, sensual wisdom (12, 57). Thus, the practices that we have developed to fill out this *ethos* do not merely reflect better methods of writing instruction, they also reflect a deeper commitment to a kind of living, a kind of wisdom, that influences all aspects of our lives.

If Sini is right about the force of writing as an “event” in our lives, his argument has profound implications for WPA work through the posture of sensibility I have been describing. First, Sini’s theory of writing calls our attention to the fact that to study writing is to explore larger questions of what it means to be human. If we explore the possibility that our larger cultural commitments to this *ethos* of writing are embedded in every aspect of our habits of communicating and our patterns of thinking, then becoming sensible to these habits opens us up to more fundamental questions about how we have learned to see the world through writing. Second, the only way to “see” this *ethos* of writing that Sini describes is to trace its boundaries in our local, contingent practices. Sini suggests that to act ethically in the face of writing, one must “dare think even against oneself, and finally against *thought*, exposing oneself to the circle thereby entailed” (32). We can understand what Sini means by thinking “against ourselves” if we recognize that our encounters with contingencies often pull us out of our habitual patterns of thought and action: indeed, such disruptions to our writing habits may be the only way to open our eyes to the shaping power of this larger *ethos* on our very practices of living. To begin sensing how we are living out certain ethical and epistemological commitments through our habits of writing, we must become highly attentive to the tensions and conflicts that constrain the ways we put writing to work.

Together, the concepts of sensibility and of the *ethos* of writing set apart a unique identity for the study of writing that takes its shape through constant, embodied attunement to the habits and values we are inclined to adopt rather than through a specific theoretical or methodological orientation. Sini describes this action as “drifting” in the current of our own

practices: as we drift, we learn to be more aware of where these currents pull us, of what obstacles alter our course, and of the limits of our own abilities to shift and alter our position in the stream (146). Conceived in more practical terms, sensibility postures WPAs to feel the push and pull of the different constituencies that affect us, to watch the consequences generated by our decisions, to become impressionable to our own limitations, and to maintain a constant, careful, and self-aware commitment to acting in the most ethical way possible at each moment. Sensibility, then, takes on a doubly important role: in addition to drawing our attention to habits and conventions we might otherwise ignore, sensibility also expands the significance of these habits as traces of the identity writing carves out for us in our unique spaces. This posture takes on characteristics of “suspiciousness” towards the boundaries of our abilities, as Janangelo recommends (121); it also takes up the adaptive, phronetic attentiveness to our ethical horizons described by Leverenz (113). By witnessing the actual conditions that affect writing in our local settings, we provide a vital and missing account of the “structural,” institutional, and cultural constraints that writing-as-*ethos* generates (Schneider and Marback 16). Such a change in stance may not immediately alter the material and political constraints that affect WPA work, but it can, I believe, at least position WPAs to attune more consciously to the ways that our material, political, and other constraints affect the ways that the *ethos* of writing is put into practice through us and around us.

CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES

To this point, I have attempted simply to define what sensibility means and to argue that embracing this posture might help WPAs gain ground in repositioning our work within composition scholarship. Here, let me elaborate on some of these advantages that cultivating a sensibility might offer to WPAs and to the field of composition studies in general. I believe that these advantages might be framed within two general categories: the first concerns sensibility towards our responsibilities as administrators, and the second concerns the ways that sensibility changes our disposition towards the larger study of writing that defines our field.

Administrative Advantages

Addressing the administrative work of WPAs first, I believe that engaging with the idea of writing-as-*ethos* can turn some of the qualities of WPA work that we have seen as liabilities into positive attributes of a posture of sensibility. As I have acknowledged above, WPAs already describe our

work in terms such as vulnerability, sensitivity, awareness, and suspicion. Sensibility provides a way to collect these qualities of our embodied positionality under a single name and at the same time invest each quality with rich theoretical and practical implications. Defined through sensibility, our disappointments, vulnerabilities, and intuitions all posture us to *witness* the personal and interpersonal costs of writing as it shapes academic values.³ Our attunement to conflict in this way draws our attention to the *ethos* of writing we are trying to change and to uncomfortable compromises which might otherwise remain unseen by those who stand safely outside of the daily negotiations that WPAs must navigate. Naming this susceptibility as a position of strength rather than weakness has positive repercussions for the kinds of action we take as WPAs and as scholars of writing. This change gives a common direction to our collective sense of contingency: it unites WPAs in the common mission of reflecting our own local and limited encounters with traces of a larger *ethos* that we must begin to describe if we are to push our habits of understanding writing beyond their current limits. Cultivating sensibility also directs our actions more consciously towards the local ethics of writing that affect the practices we choose to put into place. Reframed as an opportunity to witness the ways that writing constrains and limits our actions, this position of sensibility gives us new reasons to engage with tense situations that we might otherwise avoid. Our actions as WPAs take on new relevance and significance when we re-envision the constant adjustments we have to make not as weaknesses but as ways to keep us attuned to the consequences of our decisions.

