

## WPAs in Dialogue

### Response to Faye Halpern's "The Preceptor Problem: The Effect of 'Undisciplined Writing' on Disciplined Instructors"

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The pedagogy of multidisciplinary writing programs has been the focus of renewed criticism this past year. In her 2012 CWPA keynote address, Linda Adler-Kassner urges members of the organization to return to first principles by enforcing a “no vampires’ policy” (132) ensuring that “writing classes focus on the study of writing within particular contexts, the values reflected in that writing, the implications of relationships between writing and values. Not vampires” (134). In the last issue of *WPA*, literary scholar, Faye Halpern adds momentum to such criticism by problematizing the theoretical underpinnings of programs like Harvard’s Expos and Duke’s Thompson Writing Program (TWP), where vampires abound in the form of theme-based writing seminars. In “The Preceptor Problem: The Effect of ‘Undisciplined Writing’ on Disciplined Instructors,” Halpern draws on her experience teaching in Expos to highlight what she sees as the contradictory status of disciplinarity in such programs. In the 1990s, Expos’ directors redesigned the curriculum of the first-year writing program to align it more closely with the writing students were asked to do in their majors. Instructors from across the disciplines were recruited and trained to draw on their disciplinary expertise to teach topic-based writing seminars that introduce students to the elements of academic writing common to all disciplines. This resulted, she argues, in the creation of a “program that discounted disciplinarity at the same time as it connected what it did to what students would need to know once they entered particular disciplines” (12). She calls this approach to teaching writing “transdisciplinary” in its emphasis on teaching *beyond* the disciplines. It’s a method, she asserts, that “attends to

what writing in different disciplines shares rather than what distinguishes it" and it "derives from a sense of getting beyond the disciplinary foothills that obscure the panoramic view available when one views academic writing as the countryside we in the university all inhabit" (14). While she found this approach generative to her teaching in the program and her scholarly writing, it led to problems for her when she became a WPA in a writing program that recruited faculty from across the disciplines to teach within it and when she eventually returned to her disciplinary roots as an assistant professor of American literature in an English department. In both those contexts disciplinary—not transdisciplinary—expertise was privileged, leading her to question how transferrable her experience at Expos was to teaching writing in other contexts.

As an outgoing lecturer and WPA in the Princeton Writing Program (PWP), a program modeled somewhat closely on Expos, I read Halpern's article with great interest. I find the pedagogical model of programs like Expos, TWP, and my former institution innovative and effective in their local contexts. And like Halpern, I suspect that after teaching in such a program for five years, I'll never think about writing assignments and my own scholarly writing in quite the same way. While it's too soon to know how my experience in the PWP will inform my teaching and administrative work elsewhere, I still find myself agreeing and disagreeing with some points in Halpern's argument. The article serves, I think, as a particularly productive counter-narrative to some aspects of Joseph Harris' "Thinking Like a Program," which privileges the perspective of WPAs and relies on a rather negative definition of disciplinarity to legitimize a multidisciplinary approach to the teaching of first-year writing. While I admire Duke's program and Harris' scholarship, I think he misses an opportunity to think more expansively about disciplines when he describes them exclusively as "conservative structures—both politically and intellectually" whose "point [ . . . ] is to define turf, to limit what can be said, to regulate the work of its members" (358). In doing so he elides the powerful role that disciplines play in bestowing institutional authority and protections, which junior scholars in programs like Expos, TWP, and PWP tend to care a lot about. Program teachers are often working to build a body of scholarship that will make their disciplinary expertise visible to scholarly communities, presses, and hiring committees. Halpern's article, in this regard, productively shifts the scholarly conversation to address the perspectives of instructors teaching in the programs created by WPAs.

Halpern's critique of the problematic conceptualization of disciplinarity in Harris's genesis narrative resonates with aspects of my own experience and the experiences shared by some of the faculty in our program. In fact,

when faculty and WPAs in our program gathered to discuss Harris' article as part of a writing studies reading group, we, too, questioned the idealized portraits of multidisciplinary as "not a theoretical ideal but lived reality" (360) and teachers' motives for joining such programs. Like Duke's program, we have a community of scholars committed to teaching and learning, but a number of exigencies—personal and structural—inform faculty decisions to take up this line of work. Harris' account, "Fellows join our program because they want to work intensely on their teaching before moving on to other academic positions" (360), struck some faculty as condescending or just plain off-the-mark. Positions in the program may not be "dead-end jobs" (360), as Harris argues, insofar as they provide respectable resources and opportunities for professional development, but contracts are generally not renewable after five years in our program, which creates both stress and real challenges for some faculty in our program.

While I was excited to see the article point to the reductive definition of disciplinarity used to theorize multidisciplinary writing programs, I'm less convinced that these programs are as dismissive of disciplinarity as Halpern's article suggests. The essay's most provocative question, "Could programs like Expos and Duke's help its preceptors understand how disciplinarity does not stymie the teaching of writing but can enable it?" (24) strikes me as an oversimplification of what happens in the classroom and faculty development workshops. Likewise, her article's final call to action—"We need to make sure that the safe harbor from disciplinarity these programs offer any one WPA does not inadvertently hamper the professional advancement of their departing instructors" (24)—misrepresents, I think, the extent to which WPAs are often aware of the challenges faced by instructors and strive to mitigate them. Like Halpern, I'll write from my own experience in my response.

I'm not sure it's helpful to think about WPAs and faculty in such starkly binary terms—particularly now that at least a decade has transpired since the creation of programs like Expos and TWP. A number of current WPAs in these programs first served as teachers in the programs. This is true in my case, and it's given me a double perspective that makes me more aware of the challenges faced by full-time instructors. It's also made me more cognizant of the special opportunities that such programs provide to belong to a community of innovative teachers and scholars that offer each other feedback on everything from drafts of lesson plans to scholarly articles. Our disciplinary differences make for productive (and sometimes contentious) conversations at works-in-progress colloquia, faculty development workshops, and the annual essay competition. At these venues we see how our disciplinary training informs our values about writing.

