Council of Writing Program Administrators

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*WPA: Writing Program Administration* publishes articles and essays concerning the organization, administration, practices, and aims of college and university writing programs. Possible topics include

- Writing Faculty Education, Training, and Professional Development
- Writing Program Creation and Design
- The Development of Rhetoric and Writing Curricula
- Writing Assessment within Programmatic Contexts
- Advocacy and Institutional Critique and Change
- Writing Programs and Their Extra-Institutional Relationships with Writing’s Publics
- Technology and the Delivery of Writing Instruction within Programmatic Contexts
- WPA and Writing Program Histories and Contexts
- WAC / ECAC / WID and Their Intersections with Writing Programs
- The Theory and Philosophy of Writing Program Administration
- Issues of Professional Advancement and WPA Work
- Projects that Enhance WPA Work with Diverse Stakeholders

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

*Submission Guidelines*

Submissions should be approximately 4,000–7,000 words, though occasionally longer articles will be accepted if the subject warrants.

For complete submission guidelines, please see the information at the journal’s website <http://wpacouncil.org/info-for-authors>. Editors will acknowledge receipt of articles.

*Reviews*

WPA publishes reviews of books related to writing programs and their administration. Publishers are invited to send appropriate professional books to Ed White, 3045 W. Brenda Loop, Flagstaff, AZ 86001, who assigns reviews.
Announcements and Calls

Relevant announcements and calls for papers will be published as space permits. Announcements should not exceed 500 words, and calls for proposals/participation should not exceed 1,000 words. Please include contact information and/or links for further information. Submission deadlines in calls should be no sooner than January 1 for the fall/winter issue and June 1 for the spring issue. Please e-mail your calls and announcements to journal@wpacouncil.org and include the text in both the body of the message and as an MS Word or RTF attachment.

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From the Editors

The new Farmer's Almanac has come up with predictions for the upcoming winter season. Keeping in mind that last year the Almanac forecasted much cold and snow, and the country as a whole had the warmest winter ever, this year’s forecast is once again for colder and snowier than normal. Climate change naysayers will point to this forecast as evidence that global warming is some kind of fiction. But neither the Almanac nor the warming deniers look much at the larger picture for evidence of what is happening on a long-term basis. In a similar way, WPAs are likely to get caught up in local problems without being able to draw on broader statewide, national or international trends that can provide insights and strategies for improving programs and helping students become better writers and thinkers. This issue of the journal, like all our issues, tries to provide this kind of perspective.

In my own experience, I can think of any number of examples of how a broader view can help to make a local case for change. For instance, at my institution, when we started working on re-creating our free-standing writing center, I checked the websites of every one of Michigan’s twelve regional universities, considered similar to mine, and checked the websites of our “peer group” nationally, as established by our Office of Institutional Research. The results allowed me to send a two line email to the president and the provost, indicating that we were the only school in each of these groups lacking a free-standing writing center. As if by magic, funding and support quickly became available for our now wildly-successful center. I mention this example not to toot my own horn, but to illustrate the usefulness of a broad perspective. The insights now coming from scholars Rebecca Moore Howard and Sandra Jamieson in their Citation Project offer a similar kind of broad data set that might be useful for making a local case for new programs or approaches.

There are plenty of other examples. The key point for WPAs is that it is easy to get caught up in local problems and local solutions without the broad perspective. Our goal in the journal is to help our readers keep the broad view in mind and to provide access to the research and scholarship
that can inform proposals for change and improvement. As the climate on campuses around the country continues to change, the wider view offered in these pages may be of use.

Comings and Goings

We say farewell to assistant editor Lori Ostergaard, now officially Director of First-Year Writing at Oakland University. As Director, she’s a front line WPA, with more to do than allows for providing editorial assistance to the journal. And, with this issue, farewell also to Janae Greene, our highly organized student assistant, who has looked after Contributors’ bios and permission forms for the last few issues. Both will be much missed.

We welcome Donna Scheidt back to the journal’s staff as an assistant editor. Donna handled ads and calls for a time but now will be assisting with copyediting and other editorial work for the journal. She is an assistant professor at High Point University in North Carolina.

Oversights

We are grateful to Larry Beason for completing a review of one of the articles within our spring issue. From time to time, we ask non-editorial board members with specific expertise to review articles for the journal.

In addition, we neglected to thank and acknowledge the work of then-assistant editors Greg Giberson, Jim Nugent and Lori Ostergaard for assembling and editing the Symposium on mentoring in the Fall 2011 issue of the journal, and the follow-up comments in the Spring 2012 issue. We apologize for these oversights and appreciate the work of one and all.

In This Issue

The articles in this issue offer examples designed to meet our goal, and we hope you will find them of more use than the Farmer’s Almanac weather predictions. We offer four research articles and all of the plenary addresses from this year’s WPA Conference in Albuquerque, a symposium on the WPA Outcomes Statement as that document undergoes revision and rethinking, as well as our book reviews.

Holly Middleton’s article offers a broad perspective on the role of reading in the teaching of writing. Her research shows how explicit integration of reading instruction and specific outcomes can help students succeed.

In their detailed study of the impact of writing pedagogy studies on graduate students teaching composition, Shelley Reid, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir show that a wide and long perspective on teaching and
the insights of work at different institutions can be helpful in supporting teacher education and training.

Yet another broad perspective arises in Kate Ryan’s “Thinking Ecologically,” where she argues thoughtfully for the relevance of ecology, feminism and the concept of place in developing effective administrative strategies.

And in the fourth of the research articles in this issue, Steve Simpson sheds light on the need for writing support for graduate students. He details the needs of graduate students across many campuses and across many departments, offering yet another angle on the work WPAs need to do.

In addition to these research articles, we are happy to be able to offer texts derived from the plenary talks delivered at this year’s WPA conference in Albuquerque. Linda Adler-Kassner provided an array of strategies for working on program development in various contexts. Paul Matsuda discussed the need to pay more attention to our increasingly diverse student body in terms of the language backgrounds students bring to their writing classes. And Marilyn Valentino presented a thought-provoking discussion of the challenges of working with the growing population of veterans coming to college after their military service. If you were in Albuquerque, you know how these presentations stimulated many important discussions of the day-to-day work of running writing programs across the country. If you were not able to attend the conference, you have these plenary perspectives to read and consider in light of your own program’s situation.

Our fall / winter Symposium rereads and remixes the WPA Outcomes Statement as the CWPA Task Force undertakes a review of it. We invited six contributors—Anne Beaufort, Barbara Little Liu, Deborah Mutnick, Cynthia R. Haller, Martha Marinara, and Will Banks—to remix Sid Dobrin’s WPA-L query to the CWPA organization: “[S]houldn’t the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition include some acknowledgement of the role of the visual in writing?” (“Visual Rhetoric.” 17 Dec. 2011).

And finally, we have three book review essays, looking at new books in the field. Shane Borrowman examines a book that looks at the WPA Outcomes Statement; Anne Gere explores three books on brain research and makes clear their relevance for WPAs and the teaching and learning of writing; and David Schwalm “takes care” of a book on the myriad ways that students can now get credit for college writing other than through coursework in our programs.

Happy reading.
Extending an invitation to join the
Council of
Writing Program Administrators

The Council of Writing Program Administrators offers a national network of scholarship and support for leaders of college and university writing programs.

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• A subscription to *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, a semi-annual refereed journal
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• Invitations to the annual WPA breakfast at CCCC and the annual WPA party at MLA
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Recognizing Acts of Reading: Creating Reading Outcomes and Assessments for Writing

Holly Middleton

Abstract

While it is a truism in Composition Studies that academic reading and writing are integrated, reading is not consistently theorized with the same rigor as writing, in both the program and scholarly domains. Yet when the role of reading in a writing program is not articulated, students can experience classroom expectations for reading and writing working at cross-purposes. This essay recounts how one WPA responded to an administrative imperative to improve reading scores by designing and implementing an assessment of reading in Basic Writing classes. What resulted was a collaborative process to account for the often overlooked role of reading that further aligned our curriculum. Articulating reading objectives for composition courses has the potential to improve program outcomes and student learning, and more research is necessary to help WPAs in this process.

One day in 2007, during my first year as WPA at New Mexico Highlands University, the Dean came into my office with a sheet of paper in his hand and showed me a graphed distribution of student test scores. He pointed to the five or six marks on the far left, those that represented scores converting to 3rd- and 4th-grade reading levels and asked, “what are we doing to help these students?” As a new WPA, I felt overwhelmed by the question. As someone trained in composition studies, I knew that test scores did not assess a student’s “general reading ability.” Even so, the test scores indicated struggles in reading comprehension or testing situations that seemed wholly outside of my area, and I wondered how to address the needs of students who were represented on the sheet in front of me as statistical outliers. The Dean and I value different kinds of data—he wants to see numbers go up, distributions move to the right—but I am grateful that he asked and kept...
asking, as the research and collaboration ensuing from that initial conversation has greatly improved our program. What are we doing to help these students, indeed?

This essay serves two purposes: the first is to demonstrate a process undergone to design and implement reading outcomes and assessments in our Basic Writing-equivalent course. We first implemented a reading examination in fall 2009, and our 2009–2010 and 2010–2011 one-group pre/post-test study results show a statistically significant increase of 12 points in mean test scores. What began as an administrative mandate transformed into a productive interrogation of the role of reading in our program, and this account of the process may be helpful to WPAs currently working under similar administrative imperatives. While a curriculum and its assessment is context-dependent, an account of how one program designed and assessed learning outcomes and met administrative mandates may especially serve WPAs at universities whose Basic Writing programs are currently threatened with elimination. Finally, while my focus is on our Basic Writing course (because its “remedial” status prompted the administration’s demand for reading improvement) the process of creating outcomes and assessments is of course relevant to any writing program.

My second purpose is to argue that articulating the role of reading in a writing course can help align a program’s objectives, assessments, and curriculum, consequently improving student learning. To this end, more scholarly attention to the role of reading in writing programs would strengthen the field. In an online search of WPA annual meeting abstracts for the last three years, I noted that in 2009 and 2010 only one panel was explicitly devoted to reading, while the 2011 meeting marked an increase to two. I believe this means we are giving insufficient critical attention to what constitutes a great portion of our work. We would do well to remember that learning to write for a new discourse community requires learning to read for it, that the challenges any beginning graduate student experiences in meeting expectations for writing, for instance, are largely shaped by the demands of graduate-level reading. Such is the case for all first-year college students, whether or not they are placed in Basic Writing. For a WPA, elaborating the full implications of reading as a composing process and its constitutive relation to academic writing requires time and buy-in, but it can make a writing program more coherent and its objectives more visible, and achievable, to instructors and students.
The Role of Reading in a Writing Program

The “basic writer” varies by institution and is always a local construct, making the student population and placement procedures crucial to understanding who this learner is at any institution (Gray-Rosendale, et al. 42). So first, some context. New Mexico Highlands University is an open-admissions Hispanic-serving institution in Las Vegas, New Mexico, population 14,000. In fall 2008, 59% of our first-year students were first-generation; 51% were low-income, meaning their families reported incomes of less than $45,000; and 17.9% came from families with incomes below the federal poverty line. However, due to the state’s scholarship program, any New Mexico high school graduate who immediately enters college receives scholarship funds. In fall 2008, 92.9% of full-time first-year (and first-time) Highlands students received some kind of tuition scholarship (New Mexico Highlands University Self-Study 14). At Highlands, incoming freshmen are placed through ACT and COMPASS Reading scores: students who score lower than 17 on the ACT or lower than 80 on the COMPASS Reading exam place into English 100, or “Reading and Writing for College.” Approximately 40% of incoming freshmen place into English 100; most of these students are Hispanic and male.

Highlands students who place into English 100 frequently test at scores that convert to 5th–7th grade reading levels. Given the low socioeconomic status (SES) of our student population and the correlation between SES and standardized test scores, this is not surprising. For example, using 2001 national data, Rebecca Zwick found that the average ACT Composite score for students with family incomes of over $100,000 was 23.4; for students from families with incomes less than $18,000 the average was 18.1 (205). This correlation between family income and ACT scores consistently appears at Highlands: in 2001, 80% of our students reported ACT Composite scores, the average of which was 17.92, and it has varied only within a one-point range in the years since. While the link between wealth and test scores may be familiar ground, Zwick found that other indicators of academic achievement such as class rank and GPA are also linked to family income, so intertwined is SES with educational opportunity. Teacher quality is also a factor; Zwick found that the most credentialed and experienced teachers are concentrated in schools with the lowest proportion of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. In 2007, 66.8% of elementary school students and 52.8% of high school students in New Mexico were eligible for free or reduced lunches, a state concentration of poverty second only to Mississippi (Table A-25–3).
I explain these correlations to show how I began to read our students’ placement and diagnostic scores. Highlands students’ ACT or COMPASS scores are not static measures but an indication of their experience with schooling and their history of educational opportunity. Few will initially demonstrate the classroom attitudes and behaviors that lead to the social and economic benefits accruing to middle- and upper-middle-class students. In this way, our student test scores provided local evidence of inequities in educational opportunity and motivated me to consult the impressive body of research on reading, most of which is conducted within education, language, and developmental studies.

Until 2009, administrators judged English 100’s effectiveness through one measure: a standardized COMPASS pre- and post-test that ostensibly measured improvement in reading skills but was not connected to course content in any way. Every instructor designed his or her own syllabus, requiring different texts and assignments. Students were initially tested in class, but later testing moved to the Student Services building. In both testing situations, about half would consistently score lower on the post-test than on the pre-test, indicating an assessment result that could just as likely have occurred if no writing course were taken at all. I should say here that unlike many universities, Highlands sustains a commitment to its diverse student population, a commitment also evident in the fact that people of color comprise 38% of Highlands faculty. To my knowledge, proposals to eliminate Basic Writing never get off the ground. The administration and faculty consider English 100 central to the university’s mission, but this translates to a tremendous amount of oversight. For example, the undergraduate catalog description for English 100, “Reading and Writing for College,” stipulates that in addition to earning at least a C in the course, all students will “pass a committee-graded exit exam” to enroll in the first-year composition course, English 111 (New Mexico Highlands University Undergraduate Catalog 50). The C requirement, the exit exam, the use of invalid standardized tests to assess learning and the withholding of graduation credit all mark an iterative process of addressing learning through accountability measures. In the pursuit of objective assessment and oversight, the administration eventually began putting pressure on the English department to take assessment out of the hands of instructors who taught the course and under the purview of tenured and tenure-track faculty, many of whom never taught the course at all, a proposal that did not sit well with anyone in English. This institutional situation compelled me to develop alternative teacher-driven methods of assessment and oversight that would yield quantitative data, beginning with reading.
Rather than an elementary activity, reading comprehension is itself a complex set of practices implied, but not usually elaborated, in our writing programs. Tenaha O’Reilly and Kathleen Sheehan propose a framework for assessing reading competency that privilege “model-building” and “applied comprehension,” two required skills for developing reading competency. “Model-building” here refers to the reader’s activity of constructing a “mental model of a text’s meaning.” Inferring, generalizing, and summarizing are all acts of model-building. “Applied comprehension” refers to the act of taking it further, of using the constructed model to “achieve a particular goal (e.g., solve a problem, make a decision, create a presentation or Web site)” (5). As writing instructors, we require students to perform applied reading comprehension when we ask them to evaluate, critique, integrate, synthesize, or explain (4). A standardized test’s efficacy is limited here, as it cannot capture how reading functions in our writing courses. Instead, research on assessment in reading, much like research on assessment in writing, tells us that we should assess the processes we teach in the course. Stahl, Simpson, and Hayes argue that “[r]ather than an over-reliance upon standardized measures that are typically product orientated, instructors should consider the use of assessment procedures that reflect the reading/learning tasks students will be required to take in lower division courses. . . through simulation of a typical learning process”(3). To assess improvement on a student’s performance, the test should assess content and procedures made routine in the classroom by asking students to perform the same activities they are asked to perform for the assignments in the course.

I decided that in English 100 we would assess reading—at least in part—through writing. Isolating reading from writing in order to achieve a “pure” assessment extracts reading from the contexts and uses that make it meaningful in college. Separating reading and writing also contradicts the recommendations of compositionists and reading researchers who insist that reading and writing must be pedagogically integrated (see Horning; Adler-Kassner and Estrem 37; Stahl et al. 8). Alice Horning argues that reading “must involve getting meaning, but in addition, it must also entail moving beyond meaning to analysis, synthesis and evaluation . . . readers must be able to go significantly beyond getting meaning from print to using that meaning in very specific ways” (2). In other words, it is not enough to assess reading through the kinds of options offered on standardized tests, nor is it enough to treat reading as incidental to writing program objectives—students must construct and reconstruct meanings, often intertextually, and they must do that in writing.

Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem have also urged foregrounding the role of reading in a writing program. In “Reading Practices” the authors
cite their curriculum guide’s statement exhorting teachers to sustain the integration of reading and writing: “Remind students that in their writing, they need to incorporate reading/s that help readers [of their essays] to understand how they see what they see in the reading—this means using evidence, and explaining what the evidence they have used demonstrates” (37). This reminder situates writing as an activity that tightly connects readers and texts and explicitly defines the reading expectations for writing. However, I suggest that any writing outcome that requires “evidence”—and most composition courses require it at some point—implies that students must account for how they read to another reader. This requires working with texts in ways unfamiliar to most first-year college students. Our English 100 students began the semester, for example, with little conception that a text was something one returned to. Reading theorists have said this before: Bartholomae and Petrosky stressed teaching students what to do with texts in Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts, and Salvatori and Donahue’s “difficulty papers” teach students a method for articulating how texts exclude them. However, my argument is that emphasizing what to do with texts helped us address poor reading comprehension and the administrative demand to quantitatively assess it.

Our new curriculum and pedagogy also diverge from those of Bartholomae, Petrovski, Salvatori, and Donahue by not privileging difficult texts. Instead, we foreground the procedural knowledge required to identify and solve a problem presented across multiple texts. In Integrations, our new required English 100 textbook, Robinson and Altman identify improving reading comprehension as the first goal of improving writing: “The most basic problem our weak student writers have is that they are poor readers” (“To the Teacher”). Integrations requires different kinds of reading in each chapter and includes case studies of increasing syntactic and conceptual difficulty within chapters. Instructors then make these distinctions explicit and teach the procedural knowledge of interacting with texts while content knowledge is not yet challenging (Hillocks 147–69; Vygotsky 187–90; Smith and Wilhelm 122). For each assignment, students are given a case study and a problem to solve; the relationship between the readings constitutes the problem and creating this relationship is the meaning-making process, the activity of reading and writing, in which students engage for each assignment. It is the activity of rereading and returning to the text, of referring to the text in class discussions, that we wanted to prioritize. But deciding on that priority was the result of a different process. I now turn to an account of how we arrived there.
CREATING READING OUTCOMES

An important early component of my research was attending the 2008 WPA Workshop in Denver. Chris Anson led a session on John Biggs’s *constructive alignment*, which is the process of aligning goals and outcomes for learning with instruction and assessment. They are:

1. Define learning outcomes based on input from stakeholders;
2. Design assessment tools, criteria, standards linked to the outcomes;
3. Implement assessment tools to gather evidence of student learning;
4. Analyze and evaluate collected data;
5. Identify gaps between desired and actual results;
6. Document results and outline needed changes in curriculum, instructional materials, teaching strategies. (Biggs 95–110)

If we wanted a meaningful assessment of reading (step #3), we would have to begin by deciding what kind of reading we wanted students to learn and perform (step #1). An effective exam assesses the content and procedures of the course, so our course could not attempt to do everything. We had to identify the reading objectives that would most help students achieve writing objectives, implement an appropriate course, and design an exam that would require students to perform reading procedures made routine in the classroom. In fall 2008 several English 100 instructors agreed to serve on a committee that would study our students’ struggles with reading and create reading objectives for the course. The committee included three faculty members, one full-time instructor, and one graduate teaching assistant.

Our committee objectives were: identify and develop a common vocabulary for our students’ most significant reading struggles and create learning outcomes to address them. These objectives hewed closely to constructive alignment step one: Define learning outcomes based on input from stakeholders. We decided to meet every other week in spring 2009. To establish a common vocabulary, we began with Alice Horning’s “Reading Across the Curriculum as the Key to Student Success” and her discussion of the ACT’s research on the features of college-level texts that students struggle with the most. In a 2006 study, the ACT classified reading difficulties into six distinguishing features: relationships, richness, structure, style, vocabulary, and purpose, or RSVP (qtd. in Horning). We administered an in-class writing assignment asking our students to summarize a one-page essay, and these samples of student writing served as our starting texts.
Using RSVP vocabulary, we familiarized ourselves with how to recognize these features as our students had difficulty with them. We also looked to our own classes for what they could teach us.

Here is one example from my Freshman Composition 1 class that semester, a class that included several of my previous semester’s English 100 students. In an activity to prepare students for reading William Bennett’s “What Really Ails America,” I gave them the first paragraph, reprinted in the passage below, and then asked them to choose the most accurate of three summaries:

A few months ago I lunched with a friend who now lives in Asia. During our conversation the topic turned to America as seen through the eyes of foreigners. My friend had observed that while the world still regards the United States as the leading economic and military power on earth, this same world no longer beholds us with the moral respect it once did, as a “shining city on a hill.” Instead, it sees a society in decline. (137, my italics)

Which of the following summaries is most accurate?

1. In “What Really Ails America,” William Bennett writes that while lunching in Asia a friend told him that people there respect America’s strong economy and military.

2. In “What Really Ails America,” William Bennett tells of a friend who is afraid Asia has declined and no longer commands the moral respect it once did.

3. In “What Really Ails America,” William Bennett repeats a friend’s claim that despite America’s strong economy and military, those outside the United States respect it less.

Now, I was looking for the third summary, but few students chose it. As we discussed this passage in class, I discovered that the very references that hold the paragraph together for a strong reader—that the italicized terms in the passage above all rename but refer to the same thing—made it challenging to my students. This tendency to read sentence-by-sentence rather than sentences-in-context is one example of the kind of reading difficulty we saw often as we read student work. Students also struggled to understand the purpose behind sudden shifts in perspective and topic when reading the personal essays so common in our composition classes. And even when connections between texts were made explicit, students tended to experience each reading as compartmentalized and discrete, rather than as the sequenced intellectual journey we imagined for them.
This kind of reading is not particular to Highlands, of course. David Jolliffe and Allison Harl note in their University of Arkansas study that even though the weakest academic readers could be heavily engaged in their reading for personal growth and leisure, “it was the rare student who, like Pauline, would make connections between and among texts that she was reading for her classes” (612). Moreover, evidence of how students make meaning of their reading in writing constitutes what students struggle with already in many composition courses. DeVido Tetreault and Center write that

Students who misunderstand what they read often work hard at the reading, but despite their efforts, these students fail to grasp the thrust of the argument as it is developed in the text. Students who misread confuse statements of fact and acknowledgments of counter-claims with the author’s own claims. As a result, they often misrepresent the textual evidence they select. (50)

This description of students’ responses to arguments will be familiar to composition instructors: students may conflate their own and the author’s beliefs, confuse evidence and claims, or select a passage without making meaning of it in relation to the work as a whole or as a stage in a developing argument.