To illustrate how this idea of sensibility might affect our administrative habits as WPAs, let me turn to an example from my own experiences with the administrative responsibility of TA education that I believe foregrounds one space where sensibility can help change our habits for the better. In the writing program that I began to administer several years ago, TAs had been accustomed to seeing their roles as defending a version of academic writing that they were not free to challenge or explore. When I took over administration of the program, I wanted instructors to see themselves as participants in the ongoing conversation about what “gets counted” as writing (Nicotra W260). I began in my pedagogy course to challenge TAs with open-ended debates about writing, including conversations about whether or not writing can be taught (Kent; Kastman-Breuch) and about how writing positions us to respond to one another as “others” (Davis; Butler). TAs complained immediately that the course was not addressing their real needs for pedagogical direction and training. Yet, I did not hear these complaints initially because I was so focused on a vision of TAs emerging, phoenix-like, from the ashes of their old habits of thinking and rising to success as

critically-aware teachers and scholars of writing. While I was, in principle, sensitive to the kinds of insights that I knew the TAs needed to develop in order to invest in writing instruction as an intellectual activity, I was not, in practice, *sensible* to the feelings of disappointment and anxiety that pushed back against the vision of writing I had idealized.

While I have tried in successive semesters to live out my commitment to the intellectual responsibilities of writing instruction with increased sensitivity to the more immediate needs of TAs in our program, my narrative is not one of clear success. I still struggle to maintain a balance between provoking TAs to expand their understanding of writing and listening to the needs and expectations that TAs bring to the table as they share their own accounts of the *ethos* of writing that affects them. One of the hard realities that faces me as I work to cultivate this sensibility I have described is how difficult it is to act in ways that change the *ethos* of writing that undergirds the needs and values for writing in my local setting. Schneider and Marback describe a pattern in which WPAs improvise new solutions for action in their local situations only to find that “the order they reestablish is the old order. They do nothing to produce structural change”(17). I find this pattern very hard to shake in my experiences with TA education, where I work to make sure that instructors know how to complicate and question writing only to watch as they return everyday to an “order” of composition instruction that offers few opportunities to diverge from expected goals and outcomes. This *ethos* which influences the horizon of action in our writing programs also strongly influences the decisions that instructors can make, and simply out-theorizing this position is not an option for WPAs or instructors going forward. I acknowledge this challenge not because I see little hope of acting against it, but because I believe the difficulty of producing change points to our need to feel out different possibilities for action. Sini suggests that to act ethically is to develop a *readiness* for action (150), which is different in kind than other logics that would lead us to press our visions of change into existence no matter the situation or circumstance. Since sensibility offers one way to attune ourselves to the local conditions in which small changes might be possible, cultivating sensibility within my own writing program gives me hope that instructors will be able to sense their own limitations and be more ready to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves, limited and local as these opportunities might be.

Disciplinary Advantages

I have been describing how cultivating a sensibility towards writing might provide advantages in the administrative side of WPA work, but I want to

move on here to describe how sensibility might also help us look beyond our attempts to engage writing in practice. Our focus on writing as an *ethos* which filters into every aspect of our identities opens up the study of writing to basic, foundational questions about what we believe is true, good, right, and meaningful. If WPAs can begin to envision the tensions that always surround us as provocations to feel the pressures of how our society and culture values writing, then we can find an outwardly-focused dimension to this idea of sensibility in addition to the inward-focus I have described above. Our impressions of writing in this way become not only provocations to change our practices, but also sites where writing takes on significance as a *habit of living*. By attuning us to the boundaries of our practices—the ways in which our ideals and desires for writing meet with resistance and conflict—developing a sensibility can become one way for WPAs to account for the power and force of larger societal needs for writing. This kind of embodied, ethically-aware action may be the only way to push back against the habits of writing in our culture that have settled in as comfortable and natural ways to go about answering why we write. Outside of taking on this posture of sensibility, we risk tuning out the kinds of small, embodied changes that may ultimately work to shift and alter how we see the world through writing.

