

Travelogue

Hearing the Bass Line: Giving Attention to Writing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Shirley K Rose and Kirsten Benson

Shirley K Rose [SKR]: Kirsten, thank you again for taking time to talk with me about the writing programs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This interview is the seventh in a series *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has devoted to conversations about *place in* and *the place of* writing programs at the home institutions of the WPAs who serve as local hosts for the summer conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. I'm looking forward to this.

Kirsten Benson [KB]: Me too. It's a great series that you do here.

SKR: I'm glad you think so. I enjoy it so much, and I'm glad to be able to add this. You were the interim director of the first-year writing program when it won a 2011–2012 CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence Award. Could you talk about the signatures of the program that merited the award and what characteristics were particularly acknowledged by the award?

KB: Sure. At the time that we received that award, I was the director of the first-year writing program, although I'm back now directing the Writing Center. I was director of first-year composition for five years, and it was during that time that we put forward our proposal for the 4Cs award. I want to be sure to mention just from the start that our program itself was certainly not my sole creation. Always I like to give credit to the previous director of our program, Mary Jo Reiff, whom I'm sure you know.

SKR: Yes.

KB: She's now at Kansas. She was the director of our writing program for about eight years. She and Jenn Fishman, who was also on our faculty at that time, and I started the changes that led to the program

that received that award. From my point of view, it is important to acknowledge all of the contributions that went into that award. And, of course, the teachers themselves, who are amazing.

The things that were noted in the letter we received from the 4Cs had to do with three parts of our program. One was the strong 2-semester first-year composition sequence that we have, another was the extensive training that we give to our GTAs, and the third was the program research we had conducted over time to check whether we were doing and how we needed to refine some of the curricular approaches that we were taking.

SKR: I would like to know a little bit of detail about each of these three because it's not extraordinary to have a two-semester sequence or train TAs or even do program research, so what was it that made that work particularly praiseworthy?

KB: With the two-semester sequence, we spent a lot of time revising the curricular emphasis from our previous curriculum in which we had an English 101 course that was focused on argument, as many composition courses are, but a second semester course whose focus had been writing about literature, which had been traditional and popular for quite a few years in a lot of places. One of the biggest changes we made was to that Composition II course; we wanted to make it into a course that was more appropriate for all students in preparing them for the kinds of disciplinary research they do later in their college coursework. So rather than prepare everyone to do research solely through writing about literature, we included three different types of research in the second course. One is advanced secondary source research, research from sources that applies to so many different courses later in the college years. Another is archival research, which involves using primary materials from archives, like historians do, and developing the ability to draw conclusions directly from the analysis of those primary materials rather than relying on secondary, mediated sources. The third is qualitative research, which is more common in, say, social sciences disciplines, so that students would be able to conduct their own research using interviews, surveys, or observations and draw conclusions from those data to form answers to their research questions. This change was based on the idea of developing transferable skills to later courses and developing writing abilities that students need such as awareness of audience, genre, and discourse communities, etc. So, that was the big change that we made in our program.

In terms of program research, we conducted a variety of small-scale projects that tried to determine whether the curricular changes we

were making were successful. For example, after we changed our English 102 curriculum, we did a course-wide survey that asked about students' understanding of the different types of research; we also gathered students' papers and did some document analysis to see how well they were actually writing up these new kinds of research. Based on that, especially from the document analysis, we could see there really wasn't a strong understanding of qualitative research, which was the newest type of research the students were doing. So we developed some teacher development workshops to help teachers refine their approaches to teaching qualitative research, since it was new to most of them too, and then followed up later with another round of student work collection. We could see changes showing up in the students' work based on what the teachers were doing differently in the classroom. It was projects like that—looking at how well the students were actually doing—and a variety of transfer studies that Mary Jo and Jenn did that looked at the knowledge students were bringing with them from high school to first-year composition. It was an important part of our approach; we wanted to make sure we were doing what we said we were doing.