Our committee discussions and our desire to foreground connections between texts led us to identify “relationships” as the most significant difficulty for our students and what we most wanted them to learn to read for in English 100. We then collaboratively wrote the following reading outcomes for English 100:

1. Communicate an ability to read texts strategically;
2. Demonstrate understanding of relationships between ideas in a text and relationships between texts;
3. Communicate an ability to synthesize information/ideas in and between readings, social experience, and the world.

These reading outcomes support the writing outcomes we later wrote, below:

1. Compose an essay that responds accurately to the writing situation and sustains a controlling idea;
2. Select and use textual, cultural, and/or personal evidence as primary research to support the controlling ideas in their writing;
3. Maintain focus by organizing paragraphs that are tied to the essay’s controlling idea.

At this point our committee work was done, but we needed a test and a course that would assess student performance.

Assessment, Results, and Conclusions

For fall 2009 we adopted Robinson and Altman’s *Integrations* across all sections of English 100. Case studies, rather than individual readings, comprise the book, so it foregrounded the inquiry and intertextual reading procedures our new objectives required. Students read, evaluate, and synthesize arguments, but they begin with familiar situations. For example, an early case study presents students with a teenager who wants to take a low-paying job against her parents’ objections; a later case study asks students to take a position on censorship of a student newspaper, complete with Supreme Court decisions and arguments by local stakeholders. Students develop the habit of using textual evidence while the readings themselves are not yet difficult.

Here I should explain how English 100 writing assessment informed our reading assessment. Our twice-monthly instructor meetings were central to conducting what Patricia Lynne calls a meaningful and ethical assessment practice (117). An assessment is meaningful when the relationships among its purpose, object, and circumstances are clear, and ethical when its practices enact collectively defined values and procedures to achieve fairness. Meetings provided a forum for instructors to read and assess student writing and revise the six-point writing rubric to accommodate readings everyone agreed were fair. While I hold that there are good reasons why informed readers may evaluate writing differently, English 100’s institutional location demanded a design that minimized these differences. One technique was to aggregate the learning outcomes in every essay rather than—as in English 111—distribute them across different writing assignments and genres. In this kind of sequence, students repeat the same procedures with increasing difficulty, giving instructors repeated opportunities to calibrate their reading and assessment of student work.

Instructors’ collective work on the writing rubric also helped us limit our assessment process to one reader. Every English 100 student had to be assessed during fall finals week, which was a potentially huge burden on instructors teaching a 5/5 load. In a process adapted from the semester assessment described by Irvin Peckham in “Turning Placement into Practice,” all instructors received their students’ individual writing assess-
ment scores, their instructor mean, and the course mean, data that functioned as ongoing faculty development but not made public. Instructors knew that they would receive feedback in the form of a peer’s assessment of their students’ work, but they collectively shaped their understanding of student writing objectives and their evaluative criteria all semester. While it sounds labor-intensive, this process distributes the labor of teaching in a way that further aligns objectives, assessments, and pedagogy and makes actual grading and assessment easier and more ethical in Lynne’s conception of the term. Importantly, it also provided a convincing alternative to the administration’s request that only tenured faculty perform English 100 writing assessment, transforming what could have been a high-stakes summative assessment of students and instructors alike into a low-stakes formative program assessment.

In this way, attention to student reading and writing was integrated at bimonthly meetings as instructors shared how they were teaching the writing process for each assignment and integrated the procedures students would follow on the reading exam. We first implemented the new curriculum and the pre- and post-test in fall 2009. The test consisted of four parts: a checklist of study strategies, a true/false portion, a summary, and a grade prediction. Only the true/false portion and the summary were graded. Given its similarity to the multiple-choice questions on any standardized test, I should explain why we included a true/false portion at all. I adapted the construct from research on effective reading strategies and a study of strategic reading instruction, where teachers created pre- and post-tests through twelve multiple choice questions requiring literal, interpretive, and applied reading. I converted the multiple-choice section to true/false so it would resemble a reading guide, a pedagogical tool created by many of our composition instructors to assist students with their reading. Originally designed by Harold Herber in Teaching Reading in Content Areas, reading guides are instructor-designed literal, interpretive, and applied statements corresponding to the reading assignment. As students read for evidence to judge the accuracy of each statement, they engage in the same thought process as their instructor. In this way the guide teaches, not tests, reading comprehension and enables the kind of text-based class discussion that students otherwise find difficult. Our program’s composition instructors are taught how to make reading guides as part of their ongoing professional development and training, so the format was familiar to students as a pedagogical tool and structure for reading. The true/false portion accounted for 40% of the exam grade.

The written portion counted 60% and began with the following prompt: “Thoroughly summarize the problem described in the three documents. Be
sure to include main arguments and evidence from the three articles, and explain the issue as completely as possible.” (See the appendix for the complete test). By asking students to summarize the “problem,” rather than the reading itself, we were requiring an act of applied reading comprehension through synthesis. In class, we drew on Rebecca Moore Howard’s reading pedagogy of summary writing for individual documents and built on that as students integrated new information and arguments with prior ones. Students practiced it all semester as part of the writing process for each writing assignment. Like evaluation of literal, interpretive, and applied statements, summary writing and synthesis are activities that can teach and assess reading comprehension (Caverly 27; O’Reilly and Sheehan 4–5).

For the 2010–2011 exam, students were given three articles about child-care in three different countries. Before the fall semester began, we (English 100 instructors and I) took the test ourselves. We then met to clarify and fine tune the true/false statements and discuss what we wanted to see in the writing portion. We compared our own work and discussed what ideas and evidence from the articles we considered integral to an accurate summary of the problem. From these discussions we created a six-point rubric used to score the writing portion of the reading exam, each point of which was converted into its relevant percentage. (See appendix). The same test over the same material, the same instructions, and the same grading protocol were administered as both the pre-test and post-test. For both tests, students took the readings home one week before the test date and were given 75 in-class minutes to complete the open-book pre- and post-test. Instructors made up their own course and student codes and submitted their coded test packets to the English office. At the meeting where test packets were distributed we calibrated our assessments of the written portion with anonymous samples. All exams were only graded once but instructors could request a second grader if they wanted to challenge an exam score.

Given that our standardized pre- and post-test had for years resulted in test scores that showed no improvement over the course of a semester, our main objective was to see whether the curriculum-based pre- and post-test scores would demonstrate gain. Our Office of Institutional Effectiveness ran three one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to determine whether any significant differences across the four semesters would indicate the presence of cohort, instructor, or term effects. These analyses yielded no significant differences across semesters for the reading pre-test (F[3, 286] = 3.360, p = 0.019), reading post-test (F[3, 286] = 2.077, p = 0.103), or difference scores (F[3, 286] = 0.192, p = .901). No instructor or term effects were found. A slight cohort effect may be indicated by the moderately significant difference in pre-test scores across semesters, one I believe may be
attributed to tuition increases, as some students who might have gone to more selective universities chose Highlands. Because we were interested in gain and difference scores were constant, however, this cohort effect is not a meaningful one.

Results indicated that taken as a two-year group, reading exam scores increased significantly from pre-test (mean = 59.5) to post-test (mean = 71.5), \( t(289) = 13.53, p < .000 \). The descriptive data for all semesters are shown in Table 1:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Reading Pre-Test</th>
<th>Reading Post-Test</th>
<th>Difference between Post-Test and Pre-Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>55.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2011</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further data analysis demonstrated a positive correlation \( (r = .4658) \) between pre-test and post-test scores, indicating that students who achieved higher scores on the pre-test tended to achieve higher scores on the post-test. However, a negative correlation emerged between pre-test scores and difference \( (r = -.4763) \) meaning that, on average, the lower a student’s pre-test score, the more improvement that student demonstrated on the post-test. This negative correlation held every semester, ranging from \( r = -0.1926 \) to \( r = -0.7697 \).

The results suggest that the aligned curriculum is associated with improved student performance on the reading exam. The curriculum was implemented for all students, so we have not established a causal relationship between the curriculum on the one hand and test results on the other. Students may have improved on the post-test by simply doing their course reading. Yet anyone who has struggled to motivate students to complete course readings will see even this possibility as no small feat. Students only haphazardly completed their reading in previous years, where the purpose of reading and its relation to course objectives was not articulated. Under
conditions like these, unaware of what reading is for, students may choose not to read or not know what to read for if they do. What I see as valuable in these results, what they contribute to professional knowledge, is not a specific curriculum or pedagogy. What I see as valuable is that a programmatic attention to the often unexamined role that reading plays in a writing program can further align a program’s objectives, curriculum, and assessment. Such an analysis can prevent what is often the default condition of conflicting classroom expectations for reading and writing, in which students experience reading and writing demands at cross-purposes.

However, I joined my fellow instructors by finding the average gain oddly disappointing as the small movement didn’t correspond to the gains we imagined based on our classroom experience. We also found no correlation between reading improvement or post-test scores and final course grades. Although the practice of using one reader in our writing assessment may suit our program context and purpose, it does not meet reliability standards sufficient to test correlations between writing assessment scores and reading scores. Education researcher Sharan Merriam reminds us that “both qualitative and quantitative data are interpretations of experience. In one case the experience is mediated through words; in the other situation, through numbers” (68). That this mediation proved unsatisfying, that a number cannot capture a complex social process, that it does not reflect the achievement of students—students who we believe demonstrated expectations for college reading with increasingly thorough treatments of readings and evidence—will not be surprising to anyone reading this essay. To gather another form of quantitative data that might better capture our classroom experience, my assistant Stephen Weatherburn and I conducted manual word counts of the pre- and post-test writing portions. This count did not consider content in any way and does not constitute a random sample—because we gathered exams in the summer, we worked with what was available to us. Nonetheless, writing portions on these pre-tests averaged 190 words while the post-test average turned out to be 448, marking an increase in an average of 258 words. While this data is not as significant to the administration, it better reflects our classroom experience by indicating increased student fluency when writing about reading.

No test can assess the learning that a course aims to achieve and how each student experiences it. In our instructor meetings and teacher training, I emphasize course objectives and pedagogy, not data, so that instructors do not begin to feel their job performance will be evaluated simply on how well their students perform on the post-test. I am mindful of a recent study at the U.S. Air Force Academy whose results showed that students making high grades on tests in introductory courses tended to do worse
in the subsequent course than students making lower introductory course grades; those high scorers had less-experienced teachers who focused on test content. Tenured and tenure-track professors, on the other hand, situated course content in and through disciplinary concepts. Their students earned lower course grades in their introductory courses but outperformed other students in their subsequent sequenced courses (Carrell and West). Although the researchers focused on mathematics courses, the study is a compelling one, because it points to the limits of each assessment in the context of a learner’s intellectual life and within a sequenced curriculum. We assess what we value, but that does not mean that everything we value is or can be captured. It is my hope that keeping the course outcomes, curriculum, and assessment aligned will continuously justify a goal of improvement, while keeping our goal modest will help curb any pressure on instructors to reductively teach to the test. To that end, we now have a program goal of demonstrating a mean improvement of 10 points per semester.

Inside the program, we continually revise the exam to align with course content and reading pedagogies. The format of the test should reflect the content and procedures of the classroom, and in this way the content (three documents that set up a problem) and the writing portion (summarize the problem) do just that. However, the reading guides that looked like the true/false portion of the test were not as common as I wanted them to be. This does not mean all instructors were not teaching reading procedures. In our meetings instructors regularly shared activities and scaffolding procedures to help students complete reading assignments and do something with them. Nevertheless, the inconsistency means this portion of the exam should perhaps be redesigned or eliminated. Consistency can be difficult to achieve because over the two years of this study, only one instructor taught English 100 during each of the four semesters. The other sections were covered by a rotating staff of full-time instructors and tenured and tenure-track faculty. This rotation requires ongoing faculty development and training, but it also means that we saw student gains through reflective practice rather than through a single pedagogy. Conducting research on a specific reading pedagogy would benefit the field, but it would have to be done in a program with more resources than ours.

In their “Critical Thinking” and “Reading Practices,” Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem trace their efforts to make the uses and purposes of reading apparent to students and teachers in a writing program. As the authors demonstrate, however, even in a program where reading and writing are integrated in program documents, many instructors tend to teach the way they have been taught and construct students as passive readers (“Reading Practices” 39). Adler-Kassner and Estrem’s solution is to
make explicit not only readers’ roles but the kinds of reading required, so that instructors can more easily identify the purposes of reading for their students.

Adler-Kassner and Estrem’s account of the construction of passive readers is a habit easier to fall into if students are responding to texts beloved (or loathed) by instructors, or texts that encourage instructors and TAs to draw on their own training to construct the “right” reading—a process that scholars note allows students to witness the instructor’s learning and interpretive process but does not teach them how to do it themselves (Blau 7; Smith and Wilhelm 89). Our English 100 curriculum has helped to curb this tendency, because case studies position the instructor to focus on the process of inquiry and privilege open-ended questions rather than a “right reading” of a single text. In addition to aligning curriculum and pedagogy, this kind of discussion can improve reading comprehension. In his meta-analysis of reading research, Martin Nystrand found that interpretive rather than transmission pedagogies most effectively improved reading comprehension, especially student-led small-group discussion (395, 398). Teachers utilizing this “problem-solving organization of classroom discourse,” and who posed open-ended rather than yes/no questions proved especially effective for struggling students (398–99). A curriculum that inspires instructors to ask open-ended questions rather than one that reinforces beginning instructors’ tendency to elicit “right answers” can indirectly benefit students’ reading comprehension.

How any WPA designs outcomes, assessments, and curricula is a local concern driven by the student population it serves, certainly, but also informed by the teaching staff, resources, and other factors too innumerable to name here. The fact that I am the only composition faculty member in my department mattered a great deal; it would be irrelevant in most. For those who have not yet addressed the role of reading in their programs, it may seem a daunting process. Beginning a conversation about what stakeholders want reading to accomplish, how it constitutes the writing and learning goals of a course, can set that process in motion.

If we take seriously the mutually constitutive relationship between academic reading and writing, then the role of reading in a writing program should be made explicit. However, the research, scholarly activity, and conference presentations on reading remain scant, and attention to reading in graduate programs pales compared to the space dedicated to writing. Even as most composition courses are organized by the production and consumption of texts, reading often functions as a pre-text or an afterthought. And I have not begun to address the demands that multi-media and online environments place on our less privileged students, as well as the potential
consequences for them articulated by the New London Group in *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (Cope and Kalantzis). If we do not recognize the role of reading, the *other* act of composition, in our writing programs and our field, we aren’t recognizing the complexity of our textual world, and the student from the wrong zip code is more likely to become just another statistic.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I wish to thank Alice Horning for her guidance. I am also indebted to the anonymous *WPA: Writing Program Administration* readers who pushed me to develop this argument and to Lisa Schmitz at Saint Paul College for her invaluable assistance with the data analysis.

**WORKS CITED**


**APPENDIX: READING PRE/POST TEST (FALL 2010/Spring 2011)**

| Number: __________________ | Grade: _______ |

**Part 1: Study time.** About how much time, total, did you spend studying for this exam?

**Study strategies.** Please read the statements below and check off each one that you performed as a study strategy.

- ___ I annotated, or wrote on, my case study.
- ___ I created examples or analogies to better understand the case study.
- ___ I made connections between two or more concepts.
- ___ I wrote down or reflected on my prior knowledge of the topic before reading.
- ___ I created “why” questions before, during, or after reading.
- ___ I organized the information I read in some way.
- ___ I summarized sections of the reading so I would understand it better.
- ___ I made up questions and answers.
- ___ I worked with a classmate on one or more of the above strategies.
- ___ I studied in these other ways that work for me:

**Part 2: True/False. (40%)**

*Instructions:* Your answers below should only pertain to the readings, not your personal experience or something you have read before.

Read the statements below and clearly mark each one T for “true” or F for “false.” A statement is “true” if the same information can be found in or supported by any of the three articles.

1. _____ In the U.S., all states are required to perform background checks on child care workers and regulate day care centers to protect children.
2. _____ More and more, Canadians view child care as the parents’ responsibility alone.
3. _____ Some Canadian families pay $70/month for childcare that costs $800–1200/month in the northeastern United States.
4. _____ Due to the recession, the French government has recently cut medical, retirement, and child care benefits.
5. _____ Whereas understaffed day care centers deal harshly with children’s behavior issues, fully and professionally staffed centers do not react more appropriately.
6. _____ Although it requires government investment, research shows that quality early child care can have beneficial long-term effects for the individual child and the national economy.
7. _____ There are more child care workers per child in American day cares than in French day cares.
8. _____ The French generally trust the government to meet their child care needs, while Americans are more likely to trust community and corporate solutions.

Instructions: Choose two of the statements below. Mark the statements you choose T for “true” or F for “false,” and give one reason from the reading or your own experience to support your decision. Write on the back of this sheet if you need to.

1. ___ It is important that the American government stay out of early child development.
   This statement is true/false, because:

2. ___ College graduates would have more career options if the American government invested in affordable, quality early child care.
   This statement is true/false, because:

3. ___ Government-subsidized day care may work in Canada and France, but it would never work in the U.S. .
   This statement is true/false, because:

Part 3: Summary. (60%)
Instructions: Thoroughly summarize the problem described in the three documents. Be sure to include main arguments and evidence from the three articles, and explain the issue as completely as possible. Write on the back of this sheet or attach additional sheets of paper if necessary.

Part 4. Prediction. What grade do you predict you will earn on this exam, and why?
## English 100 Pre- and Post-Test Rubric, Fall 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May be opinion only; may be too brief to evaluate; topic may not be relevant to the reading</td>
<td>May be too brief to evaluate; coverage may be scant (such as only treating first document)</td>
<td>Quality and/or cost may not be addressed; may note ideas but not offer evidence (or vice versa); implications may not be addressed at all; coverage may be too short (briefly treats 2 documents)</td>
<td>Includes evidence/examples of quality and cost; mentions implications, however tangentially; may note distinctions between cultural perspectives or worldviews; logically connects or synthesizes all 3 documents</td>
<td>Thoroughly addresses quality and cost as defining features of the child care problem; clearly establishes relationship between ideas and evidence given for them; communicates social, national, or economic implications; responds to documents as arguments; synthesizes all 3 documents</td>
<td>Presents child care as a social, national, or economic issue; coverage of issue is thorough; responds to documents as arguments; synthesizes all 3 documents</td>
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The Effects of Writing Pedagogy Education on Graduate Teaching Assistants’ Approaches to Teaching Composition

E. Shelley Reid and Heidi Estrem, with Marcia Belcheir

Abstract

The authors report the initial results from a three-year, two-site, multimodal study of the relationship between formal pedagogy education and teaching practices for graduate teaching assistants (TAs) in first-year writing. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from 88 multiple-choice and short-answer surveys and 41 semi-structured interviews demonstrates uneven integration of key composition pedagogy principles into TAs’ views of teaching writing; additional analysis reveals very few differences between first- and beyond-first-year TAs or between TAs at the two sites. The authors recommend that on a national level, TA writing pedagogy education be routinely and robustly extended into at least the second and third years of new teachers’ work in composition programs. In addition, the authors recommend that writing pedagogy education focus on reflective practice and problem solving to help TAs integrate pedagogical strategies more thoroughly into their principles and practices.

Do you know the effects your teacher preparation program has on the teaching assistants (TAs) in your program?

How do you know?

Unless you are one of a small cluster of college writing pedagogy education researchers gathering systematic data (including Dryer; Ebest; Farris; Liggett; Rankin; Ray; Rupiper Taggart and Lowry; and Winslow), your answer is probably much like our answers were five years ago. For the most part, each of us had a collection of impressions that led us to believe that our preparation programs were having a measurable and generally positive effect on our newest composition teachers. We were following what we judged to be the best practices in TA preparation; we had also observed TAs
in the pedagogy seminar, discussion groups, and their own classrooms and had seen them implementing approaches we recommended. We saw what we expected (and surely wanted) to see: when we asked them directly, we heard them explain to us what they were learning and how they were connecting those ideas to pedagogical action. They quoted Elbow and Yancey and Brooke to us as they made plans for freewriting, reflective practice, and small group work; they explained how the pedagogy seminar caused them to re-think and expand their approaches to teaching writing; they designed rhetorically situated assignment prompts and gave constructive feedback as we had modeled. Moreover, what external indications we had of their overall teaching abilities were good: strong student course evaluations and, at one site, successful reports from portfolio-based program assessment. We thus assumed that our programs had succeeded in preparing these new teachers, that they had internalized and were consistently using the concepts and strategies to which we had introduced them. But increasingly, the calls from the profession for RAD research (replicable, aggregable, data-based—see Anson and Haswell) made us wonder: did we actually know what we were accomplishing in our work with new and continuing TAs?

In this article, we describe the study that Shelley designed and implemented at George Mason University and that Heidi co-implemented at Boise State University: a three-year, two-site, multimodal collection of data that attempted to measure the degree to which TAs were integrating our pedagogical teachings—our work within the graduate seminar; our mentoring and inservices and professional development—into their talk about and practices of teaching. We distilled our impressions into four hypotheses that many readers may find resonant with their own thinking about TA education:

H1: Formal pedagogy education positively impacts TAs’ confidence, skills, and problem-solving repertoire

H2: TAs productively integrate formal pedagogy education into their daily thinking about and practice of teaching

H3: The effects described in H1 and H2 vary significantly across sites in relation to local conditions and practices

H4: The effects described in H1 and H2 differ across yearly stages, and are more prevalent and stable for second- and third-year TAs than they are for first-year TAs.

For this initial report, we draw on the survey data (N=88) and interview transcripts (N=41) to discuss our key findings. First, data suggest that our TAs were influenced more strongly by prior personal experiences and
beliefs and their experiences in the classroom than by their formal pedagogy education. Second, TAs’ responses reveal that new composition principles were unevenly integrated into their composition pedagogy worldview. Third, survey and interview responses from TAs showed little differentiation between the two sites; and finally, survey responses from TAs showed little statistically significant differentiation between first-year and beyond-first-year TAs.

These results suggest that what we know about how writers learn is relevant to understanding the extended, recursive process that teaching learners go through. Even the most well designed pedagogy course is just fourteen weeks out of the life of a “senior student” (Sprague and Nyquist 295), who has been in school for at least two decades, accumulating experiences and principles regarding teaching, learning, and writing. Just as we have long known that no one writing course can inoculate college writers forever, no “one-shot” approach to pedagogy instruction (“the” TA seminar, for example) can be expected to succeed in dramatically altering students’ root practices. In particular, our data support an idea articulated by teacher-mentors Angi Malderez and Caroline Bodóczky, that new classroom teachers spend several years in an interteaching mode, a term that they base on the interlanguage theories of second language acquisition. Interteaching describes a stage in which a pedagogy learner is forming hypotheses about successful teaching by acting out both new and previously learned rules, testing whether those are workable in the current situation, and refining his or her practice—with varying degrees of success (Malderez and Bodóczky 16–17). While effective teachers certainly continue to modify some practices throughout their lives, we postulate that TAs and other new teachers experience this in-between, interteaching mode quite intensely for several years, and that college-level writing pedagogy education (WPE) in the US needs to more directly address such an extended process of learning (see Estrem and Reid, “Writing Pedagogy Education”).