This last argument is important to WPAs because it refigures our role as part of the very center of what it means to study writing: acting from the position of scholars invested in our own limitations, WPAs can use our experiences to reflect back the compromises that are always required as we attempt to put our idealized versions of “radical” change in composition studies into practice. Again, let me provide an example that illustrates the form that this outward reflection might take, this time drawn from Donna Qualley’s and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater’s essay on WPA vulnerabilities. Chiseri-Strater writes about her experience with a TA who (mis) handled two instances of plagiarism in her class by failing the offending students, despite the different contingencies in their cases which might have prompted a more careful consideration of each student’s individual choices. This result, writes Chiseri-Strater, makes her feel uncertain about her responsibilities as a WPA and prompts her to reconsider whether or not she acted in the best way by allowing the TA to make her own decisions (172-73). She later revisits this scene with Qualley as an opportunity to understand the material conditions that affect the “knowledge and rhetorical agency” dispersed unequally between instructors, students, and WPAs (183). Qualifying the experience of vulnerability that “keeps us positioned as learners continually having to renegotiate our positions” (172), Chiseri-Strater and Qualley ultimately go on to argue that WPAs must be atten-

tive to the experience and knowledge that affect how different members of the writing community learn to use their vulnerability productively (184).

One way that sensibility might augment this revision of vulnerability is by adding another layer of complexity to how we envision the costs of aligning our writing habits with a larger societal need for productivity. Chiseri-Strater and Qualley rightly focus on the “response-ability” that TA and WPA hold differently in this setting (179), but sensibility also helps us to see constraints on response-ability, which reflect back larger commitments that our field has made to keep response-ability, vulnerability, and other self-reflective actions securely within a framework of producing better writing instruction. In addition to the ethical strain felt by Chiseri-Strater as she ponders her own vulnerability, a number of other concerns might emerge as traces of the *ethos* of writing that shows its influence through this situation. For one, we might think about the lingering sense of guilt that Chiseri-Strater makes visible: how does our sense that we are not doing enough to develop knowledge and agency in our instructors reflect a larger expectation that our goal is ultimately to help instructors and students see writing as a source of power, authority, and increased productivity? This conflict also draws out larger questions of the identity we are calling on student instructors to assume: does response-ability really matter if it is only a means of making TAs and the students they teach more able producers of writing? Are we really valuing the subjectivity of instructors when we channel their actions into better methods of achieving goals that they themselves have not helped to create? Each of these conjectures generates its own problems, and I do not mean for either suggestion to be the final word on the issues of vulnerability and response-ability that Qualley and Chiseri-Strater introduce. At the same time, I believe that feeling out the larger implications of our actions helps us to ask the ethical question that Leverenz poses—“what makes this job so tough?” (113). Through this act of attending to the tensions that make the WPA position *so tough*, we do not merely learn to do our jobs better. More importantly, we confront the traces of the *ethos* we occupy as WPAs.

Our field has long been sensitive to the problems of trying to produce change from the inside of systems that constrain our practices, and framing WPA work through sensibility offers a valuable way to intervene in these tensions between theory and practice by reminding us that we cannot know what writing means as an *ethos* of human action unless we are intimately engaged with its specific, local effects. This shift in posture gives us new opportunities to take a stronger role in composition studies, a field that has sometimes seen WPA work as “invisible” (Micciche 434) or as limited only to the domains of writing instruction and practice. Rallying around the

idea that we can become more sensible to the *ethos* of writing we encounter daily, WPAs can take a more active and confident role in speaking out about how writing shapes the very ways that we are accustomed to think and act. With the recognition that our positions are also places of embodied action, we also find ourselves with a greater responsibility to balance on the razor's edge between theory and practice. When we identify with a posture of sensibility, we assume the delicate and burdensome task of studying writing while simultaneously studying how we are inclined to study and practice writing. Acting in this way is risky, since it means engaging in conflict and compromise that may at times disappoint one or all of the different interests we represent. Yet, it is a burden worth the risks. As we develop this ability to reflect the tensions that stretch our values of writing in real, consequential ways, we work towards a more attuned articulation of the influence of writing as it travels through our lives.