SKR: Thanks for going into that detail. It shows me how all these are so interconnected. The curriculum work and the work with the faculty were informing each other because of the research that you were able to do on specific aspects. That's great. How is the first-year composition program at University of Tennessee, Knoxville, related to other writing programs at UT, particularly the writing center where you have served as director?

KB: We've always seen all of our writing efforts to be a collaborative venture. We've always worked closely together. The Writing Center, the mainstream first-year composition program, and our ESL writing program work together to serve, especially, first-year students. The Writing Center tries to serve students directly through one-on-one tutoring later in their college course work, too. But, again we've always seen all the writing programs as aiming towards the same goals. One of the nice things is that we meet together regularly. We have a Composition Committee where we all meet together a few times during the semester to talk about issues. For example, the training of GTAs is a good example of a way all our programs are connected. All of our first-year Master's students, as part of their teacher training, sit in on English 101 in the fall and English 102 in the spring; they're mentored by an experienced teacher, observe classes, do some paper grading, and learn the curriculum. At the same time, they also work five hours per week in the Writing Center, so the connection is there

between both of these programs, and some of them work with ESL students if they have some background to start with in that area. The GTAs are getting a lot of mentoring by experienced teachers and also direct work with the students themselves, so that by the time they're teaching their courses independently in the second year they've got this amazing amount of knowledge and again firsthand experience with the students. They also take a pedagogy class that's taught by the first-year composition director and do research on first-year students during that class. So, again, there's a connection of all of the writing programs working together not just to provide similar kinds of outcomes for students but also working together to help train teachers.

SKR: That sounds like a great example of the ways that there's an interdependency among the programs for the preparation of the teachers. Having those MA students who are in the first year, with the time, the tutoring time, plus the in-class time—do they have a name for that position?

KB: Basically they're graduate teaching assistants in their first year, so we call them—I don't know if this is the right word exactly—but they're mentees. In the Writing Center they're tutors, first-year tutors.

SKR: That sounds like a great set up. I watched the "Writing at UT" video (writingcenter.utk.edu/) about the writing program there, and it mentioned that it is the origin of the *Hedges Harbrace Handbook*. Maybe I'm not putting it quite right to say it is the origin of the handbook, but that was a really great video and I was curious about when it was created and produced. Who did that, and what was its original purpose?

KB: Thanks, we definitely thought it came out really well. We had the idea to put that together when we were working on our application for the CCCC Certificate of Excellence Award. We thought it might be useful for that committee to see—not just to look at paper but also to see in a more interesting way—some of the things that we had done. It was kind of funny because one of my colleagues and I thought "Oh, we'll just create a video," and we didn't know anything, it turns out, about how to produce a good video. We wrote a little script for it and we thought, "Ok, these are the sorts of things we want to put in," and then we talked to the Creative Communications team in UT's Office of Communications and Marketing and they kind of laughed at us and said, "Yeah, this is not how you create a video." It was very fortunate that they were willing to contribute their expertise to help us to envision how to present things visually for others and also to have one of their videographers do all the filming and the editing. After

we decided on the different parts and the teachers that we wanted to highlight and the students, they put it all together, and they knew how to edit it so that we ended up with what you saw on our site. We probably need to update it because it is a bit outdated now, but we still think it still represents the big picture of what we do pretty well. We felt lucky to have that group's expertise.

SKR: Creative Communications—are they a part of your university's media relations office?

KB: Yes.

SKR: Did it cost your department or your program anything to have that team do that work?

KB: They came up with a number, a figure of what their actual costs would be, but then they said that they would do it for much less because it was part of our application for this national award. The university thought it was a good way to use their time. They basically donated I'd say four-fifths of what it cost. We had some money from an endowment for our Writing Center that we were able to use to pay for the portion that they said we should pay them. It cost thousands of dollars to put that video together, but again, the university basically underwrote the majority of that cost, which was great.

SKR: So, they told you "this is what this work is worth, based on the hours and the expertise and the production costs and all, this is an X thousand dollar video that we're giving you. But we're only going to ask for 20% of that from you because doing it is in line with the mission of our units—it's what we exist to do"?