While no current large-scale portrait of TAs in first-year writing programs exists, our professional sense (through scholarship and conversations at workshops, conferences, and on list-servs) is that our TA populations reflect a number of the characteristics of our counterparts across the United States. Our programs, likewise, use WPE strategies we think would likely seem familiar to many writing program administrators (WPAs), including a credit-bearing seminar, peer-mentoring, and classroom observation of new teachers. Notable similarities between our two programs include their size, their focus on master’s level students, and their combination of curricular and extracurricular pedagogy education; notable differences include the year of tutoring experience for GMU students prior to classroom teach-
ing and thus the placement of their pedagogy seminar a full semester before their teaching begins.

Table 1. TA Education/Mentoring at the Time of the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Characteristics</th>
<th>GMU</th>
<th>BSU</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Annual TA Population</strong></td>
<td>24–30</td>
<td>28–31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yearly Cohort</strong></td>
<td>12–16 (mostly) MFAs per cohort; up to half of third-year cohort moves from TAships to non-teaching fellowships</td>
<td>8–11 MAs per cohort (literature, rhetoric and composition); 3–6 MFA TAs per cohort (poetry or fiction)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Teaching Responsibilities** | Two- or three-year TAship  
*Year 1*: Writing center tutoring  
*Year 2*: Teach 2+2 — FYC in fall, Introduction to Literature in spring  
*Year 3*: Repeat Year 2 (option for one Introduction to Creative Writing section) | Two- or three-year TAship  
*Year 1*: Teach 1+2 FYC  
*Year 2*: Teach 1+2 FYC; MFA students teach FYC and creative writing courses  
*Year 3*: MFA students continue to teach a combination of creative writing courses and FYC |
| **FYC curricular structure** | One-semester FYC Learning-goals-based curriculum; TAs choose texts and create syllabi | Two-semester FYC Outcomes-based curriculum; course reader and syllabus outline provided to first-year TAs; TAs choose texts and create syllabi for subsequent semesters |
| **Pre-teaching WPE (see Note 5)** | Noncredit writing center education; observations of FYC class sessions with mentor; composition pedagogy seminar | Online work during previous spring and summer; eight-day pre-semester workshop in August |
Background and Methodology

Measuring the effects of teacher education is difficult. Writing program administrators already understand the challenges of assessing writing education, an activity that at least routinely results in “good writing”: a series of stable documents that can be reasonably if not uncomplicatedly assessed by experts. The results of teacher education are notably more diffuse. They might be measured by “good teaching” as evinced by curriculum development, classroom performance, and feedback to students. Such effects can also (arguably) be assessed indirectly via student performance in authentic tasks or on standardized tests, student engagement or attitudes regarding learning, student satisfaction, and/or student retention, among other measures. Because choosing and comparing appropriate measures is difficult—and because distinguishing the effects of a specific educational program from the effects of other influences is difficult—the body of research in this area is uneven.

In composition, teacher education has been assessed via several kinds of data. Catherine Latterell’s national survey of composition pedagogy programs, for instance, leads to her recommendation that programs better integrate composition theory and classroom practica. Sally Barr Ebest’s case studies of composition TAs leads to her recommendations for increased attention to reflective writing and classroom research projects for new teachers. Rosemary Winslow’s surveys of TAs in her program provoke her recommendation that TAs write and revise more, in order to gain empa-
thy with students. Direct assessment of the results of pedagogy education, though, remains tricky.

Even in analyses of K-12 teacher education, which has a stronger research history than college teacher preparation does, the scholarship presents incomplete or inconclusive results. A 2007 meta-analysis by Pamela Kelley and Gregory Camilli, working with the National Institute for Early Learning Research, analyzes the effects that possession of a bachelor’s degree had on the quality of interactions and outcomes for early childhood educators. Though they had to set aside most studies they located due to small sample sizes, they found a statistically significant positive effect for the degree-holders; however, they were unable to quantify the effect of any particular teacher-education program or approach, or to single out a particular classroom quality as improving more than others. Barbara Levin, a secondary education researcher and editor of *Teacher Education Quarterly*, finds a similar lack of consensus on the effects of teacher education. She points out that a key 1975 study by Dan Lortie, which found that teacher education principles had mostly “washed out” of new teachers’ daily practices, has not been fully updated and yet is still frequently cited in the discourse (11). Moreover, like Kelley and Camilli, she finds the data sets in these studies to be too small to support broad conclusions: she notes that most studies follow a single teacher or a small group of teachers for a year or two (Levin 7). Levin does note that more recent studies designed to assess more variables have found that teachers’ development “was not smooth or linear”; such studies did not confirm the “wash out” effect (12). Overall, though, there is much data still to be gathered about teacher preparation generally, and WPE specifically.

Building on these efforts, our study (supported by two separate CWPA Research Grants) was designed to try to make visible the effects of writing pedagogy education not on *teaching*—which we might have measured through examination of syllabi, class performance, or student work—but on *teachers*. We started by assuming that one key goal of the education process is to effect change in the teachers, their goals, their concerns, and their reflective practices. Teacher educators such as George Hillocks and Stephen Brookfield have argued convincingly that teachers’ attitudes and reflective thinking practices are crucial to their successful practice. Specifically, our study was designed to elicit, in TAs’ own words, their concerns, priorities, values, and approaches to teaching writing overall, but to do so without questioning them specifically about their formal preparation to teach composition. We wanted to know how they articulated their approaches to teaching when we weren’t present and when their focus wasn’t on the pedagogy seminar; that is, we wanted to see if our educational program
had “taken root” in ways that would allow TAs to draw on it without direct prompting, as they will have to do once they move beyond our WPE program. In addition, we wanted to gather data that could be compared across time and space.

Our project includes a survey with both multiple-choice and short answer questions as well as a separate thirty-minute interview. Participants for the study were recruited from among the TA populations at GMU and BSU during each year of the study (2007–2010). At BSU, the TAs are MA students from a range of English subfields and MFA students. They participate in an intensive August orientation week and take a pedagogy seminar as they begin teaching in the fall semester of their first year; they continue to teach (on a 1–2 load) as they complete an MA or MFA program. At GMU, the TAs are mostly MFA students who tutor in the writing center and take a composition pedagogy seminar their first year, and then teach composition and introductory literature classes in their second and third years (two sections each semester). The majority of participants were enrolled in a pedagogy seminar (either for composition or for literature) at the time they completed the interview or survey: fall semesters for BSU TAs, spring semesters for GMU TAs. TAs at all levels—first-, second-, and third-year—were recruited for participation in the survey and interview protocols. At each site, TAs had the option to participate in both the interview and the survey; some TAs participated in the study in more than one year.\(^2\) Tables 2 and 3 summarize some of the relevant demographic data from the surveys and interviews.

Table 2. Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participation (N=88)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>63% 25+ years old</td>
<td>44% 25+ years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>39% first-year TAs</td>
<td>78% first-year TAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring experience</td>
<td>98% had worked in a</td>
<td>32% had worked in a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>writing center prior</td>
<td>writing center prior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to taking the survey</td>
<td>to taking the survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td>43% had pre-graduate-school teaching or tutoring experience</td>
<td>27% had pre-graduate-school teaching or tutoring experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Characteristics</th>
<th>GMU: 24–30 TAs annually</th>
<th>BSU: 28–31 TAs annually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation (N=41)</td>
<td>Spring 2007: 8</td>
<td>Spring 2009: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spring 2008: 8</td>
<td>Spring 2009: 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spring 2009: 13</td>
<td>Spring 2010: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>34% first-year TAs</td>
<td>42% first-year TAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring experience</td>
<td>93% had worked in the</td>
<td>25% had worked in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing Center at GMU</td>
<td>Writing Center at BSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prior to being</td>
<td>prior to being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interviewed</td>
<td>interviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current teaching</td>
<td>72% had taught at GMU</td>
<td>100% had taught at BSU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>prior to being</td>
<td>prior to being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interviewed</td>
<td>interviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior teaching/</td>
<td>69% had pre-graduate-</td>
<td>50% had pre-graduate-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tutoring experience</td>
<td>school teaching or</td>
<td>school teaching or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tutoring experience of</td>
<td>tutoring experience of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>some kind</td>
<td>some kind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We took particular care to enable informed consent and to protect participants’ confidentiality: all interaction with the TAs (including the interviews, the handling of printed consent sheets, and the distribution of gift certificates as compensation for participation) was conducted by student research assistants, who kept records that are currently held for us by program administrative assistants. In a few cases, TAs opted to give us code names that can be followed from survey to interview in a single year or from their first year to a subsequent year. Both sites used Survey Monkey to host the anonymous surveys; the interviews at both sites were transcribed by third parties, so we have had no access to identifiable voice recordings or names within the transcriptions.

Our survey (see Appendix A) included three parts: traditional demographic data questions (1–10), Likert scale questions (19–21) about how TAs ranked the value of various aspects of their experience and education as having an impact on their teaching, and short answer questions (11–18, labeled as “self-identified” here) that, since they elicited the TAs’ own language to describe their thought-processes, we are using to help assess the degree to which they internalized and integrated WPE principles. The survey design and interview design shown in Tables 4 and 5 help document the relationship of the independent predictor variables to the dependent variables of self-identification, rating, and pedagogy analysis.
Table 4. Aspects of the Survey

**Survey Design**

Independent Variables: Questions 1–10
- Site (GMU or BSU)
- Gender
- Age
- Program Status (1st-3rd year)
- Number of previous semesters tutoring or teaching
- Previous teaching experience (elsewhere)
- Pedagogy courses taken

Dependent Variables:
- Self-identified areas of Confidence in Teaching (questions 11, 13, 15, 17 on survey)
- Self-identified areas of Concern in Teaching (questions 12, 14, 16, 18 on survey)
- Rating of factors that increase Confidence as a Teacher (question 19)
- Rating of factors that increase Skills/Knowledge as a Teacher (question 20)
- Rating of factors that help with Challenges as a Teacher (question 21)

Part two of the survey—the short-answer portion—was designed to prompt respondents to begin by using their own words to describe specific aspects of teaching writing. For example, one survey question read:

Please list three things, overall, you are most confident about now regarding teaching writing. Next to each item, please also type a number from 1–5 to indicate the level of your confidence: 1 = “a little confident” and 5 = “extremely confident.”

Responses to these questions—in TAs’ own language—often looked like this:

Gaining classroom authority 4
Having the resources to teach confidently 4
Feeling capable of coming up with assignments 4

To analyze this portion of the surveys (questions 11–18), we reviewed these answers independently and then collaboratively to develop an initial coding system. After multiple adjustments, we developed categories for these responses. The answers above, for instance, were coded “Roles and Rela-
The Likert scale questions of the survey named specific aspects of TAs’ formal and informal education; this enabled us to receive some direct feedback on the programmatic support and mentoring for TAs at each institution. Respondents rated factors in their preparation (such as “experience as a writer” and “reading professional articles”) to indicate the degree to which those factors increased their confidence, increased their skills, or helped them respond to teaching challenges. Data from the surveys—Likert scores and coded short answers—were then combined into a single database prior to statistical analysis. Marcia, drawing on her experience in the institutional research office at BSU, designed and completed the statistical analysis for the survey data: our primary data comes from t-tests and chi-square tests to analyze correlations among data points.

The interview questions (see Appendix C) asked TAs to identify their thought processes about various aspects of teaching.

Table 5. Aspects of the Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW DESIGN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic data collected on:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Site (GMU or BSU)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Program Status (1st-3rd year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Previous teaching experience (elsewhere)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pedagogy courses taken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Narrative-based interviews were then designed to elicit insights on: |
| • Course design process (question 7) |
| • Class meeting preparation (question 8) |
| • Negotiating challenging teaching experiences (questions 9–11) |
| • Principles for teaching writing (questions 12–13, 16–18) |
| • Areas of challenge/uncertainty in teaching writing (questions 14–15) |

The interview and survey were designed to complement each other. In the interview, participants discussed how they prepared for class and solved problems; they named their core principles for teaching writing and described where those principles came from and how they used them; they were asked also to describe a difficult teaching situation and explain how they approached it. The interview questions very intentionally did not ask for “theory” or for “best practices”; questions also did not highlight any for-
mal WPE element. The co-author from each site initially coded the interview transcripts to identify direct mention of specific ideas presented by the local WPE program, overt discussion of intuitive or past-experience-based reasoning, and specific mention of learning from peers or from classroom experience, as well as other patterns of response; we again cross-checked and collaboratively analyzed the coding and results.

Results, Hypotheses 1 and 2: The Impact and Integration of Formal WPE Experienced by New TAs

Our data suggest that TAs at both sites identify a range of influences and resources for their teaching; these include WPE-related strategies and approaches, but not primarily or consistently. We draw these conclusions from analysis of several data clusters.

Survey Results, Impact of WPE: What Fosters TAs’ Teaching Confidence (Questions 19–21)

In answering the Likert-scale questions on the survey about the perceived value of various factors in building their confidence, increasing their teaching skills, and aiding their problem-solving abilities as teachers, TAs report that they place more value on their own experiences or those of peers than on the strategies they are learning from the WPE programs. For instance, TAs were asked, “Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped build your confidence as a composition teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates ‘didn’t help much at all’ and 5 indicates ‘helped quite a lot.’” Participants were offered the following choices (with some variation across questions and sites for the question to make sense): “Experience as a writer; Experience as a tutor; Experience as a teacher; Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers; Roleplays, writing center presentations, guest- or practice-teaching; English ### [pedagogy course] practical/syllabus assignments; English ### [pedagogy course] writing/workshop assignments; Reading professional articles; Reflective writing/thinking about teaching; Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers; Orientation or professional development workshops.” Mean scores were identified for ratings of each category in each question. The combined results from all surveys are graphed in Figure 1. (Note that because of the structure of the questionnaire, there is no comparable data in the Problem Solving category for the Roleplays and Course Writing Assignments responses.)
TAs’ responses to the survey suggest that several key elements of formal WPE have relatively little overt value for them, particularly in comparison with the knowledge they bring with them and/or acquire on their own. As noted in Figure 1, mean scores dip below 3 for TAs’ valuing of “reading professional articles,” “reflective writing/thinking about teaching,” and “orientation or professional development workshops” for all three questions: did this factor improve your skills, did it build your confidence, and did it prepare you to solve teaching problems. These activities, valued the lowest by our TAs, form the core of many WPE programs, including ours. Meanwhile, TAs report that they rely strongly on their own experience as writers to build not just their confidence, as we might expect, but also their skill as writing teachers. Thus the factors that they value in improving their teaching are not the ones we introduced them to, but the ones they brought with them into the program.

Survey Results, Integration of WPE: What TAs’ Gain Confidence In—In Their Words (Questions 13–16)

While it is possible that the order of the Likert question options influenced the answers on the survey, possibly encouraging a downward trend, data from two other data clusters indicate that TAs not only value their formal education lightly but integrate it unevenly in their thinking about teach-
ing during their first years as tutors and teachers. First, responses to the short-answer questions reveal that TAs’ vision of themselves as teachers often focuses on classroom and life management rather than issues of writing pedagogy. Two examples help reveal this trend. The responses graphed in Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the number of TAs who, when prompted to write down a response using their own language, mentioned a topic that fit into an area of confidence or concern that we coded for in our analysis.

Figure 2. Confidence and Concern, Aspects of Designing a Syllabus: Questions 13–14

For example, Figure 2 shows that TAs who were asked about “Designing a Syllabus” (questions 13–14) were more likely to mention time management and class policies—as areas of both confidence and concern—than to mention assignment design or the overall focus and arc of the course (areas covered much more thoroughly in their graduate seminar and mentoring). On one hand, this result could indicate that their formal pedagogy education does a good job of mitigating concerns. On the other hand, concepts central to WPE (course outcomes; scaffolding for course goals; engaging students in deep inquiry, for example) don’t seem to register as either areas of confidence or concern. What TAs seem to most immediately indicate, when asked to do so in their own language, are areas of concern that they likely had prior to encountering WPE. (It should be noted that this survey question included the following example, which may have increased TAs’ responses: “Your answer might look like this: ‘Choosing a textbook, 3.’”)
Figure 3 similarly shows TAs’ responses to questions about their confidence in “assigning and grading student essays.” While the pattern of responses to this question includes strong and mostly confident responses for “writing a prompt” and “giving feedback,” two situational issues must be accounted for. The survey question suggested, “Your answer might look like this: ‘Writing an assignment prompt, 3,’” which may have influenced the responses. (An earlier survey question had included the model answer “Keeping up with grading, 3,” which may also have affected responses to these two questions.) Also, nearly all of the respondents from GMU had already spent at least a semester tutoring in a writing center; it is difficult to tell whether their responses about giving feedback are experienced-based or formal-education-based. But beyond those responses, participants frequently mentioned issues about fairness and time management that many TAs bring with them into their WPE programs. Although a few responses to these questions demonstrated a more composition-studies-informed understanding of syllabus design and grading—such as “Providing the right amount of comments” (meaning: the amount that will be most effective for the student)—most were too brief or general (“time management”) for us to read them as indications that these TAs are considering specific, WPE-informed visions of what writing teachers do.
Interview Results, Integration of WPE: Where TAs’ Teaching Principles Come From and How They Make Decisions

The interview participants (some of whom may have taken the survey, although the survey and interview participant data are not linked) also gave answers not directly attributable to WPE. For example, when addressing the structured interview questions about how they design syllabi and how they prepare to tutor or teach a session (questions 7–8), TAs at both sites make occasional reference to recognizable composition principles. Yet they most often discuss their plans in language too vague to directly link to the formal education we provide. One TA from BSU emphasizes procedure and expectations: “[For me it’s] just kind of laying down what I expect from the students in the course up front, at the beginning, outlining everything that I expect them to get from the course, that I expect to give them, and that I want them to get from me.” A GMU TA explains her class preparation this way: “[It’s about] thinking about class materials. It’s thinking about my past experience, my own college experience.” She mentions drawing from her peers, thinking about her own writing process, and finally considering the “materials we’ve read, the things we’ve discussed in [the pedagogy seminar].” Like many of the TAs who participated in the interviews, this person’s worldview seems to have a relatively small space for “things we’ve discussed” in the formal seminar.

The picture shifts the most when TAs are asked in the interviews to name their principles about teaching writing—and then to identify where those principles come from (questions 12–13). In these responses, learned composition or teaching principles are named more often than in other places in the interview, though their mention is often entwined in discussions of prior knowledge and experiences, of previous teachers and current peers. TAs at both sites still often describe principles based on long-internalized (and sometimes very general) interpersonal values: “I don’t really know if it’s a principle, but I guess [mine is] ‘whatever it takes to get the job done,’” notes a BSU TA. A GMU TA explains that having a “de-centered classroom” is a value for her because “that’s the environment in which I learn best and I write best so I’ve decided to adopt it as my own.” Many explain generally how they want to be “generous,” to try to “make students comfortable,” or to use group work. Our impressions suggest that these principles are not at odds with the composition pedagogy we present to TAs in our seminars, but the data are not conclusive enough to distinguish these responses as resulting from our interventions rather than being ideas that the TAs brought with them from past learning experiences.
Further, when we do find clearer traces of our instructional work, they are often positioned by the TA in a secondary or afterthought comment. Several TAs do identify the influence of a particular professional resource like the article about “under culture or whatever . . . [that] seems like it’s disruptive but it’s actually . . . positive” (a reference to a Robert Brooke article by a GMU TA). Interestingly, though, in the interviews they most often mention their personal experiences first, and describe how learned principles help name or back up what they already believe. For example, when asked to identify where her principles come from, this GMU TA explains:

[they come] from how I learned as a writer . . . [the] investigative process, I think, definitely came from how I was taught and the textbook that I used was written by my undergrad professor so it was all in that kind of analytical investigative language. . . . The creative aspect comes from my own creative work . . . you know, as a poet that’s also what I do. I work from sources I research so I think part of it comes from myself as a writer and part of it comes from my background as far as like how I was taught and then, of course, the work we did in pedagogy as well and considering different theoretical approaches helped me to kind of round that out. Like I knew I would be process centered from the very beginning, but those kinds of conversations with my peers help to kind of form a better picture of how I might do that (emphasis added).

Even though WPE is visible within this TA’s response, she frames the pedagogy course as helping her “round out” her principles rather than as influencing or even creating them, a trend in many responses.

When we ask TAs in the interviews to step back from naming their principles and just tell us a story—to describe a “tricky, difficult, or surprising situation you encountered recently related to teaching writing, either in class [while tutoring] or regarding a writing student [client]” (question 9)—the responses move even further from the composition-studies focus of our WPE programs. Relatively few TAs choose to identify a curricular problem or a challenge in teaching or learning writing strategies. Instead, they more frequently describe the problem in terms concerning a particular student or group of students who challenge TAs’ pedagogical success, personal authority or interpersonal management skills. We identified fourteen of the forty responses to this question (35%) as accounts of challenges with pedagogy—of a classroom lesson gone awry or an approach that worked differently than anticipated (see Table 6). However, we coded twenty-six of these accounts, a strong majority, as being about various aspects of working with students, and not often about working with them on their writing: a
student whose religious values are affecting classroom discussion, a student who claims to have turned in work but hasn’t, and several students who resist course work. Challenging or tricky situations for these TAs are about negotiating personal boundaries, holding students “accountable” for doing college-level work, or working to understand resistance, more than about the writing pedagogy decision-making process we hope they are learning. (For a much more in-depth analysis of these and other interview responses, see Estrem and Reid, “What New Writing Teachers Talk About.”)

Table 6. Types of Difficult Teaching Situations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of responses (n=40)</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy-centered</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>These accounts position teaching events (class organization, working with readings) as the key challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-centered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to resistance</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>These accounts focus on the challenge of how to address the more general interpersonal arenas of teaching, manage teacher authority, and negotiate a range of student behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating boundaries</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding students accountable</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Results: Impact and Integration of WPE

Like other researchers in teacher education, we find it challenging to draw conclusions from limited data, or to conclusively explain the causes for what we don’t see. While the Likert questions about factors that build confidence and skills demonstrate that TAs often rate their previous and ongoing experiences as more valuable than the formal learning we provide them, the short-answer and interview responses reveal only that familiar elements of formal WPE—attention to assigning and responding to writing, to principles of rhetorical theory and writing-learning, to reflective practice—aren’t always articulated or prioritized in TAs’ framing of their work. The interviews offer glimpses of TAs with an uneven set of resources and a tendency to locate teaching challenges in people rather than in pedagogical approaches (perhaps making these challenges easier to dismiss as intriguing aberrations or to solve based on prior knowledge). Overall, while the data do not indicate that TAs are ignoring or acting counter to composition pedagogy principles, our data do suggest that the very specific infor-
information we bring to TAs still occupies a limited and sometimes peripheral position in their daily thoughts and practices regarding teaching writing. Since these results seem to run counter to our first two hypotheses about the effectiveness and integration of formal WPE, we have changed the way we view our own teaching, as we discuss further below, and we highlight the results here for other writing pedagogy educators to consider as they review their TA education programs.