It also seems to me that many WPAs in programs like Expos, TWP, and the PWP have taught in other programs before joining our home institutions, giving us a less insular perspective than Halpern implies when she claims that "Perhaps one of the hardest things for a program to do is to acknowledge its own partiality" (23). In my own experience, these multiple double perspectives (in addition to engagement with the scholarly literature) have better positioned me to collaborate with others to advocate for resources to advance my colleagues' work as scholars and teachers in their fields. In the PWP my colleagues and I have actively pursued opportunities to make our faculty eligible for fellowships and teaching opportunities in departments and interdisciplinary programs. We've created faculty development programs and committees responsive to faculty requests for professional development. And we've regularly supported faculty applications for university research grants and assistantships, which they secure in high numbers. I recount these efforts, not to paint an idealized picture, but to suggest that I suspect that many WPAs like myself have done our best to work within institutional constraints to facilitate opportunities that faculty have said they'd like to pursue.

I wonder, too, whether working in multidisciplinary programs "may inadvertently hamper the professional advancement of their departing instructors" (24). It's definitely true that faculty can feel isolated from their home disciplines when teaching in a multidisciplinary program, but as I've suggested (and others have argued) such programs provide strong resources to support teaching and research. It's true that, as Halpern suggests, faculty must find a way to make visible to hiring committees how their experience teaching in such a program will make them an asset to a department, but many faculty have been successful at securing competitive postdocs and tenure-track positions while teaching in the program—and not just at institutions that privilege teaching. Many faculty have reported that the experience of teaching writing in a multidisciplinary program has given them a nuanced way of communicating how they structure their classrooms to invite students to participate in the work of a discipline. Of course, there are exceptions to these success stories reflective of structural inequities of the job market, but faculty alumni of our program secure tenure-track positions at a rate that far exceeds the national average and some have turned down tenure-track positions elsewhere for personal reasons or because the conditions for teaching or research have been more favorable in our program. For this reason, I'm not sure that the risks of teaching in such a program are as great as the article implies—or even greater than a number of other professional possibilities scholars pursue outside of the tenure-track. We're not operating in a perfect system by any means, but I think we've

done a good job of making the positions attractive and productive for those who accept them.

If WPAs are mindful of the challenges faced by disciplined faculty on the job market, they also run multidisciplinary programs that are often complex in their negotiation of disciplinary authority. I greatly appreciate Harris' "Thinking Like a Program" for making the case that, with institutional support, faculty from across the disciplines can do an excellent job teaching writing. Such programs attempt to realize—however imperfectly—the ideal that writing is a shared responsibility because it's an important means by which disciplinary knowledge is communicated. Calls for "no vampires" obscure, I think, the extent to which multidisciplinary programs often share the same pedagogical values as programs that design their first-year writing sequence as writing-about-writing. And I recognize that such a model might not work everywhere, as was Halpern's experience as a WPA at a small liberal arts college. In the PWP, we think of our approach to teaching writing not as "transdisciplinary," as Halpern describes, but "metadisciplinary." Like Expos, the program is based on the principle that teaching students the elements of writing common across disciplines—motive, thesis, analysis, structure, etc.—helps students develop a heuristic for understanding writing, which facilitates transfer. On the surface, such an approach may appear to obliterate disciplinary differences—to attempt to transcend them by moving beyond them, as Halpern argues. Yet in my experience something more complex happens on the ground. The writing seminars at Princeton, which are interdisciplinary and research-oriented, give students an early opportunity to see how conventions of academic argument play out in different disciplines. The interdisciplinary nature of the writing seminars provides a testing ground for students to recognize and practice these differences and to make more informed choices about the kinds of disciplinary conversations they want to join in their research. Such a program cultivates in students—and in instructors—a "meta" awareness of disciplinary practices by attending as much to similarities as to differences in intellectual practices.<sup>1</sup> Through my experience teaching in the PWP, where lively and sustained conversations about disciplinarity are a regular part of conversations about teaching, I've become aware of the extent to which my own disciplinary training informs—and has limited—my understanding of what scholarly writing is and can be.

I'll be moving to a new position and disciplinary home this fall. I know from writing studies scholarship that learning doesn't transfer easily to new contexts. New institutional cultures require different teaching and administrative practices. Yet I also think I've benefitted tremendously from the opportunity to teach and serve as a WPA in a program that supported my

development as a teacher, administrator, and scholar. In my case, the program provided me with the much needed time and research support to begin developing expertise in writing studies, which I now consider my home discipline. Thanks to the insights of my colleagues from across the disciplines, which triggered a research interest in genre theory and writing-in-the-disciplines, I'm leaving the program with greater insight into how disciplinary knowledge is constructed and shared. I'm a better teacher for it, I think, and a better and more disciplined scholar in my new field.

#### NOTE

1. I thank my former colleagues, Amanda Irwin Wilkins (director), Keith Shaw (associate director for the writing seminars), and Judy Swan (associate director for writing in the sciences and engineering) for helping theorize the concept of "metadisciplinary awareness," which we've been using to describe the program's pedagogy. This pedagogical approach owes much to the innovation of former director Kerry Walk, who relocated from Expos to rebuild the program in Princeton in 2001, and current lecturer Kristin Dombek, whose leadership in creating the curriculum for Ways of Knowing Seminars for incoming freshman has informed the program's approach to teaching disciplinarity.

#### WORKS CITED

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