KB: Yeah. The idea was that the benefit—of course we didn't know if we would receive the award—but the possible benefit to the university in terms of the public awareness of our program was in line with the university's PR goals. We have this great program, we want people to know about it, and so we want to make it possible for others to see that, so they thought that was again part of the university's overall mission, and therefore were willing to underwrite it. That may not be exactly the right way to phrase that . . .

SKR: Thanks for explaining that. I read that the Writing Center at UT was created in 1936. That's pretty impressive longevity. How much do you know and can tell about its origins and the ways that it's changed and developed over the years?

KB: There is a nice piece that was published in the *Tennessee Alumnus* magazine back in 1937 that describes the origins of what was called at that time the English Laboratory. It started in the winter of 1936, and it was for English department students who could come, voluntarily,

to a two-hour time period in which they would write whatever they might be working on in their courses, so reports, term papers, things like that; they would write for those two hours and get help from the faculty member directing it at that time. I'd have to look back to see if any numbers were mentioned about how many students actually took advantage of it at that time, but I do remember the piece saying that they considered it successful enough to continue it on into the following year.

So, that's where the idea of providing a space and time for extra help for students to write got its start at UT, but after that there are some blank spots in the history. I've looked through various historical documents to try to see whether there was any reference after that, but I couldn't find anything until the 1970s, when what was then called the Writing Lab came into existence—I don't know exactly the year but sometime in the 70s. A similar idea, it seems, where there were a few open hours during the day. It was in a classroom, a space that was otherwise used for classes when the Writing Lab didn't have its time. Students could just drop in for help. It was primarily students in first-year composition again at that time. Some teachers would refer students, too. That particular operation grew during the later 70s and the early 80s when the university had in place a system where teachers in any course could check a box on the grade sheet that indicated "English Deficiency" and that would mean the student had to go to the Writing Lab. It was pretty elaborate: the students had holds put on their registration so that they couldn't register for courses unless they had shown up at the Writing Lab and started work on a structured set of assignments and exercises that were appropriate for their so-called deficiencies. They had to produce three papers as a way of clearing that "deficiency" from their record. I was involved with the Writing Center back in the later stages of that period when we would have to do amazing things, such as—this was during the time when IBM punch cards were used to send information into a central computer—we would have to gather the cards of these students and indicate which were the students whose registrations had to be held up because of their English deficiency. It was really bizarre.

SKR: That conjures up a great image with the punch cards.

KB: Fortunately, we were able to get rid of that and put into place a different approach in which teachers may assign a grade of "Incomplete due to Writing," which sends the student to the Writing Center for additional help. But it's no longer considered an English deficiency, and

it doesn't have that same annoying registration hold that made it feel like writing prison as opposed to writing help.

Finally in 1996, when I first started directing the Writing Center, we were fortunate to receive a donation from a local family, the Stokelys, and they established an endowment for the Writing Center that was substantial enough that it included being able to create a wonderful, renovated space dedicated only to the Writing Center. It made the location more desirable and more pleasant. The last part of that was creating a couple of writing workshop courses that students can sign up for—one-credit electives—while they are in first-year composition courses, and they come each week and get feedback on their writing. That ended up being big, in terms of numbers—it led to a major expansion in terms of the number of students who visit and continue to visit over the four years of college. The Writing Center has grown tremendously through those kinds of changes.

SKR: In a lot of ways, I suppose it is a story that is true at a number of universities as far as how the writing center or writing lab has changed over the years in the definition of its role and the particular ways it does its work.

KB: I think so, I agree.

SKR: That's fascinating. Let's shift to some questions that are more about the university as a whole rather than just the writing programs but through the lens of the writing program. I've read a little bit of the history of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and I was surprised to learn that the university was originally chartered as Blount College in 1794, which is before Tennessee was even a state and Knoxville was still part of the so called Southwest Territory, so that makes it one of the oldest public institutions in the US. Would you say those very early origins are still evident in any way at the university or in the writing programs in particular?