Results, Hypotheses 3 and 4: Differences among Sites and TA Stages

The third hypothesis our study was designed to test proposes that TAs and their responses to their education differ substantially from one site to the next, thus necessitating significant local modifications to writing pedagogy education. And our fourth hypothesis proposes that first-year and beyond-first-year TAs are affected by and integrate WPE differently, perhaps demonstrating greater valuing, application and/or integration of composition studies principles after the first year of teaching. However, our data and analysis reveal very few differences along these axes of comparison among the TAs we surveyed. (For complete data for the statistically significant results, please see the tables in Appendix D.)

Comparing Two Sites: Likert-Question Analyses (Questions 19–21)

T-tests were run on all of the confidence/skill/problem-solving Likert responses (questions 19–21) to determine differences between GMU and BSU TAs. The following are the only statistically significant differences (p < .01) on these questions among over thirty possible points of comparison:

- BSU TAs value discussions with peers more than GMU TAs for confidence building: $t(73) = -2.81$, $p < .01$
- BSU TAs value discussions with peers more than GMU TAs for skill building: $t(73) = -4.62$, $p < .01$
- BSU TAs value reflective writing about teaching more than GMU TAs for problem solving: $t(72) = -4.17$, $p < .01$

That is, the mean scores denoting valuation of these elements were higher at statistically significant levels in the BSU responses than in the GMU responses. We have no clear interpretation of these results based on comparing the characteristics of the two programs. Shelley’s impression of the GMU TAs, for instance, is that they formed a very tight and supportive cohort and valued each other’s input. Moreover, the results do not correlate
with key differences we assumed would affect TAs’ responses to our programs: the prevalence of creative writing students with tutoring experience at GMU might have led those TAs to value writing or teaching/tutoring experience more highly, while the intensive summer workshops in place at BSU might have led them to report higher values for that factor. However, no statistically significant differences were found to support either of those assumptions.

Comparing Two Sites: Self-Identified Responses (Questions 11–18)

Statistical analysis of all the short-answer questions was limited by having much smaller numbers: in a few cases, as many as twenty-five or thirty responses accumulated within a single coding category, either as a concern or as a point of confidence, while in other cases, only five or six responses fit a category. (Remember that we had coded responses into categories and counted the number of times a particular category was mentioned as either an area of confidence or an area of concern.) The following were the only statistically significant differences between sites found from over 60 chi-square analyses of the four pairs of short-answer questions:

- **GMU TAs mention confidence about designing an assignment prompt more than BSU TAs in the overall inquiry about teaching (question 11):** $\chi^2(1, n = 12) = 6.15, p < .05$

- **GMU TAs mention confidence about class preparation and management more than BSU TAs in the overall inquiry about teaching (question 11):** $\chi^2(1, n = 31) = 6.39, p < .05$

- **BSU TAs mention confidence about conferencing and providing feedback more than GMU TAs in the overall inquiry about teaching (question 11):** $\chi^2(1, n = 31) = 7.49, p < .01$

- **GMU TAs mention confidence in choosing a textbook/readings more than BSU TAs in the inquiry about designing a syllabus (question 13):** $\chi^2(1, n = 18) = 4.47, p < .05$

- **GMU TAs mention confidence in giving class lectures more than BSU TAs in the inquiry about designing class meetings (question 15):** $\chi^2(1, n = 6) = 6.37, p < .05$

- **GMU TAs mention concern about organization and course pacing more than BSU TAs in the inquiry about designing a syllabus (question 14):** $\chi^2(1, n = 23) = 4.84, p < .05$
GMU TAs mention concern about engaging students more than BSU TAs in the inquiry about designing class meetings (question 16): $\chi^2(1, n = 9) = 6.01, p < .05$

As we discuss in more detail below, the implications of even these few differences are hard to determine. TAs at GMU are taught specifically how to design an assignment because common prompts are not provided, though Shelley’s sense had been that they felt ill-at-ease rather than confident about this part of their work. Meanwhile, the BSU TAs exhibit a confidence about conferencing and responding to student work that eclipses that of the GMU TAs, although the latter spend a full year learning about conferencing and responding as writing center tutors. Generally, though, that sizeable difference in our WPE programs—GMU’s year-long preservice WPE involving tutoring, observing, and a seminar vs. BSU’s two-week preservice workshop and semester-long seminar—does not seem to have had a measurable effect on TAs’ expressions of confidence or concern; neither does the difference between having to design a syllabus independently (GMU) and drawing on a common course syllabus (BSU) measurably affect these responses.

Comparing First-Year and “Experienced” TAs: Likert-Question Analyses (Questions 19–21)

The comparisons between first-year and beyond-first-year TAs also revealed very few statistically significant differences. In the Likert question analyses regarding skill building and problem solving, “new” first-year TAs had higher mean scores on all of the factors, valuing everything more highly than “experienced” beyond-first-year TAs; perhaps that is due to the enthusiasm and/or optimism of brand new teachers. No statistically significant differences between levels of TA experience were noted for any of the confidence-building factors. Among responses to the skill-building and problem-solving questions, the following are the only statistically significant differences between how new and experienced TAs valued contributing factors:

- Experienced TAs value teaching experience more than new TAs for skill building: $t(63) = 2.02, p < .05$
- New TAs value practical course assignments more than experienced TAs for skill building: $t(37) = -2.23, p < .05$
- New TAs value all course assignments more than experienced TAs for problem solving: $t(61) = -2.08, p < .05$
New TAs value information from reading articles more than experienced TAs for problem solving: $t(70) = -2.28, p < .05$

New TAs value reflective writing more than experienced TAs for problem solving: $t(71) = -2.66, p < .05$

Some of these results align well with our impressions about teacher preparation: experienced teachers value their experience, while new TAs (who at each site were taking the survey as they completed their pedagogy seminar) value the course assignments, articles, and reflective writing they’re engaged in more than the experienced TAs who likely have fewer encounters with such resources after completing their required seminar. The absence of any statistically significant differences between what first-year and beyond-first-year TAs value for building confidence interests us, though. Are “experienced” TAs still drawing confidence from what got them through the first year, without developing new resources? More importantly, an inoculation model of WPE suggests that we should be able to measure many points of significant difference between novice first-year TAs (all of whom are taking the survey before they complete their first semester of teaching or their first pedagogy course) and experienced TAs who have been thoroughly certified to teach writing, yet our data do not support such a conclusion.

The thinness of quantitative results about differences between new and experienced TAs is echoed by the results for the only TA whose voluntary code-name participation (“Maggie”) allows us to compare surveys from her first, second, and third years. From over thirty points of comparison across the Likert questions, Maggie’s responses differ by more than a point on only twelve questions: where, for instance, a first-year response values a factor at “5” while second- and third-year responses value it at “3.” Moreover, only four sets of those higher differential responses suggest a kind of progression or growth. Maggie values her teaching experience much lower for all three questions in her first year, when—as a GMU TA—she had tutored but not taught writing, and she values her own writing experience higher as a first-year TA for solving problems (as a tutor of writing). The other eight sets of responses are too mixed to suggest conclusions about progression or regression.

Comparing New and “Experienced” TAs: Self-Identified Responses (Questions 11–18)

In comparing first-year to experienced (second- and third-year) TA short-answer responses, even fewer clear differences emerged. The following were the only statistically significant differences attributable to TA stages of learning we found:
Experienced TAs mention confidence about preparing and managing class sessions more than new TAs in the overall inquiry about teaching (question 11): $\chi^2(1, n = 30) = 6.45, p < .05$

Experienced TAs mention confidence about leading class discussions more often than new TAs in the inquiry about designing class meetings (question 15): $\chi^2(1, n = 16) = 4.54, p < .05$

Experienced TAs mention confidence about giving feedback more often than new TAs in the inquiry about grading student writing (question 17): $\chi^2(1, n = 27) = 4.70, p < .05$

Among all the data analyses, this set of results perhaps surprises us the most: not because the three statements above confuse us (they don’t!), but because only three of more than sixty tests show statistically significant differences in the confidence levels of first-year and beyond-first-year TAs. If TAs’ teaching principles or their confidence about teaching writing are not measurably affected in a two- or three-year WPE program, we wonder what we can claim as the effects—as valued by the TAs or as visible in their integration of new ideas—of all of our hard work.

Comparing Sites and TA Stages: Interview Analyses

Within the interviews also, no significant patterns have emerged related to location or to experience within the program. While the numbers are too small to allow quantitative analysis, we can look for trends and patterns. Perhaps it is noteworthy that in response to the prompt to tell a story of a surprising, challenging, or tricky situation, three narratives which we identified as revealing a “reflective-practitioner” stance came from second-year TAs, but the numbers are too small to let us draw strong conclusions. Meanwhile, TAs with prior teaching experience, second- and third-year TAs, and first-year TAs all tell accounts of “this student who . . .” in high numbers. When naming their beliefs and accounting for the origins of those beliefs, TAs likewise demonstrated no patterns of variance across experience levels. Between the two sites, the only real differences relate to the general context of the two sites (e.g., many more GMU TAs discuss experiences as writing center tutors, because they all tutor during their first year).

Summary of Results: Comparing Sites and TA Stages

It is possible that our limited conclusions here are a result of limitations in our methodology. For instance, interviews comparing instructors in their first weeks of teaching and last semesters of teaching might capture specific,
differing patterns of response. Additionally, a survey that included larger numbers overall, larger numbers of beyond-first-year TAs, TAs with a wider range of educational foci, and/or TAs with more experience (four, five, or six years in the classroom) might have revealed more points of divergence. Currently, though, the results of the data we gathered directly question whether differences between first- and second-year TAs and differences between this local WPE program and that one should be dominant factors in discussing the impact of WPE on graduate TAs. Our data suggest instead that input from many other factors—TAs’ reliance on previous experiences, their trust in their personal skills and peer input, their concerns about challenging students—influences first- and second-year TAs, east-coast and northwest TAs, defining them at least as much by their similarities to one another as by their differences.

Discussion: How Do TAs Think About and Use WPE?

We remain convinced that the TA participants at both sites could have, if prompted directly, connected some of their teaching plans or practices to specific readings, assignments, or principles from their pedagogy education, using language that we would all recognize as emerging from the study of composition theory and pedagogical theory. If they had been pressed specifically for responses concerning the challenges of teaching or learning writing skills, our TAs could have identified and thoughtfully discussed relevant issues, learning goals, or pedagogical options, as they do regularly in class discussions at both sites. We also stand by our professional impressions that TA participants’ syllabi, assignments, responses to student writing, and classroom practices drew heavily on the guidance and materials we presented to them. Finally, we’re convinced—as were our TAs—that they became better teachers as they gained knowledge and classroom experience in teaching writing, despite the one-shot nature of much of our WPE. However, we must account for and address our data: when we review our TAs’ responses to less direct questions, we see only inconsistent glimpses of our formal WPE teaching rather than the steady composition pedagogy-informed thinking that they reflect to us in seminars and conferences. Our new teachers see writing education often, even predominantly, through a lens of student management rather than composition pedagogy; they continue to explicitly value their own lived experience more strongly than the knowledge or skills we focus on with them; and they infrequently use language or mention concepts that we can identify as coming from our programs. In other words, the data we didn’t find thus suggest the need for a
more complex understanding of causation and learning regarding writing pedagogy education.

Impact and Integration of WPE: Not a TA “Resistance” Problem

We believe it is important, in analyses of our data, not to move too far into focusing on our students’ limitations. Thus we want to complicate a possible reading of our results as reinforcing a common assumption about TAs’ “resistance” to “theory” (see Belanger and Gruber; Ebest; Fisher; Hesse; Stancliff and Goggin; and Welch, among others). It’s true that “reading professional articles” scored at or near the bottom of what these TAs valued and that mentions of specific pedagogical or composition studies concepts were infrequent in the interviews. However, the “resistance” we see in our data may be more inertial than consciously directed: we may simply be seeing TAs rank the least familiar and most abstract factors lowest among things they can rely on in helping them feel and act like confident teachers. Indeed, we expect that few experienced writing faculty would say that new-and-complicated ideas, tools, or approaches are the ones we usually turn to first when we need a confidence boost or are trying to solve an immediate problem.

The process of making new knowledge seem as useful and reliable as older knowledge can be complicated and recursive, as Robert Parker notes:

[L]earning involves a movement from experience to the personal viewpoints we construct, the result of which is personal “theory.” Occasionally, we encounter “THEORY,” those more formal and abstract hypotheses about how large segments of the world work, or why they work as they do. We can make THEORY of this order a part of our world view only in relation to the personal theory we have already constructed. So, from experience we construct a “theory,” in use, and then move from its practical, ready-made hypotheses to the experts’ hypotheses (THEORY), and back. (413–14)

A first step, as we saw in several of the interviews, is collecting THEORY that matches theory: “[I’ve been] thinking about the materials that we’ve read,” reported one GMU participant, “... and pulling out elements that feel appropriate to my own beliefs and my standards.” If new TAs are to make the second step—using THEORY to revise and expand personal theories, rather than simply confirm them—they will need more time and opportunity. We cannot endow our TAs with new theory by giving them a pedagogy class; they must appraise and integrate new knowledge themselves.
Impact and Integration of WPE: No Magic Wands

We find it reassuring that participants found the “practical” elements of the pedagogy courses immediately valuable in building their teaching skills; the lower valuations of such assignments in the skills and problem-solving categories seem to connect to the pattern of TAs framing their teaching and problem solving in terms of individual, challenging students. We are interested in thinking more about why the writing and workshop assignments were valued somewhat more for building TAs’ confidence. Are we mostly reinforcing a confidence they already draw from their writing abilities and experiences, or adding a new support? And we are intrigued by how, when, and why WPE-related ideas are mentioned when TAs are asked to identify the origins of their beliefs about teaching writing: WPE figures into their thinking, although often as a way to confirm what they already believe. Generally, though, our formal education efforts are not very apparent in the data we have gathered. To be sure, we had not expected to find dramatic results, given all the complications of “value added” educational assessment, but we had hoped for more evidence of our educational impact than we found.

In coming to terms with our data, we have found ourselves pulling back the curtain of the powerful pedagogy seminar and deciding that we may yet be good teachers but just very bad wizards. Like legions of FYC teachers, we do not have the power to fully transform students in a single seminar at the beginning of students’ intensive graduate study and practice. Research on teacher change supports this analysis: for instance, Margaret Vaughan’s study of 100 public school teachers leads her to this conclusion about the pressures and opportunities necessary to induce change:

[F]or a description or rule [often presented in a workshop or class] to change behavior, a teacher must already be able to engage in the behavior and must find the consequence for doing so reinforcing. To generate new behavior, a teacher requires . . . individualized instruction, . . . artificial antecedents [required in-class routines] or . . . artificial consequences. (125)

Jo Sprague and Jody Nyquist, drawing on decades of research about how students and professionals gain competence, suggest, in addition, that novices follow a staged developmental process, along spiraling, recursive paths of increasing competence (unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, unconscious competence) or along paths of increasing flexibility (looking for one best model, being open to alternate approaches, drawing from several models, creating and combining models) (297–301). Moreover, they argue convincingly about the need for new TAs
to work on a few skills at a time, gaining confidence in those before risk-
ing new approaches (Sprague and Nyquist 298). These strategies for prepar-
ing new teachers run counter to some of the pressures placed on writing 
pedagogy educators to quickly and efficiently “cover” everything a new TA 
needs to know to succeed; we come back to these models with renewed 
appreciation after seeing how small the measurable gains that our TAs dem-
onstrated were, even over two or three years.

Additionally, the literature on transfer and learning encourages us to 
take a broader view of the complexity of applying knowledge from one 
context (in this case, the graduate pedagogy seminar) to another (the FYC 
classroom). John Bransford and Daniel Schwartz’s review of the literature 
on transfer includes a summary of Harry Broudy’s conception of learning—
a conception that includes “‘knowing that’ (replicative knowledge) . . . and 
‘knowing how’ (applicative knowledge)” but also, importantly, emphasizes 
“knowing with” (10). They write, “By ‘knowing with’ our cumulative set 
of knowledge and experiences, we perceive, interpret and judge situations 
based on our experiences in the past” (Bransford and Schwartz 10). So of 
course TAs’ prior experiences and social networks figure prominently in 
their approaches to and decisions about teaching. (And as Dylan Dryer’s 
research demonstrates, TAs’ prior lack of knowledge and confidence— 
about academic writing strategies, for example—also continues to strongly 
frame their work with students.) But as TA educators, we face the persis-
tence of the common models of college WPE, all still tightly focused on 
the first year or even the first semester of teacher education, combined with 
institutional pressures to certify our TAs as “ready to teach” without addi-
tional resources, and so we have tended to overlook such complications.

Sites Of WPE: It’s Not (Necessarily) a Local Phenomenon

The replication of this study across two sites allowed us to consider what 
difference the local culture, FYC pedagogy, and WPE structure has on 
TAs’ views of themselves as teachers. Where we found significant differ-
ences, though, the results were as often puzzling as sensible. On one hand, 
the BSU TAs who took their pedagogy seminar as they were first teach-
ing quite reasonably valued reflective writing (of the sort they did in that 
seminar) for problem solving about teaching more than GMU TAs, who did 
little guided, reflective writing once they started teaching, a contrast that 
agrees with our impressions about local influence. On the other hand, the 
GMU TAs who had had a year of experience tutoring in a writing center 
were unexpectedly less likely than the BSU TAs to mention confidence 
about conferencing and providing feedback. Likewise, while the GMU TAs
who were responsible for designing their own syllabi did not surprise us by
mentioning organization and course pacing as a concern more often than
their BSU counterparts who worked from a common syllabus outline and
text, we were intrigued that they expressed more confidence about choosing a textbook and course readings. It’s possible that our two sites and WPE
cultures are simply not different enough to register in our TAs’ reported self-concepts and teacher-talk. Yet it seems equally possible that the commonalities among people who choose to get a master’s degree in English in
the US—along with the limited impact overall that a year’s worth of WPE
appears to have on TAs in this study—serve to mitigate any moderate dif-
fferences between programs. Adaptation of WPE to local needs and cul-
tures, while perhaps important for other reasons, seems to have less effect on what TAs value, gain confidence about, and integrate into their teach-
ing and teacher personae than our previous conversations about program
design have acknowledged.

Stages of TA Learning: No Quick Competencies

In designing this study to include TAs from their first year to their third
year of teaching, we thought we had built enough time and opportu-
nity into the study to be able to see TAs increasingly demonstrating the
impact and integration of their formal WPE. The few changes we do see make sense: first-year TAs value elements of the pedagogy seminar a little more than their more-senior peers do, while beyond-first-year TAs value their newly acquired teaching experience more than their novice peers. More-senior TAs mention feeling confident a little more often than novice TAs do. The sparseness of statistically significant results, though, suggests that even third-year TAs have more in common with their novice peers than they have differences: our results suggest not that WPE lessons have “washed out” over time, but that they have not yet fully taken root. After all, even third-year TAs are still new learners: they inhabit an interteach-
ing stage in which they are drawing heavily on the rules from their “first language” of teaching—what they observed as students—while looking for ways to accommodate their “second language” compiled from the perspec-
tives, principles and strategies offered by specific composition pedagogy. Moreover, it’s important to remember that our TAs are self-selected and externally selected to produce a cohort of already capable teachers: they are interested in and talented at solving writing problems, and many have both an interest in teaching “English” and empathy for students in a college set-
ting. Like FYC students, they aren’t blank slates; we are invested in making
them better rather than making them adequate, a much smaller leap to try to measure.

The cross-stage data do give us additional reasons to consider why and how we might focus and extend WPE. It’s possible that TAs value formal pedagogical education more not just when they’re novices, but while they are participating in it. In that case, ongoing formalized participation could help TAs deepen their valuing of “theory” and new disciplinary strategies. Continued access to guided educational moments might provide the interruption, the call to reflection and ongoing metacognition that have been found to enable transfer. Importantly, both our quantitative and our qualitative data suggest that TAs aren’t gaining confidence in their teaching as dramatically as we had hoped (and as they had suggested to us). If we were to officially extend the process of certification beyond the first year, we might better convey to TAs our conviction that learning to teach well takes time, is a draft-and-revise process, and entails ongoing adaptation to new circumstances—just as a multi-stage or writing-across-the-curriculum based writing education program conveys an extended, recursive writing-learning process to undergraduates. In a more extended educational process, TAs like one from BSU who found it “kind of frustrating just not being perfect” might feel less pressure to solve problems and happier to explore possible solutions. Finally, as Sprague and Nyquist argue, some of the pedagogical learning may be more effective once TAs have moved some teaching knowledge to “unconscious competence” and so are no longer struggling as much as they did in their first year(s) of classroom teaching. We may find more openings for discussion of genre-based instruction or effective commenting strategies once new teachers have gained confidence managing their students and their classrooms.

Conclusions

We emerge from this study still persuaded that formal WPE in university composition programs can be effective. We acknowledge the possibility, revealed by our data, that TAs like the ones who participated in our study are surviving as early-stage composition teachers by relying primarily on what they learned before they met us. Yet we conjoin our educated local impressions—that our TAs deliver better writing classes with our guidance than without it—to our data and to our newly intensified understanding of the pedagogy learning process as lengthy, initially partial, and recursive. We thus conclude that WPE programs are on a reasonable track that needs adjusting and expanding rather than overhauling. Writing pedagogy educators can be important and successful guides to the profession: we can help
students become not just better teachers but better teaching learners. But to be more successful at this over a long term, we need to shift our goals and expectations—and those of our students.

**Impact and Integration of WPE Principles: Teaching For Transfer**

First, we recommend that pedagogy educators teach explicitly for integration and transfer of new material, as well as for increased reflective problem-solving, rather than for knowledge of the field or even full competence as classroom practitioners. We have evidence that our TAs *can* and *do* incorporate at least some of what we teach them, well enough that they recall it (if sometimes belatedly or partially) in discussing and responding to teaching problems. A key to better WPE may be to teach directly toward that kind of integration and application of core principles. Malderez and Bodóczyk’s image of new teachers as “icebergs” helps us imagine our students as affected lightly at the top by the climate of formal education while they are driven forward by the interactions between a massive core of personal experience and the undercurrents of culture and society (14). TAs may thus need more direction to learn how to link limited amounts of new knowledge to their strong previous knowledge, in such a way that both remain accessible to them as practicing teachers. Shelley’s suggestion that “The time we spend covering ‘just a little more’ theoretical or practical information may devour the time we intended to provide for reflection on and discovery of related questions” (Reid 16) becomes even more relevant to pedagogy seminar design if reflective work is co-requisite to any long-term learning.