CULTIVATING SENSIBILITY

In this final section, I want to contribute several ideas that may begin to help WPAs think about sensibility as a posture that we can and should begin to cultivate in ways that impact our capacities to act in our local situations. I make this statement with the reminder that sensibility is more than a theory to be adopted: it is a decision about what kinds of identity we want to assume. Because assuming a different identity is not a matter of gaining the right knowledge or aligning ourselves with the right values, what I can offer here in the way of encouraging the development of sensibility is ultimately no more than a sketch of initiatives that will inevitably produce different consequences in each of our settings. As a habit of living, sensibility cannot be engaged by following a set of rules or principles. These caveats aside, however, I do believe that there are several spheres of action in which our interventions are worth pursuing, and I will offer several suggestions here as starting places for engaging the kinds of movements and gestures that might help us take up the sensible posture of what Sini calls “thinking against oneself” (32).

Through Recognition and Naming

In their essay on WPA identity, Schneider and Marback write that our work as WPAs always requires more from us than “doing what the research says” and often “results in something other than the research describes” (9). As I have shown above, we have attempted to define this “something other” of intellectual work in WPA scholarship through terms such as susceptibility, vulnerability, and ethical awareness. But while these terms have remained

fragmented in our scholarship, I propose that we harness them together under the common name of sensibility and, in this way, focus our common attention on how each of these unique qualities contributes differently to the posture we must assume in order to feel the impressions of writing in our local settings. By identifying WPA work with sensibility, we provide what Kenneth Burke calls “perspective by incongruity” (133): sensibility becomes a marker that stands out from other WPA identities in its “incongruity,” and thus serves as a point of convergence and divergence as we compare our individual practices to the definition of sensibility we establish (and, over time, refine). Naming sensibility in this way provides the kind of “distance” from our habits that, Janangelo suggests, can promote new ways of seeing (123-24). Specifically, WPAs who rename our role through sensibility can begin to look at practices we encounter daily—practices such as TA education, curriculum development, and assessment—as sites where our unique attentiveness to the *ethos* of writing is most needed.

Collective recognition of this identity also cultivates the posture of awareness I have described above by presenting an alternative to the label of “middle management” that has been applied problematically to writing program administration. Marc Bousquet, in “Composition as Management Science,” critiques the WPA role for its complicity with economic logics of the university (494). Other writers, such as Peter Elbow, have also worried over the “business model” approach to administration, noting that WPAs are pressured to treat TAs and other instructors as resources to be managed (160). I do not want to lessen the bite of these critiques, for I believe that Bousquet’s call to look carefully at the background of “organized academic labor” that supports our work contains hard truths that WPAs need to face and engage (494). At the same time, identifying our work with sensibility reminds us that we are always in the center of competing tensions that do not have to be resolved in favor of the economic logics that Bousquet and other scholars describe. If we sometimes must compromise in ways that make writing more efficient and productive, we also face endless opportunities to push the shape of writing in different directions. Our interventions can help make this scene of compromise and conflict more visible as part of the conditions that affect how writing ultimately filters through our environments. Changing this perspective is one way to recognize one another as scholars who are uniquely prepared to feel the ways that writing is pressed and pulled into shape in our local settings. When we see one another as co-conspirators in the ongoing pursuit of epistemological and ontological questions of writing, we create tension against the still-present narrative in composition studies that positions the WPA as a worker who merely moves resources around.

Through Self-advocacy

Of course, even as WPAs actively resist the label of “management” that has been applied to us, we may encounter resistance, especially from those who are uncomfortable with WPA work leaving the safe spaces of writing instruction. For these reasons, I argue that we must begin opening up the complexity of our actions to those with whom we are interacting (and to whom we are responsible). We need to expose the deliberative nature of our work as a hotbed for intellectual activity, highlighting the profound theoretical and practical significance of the decisions we make. Pursuing this objective involves retraining audiences in the academy that have come to rely on the productivity of WPA work but have not acknowledged the ethical, moral, and other complexities that WPAs must navigate in order to make even the smallest adjustments to how writing is practiced in our local settings.