KB: It's a little hard to state exactly the history over time in terms of the writing programs. I think the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, does have a very interesting history. Blount College was really small. I don't know exactly how many students, but it was probably something like one hundred. The first president was Samuel Carrick, and there is a residential dorm named after him today. When it was founded, it was declared non-sectarian, which was pretty interesting at the time because most colleges then were affiliated with some kind of religious organization. So, even though Carrick was a Presbyterian minister, there was deliberate choice to make it a non-sectarian college. There is also this mysterious number of five female students who

were enrolled back in the early years. This is before women regularly would be enrolled in colleges like this. UT now makes the claim that it is one of the first, if not the first, non-sectarian college in the US and also one of the first to enroll women, which I think is interesting and seems related to what the university is now, trying to appeal to and educate all students as part of its land grant status. That is an interesting thread that follows through all the years. Let's see, what else about the original college? There is a particular building on campus on a site called The Hill; the original college was relocated to that spot, and now it's an important part of the visual landscape of the campus.

SKR: UT was designated as a public land grant college by the Morrill Act in the late 19th Century. How does that land grant mission work to shape the writing program at UT? Do you see that in some way inflecting or shaping the writing program?

KB: At the time of the 1862 Morrill Act, it originally applied only to northern colleges. As I understand it, there was a special act of Congress in 1867 that allowed what had by that time become East Tennessee University to have land grant status. So, unlike the other state colleges at the time in the so-called Confederate states, this was certainly a big boost to the school. I believe it quickly tripled in enrollment. The whole idea of the land grant charter focused not just on traditional academic studies but also on agricultural, engineering, and at that time, military science, more practical studies. It led to a huge influx of enrollment here, and the university became known as the state's flagship university around 1879, so between 1867 and 1879 there were huge increases in enrollment by students from all across Tennessee.

I think the land grant status shows up in a variety of ways in our writing program. Since the whole idea of a land grant university is to serve the citizens of the state, our writing program, especially our first-year writing program, has tried always to provide writing instruction that is appropriate for all of the students who come to the university. For example, the two-semester first-year composition sequence that I talked about earlier aims to provide all students with strong argument skills, strong research skills, and strong preparation for disciplinary and then later professional and practical writing. I think it is that idea—that the university's mission is to prepare all students—we have tried to do that in creating our curriculum and also in creating different paths within our curriculum. For example, the vast majority of students take English 101 and 102, and we have a parallel sequence for students who are L2 writers, so they have slightly different types of assignments, and the instruction is appropriate for them as students

who are learning English as their second or third or more language. There is also another parallel sequence of first-year writing courses designed for honors students. The idea is that we want to make sure we're offering appropriate instruction to all students, and we've tried to create particular approaches for different types of students, realizing that people come with different needs and preparations. That shows up strongly in some of the things we've tried to do in the writing program, and I think that traces back to that idea, again, of the land grant university serving all.

SKR: My next question takes us in a different direction: UT is known for ties to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and I recently learned that the Arboretum is on land that was purchased for the Manhattan Project. If participants in the 2017 CWPA Conference visited the Arboretum this summer, which I think is a realistic thing for them to do, what might be of special interest or significance to them? Are there other sites on campus that would be especially interesting or significant to WPAs?

KB: Here's where I think that people who come to the conference are going to find there's a huge number of interesting things in the area and places to visit. The Arboretum itself is a beautiful, beautiful piece of land. There are some historical materials, oral histories of the Scottish and Cherokee residents who originally lived on that land before the Manhattan Project came into existence. Now it is mostly a plant and wildlife refuge, and there are miles and miles of walking trails. Bird watchers, for example, would love it there. Anyone who is interested in local foliage—all the types of trees are labeled, the different types of foliage specific to the East Tennessee area. So I think that anyone who loves history and who loves the outdoors is going to love a place like that. The Arboretum itself is not very far from the Oak Ridge Department of Energy facilities, and people can take a public tour that goes to the Oak Ridge National Lab and see some of the places involved in the Manhattan Project. There's Y12, too—there is a graphite reactor there and also now a supercollider, one of the largest particle accelerators in the world. It is an amazing facility. Again, there's a public tour that goes out there, and I think it would be easy for any of the conference attendees to do that.