For example, if TAs see their own writing experience as a key source of confidence and skill, we could invest time in assignments and activities that help them connect new ideas about writing education to those writerly experiences (pulling new information down into the iceberg); we could also help them articulate what they know as writers—and, as Dryer suggests, how they can apply it, or may need to adapt it, to the work they do with FYC students, thus pulling previous experiences up to the iceberg surface (442–43). Similarly, if what we want is for TAs to deliberately use what they learn in a pedagogy seminar as they move into their own classrooms, we need to directly model and assign them that kind of informed practice, both before they teach and as they begin and continue teaching. In particular, if we want TAs to solve teaching problems in part by reflecting on and critically applying concepts from composition research and scholarship, they need practice in becoming those reflective, critical practitioners. While Sprague and Nyquist argue that an increase in “unconscious competence” is one sign of the progression from novice toward proficient practitioner
(296–98), we do not want TAs to move too quickly or completely to a nonreflective stance. Beyond the controlled spaces of the pedagogy course, reflection may disappear if it does not become a familiar practice, one that teachers deem valuable.

Stages of TA Learning: Extending WPE Across Several Years

Reflective practice is just one of the ways of being a writing teacher that needs reinforcement throughout TAs’ extended interteaching stage. Our second recommendation thus is not only that WPE would be somewhat better if it continued across multiple years; that is a premise most pedagogy educators would agree with. Instead, we argue more strongly: given data that reveal so few differences between first-year and beyond-first-year TAs, a program of regular, formal, directed pedagogy education must continue beyond the first year if we hope to have any substantial, lasting effect on how TAs teach and think about teaching writing.

This recommendation also goes further than a general understanding that all teachers need continuing opportunities for learning and reflecting. Our TAs particularly need and will benefit from continuing structured learning because they are new teachers: they are still in an unsettled and receptive learning mode, and they struggle with both overconfidence and frustration at “not being perfect” if they assume that they have been certified as fully competent teachers. Moreover, many of the professional positions they are hired into after graduation will not be conducive to further learning about teaching writing. To be sure, the peer discussion groups and additional workshops we already provide will support this WPE extension: our data reveal that TAs value and integrate knowledge provided by their peers and by practical workshops, so TA education should continue to be multimodal. Yet our data suggest that those incidental learning experiences are insufficient to have a long-term, transformational effect on new TAs. In addition, our TAs may need more extended, structured learning because they are new teachers in and of composition. We value their success as teachers because our scholarly field is firmly rooted in the development of theorized pedagogy designed to maximize active student learning, creativity, critical thinking, flexibility, reflective practice, and collaboration. More than that, though, we require their success because of our field’s commitment to pedagogical outreach: if good writing pedagogy is created in the field but nobody outside the scholarly echelons of the field knows or reflectively uses it, the value of our work diminishes.

We can choose to leave fewer of these pedagogical changes to chance, hoping that new teachers will sometimes remember “some things we dis-
cussed”; instead, we can more directly assist and intervene while TAs’ habits of mind and action—including the ones that will provoke and enable them to continue learning about teaching as they mature—are still forming. Thus an extended education program, like the initial efforts, should include structured assignments that require TAs to further integrate, connect, and reflect on a range of pedagogies, their own and those of specialists in the field.

Sites of TA Education: Additional Data Needed

Finally, because our data show so few differences between TAs’ responses at our separate sites, we conclude that a majority of WPE programs—regardless of local conditions—need and would benefit from extended, transfer-focused pedagogical education programs. Your TAs and WPE program may differ in many ways from ours, but our data strongly suggest that as a field, we all need to move beyond seeing the inoculation method as officially sufficient, and need to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to realize returns on the intensive investment of our pedagogy education efforts.

But don’t take our word for it. Go gather data—not just impressions—from your own TAs, based on the kind of defined model we have designed for this study shown in Tables 4 and 5. What new (or old) learning do they value? How do they talk about teaching when you’re not in the room? To what degree do they change as they move beyond their first year of teaching? How do their responses differ from those of the TAs we studied? You may find such data helpful in arguing for resources to extend WPE to the point at which it is having lasting effects on your composition teachers. Beyond that, though, the answers to these questions, and the actions we take in response, are crucial for the field of writing education. If we are sending incompletely educated TAs out to teach composition—at research-intensive and teaching-focused state universities, at small liberal arts colleges and community colleges and high schools, to teach one writing course a year or six per semester—then we are letting slip a key opportunity in the larger effort to improve writing education. The more we learn about how complicated and important learning to write is at all levels, and the more colleges and universities face pressure to teach and assess writing with inadequate resources, the more it becomes clear how much we need confident, mature, reflective composition teachers representing us—and extending our scholarly reach—at all levels. And to ensure that representation, we need a more intensive cycle of data-driven program assessment leading to curricular and co-curricular improvement of writing pedagogy education.
Do we know the effects that writing pedagogy education programs nationally have on the teaching assistants in them? Not really? Then for the sake of the TAs, their students, and the field of composition, it’s time to find out.

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Notes

1. As one example, consider Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore’s recent English Education article about learning to teach writing and grammar, which explores the consequences of limited or absent WPE by following a single teacher through her first two years of teaching.

2. Note that these questions were asked slightly differently on the interview script and the survey, and so the resulting background information is also slightly different here.

3. Due to a procedural error, five participants were not asked about this question at BSU; in calculating this number, their answers were recorded as “No.” Heidi reports that the percentage here resembles the overall trend in her program.

4. As an adaptation to local conditions, some of the Likert questions were re-worded on the BSU survey so that participants could identify the kind of experience accurately even though it is named differently or discussed in different terminologies at each site. In hindsight, having now analyzed the data, we would have changed some of the survey design to ensure greater consistency among questions and across sites, and to provide directions that were even less likely to influence participants’ answers.

5. The numerical rankings for the short-answer questions, designed to indicate intensity of confidence or concern and provide another possible measure of development, subdivide the data to the point at which finding statistical significances would be unlikely, especially given the lack of significant differences in the larger categories. A more qualitative analysis of these indicators is a matter for a future analysis.

6. One TA couldn’t think of an account of a difficult teaching situation.

7. The “first-year” TAs at GMU and BSU aren’t exactly parallel, though TAs at both sites participated while taking their composition pedagogy seminar: GMU first-year TAs participated during their second semester of tutoring but
before they moved to classroom teaching, while BSU TAs were completing their first semester of teaching a single composition course. Similar differences exist in the “beyond-first-year” categories. However, all first-year TAs participated as the bulk of their formal WPE was coming to an end, and all other TAs participated while at a stage where they were considered by program standards to be no longer in need of direct education.

 Works Cited


Kelley, Pamela and Gregory Camilli. “The Impact of Teacher Education on Outcomes in Center-Based Early Childhood Education Programs: A Meta-anal-
Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

1. (Question 1 is the Informed Consent check-box.)
2. (Question 2 provides an option to give a trackable Code Name.)
3–10: Questions 3–10 ask for gender, age, program status (e.g., first year), previous semesters tutoring or teaching writing, previous teaching experience, pedagogy courses taken, and whether the participant has taken this survey before.

11. Please list three things, overall, you are most confident about now regarding teaching writing. Next to each item, please also type a number from 1–5 to indicate the level of your confidence: 1 = “a little confident” and 5 = “extremely confident.” Your answer might look like this: “leading class discussions, 3.”

12. Please list three things, overall, you are most concerned or anxious about now regarding teaching writing. Next to each item, please also type a number from 1–5 to indicate the level of your concern: 1 = “very mild concern” and 5 = “extremely concerned.” Your answer might look like this: “keeping up with grading, 3.”

13. Consider the process of designing a syllabus: please list 1–2 things about creating a composition syllabus you are most confident about, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your confidence (1 = low, 5 = high). Your answer might look like this: “Choosing a textbook, 3.”

14. Still on the same topic: please list 1–2 things about creating a composition syllabus you are most concerned or anxious about, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your concern (1 = low, 5 = high).

15. Now consider the task of meeting with students in a classroom: please list 1–2 things about classroom teaching about which you are most confident, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your confidence. Your answer might look like this: “Designing group activities, 3.”

16. Still on the topic of classroom teaching: please list 1–2 things about classroom teaching that you are most concerned or anxious about, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your concern.

17. And finally consider the process of assigning and grading student essays: please list 1–2 things about assigning and/or grading student work that you are most confident about, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your confidence. Your answer might look like this: “Writing an assignment prompt, 3.”

18. On that topic of assigning and grading student writing: Please list 1–2 things about assigning and grading about which you are most concerned, and include a number (1–5) to indicate the level of your concern.

19. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped build your confidence as a composition teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “didn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helped quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered yet.

Experience as a writer
Experience as a tutor
Experience as a teacher
Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers
Role plays, WC presentations, guest- or practice-teaching
English ### practical/syllabus assignments
English ### writing/workshop assignments
Reading professional articles
Reflective writing/thinking about teaching
Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers
Orientation or professional development workshops
Other

20. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped build your skills as a writing teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1–2 indicate “didn’t help much at all” and 5–6 indicate “helped quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered yet.

Experience as a writer
Experience as a tutor
Experience as a teacher
Observing other teachers/being mentored
Role plays, WC presentations, guest- or practice-teaching
English ### practical/syllabus assignments
English ### writing/workshop assignments
Reading professional articles
Reflective writing/thinking about teaching
Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers
Orientation or professional development workshops
Other

21. When you face a challenge or a problem as a tutor/teacher, how well do the following help you address that problem? Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “doesn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helps quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered or tried yet.

Drawing on my experience as a writer
Drawing on my previous experience as a tutor
Drawing on my previous experience as a teacher
Observing other teachers (or consulting their course materials)
Consulting a mentor or adviser
Remembering strategies from English ### assignments
Reading and/or remembering previously-read professional articles
Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching
Discussing the issue with other peer teachers
Drawing on orientation or professional development workshops
Other

22. What would most help you now to address or alleviate your strongest concerns about teaching composition?
Appendix B: Short-Answer Question Coding Categories

Questions 11 and 12 (overall teaching): Assignment design, classroom preparation/management, class discussion, student engagement, written feedback, grading, roles and relationships, syllabus/semester class design, teaching thinking/content, time management/organization, miscellaneous.

Questions 13 and 14 (syllabus design): Assignment design, focus/arc of course, syllabus tone/design, choosing readings/textbook, organization/pacing/workload, classroom policies, miscellaneous.

Questions 15 and 16 (classroom teaching): In-class assignments/activities, class discussion, student engagement, group work, lecturing, instructor-student relationships, resistant students, managing time/transitions, miscellaneous.

Questions 17 and 18 (assigning and grading essays): Writing a prompt, clarity of expectations, giving feedback, grading/evaluation, grading fairly/objectively, grading time management, creating supporting assignments/instruction, miscellaneous.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Questions in italics provide possible follow-up options if needed. Questions 1–6 ask about program status, gender, previous teaching and tutoring experience, and pedagogy courses taken.

1. Please tell me, what are some of your main steps or thought-processes as you prepare a writing-class syllabus? (Are there any other issues or goals you consider?)

2. Now can you tell me, what are some of your main steps or thought-processes as you prepare to teach/tutor a class meeting (or tutoring session)? (Are there any other issues or goals you consider?)

3. Please tell me a little about a tricky, difficult, or surprising situation you encountered recently related to teaching writing, either in class [while tutoring] or regarding a writing student [client]. (What was difficult or surprising about it?)

4. How did you respond? (How are you planning to respond?)

5. Why did [will] you respond that way?

6. What do you see as 3–4 key principles for your teaching [tutoring] of writing? (In other words, what do you think is important for you to do as a writing teacher [tutor]? What do you try always to do or not do?)

7. Could you say where those principles come from, or are related to? (Were they from something you read or learned, something you heard of or saw someone doing, some experience you had?)
8. What 1–2 questions or issues remain most uncertain and/or challenging for you about teaching [tutoring] writing?

9. How do you cope with that uncertainty right now?

10. Do any (more) of your principles help you cope? [Interviewer may remind interviewee of answers to Question 6.]

11. Are there any other ways that the principles you mentioned earlier, or other principles, come into play as you plan classes or solve problems?

12. On a scale of 1–5—with 1 being “not much at all” and 5 being “quite a lot”—how often do you find yourself thinking of your teaching-principles when you are involved in the following activities:
   • planning your syllabus (even for those who are currently only tutoring)
   • planning your class day or tutoring session
   • teaching/tutoring your session
   • responding to student writing
   • problem-solving as a teacher/tutor

19. Do you have other comments about or reflections on your recent teaching or teacher-preparation that you’d like to add to this interview?

APPENDIX D: DATA TABLES FOR SITES AND STAGES COMPARISONS

Note: While we accumulated 88 survey responses and 41 interview responses across three years, we frequently have fewer individual participants for each question: some participants did not answer the full survey; in the self-identified answers, participants were instructed to provide up to three answers to questions for which we coded up to eleven distinct categories; and some interview participants did not respond to a question. Some participants took the survey as many as three times, while others took the survey only once. Some participants who took the survey also completed the interview, once or more than once, in the same year and/or in another year; some completed one but not the other. Response rates therefore vary.
Table 7. T-Test Survey Comparison, Analysis of Site Differences, Significant Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question and response category</th>
<th>GMU Mean, Range, SD (N = 47)</th>
<th>BSU Mean, Range, SD (N = 41)</th>
<th>t, p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped <em>build your confidence</em> as a composition teacher.</td>
<td>Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers 4.00 (3, 5) .77 (n = 42)</td>
<td>4.48 (3, 5) .71 (n = 33)</td>
<td>t(73) = -2.81 p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped <em>build your skills</em> as a writing teacher.</td>
<td>Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers 3.19 (1, 5) 1.07 (n = 42)</td>
<td>4.21 (1, 5) .78 (n = 33)</td>
<td>t(73) = -.462 p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. When you <em>face a challenge or a problem</em> as a tutor/teacher, how well do the following help you address that problem?</td>
<td>Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching 2.27 (1, 5) 1.03 (n = 41)</td>
<td>3.39 (1, 5) 1.30 (n = 33)</td>
<td>t(72) = -4.17 p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 8. Chi-Square Survey Comparison, Analysis of Site Differences, Significant Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question and coded response-category</th>
<th>BSU/GMU (df = 1)</th>
<th>N = 88</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Please list three things, overall, you are most confident about now regarding teaching writing</td>
<td>Assignment design</td>
<td>n = 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom preparation/management</td>
<td>n = 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written feedback/conferencing</td>
<td>n = 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Please list 1–2 things about creating a composition syllabus you are most confident about</td>
<td>Choosing readings/textbook</td>
<td>n = 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Please list 1–2 things about creating a composition syllabus you are most concerned or anxious about.</td>
<td>Organization/course pacing</td>
<td>n = 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Please list 1–2 things about classroom teaching about which you are most confident.</td>
<td>Lecturing</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Please list 1–2 things about classroom teaching that you are most concerned or anxious about.</td>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>n = 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
Table 9. T-Test Survey Comparison, Analysis of Stage Differences, Significant Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question and response category</th>
<th>Experienced TAs Mean, Range, SD (N = 47)</th>
<th>First-year TAs Mean, Range, SD (N = 41)</th>
<th>t, p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>20. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped build your skills as a writing teacher.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience as a teacher</td>
<td>4.71 (1, 5), .64 (n = 31)</td>
<td>4.29 (1, 5), .97 (n = 34)</td>
<td>t(63) = 2.02, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English ### practical/ syllabus assignments</td>
<td>2.72 (1, 5), 1.10 (n = 25)</td>
<td>3.57 (1, 5), 1.22 (n = 14)</td>
<td>t(37) = -2.23, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>21. When you face a challenge or a problem as a tutor/teacher, how well do the following help you address that problem?</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering strategies from English ### assignments</td>
<td>2.59 (1, 5), 1.10 (n = 32)</td>
<td>3.11 (1, 5), .92 (n = 38)</td>
<td>t(61) = -2.08, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and/or remembering previously-read professional articles</td>
<td>2.33 (1, 5), 1.08 (n = 33)</td>
<td>2.90 (1, 5), 1.02 (n = 39)</td>
<td>t(70) = -2.28, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching</td>
<td>2.33 (1, 5), 1.19 (n = 33)</td>
<td>3.10 (1, 5), 1.26 (n = 40)</td>
<td>t(71) = -2.66, p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10. Chi-Square Survey Comparison, Analysis of Stage Differences, Significant Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question and Coded Response Category</th>
<th>Experienced TAs / First-year TAs (df = 1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced TAs / First-year TAs (df = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Please list three things, overall, you are most confident about now regarding teaching writing.</td>
<td>Experienced TAs / First-year TAs (df = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom preparation/management</td>
<td>n = 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 6.45 ) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Please list 1–2 things about classroom teaching about which you are most confident.</td>
<td>Experienced TAs / First-year TAs (df = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading class discussion</td>
<td>n = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 4.54 ) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Please list 1–2 things about assigning and/or grading student work that you are most confident about.</td>
<td>Experienced TAs / First-year TAs (df = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving feedback</td>
<td>n = 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 4.70 ) *</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01
Thinking Ecologically: Rhetorical Ecological Feminist Agency and Writing Program Administration

Kathleen J. Ryan

ABSTRACT

This article theorizes writing program administration in terms of place and ecology to create new understandings of how they function epistemologically and rhetorically for WPAs. To this end, I bring epistemologies of place and ecology to writing program administration to create more ways for WPAs to flourish as agents in their communities. First, I summarize key aspects of two alternative epistemologies that are more inclusive of women, minorities, and ecologies and that better reflect the messiness of life than positivist epistemology. Second, I outline a compatible rhetorical ecological feminist agency, where agency refers to “the capacity of the rhetor to act” (Geisler 12), in relationship to these epistemologies. Third, I illustrate how this theorizing can help WPAs administer their programs more effectively. My hope is to offer WPAs new possibilities for knowing and acting agentively in their working lives.

I reject the rootlessness and ignorance of place typically ascribed to academics because of our intellectual orientation to a “boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths” and as a result of national job searches that mean most academics “are living wherever we could find work” (Zencey 15). I believe faculty can choose rootedness despite the vagaries of an academic job market. As I see it, the choice isn’t whether or not to choose rootedness but why and how writing program administrators (WPAs) in particular should choose to explore location as an epistemic identification.¹

Unearthing “hidden subjectivities” like physical location disrupts assumptions that knowledge is discrete and knowers are neutral, universal, autonomous subjects who exercise mastery over the objects of their knowing (Code, “Taking” 19). Positivist epistemology dangerously privileges what bell hooks calls the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and advances anthropocentrism, an “overemphasis on the centrality of human
values and concerns at the expense of nonhuman ones” (qtd. in Preston xi). A great deal of scholarship in writing program administration destabilizes the former while the latter is emergent in our scholarship, largely in the form of discussions of place and context. Conversations about WPA places and spaces in The Writing Program Interrupted: Making Space for Critical Discourse begin to do this work. For example, Sidney Dobrin critiques the Council of Writing Program Administrators as an organization for its “guarded conservatism to protect its place” (57), while Lisa Emerson and Rosemary Clerehan explore how to resituate writing program administration outside of North American contexts. That “good assessment is local” has become a valued commonplace in writing assessment scholarship (Condon xiv). Organic Writing Assessment is only one example; it extends Bob Broad’s dynamic criteria mapping into different academic contexts to strengthen the case for supplanting “fast-food style” assessment with “organic, localized assessment to nourish productive teaching and learning” (Broad et al. 2). Scholarship in community literacy and service learning also connects writing program administration to place. For instance, Eli Goldblatt’s Because We Live Here discusses his efforts to build connections between the writing program at Temple University and neighborhood literacy projects in Philadelphia.

I am encouraged by the rich attention to local context in WPA research. However, I would like to see us theorize writing program administration more fully in terms of place and ecology to create new understandings of how they function epistemologically and rhetorically for WPAs. To this end, I bring epistemologies of place and ecology to writing program administration to create more ways for WPAs to flourish as agents in their communities. First, I summarize key aspects of two alternative epistemologies that are more inclusive of women, minorities, and ecologies and that better reflect the messiness of life than positivist epistemology. Second, I outline a compatible rhetorical ecological feminist agency, where agency refers to “the capacity of the rhetor to act” in relationship to these epistemologies (Geisler 12). Third, I illustrate how this theorizing can help WPAs become better at administrating, helping us to change things for the better.

Framing Knowledges: Grounding Knowledge and Ecological Thinking

I begin by introducing two related epistemologies that motivate my effort to persuade readers to include physical location and ecological thinking in doing writing program administration and that serve as a cornerstone of my argument for doing so. I draw on Christopher Preston’s epistemologi-
cal project because of his close attention to the relationship between place and knowing and Lorraine Code’s scholarship for her broader consideration of ecology, literally and metaphorically, as a new epistemological project. Both projects significantly challenge positivist epistemology in useful ways for WPAs interested in disrupting divisions between place, ecology, and knowledge making.

In *Grounding Knowledge*, environmental philosopher Christopher Preston argues that “the very cognitive processes with which we contemplate our place in the world are themselves derived from and wedded to our physical locatedness” (xv emphasis original). Quite simply, place helps constitute knowledge. For example, people living by the ocean, in Tornado Alley, or in the desert Southwest all have values, beliefs, and practices grounded in those geographies. Moreover, encountering different environments productively disorients people’s sensorimotor functions and creates confusion, a feeling that “reflects the struggle of the embodied imagination to hastily rearrange sensorimotor and cognitive structure so that a person can feel at home in the new situation” (Preston 132). I still have to remind myself that a hazy summer sky in Montana is not a sign of humidity as it is on the East Coast but a sign of fire season. Stepping off a roller coaster or a treadmill or encountering a dramatically new landscape for the first time challenges our senses, and the struggle to reorient is both physical and cognitive. This is a significant point because, as Preston goes on to argue, encountering environmental diversity supports cultural diversity. It helps us become more creative and flexible in dealing with the confusion of adjusting to differences and changes: “Walking long distances on snow, bundled up against the cold in Manitoba, requires significantly different embodied schemas from kayaking through the steamy swamps of the low country of South Carolina” (Preston 130).

Preston’s work helps us consider how the natural and constructed environments we live in function epistemically. To draw the connection closer to the places in which WPAs work, consider the commonplace that rows versus circles of desks sponsor different kinds of knowledge, acquisition on the one hand and construction on the other. As we move from offices to classrooms and other meeting spaces, “even the most office-bound among us finds the phenomenal field reconfigured through direct or indirect contact with the spontaneity of the natural world” (Preston 45). We pull coats on or off to walk across campus to meetings, share our garden’s abundance with colleagues, and observe encroaching darkness as winter approaches and increasing daylight hours in spring. While these experiences don’t have a direct cause and effect relationship to writing program administration, Preston’s research reassures us that “places draw together the natural, the
social, and the intellectual in such a way that they give us a location from which to understand the full complexity of our relationships to what lies around us” (107).