As a number of other scholars have already addressed the need to make WPA work more visible to the academy, let me constrain my comments here to how I believe our interactions with other teachers, colleagues, and administrators can help WPAs cultivate sensibility in ways that can augment this goal of visibility.⁴ Beginning with teachers and students first, I will suggest that the cultivation of sensibility should be shared among all students and instructors in our writing programs. Instructors and students need to be able to see their study of writing as part of something bigger—part of how they learn to live and not simply how they learn to communicate more effectively. This initiative may involve curricular changes: we should consider, for instance, providing more space for students and teachers to describe the conflicts and contingencies that pull them away from their comfortable and familiar habits of writing. Such a curricular change might mean helping writers find room to feel out pressures on their writing that we as administrators cannot see. I also think that cultivating sensibility must change our posture towards instructor training and orientation. In my own experiences with TA education, I have started to begin each program-sponsored event by providing a broad overview of the conflicts that surround assessment, textbook selection, and other issues that I address in these sessions. Foregrounding my own decision-making as a WPA provides some space for instructors to see the tensions and conflicts that constrain our actions, and this is one small way that I have attempted to make myself and the instructors in my program more sensible to the *ethos* of writing in our local setting. I imagine that other WPAs can offer much deeper accounts of practices that they use to cultivate sensibility in their local spaces. The most important commitment we can make going

forward is to share the limits of what we are able to see with one other and with our communities, publicizing our perspectives in ways that can help us and those around us to better confront the complexities of writing in our environments.

Through Public Intervention

This last point about public action leads me to a final way that WPAs can begin to cultivate our sensibility to writing, which is through avenues of publication. I recognize the irony of admonishing WPAs to publish our experiences more widely when lack of publishing opportunities has been a frequent complaint in our scholarship. But I believe that acknowledging our sensibility to conflicts and tensions as a source of intimate engagement with the complexities of writing gives us new ways to frame the insights of our work within the field of composition studies. As we share our struggles to take limited, embodied action in our local situations, we are contributing to the larger picture of writing as an *ethos* that affects our habits of thinking as a culture and society. Whatever our different workloads and institutional settings, each of us in the WPA community has a vital role to play in describing how this *ethos* of writing takes shape as it moves through our positions and into our communities of instructors and students. The wider field of composition studies needs our perspectives, and footholds for this intellectual work already exist. They have been chiseled out in calls for a “questioning attitude” (Worsham 103); for listening to “those who offer new perspectives on problems in our teaching and research” (Lindemann 528); and for revising “what gets counted as ‘writing’” (Nicotra W260). These opportunities will not land at our feet: we face hard work, risky work, in repositioning our perspectives as contributions to a different, embodied way of accounting for the complexity of writing. We will have to be sharply attuned to our own limits as we move forward, learning how to frame our experiences in ways that address the beliefs and values of our colleagues who do not share our positions or responsibilities. But we do not face this work alone: we can help one another recognize our positions as sources of insight and perception, and we can carve out new footholds for others to contribute alternative perspectives. By constructing a network of sensibility that begins with WPAs and spreads outward into our communities, we can slowly engage composition studies in new habits of writing that may, over time, reshape the *ethos* of writing in our culture.

CONCLUSION

At the end of his article on suspicion, Joe Janangelo urges WPAs to question our roles by asking, “What do we feel secure about and what might we rethink?” (135). The stories we tell, he goes on to say, should “seek to be superseded” (136); that is, WPA work needs to be not just vigilant but ever-vigilant; not just vulnerable but always-vulnerable. I have intended here to suggest why adopting a posture of sensibility and cultivating this posture might help WPAs begin to think of our work in ways that turn these ever-and-always positions of risk into something other than liabilities. I have argued that sensibility offers WPAs the opportunity to pursue vital connections between the work we do in our local settings and the work we do to advance the study of writing in our field and in our communities. Of course, sensibility promises nothing. While this faculty positions us to feel out the ways that writing affects our lives, it does not lend itself to conclusions that sweep across our field like the winds of change we once hoped for. Sensibility is much more limited in its focus, requiring us to drift in the current of our own habits with a conscious sense of our own limitations. But these risks should not stop us from exploring sensibility together as a position from which our actions as WPAs can take on new significance. While we cannot craft universal meaning out of our isolated experiences alone, we can, collectively, contribute the kinds of “evolving” and “splintering” stories of our own encounters with the *ethos* of writing that, as Janangelo says, can help us “keep developing our capacities for intellectual suppleness” (134, 137). My hope is that such suppleness, refined through a posture of sensibility, will not merely help WPAs become better at administering writing, but will also position us to feel out better ways of making the spaces we inhabit more livable for ourselves and others.⁵

NOTES

1. I borrow the term “unpack” from Janangelo and intend to inflect the term here with Janangelo’s sense of the kinds of actions WPAs need to take in order to “move beyond declaration and revelation to unpack the investments and processes” of our work and scholarship (133).