Oak Ridge is about a 25-minute drive from downtown Knoxville, where we'll be located. There's lots to do that's even closer. There is the Museum of East Tennessee History, which WPAs would enjoy going to, and that's just a few blocks from the conference hotel. A lot of local history. A lot of additional outdoor activities, too. Knoxville

has a great urban wilderness with several close-in parks. There is a place called Ijams Nature Center, and if you can't get out to the Arboretum, you can go just a couple miles to Ijams. There's hiking, a marble quarry, canoes and kayaks, and birdwatching, all of which I know a lot of WPAs like to do.

On-campus sites that WPAs would be interested in: We have an incredible library. It is very interesting looking—built in a ziggurat formation, it looks almost like a temple. It is beautiful inside. It's just a great facility, so anyone who wants to can take a short free trolley ride over to the Hodges Library. There is a museum on campus, the McClung Museum, which has a lot of Civil War history. There is a nearby park dedicated to James Agee that I think a lot of folks may be interested in. All of this is a trolley ride or walkable from the conference hotel. One place I think people should go to if they get to campus—this is especially interesting for people who love public rhetoric—there is something called The Rock, and it literally is a huge rock in the middle of the campus, and students paint messages and images on it every day.

SKR: Every day?

KB: It is really a fun public rhetoric site that WPAs would be interested in.

SKR: That sounds like a must see. Thanks for going over all of those things because people are going to want to know.

SKR: Let's move on to the last couple of questions. How would you describe the location of the writing program or programs within the institutional organization of UT as a whole? Is there anything about the physical location that reflects on the writing programs' position within the university as an organization?

KB: Institutionally speaking, the writing program is connected to the College of Arts and Sciences and specifically to the English department, and that has worked well for us over time, especially since the time of John C. Hodges, who created the *Harbrace Handbook* through looking at student writing done here in our English courses. The legacy of his work and that *Handbook* has well supported our writing program. I know it is always a question, a debate in a lot of places, where do you get the best support? But, in this case I think it works well for us to have not only the history of the *Hodges Harbrace Handbook* but again the legacy of that support that helps our writing program and has supported it for sixty-odd years. Another thing that is good about the way we are structurally set up is the English graduate students who teach for us and also work in the Writing Center. We have the opportunity, because they are part of the department, to train them very

intensively, and that has so many benefits both for what we are trying to do teaching-wise and especially for the students they work with.

I think in terms of the physical location, everything we have—the English department, First-Year Composition Office, and the Writing Center itself are pretty much right smack in the center of the campus. The Writing Center, for example, is in what is called the Humanities classroom building, on the top floor of that building. We have a big space, which we've added to over time. One of the good things about the location is that students are taking their classes and they can just run down the hall or climb up a flight of stairs and be right at the Writing Center, so it is really easy to get to. It is a building where there is constant student activity, so that helps the visibility of the writing program—it's strengthened by being right there. We're right across the street from the Hodges Library, where the Writing Center also has a satellite location with our ESL Writing Center and some after-hours help. It's great to be right in the heart of things. It is almost impossible to be in either of those buildings without knowing there is something to do with writing going on. I think that illustrates the good support that we've had on the campus. I think that's a real plus for us.

SKR: How does the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, reflect its geographic location? If I were to walk onto the UT campus, what would I see that would tell me I'm in Knoxville? What geographical and architectural features of the campus?

KB: In terms of the geographical location, the campus itself is nestled in with some classic Knoxville features. On one side of the campus is downtown Knoxville; that's the east end where you can see, from just about anywhere, the nearby downtown, so you're connected to the city in that way, just visually. On another side you have Fort Sanders, an original residential area of Knoxville, which now is more students' apartments and housing rather than regular, full-time Knoxville residents but still looks like the old Knoxville would have looked. The North side of campus is bounded by that community. The South side is the Tennessee River, which is part of what defines this area geographically. This area of the country is so pretty, with lots of lakes and hills. We're basically the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. You can't walk on campus without realizing you're walking up or down some hills! So, again, geographically, you're connected to the surrounding area just by that.