Faculty members also experience adjustment periods as we move to different institutional and geographic homes. Preston recognizes the difficulty of such physical transitions: “Relocating to a different area should be recognized as a painful time of mental reorganization rather than a harmless change of scenery” (100). That’s true whether you’re moving from a large public university to a small liberal arts college in the same city or from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountains. If we accept that academics live only in the world of the intellect, then we may struggle to observe and develop connections to where we live or to understand how location can be a stepping off point to understanding our writing programs and our campuses differently simply because such influences are not on our horizons.

Feminist epistemologist Lorraine Code’s most recent project, Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Thinking, shifts us from Prescott’s tight focus on knowledge making and place to take up ecology more broadly. That place constitutes knowledge figures as only part of Code’s project; she is concerned with larger ecological patterns and tensions. Ecology is “the study of habitats both physical and social where people endeavor to live well together” (Code, Ecological 25), and ecological thinking conceives of “place, embodied locatedness, and discursive interdependence” as “conditions for the very possibility of knowledge and action” (20). Code’s interests include the politics and ethics of situatedness and interconnection in studying the nature of knowledge. She advocates disrupting the “social imaginary of mastery,” or positivist epistemology, in favor of an epistemology characterized by a “responsible deliberative-negotiative citizenship” (Code 20). In doing so, she repositions knowers as

self-critically cognizant of being part of and specifically located within a social-physical world that constrains and enables human practices, where knowing and acting always generate consequences. For this subject, internal interdependence within communities and their external dependence on one another are given. . . . Acknowledging the partiality of their knowings and self-knowings, and cultivating an awareness of the effects of that knowing (however small, however local), ecological subjects are well placed, collectively and singly, to own and take responsibility for their epistemic-moral-political activity. (Code 5)

To summarize, ecological knowers are situated, embodied, interconnected persons whose recognition of the limits of perspectives positions them to
be accountable for what they know and do because they are cognizant of politics of location and relation. For Code, *Silent Spring* exemplifies ecological thinking because Rachel Carson “read[s] evidence—say, for the power of DDT and other pesticides—together with the careful investigations of implications for human and other lives of profligate usage” (40), conducts research in the field and the laboratory, engages with multiple audiences (including scientists, government agencies, nature lovers), and recognizes that not just “the surface characteristics and internal specificities of organisms” matter but “understanding how those specificities work together” (51). These acts of knowledge making include practices like mapping interrelations to examine patterns, willingly negotiating different perspectives, acknowledging multiple interpretations, advocating for others ethically, valuing scientific/disciplinary evidence and experiential evidence, and taking the “longer temporal and spatial view” (Code 45). It “is about imagining, crafting, articulating, endeavoring to enact principles of ideal cohabitation” (Code 24), or creating “habitats where people can live well together and respectfully with and within the physical/natural world” (Code 19).

Code’s scholarship helps WPAs consider our disciplinary knowledges and beliefs relationally, situationally, and ethically in the midst of the webs, patterns, and puzzles that surround us: competing and connecting departments and programs; local histories and happenings; different perspectives, alliances, and locations of faculty, staff, administrators, and students; and our own disciplinary knowledges, experiences, and affiliations. Ecological thinking helps WPAs resee everyday experiences like committee work. No committee is just a group of individuals with discrete knowledges and investments; rather, committee members may hold any number of locations and patterns and puzzles of affiliations crisscross within and beyond the immediacy of any given meeting. Knowing in this way means a WPA can observe and reflect on interactions in meetings like campus writing committees, writing center meetings, or department meetings differently, with an eye towards seeing where others locate themselves but also watching relationships in motion, ideas moving across perspectives, and positions oscillating in tension. Observing and mapping such patterns offers new knowledge of campus issues and helps us imagine new ways to interact with colleagues and advocate for our programs and writing students. Instead of discounting a faculty member (in a long line of different faculty members) who claims students can’t write as a histrionic stance, I can entertain and respond to that perspective in the context of larger conversations about what it means to write and learn to write on our campus (and nationally) and in terms of how our university’s writing requirements enable or neglect students’ needs as writers and faculty members’ needs when teaching writ-
ing intensive courses. WPAs can and do practice the patience and planning a “long view” demands.

Christopher Preston’s and Lorraine Code’s epistemological projects both frame and prompt my case for WPAs to counter rootlessness not only by considering “connectedness to place” as a “key aspect of an integrated life” (Zencey 16), but also by exploring how an ecological framework (which includes recognizing place as constitutive of knowledge) leads to what Code refers to as ideal cohabitation, and what I want to identify as flourishing. In GenAdmin: Theorizing WPA Identities in the Twenty-First Century, my coauthors and I conclude our theorizing of GenAdmin as a productive identity for writing program administrators by sketching a concomitant ethics. A WPA ethics of flourishing includes three interrelated dimensions: committing to hope, enacting epistemic responsibility, and seeking eudaimonia or the “good life.” We look to Paula Mathieu and Dale Jacobs to articulate “doing hope” as an active, social means of “working contextually, inventively, and creatively towards change while being equally creative in how we measure change” (Charlton et al. 177). Epistemic responsibility assumes we are accountable for where we stand as knowers, what we know, and how we put it to use. Responsible academic knowers take the situations that we find ourselves in, add value to them, shape them to the extent that we can to meet our intellectual and pedagogical commitments. . . . but above all, expend our energy “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions” to the extent that we can create that good life and those just institutions. (Hall 30, emphasis original)

While GenAdmin flourishing implicitly values much of ecological thinking (in part because we’re indebted to Lorraine Code’s work on epistemic responsibility), and reflects the rhetorical understanding of the significance of context, we did not explore rootedness to place and ecological thinking as means to flourish. I begin to do that work here by advocating for a specific kind of epistemological shift and, in the next section, developing a related definition of agency to articulate the agentive possibilities associated with these ways of knowing. My hope is that WPAs sympathetic to these epistemological projects will embrace new possibilities for knowing and acting in their working lives.

Defining a Rhetorical Ecological Feminist Agency

Rhetoricians and feminists are among those who’ve examined the prospects for agency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries following postmodern critiques of the author. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell writes in “Agency:
Promiscuous and Protean,” “reports of the death of the author are greatly exaggerated” (5). Rather, the reliance on the autonomous agent or positivist knower has been supplanted by the understanding that “authors/rhetors are materially limited, linguistically constrained, historically situated subjects” (Campbell 5). Understanding that definitions of agency reflect models of knowledge reopens agentive possibilities for subjects who embrace grounding knowledge and ecological thinking. WPAs need robust definitions of agency that go beyond positivist epistemology to help them envision and undertake their jobs effectively.

To this end, I rely on feminist philosopher Chris Cuomo’s definition of moral agency as a starting point for articulating a rhetorical ecological feminist agency to help WPAs situate themselves as agents in respect to grounding knowledge and ecological thinking, epistemologies that help us choose rootedness and location as a subjectivity. I bring Cuomo’s definition of moral agency into dialogue with Andrea Lunsford’s concept “principled strategic rhetorical agency” (a definition of rhetorical agency that emerged during the first meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies in September 2003 and related publications) and my scholarship on feminist pragmatic rhetoric with Tarez Graban to offer a definition of agency that privileges subjects’ ecological and physical locations and is also explicitly rhetorical and ethical. In brief, a rhetorical ecological feminist agency is socially constructed, ecologically located and enacted, ethically responsible, rhetorically directed, and pragmatically oriented. It values experiential knowledge alongside disciplinary knowledge and recognizes that place and situation constitute knowledge. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency is valuable for WPAs for at least two reasons. First, WPAs always care about agency, and a consideration of the agentive potential associated with grounding knowledge and ecological thinking stimulates new perspectives on WPA agency. Second, WPAs value ethical decision making yet the word “ethical” is typically vaguely defined in our literature; Cuomo’s work, along with Preston’s and Code’s, offers renewed potential for ethical agentive activity because she locates agency in a specific feminist, environmental, and ethical framework called ecological feminism. Expanding ecological feminist agency via rhetorical agency and feminist pragmatic rhetoric renders ecological feminist agency more explicitly rhetorical and more fruitful for WPA rhetoricians who regularly need “to respond productively to what may seem an endless stream of irresolvable dilemmas” (Leverenz 106).

Cuomo’s ecological feminism “focuses on the links and patterns among the treatment of oppressed, exploited, or undervalued beings and entities—that is, among forms and instances of oppression and degradation, and common ethical and ontological bases for maltreatment” (7). It brings
together women’s oppression and the degradation of nature without the problematic essentialism characteristic of much ecofeminist work where “woman” gets too simply equated with “nature.” As Kim Hall puts it, “an ecological feminist must also claim, inhabit, and negotiate spaces between nature/culture” (81). Like Preston and Code, Cuomo’s concern is with the knowing subject as local, embodied, and living in relation to human and non-human others. Like Preston, she challenges the limits of anthropo-centricism and envisions her ethics as relevant for women and non-humans (although she doesn’t go into detail on the subject of non-humans). Code acknowledges that ecological thinking and ecological feminism make “good allies” (Ecological Thinking 17). Finally, Cuomo’s work with ecological feminism is oriented towards the kind of flourishing I seek here.

Moral agency is an “ethical starting point” for Cuomo’s theorizing (52), and she enumerates this concept throughout Feminism and Ecological Communities. In general, moral agency is about making deliberate choices, choosing the “best” course of action or making the “best” decision in situations with competing choices and definitions of “best.” Moral agency, Cuomo’s term for the ecological feminist agency she outlines, combines the following five characteristics: moral agency is social (53), selves are embodied and fluid (87), moral agents are responsible to and respectful of living entities and ecosystems (72), moral agents practice deliberation and decision making, and moral agents are pragmatically oriented towards changing things for the better rather than towards specific ends (76, 109). Cuomo’s ecological feminist agency entails social, pragmatic, and ethical beliefs that de-emphasize “liberal emphases on atomistic individuals” in favor of locating people in biotic and abiotic communities (111), advancing living with others as a practice of ethical decision-making, and connecting experiential and scientific knowledge making to action. Moreover, an active resistance to oppressions weaves throughout these features.

Critiques of Cuomo’s flourishing tend to focus on rhetorical concerns, specifically questions about who gets to decide how to define flourishing, who “should” flourish, and “how to prioritize competing claims for flourishing” (Zack 59). For Naomi Zack, these concerns necessitate heuristics to help people practice the “judicious valuing” entailed in enacting flourishing (59). Augmenting ecological feminist agency with rhetorical agency redresses this exigency because rhetoricians recognize the responsibilities involved in decision-making and have any number of heuristics and theories for analyzing and composing texts (i.e. discourse, images, situations) in context. The strategies of decision-making, interpreting, creating (or inventing), and acknowledging context that Cuomo identifies as part of decision-making are all rhetorical practices. The realm of rhetoric is precisely this
world of situated human judgment, the Freirean work of reading and writing our world. WPA rhetoricians are well suited to address these kinds of questions.

Andrea Lunsford’s concept “principled strategic rhetorical agency” offers helpful elaboration for crafting the rhetoricity of a rhetorical ecological feminist agency. Her definition acknowledges three key dimensions of rhetorical agency: “agency is always contingent but . . . can be adopted strategically, and rigorously, to bring about desired action,” agency “mediates ‘between individual action and the cultural environment in which individuals speak and act,’” and agency gets enacted in a “limited, rigorous and principled way” (Leff and Lunsford 65). A principled strategic rhetorical agency points to the social and contextual dimensions of rhetorical agency, the alliance between rhetoric and action, and the idea that rhetorical action is ethical action. Rhetorical agency, then, is adopted, constructed, situated, and deployed in context and among persons; it is ethically motivated and enacted. Augmenting rhetorical agency with Cuomo’s ecological feminist agency impresses upon WPAs the fact that ecology goes further than context in making the critical point that interactions between living beings and physical and biological environments constitutes subjectivity and enables and constrains agentic possibilities.

Expanding ecological feminist agency via feminist pragmatic rhetoric, a specific rhetorical theory, renders ecological feminist agency more explicitly rhetorical even as it reinforces key principles of ecological feminism. Feminist pragmatic rhetoric is motivated by the feminist goal to end oppressions and the pragmatic understanding that we can change our lives and our world for the better by acting thoughtfully on our beliefs. Because subjectivity shapes knowledge, making knowledge is contingent and interpretive. In addition, knowledge guides action and action has the potential to change beliefs and redirect action through reflection. Like ecological feminism, feminist pragmatic rhetoric ascribes to pragmatic philosophy, seeks to disrupt oppression, and is a “thoughtful practice” (Cuomo 143). Feminist pragmatic rhetoric is a hopeful rhetoric, one where knowledge and discourse work in service of reaching a vision of change holistically and specifically without being prescriptive.

One site in which this cycle of experiential knowledge making, pragmatic reflection, and action gets enacted is in discourse; dialogic negotiation is feminist pragmatic rhetoric’s primary discursive method. Feminist pragmatic rhetors are responsible knowers who practice a willingness to believe others (until evidence proves otherwise), aim to keep conversations productive, acknowledge subjectivity matters in discourse, and recognize rhetors enter discourse with an openness to changing their own mind even
as they seek to persuade others to entertain different beliefs. Ultimately, this model revises unsatisfying discourse practices that end without useful resolution because of differences. It is particularly useful for WPAs who regularly find themselves in conflicts on the job because of such challenges as the limited views of writing extant on many campuses and represented in national media outlets and because of the conflicting desires faculty, writing students, and administrators express about writing instruction. When ecological feminist agents are feminist pragmatic rhetoricians, they do their best to make good—responsible and located—choices about how to interact and communicate with others, how to act as members of groups, and how to live respectfully, especially when discursive conflicts seem inevitable.

Enacting this agency can arguably serve WPAs well because it both reinforces commonplace beliefs in our discipline, like social construction and civic values, and it offers new ways of thinking and acting agentively, particularly when it comes to considering the interplay between human (and non-human) locations and interrelations. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency encourages WPAs to recognize negotiating decisions in place as part of our responsibility as individuals who engage with other living organisms in biotic and abiotic communities, where the means and ends we pursue are no less ethical for being open to possibilities yet aligned with a specific ethics. Consider Debra Frank Dew’s point that “WPAs do not just enjoy a textual relationship with a subject matter; we employ our rhetorical training to establish a sound writing enterprise within the local context” (W41). WPA scholarship considers many methods, challenges, and strategies to do this work effectively because doing it is much harder than it sounds, and we need theories and practices for doing it well. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency can arguably help us do this work even better because it forwards a specific, robust ethical and ecological identification to enact epistemologies where place constitutes knowledge and embodied knowers situated among other knowers in place replaces positivist models and assumptions about knowers and agents.

Enacting a Rhetorical Ecological Feminist Agency

The possibilities for enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency are endless, whether you are a solo-WPA or part of a team of WPAs, a graduate student WPA or a senior scholar and WPA, or whether you are part of an independent writing program or firmly ensconced in an English Department. Here, I offer three ways to enact a rhetorical ecological feminist agency as a means to help WPAs imagine ways to adopt this agency in their own lives. First, I describe a scenario related to composition place-
ment where I would have benefited from this agentive perspective. Second, I discuss holistic reasons for WPAs to embrace a rhetorical ecological feminist agency that pertain to a sense of responsibility to the environment and other people. Third, I outline this agency at work in the context of a curricular revision. These examples illuminate what a rhetorical feminist ecological agency can offer WPAs, but they aren’t intended as prescriptive because this agency is situated and contingent; quite simply, the dynamics of place, ecology, and interrelations among people on the ground help shape the situations we encounter, the decisions we make.

The first scenario identifies the kinds of gaps in communication and understanding that occur when a strong sense of location and an awareness of the connections and patterns among members of a university community are not fully present. When I was in my second year as the Director of Composition, a solo WPA position, I was asked to help implement a new Board of Regents (BOR) policy on composition placement, one that, like many colleges and universities across the nation, uses minimum ACT and SAT test scores and a local placement to determine whether students need to take a developmental writing course, a first year composition course, or an advanced composition course. My role was to adapt the current placement test and process (which I oversee as part of my responsibilities) to the new guidelines and communicate the changes to staff members in advising, orientation, and the registrar’s office. At the time, I saw my task as largely organizational (regardless of what I believe about the value of the policy simply because the time was over to discuss the nature of or perceived need for the policy) and, in fact, simpler than the current placement process since fewer students would be required to take an on campus placement test administered during their summer campus orientation.

I was confused when I found pockets of resistance to the policy and to my efforts to revise the placement testing process accordingly. I later realized that I proceeded as I would have at my previous job, on a campus where lines of communication were clearer and faculty, staff, and administrators would have been more collectively prepared to respond to and implement a new BOR policy in composition. I was unfamiliar with some key aspects of my new institutional place, including a resistance to BOR policies in general on the grounds that they are often unaccompanied by funding and don’t necessarily include stakeholders in the policy making process. I wrongly assumed that in the course of developing the policy, discussions about the nature of the policy included relevant staff people and faculty members. In fact, key staff people felt that they weren’t well-informed by the administration and lacked agency in the creation of the policy, never mind its implementation. In retrospect, I better understand resistance on
my campus to BOR policies. What I first saw as resistance to placement policy implementation was more of a conscious/unconscious resistance to mandates that aren’t necessarily well-known, well-understood, well-valued, or well-funded. I misinterpreted the situation and my role largely because I wasn’t thinking about my current location, my new campus’s institutional ecology and its web of relations. Instead, I was overlaying on that situation practices, values, and knowledges I was familiar with from another institution.

A rhetorical ecological feminist agency affords WPAs assigned a particular, wide-ranging duty when new to a job the opportunity to consider patterns, relationships, and discursive needs in the specific institutional place. In this case, it would have encouraged me to imagine, interpret, and explore the links and patterns or even gaps in communication in relation to staff people who should’ve been included in conversations about the policy sooner. It might have exposed the tensions between my experiential knowledge with BOR policies and the experiential knowledge of those on my new campus. It could have alerted me to the oppressions at play among those who felt disenfranchised by the method of the policy’s creation even as they needed to adopt it, that is, to the ethics of helping others, particularly staff in advising and orientation, flourish in the context of putting the policy in place. Through conversation and observation, I could have developed different strategies to implement the policy responsible not just to the implementation of the policy and the students, but also the emotions and logics of the staff members involved.

Dialogic communication would have been an excellent strategy to use for talking face to face with people who seemed confused or frazzled by the change to explain the decisions we could make and invite others into shared decision making processes where possible to increase their agentive potential in at least implementing the policy. Had I thought through the potential differences in institutional location, I would have been better positioned to explore patterns of relations between faculty, staff, administrators, and BOR policy makers in relationship to what I already knew about policy implementation in general. In other words, a rhetorical ecological feminist agency calls for a shift in perspective from an autonomous and linear approach to implementing a task with a deadline to negotiating the best version of a policy implementation possible at the time, knowing it can be adapted over time as we learn more about the local implications of the policy. This approach would better mediate between action and location and respond to the complex webs of relations in which we are all implicated. The whole situation may have changed; people involved, including me, may have changed their minds about the implementation of the policy as well.
as beliefs and practices about how faculty, staff, and administrators on our campus might respond, individually and collectively, to BOR policies.

The prior scenario focuses largely on institutional ecologies; a more holistic even elusive scene for enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency is one that takes up environmental ecologies and ethics. I refer to the commitment to and respect of human and non-human others and to living in place well as holistic because there is no obvious cause and effect relationship between, for example, knowing the flora and fauna of the place you (now) call home and being a more effective WPA. However, WPAs can engage the bioregional premise that “people who resolve to live in a place indefinitely with deep commitment, no matter what their politics or philosophical views may be, are the key to that place’s future” (Thayer 258).

Part of the argument is that “If we are not directly tied to the land through our vocation, then we must attach to it by avocation” because “To really belong is to immerse oneself within; there are no substitutes for ‘being there’” (Thayer 85, emphasis original). Yet, as Eric Zencey observes, academics are often rootless, denizens of ideas not places. Derek Owens questions why composition studies largely ignores not simply place but the ecological degradation and ecological injustices rife in our world: “Why are these matters so absent in English and composition studies, whereas our work has been so radically transformed and enhanced by our willingness to explore race, class, and gender? To what do we owe this inexcusable lapse?” (366). Why separate ourselves from place when the earth “supplies the conditions and possibilities for everything we do,” and all our thinking “takes place against the background of the systemic impoverishment of many of those biotic systems in the face of increasing populations and consumption patterns” (Preston xii-xiii)?

Instead of asking why WPAs should care about environmental ecology, we might follow Owens and Preston and ask why many of us don’t. Because “graduate education is the site where our disciplinary identities are formed and internalized” (DiLeo 9), because job searches may take faculty far afield, and because publication is largely a disciplinary accomplishment, it takes time and effort for faculty to affiliate with a new institution and a new place. Hiring practices transplant faculty to new locations and leave them on tenterhooks while they earn tenure; as a result, pretenure faculty may not feel able to commit to a new place or develop community projects because they feel temporary. New hires may not realize the extent to which being a member of a department on a small liberal arts campus differs from being a graduate student in a privileged program at a research university. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency can help students and faculty, whether they stay in place for four years, seven years, or indefinitely, attend
to such differences in place and even shift from being “temporary and rootless occupant[s]” to inhabitants (Orr 102), “balanced, whole persons” (Orr 101), with a willingness to live in place and act for that place and its inhabitants. A rhetorical ecological feminism helps WPAs value and build connections to a new life place and campus colleagues as well as link local to global issues.

Living in a place knowledgeably and respectfully encourages commitment to its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Ways to build that commitment include learning about the local landscape, ecosystem, watershed, indigenous cultures, environmental history, climate, geography; workplace infrastructure, including sources for water, electricity, food, heat, and problems the workplace imposes on the environment; workplace history, current events, and future planning, and life place practices of those in the workplace and community. For instance, I’ve begun to learn about my adopted bioregion by observing the natural world, talking to locals, consulting guides like *Plants of the Rocky Mountains*, following local news on Twitter, and visiting websites to read about topics like local watershed restoration. Doing this kind of research helps transplants like me learn to live in and care about a new place and develop a willingness to understand people and help solve problems locally and cooperatively with an eye to the present and future. Understanding what it means to work at a land grant university or an historical women’s college can help you understand your campus’s and new state’s history as well as present challenges and strengths.

WPAs, new to their campuses or not, can adapt pedagogical mapping activities taught in composition courses to get to know their campus location in order to invent programmatically mindful of ecological location. Robert Brooke and Jason McIntosh use deep maps to teach students to “consider the places they inhabit” and develop civic identities (133). One assignment asks students to “draw a map that is rich with the places and pathways you inhabit today” and compose a narrative legend to analyze and synthesize their maps, paying attention to patterns and questions about “both what they did know about the places they inhabit as well as what they did not know” (Brooke and McIntosh 135, 137). Place-based assignments like this one arguably help students recognize that “rhetorical action comes into being as the writer shapes a clear understanding of the place of the action” (Brooke and McIntosh 147). Nedra Reynolds’ scholarship on mapping builds, in part, off the concept of deep maps, too. Her study of mental maps in Leeds shows how mapping “helps us understand the social production of space and people’s experiences in space” (86). Where we go, don’t go, and the places in between say quite a lot about our identities, including race, class, and gender. Reynolds’ students found, for instance,
that some areas of Leeds weren’t safe for them to go because of crime while others were places that “‘belonged’ to other social groups,” and still others were shared or contested spaces (92). Students in her Mapping URI project similarly explored, engaged and critiqued their campus environs by studying unfamiliar areas. This kind of mapping helps students consider the ways oppression is located in habitats and patterns of movement. For instance, a walking tour around the University of Tennessee’s Chattanooga campus draws attention to significant racial and environmental histories in the presence of a Confederate cemetery across the street, a memorial to the Trail of Tears near campus, and a well-documented history of environmental toxins in the air and water that have been under restoration since the late 1960s.