2. The term “sensibility” is used in this way, though not specifically defined, in Moskovitz and Petit (89, 90). I intend to separate sensibility as a unique “faculty” from its connotation with fashion, taste, and *belles lettres* as described, for instance, by Thomas Miller in *The Evolution of College English* (100).

3. The action of “witnessing” here should resonate with every quality that Kelly Oliver attributes to the deliberate act of *bearing witness*, including attending

to “blind spots that close off the possibility of response-ability and openness to otherness and difference” (19, 20).

4. On the topic of WPA visibility, see Keith Rhodes’ recent argument for WPA “branding” (58).

5. My sincere thanks to the editors and readers at *WPA: Writing Program Administration* for important contributions to the idea of sensibility described in this essay. Thanks also to Kyle Jensen, who introduced me to Carlo Sini’s work with the *ethos* of writing.

WORKS CITED

- Anson, Chris. “The Intelligent Design of Writing Programs: Reliance on Belief or a Future of Evidence.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 32.1 (2008): 11-36. Print.
- Beason, Larry. “Fostering Quality through Sense of Place.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 34.1 (2010): 149-52. Print.
- Bousquet, Marc. “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University Without a WPA.” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22.3 (2002): 493-526. Print.
- Breuch, Lee-Ann M. Kastman. “Post-Process ‘Pedagogy’: A Philosophical Exercise.” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22.1 (2002): 119-50. Print.
- Brown, Stuart C. “Applying Ethics: A Decision-Making Heuristic for Writing Program Administrators.” *The Writing Program Administrator’s Resource: A Guide to Reflective Institutional Practice*. Ed. Stuart Brown and Theresa Enos. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002. 155-64. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.
- Davis, Diane. “Finitude’s Clamor; Or, Notes toward a Communitarian Literacy.” *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001): 119-45. Print.
- Elbow, Peter. “What Is Real College Writing? Let the Disagreement Never End.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 34.2 (2011): 153-61. Print.
- Foster, Helen. *Networked Process: Dissolving Boundaries of Process and Post-Process*. West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2008. Print.
- Janangelo, Joseph. “Notes on Comp: When “WPA” Work Hints at Suspicion.” *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 34.1 (2010): 117-40. Print.
- Kent, Thomas. “Principled Pedagogy: A Reply to Lee-Ann M. Kastman Breuch.” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22.2 (2002): 428-33. Print.
- Leverenz, Carrie. “Theorizing Ethical Issues in Writing Program Administration.” *The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist: Making Knowledge Work*. Ed. Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2002. 103-15. Print.
- Lindemann, Erika. “How Well Are We Listening? Lessons from the Founding of NCTE and CCCC.” *College Composition and Communication* 62.3 (2011): 504-39. Print.

- Micciche, Laura. "More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work." *College English* 64.4 (2002): 432-58. Print.
- Miller, Thomas. *The Evolution of College English: Literacy Studies from the Puritans to the Postmoderns*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh UP, 2010. Print.
- Moskovitz, Cary, and Michael Petit. "Insiders and Outsiders: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Writing Program." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31.1/2 (2007): 86-103. Print.
- Nicotra, Jodie. "'Folksonomy' and the Restructuring of Writing Space." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (2009): W259-W276. Print.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. Print.
- Qualley, Donna and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater. "Split at the Root: The Vulnerable Writing Program Administrator." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31.1/2 (2007): 171-84. Print.
- Rhodes, Keith. "You Are What You Sell: Branding the Way to Composition's Better Future." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 33.3 (2010): 58-77. Print.
- Schneider, Barbara and Richard Marback. "Judging WPAs by What They Say They Do: An Argument for Revising 'Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration'." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 27.3 (2004): 7-22. Print.
- Sini, Carlo. *The Ethics of Writing*. Trans. Sylvia Benso. Albany: SUNY P, 2009. Print.
- Smith, Daniel. "Intensifying Phronesis: Heidegger, Aristotle, and Rhetorical Culture." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 36.1 (2003): 77-102. Print.
- Worsham, Lynn. "Coming to Terms: Theory, Writing, Politics." *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*. Ed. Gary Olson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002. 101-14. Print.