As far as the campus architecture, the variety on campus shows the growth over time of this area, some of the diversity and experimentation on the campus constructing its identity over time. Some of the

older buildings on campus are the main College of Arts and Sciences Building, Ayres Hall, which is a Gothic Oxford/Cambridge-style building with a clock tower, and there are some other older Queen Anne-style frame houses dotted around the campus. But, you also see, I mentioned before, the Hodges Library, the main campus library, has the ziggurat, an extremely unique structure. To me it suggests an older, ancient temple of learning idea. Then there is much more modern stuff. There's our Art and Architecture Building—a low-profile, concrete structure. So, you see a variety of architectural styles, but I think that is typical of Knoxville, too, which itself has grown so much over time, has become bigger, embraced new things, maybe experimented with some things that didn't work and some that did. You see the different phases of the area also reflected in the campus buildings.

You also see some other typical features of the area, such as the use of marble. East Tennessee was known for its marble quarries, and you can see some beautiful marble in the Howard Baker Center for Public Policy and in the Library—the marble floors are just beautiful. These are connections to the local area that I think are pretty interesting.

SKR: Tell me about your metaphor for your writing program.

KB: I'll turn to a musical composition here and think of the bass line that underlies so many musical compositions and performances. The idea I have here is that a lot of times it is that bass line that sets the tone, that grounds a musical composition, and in some ways writing too is one of those grounding types of activities or experiences. Especially in academia but also in so many other ways, writing is the thing that is both part of the creative process and also is the thing that allows ideas to take their concrete shape or form. The bass line that underlies so much of most musical compositions is a useful metaphor for thinking about writing and a writing program. I've used a particular phrase several times when I talk to people about what writing program administrators do: a lot of us, when we listen to music, we know the bass is there but we don't really pay that much attention to it. Similarly, in universities, writing is always there, always a main activity through which students demonstrate their knowledge and create their knowledge, but it doesn't get attended to as much as some other things. I call this being *bass deaf*, a term I adapted from my friend Curt Rode, where you don't hear the thing that's really keeping the piece together. As a writing program administrator, my job is to get people to hear the bass line, to attend to the writing. I think that works in a way to describe both writing and what we do as WPAs—to try to pay attention more to writing and eliminate that bass deafness.

SKR: I love that. I sing with an a capella chorus, so I know how important the bass line is. I have one more question: I wondered if you would be willing to talk a little bit about your history with the writing program, in particular the writing center. Why did you end up in this program? What is it about the program that makes it a good match for you?

KB: I think that a couple of interests of mine come together to make being a WPA make sense for me. I have always—I can remember thinking back to things like this when I was in high school even—been interested in the ways that institutions work, in the ways institutions do and sometimes do not do what they're supposed to do or what they're supposedly trying to do. It has been a kind of constant preoccupation for me. It is part of why instead of getting a doctoral degree in literature, I decided to shift gears into policy studies in higher education, that's where my degree is. It was my interest in studying institutions and how their policies support their students that led me in that direction. And when I was in my master's program, I worked in the Writing Center for the first time, and it was then that I saw the immediate and powerful benefit of one-to-one work on writing. Combining that belief in the power of talk to help people write and the power of that one-to-one connection, that was very, very strong, so that's why I gravitated specifically to the Writing Center part of what I do, because I believe in emphasizing that work and trying to make it more known, better supported. Again, thinking about institutional policies, doing whatever I can to make sure that this work, which is so at the heart of how people learn and how people show what they've learned—I wanted to be able to do as much as I could to support that. I would say those are the things keep me in this work, and that really has never changed for me.

SKR: Thanks so much, Kirsten, for giving me your time today for this conversation. I'm looking forward to seeing you and visiting some of these places in Knoxville during the Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference this summer.