Imagine what WPAs can learn from mapping the daily pathways and places we inhabit. Imagine what you might learn from asking your WPA or writing colleagues to make their own maps and then using them to catalog and reflect on patterns and divergences. Asking questions about such maps is instructive for reflecting on the ways we move about our campuses and communities and using this information to construct and reconstruct our programs. The questions Brooke and McIntosh ask students to answer can guide WPAs, too: “What people or groups of people do you associate with different locations on your map?,” “What places do you walk, ride, or drive by regularly but never enter (outdoor and indoor places)?” and “What is not on your map?” (137). This analytical activity can help WPAs learn more about their workplace and colleagues. A more explicitly writing program mapping project might mean mapping places on campus where writing pedagogy, student writers, writing assessment or WPAs themselves are welcomed, excluded, or derided. Following Reynolds, studying the politics of place and writing spatially is a means to get to know circulating beliefs about writing in different parts of campus and potential sites of oppression and support (of student writers, writing pedagogy, etc.) from a different perspective. Practicing such ecological thinking helps WPAs discover “a whole new energy for shaping the state of the places where we will live, and the kinds of places we help those locations become” (Brooke and McIntosh 147). For instance, in mapping my typical movements on campus, I notice I rarely venture onto the south side of campus where many of the hard sciences are housed. If I want to hire a professional and technical writer, I should physically and mentally go over to that part of campus to learn about how such a position might support scientific writing instruction on my campus. By doing so, I can increase my awareness of and knowledge about writing in different places on campus and thus better—that is, more strategically and more effectively help construct the writing program on my campus.
Knowing our place and developing a sense of responsibility to it gives us a shared context for communicating with others, enabling our abilities to listen, talk, and learn. To know something of my colleagues as gardeners, hunters, or fly fishermen helps me talk informally with them to know them differently and them me, shifting our perspectives on each other, and thus potentially changing how we engage one another in committee work or departmental politics. As Thayer writes,

*People of considerably different backgrounds, and opinions can share feelings of belonging, identification, and caring for specific natural places. In the process of learning about a life-place, many can find new common ground with people whose political opinions they might otherwise or previously have disagreed.* (254)

Sharing a life place can help people who disagree over campus issues uncover some mutual values (though potentially different ways of experiencing those values) to aid dialogue and campus work. Learning a colleague you regularly disagree with volunteers for an organization you admire can help you build new lines of connection and communication that support more productive dialogue on committees or in departments.

Curricular revision offers another opportunity to engage a rhetorical ecological feminist agency. The first year composition course at my university is taught largely by teaching assistants earning a master’s degree in literature, English teaching, environmental studies, philosophy, or an MFA in poetry, fiction, or non-fiction. The turnover is rapid since teaching assistants teach one class each semester for only two, three, or four semesters depending on their appointment. A couple of long-term lecturers (one of whom mentors teaching assistants (TAs) and develops pedagogical workshops in her role as the Composition Coordinator), and two to three part-timers, often graduates of the program, round out the teaching staff. While the philosophy of the program, which draws from critical pedagogy and genre studies, remains fairly stable, the focus of assignments shifted too dramatically from year to year because I couldn’t quite find a match that worked for our student body comprised largely of first generation students from Montana and nearby states, teaching assistants from across the United States, and specific campus and community ecologies.

I revised the first year composition curriculum following my participation in a two-day faculty development workshop on ways to incorporate sustainability into undergraduate courses. Working with a group of twenty colleagues in a cross-disciplinary campus workshop, called Green Thread, significantly motivated me to experiment with a focus on sustainability because I learned more about my campus’s and my community’s signifi-
cant commitments to sustainability, and I received support from colleagues across campus as I shared my thinking. As the only expert in rhetoric and composition in the composition program, I often feel alone in inventing the program; participating in the Green Thread workshop gave me an opportunity to invent with others who also feel a responsibility to live in place well and have seen the benefits of doing so for individuals and communities. Recognizing that agency is in fact “formed within and responsive to . . . communities” means even solo-WPAs like me don’t have to invent and design curricular changes alone (Cuomo 53).

Through this collaborative work, I realized sustainability was a potentially productive way to shape first year composition on our campus for students and their teachers, in part because it offers a powerful way to encourage new students and new teachers to inhabit where they live, work, and study. First, ecocomposition is a good curricular fit on my campus, where the College of Forestry and Conservation and the Environmental Studies Program are nationally recognized, where we have minors in climate change and wilderness and civilization, where the creative writing program’s legacy includes poet Richard Hugo and writer William Kittredge, and where students and faculty generally share a love of the outdoors. Second, the new curriculum invites students to live in place, to link local and global issues, and to know about and care about where they are and where they are coming from as means to speak and act on behalf of a place and its inhabitants. In this case, the social networks and places I entered through Green Thread gave me the knowledge, inspiration, and confidence to develop a new curricular focus that helps students find their place as well.

Overall, teaching assistants thrive in this new curriculum. Helping first year TAs orient themselves to a new town, campus, and program has reframed the TA orientation by reminding me and other seasoned teachers what it’s like to be new to the campus and program while helping us to encourage new TAs to think ecologically about their new endeavor. I ask TAs to write a life place essay in orientation, and not only does writing this assignment invite them to do the kind of writing they’ll ask of their students, but they also begin to explore their new place. Doing so helps TAs new to a rural place reflect on metrocentric perspectives they may unconsciously bring to the program and the classroom. In the past, some TAs have criticized our students for their interests in rodeo or hunting and their lack of knowledge of The New Yorker. Learning about their new town in western Montana helps new TAs see where they are and who they are teaching relationally and more holistically then they might otherwise. As TAs learn the curriculum, pursue activities to develop their own approaches to this course, and adapt common assignments to reflect their interests and
strengths, they develop as agents, too. TAs have pursued such innovations as developing service learning components to assignments, emphasizing social issues of sustainability, and inviting students to compose digital life place narratives. Understanding agency as social opens up opportunities for recognizing and thus more explicitly responding to the ways membership in a community extends agency and invites commitment to a location. This is also true on urban and suburban campuses, as Derek Owens’ discussion in *Sustainability and Composition* illustrates.

When where we are is part of who we are, then as we move between places and live temporarily in them, we may come to hold more complex understandings of ourselves and others. For instance, the personal academic essay assignment first year students at my university compose on sustainability issues urges them to explore ways they construct their identities in a writing situation where “writers do not have recourse to an ‘authentic,’ independent, or centered self,” and they learn the “constructed and interpretive nature of experiential discourse” (Spigelman xvi). More broadly, I’ve quite simply come to unapologetically agree with Owens, Orr, and others that sustainability should be an academic focus across disciplines and departments to change thinking about humans’ relationships within and responsibilities towards biotic and abiotic ecosystems. My participation in the Green Thread workshop, as well as my reading in ecocomposition and ecological feminism, empowered me to articulate and act on this ethical stance as a WPA. The clarity, yet flexibility of making this commitment is agentive in that it gives me a direction in which to guide curricular revision, a collective conversation to inspire it, and a specific framework for acting ethically in my other WPA commitments.

Finally, enacting a rhetorical ecological feminist agency has lead me to construct a curriculum I believe in and one that seems more productive for students, teachers, and other program affiliates than past curricula we’ve used. A rhetorical ecological feminist agency offers an ethics and epistemology to guide program decision-making towards flourishing for all of those involved, including teachers, students, and colleagues. Second, as a specific ethics I can name and stand behind, I find it compelling–worth enacting and pursuing, and worth persuading TAs and students to embrace every semester. I am persuaded that ecological location matters and that we can reinhabit our campuses and our programs. A rhetorical ecological feminist perspective entails beliefs about agency I value for myself and for others: agency is social; individual agents are embodied and fluid; agents have a responsibility to and respect for humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems; agents are rhetoricians capable of making complex decisions; agents are pragmatic in the sense that they seek to change things for the better in com-
municative relationships with others. This article grew out of my belief that if we ask students to interrogate issues of place, ecology, and sustainability in their composition courses, so too can we ask ourselves, as WPAs, where these issues surface in writing program administration. Doing so has energized and improved my local program. Thinking ecologically, that is, drawing on grounding knowledge and ecological thinking through a rhetorical ecological feminist agency, supports not only my agency as a WPA but supports the entire enterprise as students, teachers, and colleagues develop a sense of connection and commitment to one another, the program, and the campus community and environment. Ultimately, the prospects for changing how we live on our campuses by embracing rootedness and location as epistemic are tantalizing for the prospects of flourishing in our world.

Notes

1. I want to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article and Rebecca Jones for helpful revision suggestions.

2. Chris Gallagher cautions us that “local assessments might not serve local needs and interests well” because “they may be poorly constructed, unaligned (or misaligned) with curriculum and instruction, and even blatantly unfair and discriminatory” (11). He proposes, rather, that good assessment depends both on “local and disciplinary values” (20).

3. I am thinking of the formative contributions Natural Discourse (Dobrin and Weisser, 2002), Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference (Reynolds, 2004), and The Locations of Composition (Keller and Weisser, 2007) bring to ecocomposition.

4. Lorraine Code acknowledges that her work on habitat “as a place to know” (Ecological 37) “is in some respect consonant with the position Preston develops in his Grounding Knowledge” (Ecological n31, 37).

5. GenAdmin means “a group or generation of writing program administrators whose graduate careers prepared them to do WPA work in some form, who came to see administration as a core component of their professional and intellectual identities, and who pursued or accepted administrative roles before tenure to satisfy personal or professional needs” (Charlton et al. xi). In other words, GenAdmin is a chosen subject position for WPAs.

6. “How ought we to understand the concept of rhetorical agency?,” also the title of Cheryl Geisler’s report, was one of the four major topics discussed at the working meeting of the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies (Geisler 9).

In *Life Place: Bioregional Thought and Practice*, Robert Thayer defines bioregion as “literally and etymologically a ‘life-place’—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can variously be defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region” (3). Bioregion offers a different way to form and organize our understanding of place by emphasizing environmental features that have historically shaped how people live in different landscapes.

Reynolds and Brooke and McIntosh are all indebted to William Least Heat Moon’s use of the term deep maps, which he used “to describe his rendering of the history, geobotany, cultural significance, and personal significance of one county in Kansas” (qtd. in Brooke and McIntosh 131).

According to the Greening UM web site, “The Green Thread Initiative is intended to infuse issues of ecological, social, and economic sustainability into courses across the UM curriculum.” Green Thread is modeled off of the Ponderosa Project at Northern Arizona University and the Piedmont Project at Emory University.

**Works Cited**


The Problem of Graduate-Level Writing Support: Building a Cross-Campus Graduate Writing Initiative

Steve Simpson

Abstract

Despite the critical role writing plays in graduate students’ professional lives, graduate writing support for both native and non-native English speakers remains an unmet need at many universities. Many WPAs, like others across the university, recognize the need for graduate writing support, but they may be understandably reluctant to get involved due to the strain it might place on existing resources and personnel, which are often allocated to undergraduate writing instruction. By not engaging this issue, however, writing programs are potentially missing out on opportunities to develop cross-campus partnerships and build respect for writing program work. In this article, I argue that the “problem” of graduate writing support is a systemic one, necessitating partnerships between writing programs and other university departments (e.g., writing centers, graduate offices, other departments in the disciplines). I start by reviewing recent research on graduate-level writing in higher education, second language writing, and writing studies. I then describe a graduate writing initiative being developed at New Mexico Tech. While such programs are likely to vary considerably across institutional contexts, I aim to provide writing programs and other university departments with ideas for creating similar cross-campus efforts in their own contexts.

Introduction

This project on graduate writing support grew from a chance encounter with a group of international doctoral students who wandered into the writing program office at a northeastern state university, looking for some course that they could take to improve their science writing. By the time they came to us, they had already been pinballed from department to
department on campus. Their own department had told these students that they could help with scientific content but that the students would need to seek writing support elsewhere. The small, under-resourced English as a Second Language (ESL) institute had a graduate ESL class but could not offer much guidance in academic conventions. And the school’s graduate office did not offer dissertation writing workshops at that time. The writing program seemed to be a logical place to go for writing support. While we created a one-time summer course on academic writing for these students, the fact remains that we, like many writing programs across the country, mostly offered writing courses for undergraduates. Discussing this situation a year later, one of these students admitted to being perplexed. “Why would you focus on undergraduates?” she asked. “Undergraduates don’t care about writing. Graduate students need writing.” While writing programs cannot—and should not—neglect undergraduate student needs, this student identified a significant gap in writing program design.

Mike Rose and Karen McClafferty argued over a decade ago that, historically, little effort has been made to address graduate-level writing instruction in any “systematic” way (27). Many across the university have long assumed that graduate students should already know how to write, even though the writing demands and genres graduate students encounter may be far different from what they have previously experienced. Given the glacial pace of change in most university systems, one should not be surprised that the situation Rose and McClafferty described still rings true today.

However, we are quite possibly witnessing a change in the priority afforded to graduate-level writing in higher education. As Alison Lee and Claire Aitchison argue in “Writing for the Doctorate and Beyond,” changes in the global economy and in academic job markets have resulted in significant changes to graduate education worldwide. These changes have highlighted the need for graduate-level writing support, particularly for science and engineering students who not only might lack awareness of disciplinary writing conventions, but who also are under increased pressure from their programs and advisors to publish scientific papers before graduating and to procure high-stakes research funding (88). Furthermore, the Institute of International Education reports a continuing increase in the numbers of international students pursuing graduate degrees in the US, many of whom are non-native English speakers (“Open Doors”). Given the role that English has assumed as the lingua franca of academic publication worldwide, many of these students will need to continue publishing in English if their research is to receive international recognition.
While many across the university recognize a need for graduate writing support, few agree on who should provide it. At many universities, graduate writing support is a hot potato passed between university departments and advisors, writing centers, ESL departments, and writing programs. Graduate advisors, who get swamped very quickly from numerous advisees requesting writing feedback—and who may have difficulty explaining implicit discipline-specific writing conventions—often refer students to writing centers. Writing centers, in turn, become quickly overwhelmed by dissertation-length projects coming in from around campus. While some writing programs across the country have experimented with graduate-level writing courses, writing programs have traditionally allocated their resources and personnel to undergraduate writing instruction.

The problem with graduate-level writing support is that it does not fit neatly into any university department as currently conceived. Or, to flip this statement, university systems often do not account for the fact that graduate students might still have a lot to learn about writing. Frankly, any university department or entity—including writing programs and writing centers—would have difficulty shouluding the weight of graduate writing support independently. Thus, this dilemma’s solution lies in cross-campus partnerships involving writing programs, writing centers, and ESL and other university departments.

This article draws from research and experience with graduate student writing from complete opposite corners of the US to pose principles for developing systems-based, cross-campus graduate writing initiatives. I start by describing recent educational initiatives and research on graduate writing from numerous fields, including higher education research, second language writing and English for academic purposes (EAP), and writing studies. I then describe one graduate writing initiative at New Mexico Tech, involving the writing and technical communication programs, the writing center, and the Center for Graduate Studies. While other institutional contexts may vary in how these components are configured, my goal is to provide writing programs and other university departments with ideas for creating similar cross-campus efforts in their own contexts.

The Problem of Graduate-Level Writing Support

Riding the Winds of Change in Graduate Education

Recent interest in graduate writing support comes alongside much larger concerns about the state of graduate education in the US and abroad, concerns fueled by rising graduate attrition rates (which range from 40–50 percent in US doctoral programs), increasing time to completion, and dismal
academic job markets (Golde 669; Golde and Walker). In the US, both
government and privately funded organizations such as the National Sci-
ence Foundation (NSF), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of
Teaching, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation have called for research
into how the doctoral experience can be improved and for creative educa-
tional initiatives that better prepare graduate students for academic life.
(See, for example, the NSF Integrative Graduate Education and Research
Traineeship [IGERT] program, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate,
and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation’s Responsive PhD Initiative).
In Europe, the Bologna Process, which now boasts participation by forty-
seven European countries, has sought to improve the quality of graduate
education in Europe and to make European graduate schools more com-
petitive with US institutions, both in terms of research quality and interna-
tional student enrollment.

These calls for graduate education reform have prompted a flurry of
higher education research on graduate education and mentorship in the
sciences (Boud and Lee; Golde; Nakamura and Shernoff; Walker et al.;
Wuff and Austin). Granted, researchers have identified numerous aspects of
graduate education needing improvement—from the quality of mentoring
relationships to student isolation—but communication skills surface con-
tinually in these discussions. Changing conditions in the academic job
market, coupled with increased competition for research funds, have raised
the stakes considerably for graduate students. As Anthony Paré explains in
“Slow the Presses,” graduate students are under more pressure to publish
before graduation than they were in the past. “Scholarship juries, funding
agencies and hiring committees all search for ways to divide applicants into
the more and less desirable,” Paré argues, “and a list of publications iden-
tifies a promising newcomer” (30). Further, many science and engineering
programs have abandoned the book-length dissertation for the “article compi-
lation” dissertation—a dissertation comprised of three or four publishable
(or published) articles.¹ In some universities, including my own, even mas-
ter’s students are pressured to publish research and to present at academic
conferences, as doing so makes them more competitive for leading doctoral
programs.

Admittedly, the push for graduate students to publish early is fueled by
pragmatic concerns: Not only does publication make students more mar-
ketable for jobs and post-doc positions, but writing journal-length articles
makes more sense for journal-driven fields with few publication outlets for
book-length manuscripts. Several advisors whom I interviewed at my pre-
vious institution in the northeastern US gestured with amusement at the
hulking, black-bound, dissertations collecting dust on their shelves. One professor joked that his dissertation made an ideal door stop.

As Paré laments, this “premature” push to publication also changes the dynamic of graduate writing. Graduate school, he argues, has always emphasized learning the practices of academia and specialized research communities, and dissertations have always been, and continue to be, an intense experience for any graduate student. A dissertation monograph written mainly for an audience consisting of one’s advisor and doctoral committee played a much more “heuristic” role in students’ learning processes than a collection of articles written for the entire research community (31). Students learned the practices of their community, but in a slightly lower-stakes environment more forgiving of novice mistakes. The pressure to publish as a graduate student forces students into the role of a practicing scientist much more quickly and steepens the curve for learning scientific genres and conventions. However, Paré concedes that “we cannot ignore the market pressure on students who must compete for jobs and scholarships, or the potential educational benefit of entering the debate in one’s field” (38). Thus, universities need innovative ways of supporting their graduate students in these efforts.

My colleagues in second language writing and applied linguistics have been researching advanced academic literacy practices of non-native English speaking graduate students and researchers for over two decades (e.g., Casanave; Swales Genre, Research; Tardy). While they have developed models for genre-based academic writing courses for non-native English speaking graduate students, researchers in writing studies and higher education research seem to be just picking up the trend.2

Much of the recent research on graduate writing support has come from researchers in non-US settings, most notably from Australian and Canadian researchers. Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson’s Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies of Supervision and Aitchison, Kamler and Lee’s Publishing Pedagogies for the Doctorate and Beyond are two particularly useful works from Australian settings that blend research on writing as a social practice with practical programmatic and classroom suggestions for graduate-level writing. Kamler and Thomson identify a huge gap in the scholarly attention given to doctoral writing—particularly to writing the dissertation—and an equally significant gap in the time doctoral advisors give to explicit writing instruction, though advisors frequently comment on students’ difficulty with writing. In the absence of specific guidance, they argue, doctoral students often seek the help of the many “do-it-yourself” dissertation writing guides on the market—such as Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day (Bolker)—though such books often oversim-
plify the writing process and are a poor substitute for quality writing support (Kamler and Thomson, “Failure,” 507).

Further, Doreen Starke-Myerring and a team of researchers from McGill University and the University of Alberta have been conducting an ongoing, multi-site study on “The State of Doctoral Writing in Doctoral Education,” with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This large-scale study involves extensive interviews with graduate students and their advisors, department heads, and writing center administrators at Canadian research institutions to identify both the writing problems students and advisors identify and the systemic obstacles to graduate writing support. (For some initial results, see Paré, Starke-Myerring, and McAlpine, “Dissertation”; Starke-Meyerring)

US-based composition researchers have just started exploring this subject in more depth. Laura Micciche and Allison Carr’s pivotal College Composition and Communication (CCC) article, for example, recently called for an “explicit commitment to graduate-level writing in English studies” (478). While Micciche and Carr focus on graduate-level writing courses for English and composition students, they nonetheless raise numerous issues relevant for graduate writing across the disciplines. Mya Poe, Neal Lerner, and Jennifer Craig’s Learning to Communicate in Science and Engineering, a series of case studies emerging from the communication across the curriculum program at MIT, features an innovative grant-writing assignment as part of a graduate-level biomedical engineering course. Furthermore, graduate writing initiatives have received much more attention in recent writing studies conferences, such as the 2011 Writing Research across Borders II conference at George Mason University, and the 2011 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Atlanta, GA. Example sessions from the 2011 CCCC include “The Successful Dissertation Boot Camp: Time, Space, and Motivation for Writing,” a presentation on a cross-disciplinary dissertation workshop at the University of Delaware; “The Story of the Dissertation Writing Institute,” an endowed graduate writing initiative at the University of Michigan; and “Graduate Student Writing: Dissertations, Grant Proposals, and Publications.”

While graduate-level writing research is developing momentum in writing studies, more research is needed to explore programmatic responses to the need for graduate writing support. Moreover, we need more research that identifies areas of overlap between emerging research in writing studies and existing bodies of research on genre-based graduate writing pedagogies in second language writing and English for academic purposes. A need exists for graduate writing pedagogies, and as writing researchers, we have a significant body of expertise to bring to this discussion. If we disengage
from these conversations, we miss out on offering our valuable input. We also miss an opportunity to meet a growing need at US research institutions and to develop critical cross-campus partnerships that could potentially build both the visibility of and respect for writing program work.

Pedagogical and Programmatic Challenges to Graduate Writing Support

Three pedagogical and administrative issues emerge as we discuss graduate-level writing support. First, learning in graduate school is much more decentered than we typically expect in undergraduate education. Graduate education, as a system, relies heavily on mentoring as the engine of teaching, particularly in the sciences. While this system is advantageous for numerous reasons (among them the opportunity for hands-on, situated learning with experienced professionals), it also has its pitfalls, in that mentoring relationships—and, in turn, students’ learning experiences—can vary drastically from field to field and even within graduate programs. Some advisors are hands-off; others micromanage students’ every movement. Some advisors, particularly in the sciences, carry additional responsibilities outside the university that limit one-to-one attention (e.g., consulting and government advising jobs); others have more time to work closely with students. Some advisors articulate writing habits to students well; others experience difficulty explaining writing conventions for which they have only implicit—not explicit—knowledge. While graduate mentoring relationships are critical, and while many in writing program administration might (rightly) believe that advisors should play a more active role in their students’ writing development, the reality is that graduate students often need multiple sources of input, as Jeanne Nakamura and David J. Shernoff have argued in their study of scientific mentoring (259). The challenge is to create sources of input that strengthen (and do not compete against) the mentoring relationship and that help students recognize and tap into existing resources in their fields.

Along these same lines, learning in graduate school can be highly distributed, in that much of the learning happens outside traditional classroom settings as students work in labs or in the field, solve problems with their research, negotiate with advisors or journal reviewers, network with other researchers at conferences—in general, while “in the thick” of their academic work. Similarly, as Nakamura and Shernoff argue, students encounter “multiple influences during the course of professional training” (184). Students, as learners, become active “selective agents” in their learning: adaptive complex systems that actively choose to select or reject pieces of knowledge in their attempt to construct a “model of the kind of scien-
tist they would like to be” (183–184). This distributed nature of learning might necessitate rethinking our knee-jerk models of writing instruction (i.e., offering preparatory writing classes) and exploring models that better fit within students’ existing academic networks and learning rhythms. For example, graduate students can be highly resistant to the idea of writing support when it is presented before they have recognized the need for it in their own learning, yet highly engaged once they have recognized this need (especially once they have started the dissertation process). Thus, graduate writing support needs to be flexible and to have multiple points of entry for students.

Second, both native and non-native English speakers need graduate writing support, which raises questions about how to satisfy the needs—some overlapping, some distinct—of both populations. Christine Feak, a graduate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor at the University of Michigan’s English Language Institute and co-author with John Swales of a popular graduate ESL textbook series (e.g., Swales and Feak), raised this very issue in her talk at the 2011 CCCC, “Academic Writing for Graduate Students: It’s Not Just for International Students Any More.” Feak’s call for genre-based graduate writing courses for both native and non-native English speakers was motivated by her recent experiences with native English speaking graduate students requesting to enroll in her graduate ESL courses, as—like the students described earlier in this essay—they felt that they had nowhere else to go.

However, our field often has difficulty imagining how the needs of native and non-native English speakers intersect. In both our literature and our teaching, we struggle to find the balance between separating and integrating the concerns of non-native English speaking students (NNES)—between seeing their concerns as distinct from those that Native English speakers (NES) face (e.g., as so-called ESL issues) and seeing them as pretty much the same as NES issues. I have also encountered this phenomenon repeatedly when talking to disciplinary faculty. For example, advisors have told me that every student—both NES and NNES—struggles initially writing a methods section for a journal article. Thus, writing a methods section is not an “ESL issue”; it is something every student needs to learn. While both populations do struggle with the methods genre, speaking to NNES students about their experiences reveals that they struggle for a number of reasons, some related to difficulties with the English language and some related to learning generic conventions.

Similar to what Paul Kei Matsuda argues in “Embracing Linguistic Diversity in the Intellectual Work of WPAs,” and in “The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in US College Composition,” so-called ESL issues
need a place for discussion in any writing course that we teach, even if there is a mixed student population. While many writing researchers have posed intriguing classroom models that purposefully integrate the needs of NESs and NNESs (for example, see Matsuda and Silva; Reichelt and Silva; Shuck), many of us in writing program development are still wrapping our minds around how to make this integration a regular part of the writing classroom. For graduate students, the question extends beyond just how to integrate the needs of these populations to how to put these two populations in conversation with each other in productive ways.

Third, as David Damrosch argues throughout *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, many university systems are highly fragmented and compartmentalized, and they resist the sort of interdisciplinary efforts needed to effect meaningful change. That is, university departments often work on a strict division of labor model and assume that any task that they do not identify as belonging to their department belongs, by default, to another department, a phenomenon that has frustrated writing program and WAC/WID administrators for years—“Our job is to work on the science. You’re supposed to work on the writing!”

Ironically, while departments within the university appear to be disconnected and to make decisions locally and independently, these departments can likewise be seen as functioning as part of a common system—albeit, a frequently inefficient one—in that decisions made locally in the university often have ramifications for other departments. Thus, a department that decides that it is not responsible for teaching writing might feel as if it is solving an internal departmental problem, though it is really, as Peter Senge and other systems and management theorists argue, “shifting the burden” to some other part of the system (104)—in many cases, writing centers and writing programs. Writing programs that decide they are not responsible for graduate writing are, again, shifting the burden elsewhere. As Senge argues in *The Fifth Discipline*, his landmark book on systems thinking and management strategy, this compartmentalization of responsibilities “creates a false sense of confidence”: “The boundaries that make the subdivisions are fundamentally arbitrary—as any manager finds out who attempts to treat an important problem as if it is purely ‘an economic problem,’ or ‘an accounting problem.’ Life comes to us whole. It is only the analytic lens we impose that makes it seem as if problems can be isolated and solved” (283).

Similarly, the “problem” of graduate writing instruction demands a more holistic lens, one that does not treat it simply as a “mentoring problem,” a “writing program problem,” or a “writing center problem,” but a problem affecting the entire institution.
The problem of graduate writing is a systemic problem in need of a systems-based solution. Contrary to what many think, the solutions to systemic problems are rarely large-scale system overhauls, as large-scale solutions are generally costly and time-consuming and can introduce new sets of problems in need of fixing. In the case of most writing programs, systemic overhaul might not even be on the table, as few writing programs have the resources, personnel, or energy to redefine themselves in such drastic ways. Rather, systems theorists work to identify “leverage points,” places in a system where small, strategic changes can potentially have ripple effects throughout the system, nudging even the most stubborn systems to adapt and change (Meadows 145; Senge 114). While these leverage points are not magical cures, they are places where writing programs and university departments with few resources and personnel can focus their efforts to strengthen their educational systems. As Damrosch argues, “Global changes can be initiated only by local means, in our decentralized academic system; at the same time, however, local changes, if they can be carried through gradually and cumulatively, can have profound consequences across the entire system” (159).

Developing a Graduate Writing Initiative at New Mexico Tech (NMT)

Institutional Context

New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology (NMT) is a small science and engineering research university with twenty-eight graduate programs, including very strong programs in astro- and atmospheric physics, earth sciences, and petroleum engineering. While our graduate population is small—approximately 400 students, 30 percent of whom are international students—our students contribute to cutting-edge research performed in a variety of labs and research facilities located on campus or operated in partnership with our university, such as the Very Large Array, a radio telescope apparatus featured in the movie Contact with Jodie Foster; the New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources; and a laboratory at an active volcano in Antarctica. NMT also specializes in energetic materials research, making it a popular filming location for the hit show, Mythbusters.

NMT has both a writing program with a three-course undergraduate writing sequence (two first-year writing courses and a required junior-level technical writing course) and a technical communication (TC) program with a bachelor’s of science in technical communication, one of only thirty such programs in the country. Both writing programs are housed in the interdisciplinary department of Communication, Liberal Arts, and Social
Sciences (CLASS), which also hosts the school’s writing and oral presentation center. Due to the small size of the department, overlap exists in faculty and resources for the two writing programs and the writing center, a configuration which may differ from other institutional contexts.³

In 2009, NMT received a Title V grant for graduate students from the Department of Education (PPOHA: Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans) which allowed the school to retool its Center for Graduate Studies and to launch a series of initiatives to improve students’ graduate experience, including graduate communication courses and ESL support. Substantial portions of this grant called for classes or resources that our TC program would need to supply, which initially placed us in a complicated position. However, our department also saw participation in this grant as an opportunity to fill long-overdue needs on campus (such as graduate ESL support), to increase our programs’ visibility, to build our programs, and to build better cross-campus relationships with science and engineering faculty. Our goal was to help build an infrastructure for graduate student support without confirming notions of our department as a “service” entity, and to do so with fairly limited resources—a small and maxed out staff, a very small writing center, and state-wide funding cuts that limited the potential for new personnel. I was hired in large part to develop graduate writing and communication programs proposed by this grant and to serve as a liaison between the TC and writing programs and the Center for Graduate Studies.

Leverage Points for Program Development

Because of our department’s small size, we knew that building a sustainable graduate writing initiative would require significant buy-in and involvement from other campus departments. While we would initiate these graduate writing programs, other departments would need to recognize their importance and share the burden of sustaining them. Not only would these writing initiatives need involvement from other departments, they would need to strengthen existing or potential networks within other departments. As Donella Meadows argues in “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,” “information flow” (i.e., “access to information”) is a high point of leverage in many systems (156). Numerous bottlenecks exist in the input students receive in their departments. Ask any graduate student in science and engineering fields who gives her feedback, and she inevitably answers “her advisor,” and only her advisor. As I have argued elsewhere, graduate students’ most underused resource is often each other (Simpson). Despite the collaborative nature of science and engineering research, graduate stu-
dents can become intensely isolated once they hit the writing stage. This lack of additional writing input places an incredible strain on the advisory relationship, as advisors can become quickly bogged down with just how much feedback they are expected to give.

With these thoughts in mind, we developed the following principles for designing sustainable graduate writing resources:

- Graduate writing support should enhance the feedback students receive from advisors and peers.
- Any course that is created should be seen as a “springboard” to other sources of support, rather than being a terminal learning experience. In other words, courses should do more than just provide content; they should provide longer-term learning strategies.
- Graduate writing support should provide explicit opportunities for both native and non-native English speakers and should put the two populations in conversation with each other.
- Graduate writing support mechanisms should intersect and should be flexible enough for students to access at multiple points in their graduate careers.

These guiding design principles, while simple, had a complicated origin. In part, they originated from research and from experiences with graduate students at a northeastern state university. However, they crystalized over the course of several months of strategic planning at NMT with faculty and staff from the TC program and from the Title V grant team. In one sense, these principles reflected both the realities and limitations of our institution and the needs of our graduate students. In another sense, they dovetailed well with our grant objectives, in that they leveraged, when possible, existing resources to encourage feasible and sustainable growth, which should be a program development goal with or without the existence of such a grant.

Naturally, these principles are ideal. Operationalizing them is the difficult part. As one can see in the remaining portions of this essay, this process is gradual and unfolds through modeling these principles to others within our department and across the university and through diplomacy and cross-campus dialogue. In our case, we started the process by opening our Writing and Oral Presentation Center for graduate students and piloting the following courses and initiatives in the 2010–2011 school year.

“Linked” Communication in the Sciences/Engineering Graduate Courses. These 3-credit courses, the rough graduate equivalent of undergraduate linked learning communities, focus on graduate and professional academic
genres (e.g., conference abstracts, journal articles, conference presentations, etc.) and communication to a variety of audiences. More importantly, they each have a “link” to a specific course or seminar in another department. That is, the communication course and the class/seminar in the disciplines share at least one writing or communication assignment, and the two professors collaborate on topics.\(^4\) In addition to the shared assignment, the communication courses explore a range of topics relevant to the sciences and engineering, such as communicating technical information to non-specialist audiences, analyzing discipline-specific writing for generic features, and “surviving” the academic peer review process. These courses are open to both native and non-native English speakers and purposefully integrate materials intended for both populations, thus inviting cross-cultural and cross-linguistic dialogue on academic conventions. We piloted two courses in fall 2010, one taught by the TC program director (linked with a mechanical engineering graduate seminar) and one taught by me (linked with a required quantum mechanics class in the physics department), and two courses in the 2011–2012 school year (linked with earth and environmental sciences and electrical engineering).

An Academic Communication Course for NNES Students, Linked with the Writing Center. In spring 2011, I piloted an EAP course very similar to the communication in the sciences/engineering courses, open to NNES graduate students from all departments. This course doubled as an independent study for our graduate writing center tutor, who received course credit for assisting with in-class activities and working with students on their projects in the writing center. By piloting a course specifically for NNESs, we are in a position to compare NNESs’ experiences in a mixed NES-NNES course with their experiences in a course strictly for NNESs. (One student has actually taken both courses). After offering the course again in spring 2012, we can determine whether both courses are necessary.

Thesis/Dissertation Boot Camp. “Boot camp” is a week-long intensive workshop for graduate students at the thesis or dissertation stage. Currently, the workshop is hosted by the writing center and staffed by a technical communication faculty member, a math professor, and a graduate writing tutor. While the boot camp staff offers short writing and time management workshops, participants spend much of the week writing in a comfortable environment with plenty of coffee and a strict “No Facebook” policy. Currently, we offer two boot camps a year, during both winter and summer breaks. Boot camp originated as a free writing center workshop,
though it will eventually be institutionalized as a 1-credit class covered by students’ graduate fellowships.

The need to make these initiatives flexible and accessible to graduate students has required us to adapt our program plans along the way. For example, we initially envisioned that graduate students would take the communication courses while completing their coursework in their departments, and that they would prefer to attend boot camp while in the final push toward finishing their degrees. We quickly found, however, that graduate students differed in how they wished to use these resources. Some graduate students preferred to have the support of a structured communication course while working on a thesis, and some graduate students used the boot camp to kick start the process of writing their thesis or dissertation. We even had students attend boot camp and then follow up the next semester by taking the EAP class. While our original conception fit a little more snugly with our grant objectives, allowing for graduate students to decide when and how to use these resources ultimately made them more useful to students. (As it happens, our external reviewer from the Department of Education also appreciated this flexibility in program design).

These changes in resource use required us to adjust our planning strategies, though. For instance, in our second round of pilots, we linked the communication in the science and engineering courses with larger departmental seminars rather than entry-level graduate courses.

As mentioned previously, cross-campus partnerships are critical to the success and sustainability of these programs. Interestingly, we found that the well-advertised, cross-disciplinary nature of these programs created opportunities to initiate conversations about graduate writing on campus and to forge new partnerships. In the initial stages of program development, we relied on a couple of energetic faculty members in science and engineering disciplines whom we recognized as potential writing advocates. The graduate dean at the time—an astrophysicist and a proponent of a well-rounded education—advocated the idea to his own department and encouraged a physics professor to participate in one of the links. This physics professor, Dr. Sharon Sessions, who later became my research collaborator, was up for tenure and saw this course link as a potentially beneficial opportunity. For the engineering link, we knew that the mechanical engineering department head was the most vocal proponent among engineers of communication on campus. As we expected, he was eager to participate. Lastly, our boot camp was developed with the help of a math professor whose daughter had just attended a dissertation boot camp at a nearby university. Upon hearing that we were developing cross-disciplinary
graduate writing initiatives with our Title V: PPOHA grant, this professor approached me with the idea of creating a dissertation boot camp. The fact that he was also serving as the current faculty senate moderator helped with publicizing the initiative.

In our first round of pilot courses, we tapped science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) faculty who were already convinced of our program’s importance. The real work came in the second round of pilots when we needed to persuade other campus departments to participate. As Paretti et al. indicate in “Reformist Possibilities? Exploring Writing Program Cross-Campus Partnerships,” partnerships are often formed more easily with departments in the humanities or social sciences than with science and engineering disciplines (86). While many faculty acknowledge the need for graduate writing support, many initially favor outsourcing this support over forming a partnership that could potentially take away from research time. However, our first round of pilot courses allowed us to approach departments with specific examples of successful linked courses and with STEM faculty members who could vouch for our initiative.

In the case of the communication in engineering course, the successful mechanical engineering link caught the attention of professors from both electrical and chemical engineering, sparking conversations on what these courses would look like in their own departments. Discussions surrounding the second communication in the sciences course were more complex. I approached the earth and environmental sciences department for two reasons: they have the largest graduate program on campus, and many of their students had already participated in our other initiatives (i.e., boot camp and the EAP course). My proposed link was met with cautious enthusiasm. While speaking at a department meeting, I perceived an immediate consensus among faculty regarding the need for graduate communication support mixed with a reluctance stemming from numerous possible reasons (e.g., the time commitment or questions about implementation). One hydrology professor agreed to participate, though he later confessed to holding back a little until seeing how many graduate students enrolled. Once students expressed interest in the course, he jumped in with both feet.

In addition to simply linking with departments, these courses, by design, provide space for faculty and researchers to share their own experiences with students, which helps open lines of feedback among faculty and students in participating departments. The hydrology professor took an active role in the communication course. In one class devoted to communicating with non-technical audiences, he shared specific documents that he had tailored to non-scientific audiences, including a PowerPoint he had used when serving as an expert witness in a water rights trial. He
also helped organize a session on writing job application materials, such as CVs and research statements. Dr. Sessions shared a very rough version of a National Science Foundation proposal with the first communication in the sciences course and discussed her composing processes. In other cases, staff from the various research facilities on campus—including the New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources and the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO)—visited to share anecdotes and communication strategies.

Some Initial Results

While we are still in the early stages of program development, we are already seeing signs of success. At the most basic level, student reviews for the courses and boot camp have been overwhelmingly positive. Enrollment in all of our courses has been optional, yet most have filled quickly. (Both the EAP and the communication in engineering courses, each capped at 12 students, were at capacity). In a recent campus-wide survey on graduate communication needs, one respondent self-identified as a former student and wrote that “bar none, the most useful course I took outside my major was the graduate writing course.” All three boot camps have filled quickly (13 in the first boot camp, 10 in the second, and 14 in the third) with a healthy mix of NESs and NNESs students from across campus, and reviews from both students and advisors have been positive. One advisor, responding to an anonymous survey, noted that “the student presented me with an excellent draft of his thesis last week . . . [;] it would not have been anywhere near that had it not been for the boot camp.”

Beyond the surveys and program assessments, however, the stories of student collaboration are particularly telling. Most promising were the opportunities for NESs and NNESs to interact and grow more trusting of each other’s expertise, which was one of our original principles for program development. The open nature of these initiatives encourages students to share articles or advice with others. In the fall 2010 communication in the sciences course, one Colombian student, who frequently admitted to lacking confidence in her English proficiency, voluntarily provided a workshop for her peers (complete with a set of written instructions) on inserting LaTex equations into PowerPoint presentations. In the fall 2011 communication in the sciences course, students regularly stayed after class to continue peer review sessions. In one case, an NES geology student recognized that an NNES petroleum engineering student was experiencing difficulty with the geological terminology in his essay, and the two scheduled a meeting outside of class so that she could explain the concepts behind the difficult dis-
disciplinary terminology. Students also scoured professional newsletters and journals for writing-related articles to forward to the rest of the class, several of which we worked into class readings. For example, students found an article from *Eos*, an American Geophysical Union publication, entitled, “What Role Can Scientists Play in Public Discourse?” (Oppenheimer) and a recent *Nature* article about a group of Italian seismologists on trial for manslaughter for not adequately communicating the risks associated with an “earthquake swarm” (Hall).

Our larger goals for these programs, however, were to build better infrastructures within departments for graduate-level writing support, which involves creating avenues for more regular feedback among students in particular graduate programs. While we expect this process to happen more gradually over time, we are already seeing some positive results. For example, since we know that we are not yet able to accommodate all graduate students in courses or in boot camp, we coach students on peer review and on developing writing groups. The idea is that these students can share these learning strategies with other students in their programs through other means, such as student-run peer writing groups. So far, we have had two graduate writing groups evolve from these initiatives, both of which were comprised of both NESs and NNESs. In both cases, the writing center helped students with logistical start-up issues, such as meeting times and spaces, but the groups were entirely student-run. Both groups also recruited students who had not yet participated in any of our writing initiatives, an indication that our students were passing along what they learned to others. One writing group from the first boot camp coached another student from their department on developing a writing plan for the second boot camp. I have even had professors from that department boast about these writing groups both privately to me and publically. (I am particularly pleased with the way these faculty members took ownership of the writing groups when speaking about them). We would like for these self-aggregating writing groups to be more widespread and will use the current groups as models when speaking with students in other departments.

Most importantly, both of the departments with which we worked in fall 2010 (physics and mechanical engineering) have taken steps toward better integrating communication and writing instruction in their curricula. The mechanical engineering department head actually requested permission from academic affairs to hire a communication specialist. Dr. Sessions has become my collaborator and has been instrumental in planning and publicizing our graduate writing initiatives. She and I will offer faculty-development workshops on our campus on integrating writing instruction with graduate courses in the disciplines. She adopted most of
the shared writing assignments that she and I developed as a regular part of her graduate courses (some of which are required of all incoming physics graduate students). Further, she and I have continued to experiment with writing center workshops that help students with these writing assignments.

In many ways, Dr. Sessions embodies the sort of cultural shift in attitudes toward writing and teaching that we would like to see on campus. While we have a ways to go before we experience a campus-wide cultural shift, her discussion of her own transformation—in addition to more practical discussions of how to fit the hands-on writing projects into traditionally content and lecture-based courses—has provided opportunities to discuss our program goals with other disciplinary faculty.

Granted, much work still needs to be done for these programs—these leverage points—to develop into large-scale shifts in the culture of writing on our campus. I don’t wish to misrepresent our experiences. We have had numerous successes, though for each success, we encounter at least two logistical issues that need to be sorted out. Our biggest obstacle has been fitting these initiatives into students’ schedules, which is easier in some departments than others. Both the physics and mechanical engineering departments were flexible in moving around students’ required labs and research hours, but other departments have less “wiggle room” than others. Thus, these obstacles may require not only more diplomatic effort on our part to argue for the value of our initiatives, but some more flexibility in our program design to better accommodate students from these departments.

Conclusion

This article has described a graduate writing initiative at NMT that involves partnerships between our writing and TC programs, the writing center, the Center for Graduate Studies (which has helped considerably in resolving logistical issues with students’ schedules), and various departments across campus. While this particular argument is directed toward writing programs, a variety of other university departments or offices—writing centers, independent WAC/WID programs, graduate offices, and science and engineering departments—may also benefit from our program description and may be instrumental in initiating such conversations on their campus. As mentioned previously, the configuration of departments and resources on our campus might differ from the configuration at other institutions, and so such partnerships will inevitably look different from campus to campus.

Good reasons exist, however, for writing programs to assume a leading role in these conversations. My status as a tenure-track research faculty member—working with a tenured professor in the physics department—
has given me considerable clout when speaking to departments about graduate education. While some writing center directors are tenure-track faculty, others are not. Thus, depending on the institution, writing program faculty might have a little more leverage to discuss graduate education. Further, graduate writing support is a significant gap on many campuses. Writing centers have already felt the pressure to provide graduate student support, and some have started to respond through a variety of programs, including graduate writing consultations, writing groups, and boot camps. Writing programs have been slower to respond, and many could benefit from exploring how they could collaborate with writing centers in this effort. Finally, graduate writing initiatives have the potential both to build our writing programs and to enrich the research in our field considerably. The fact that our programs have taken the lead in addressing what many have identified as a serious need on campus has not gone unnoticed by faculty in other departments and by the school’s administration, and we have benefitted from our involvement in numerous tangible ways, including financially.

Graduate writing support is rich, unexplored territory. While fruitful discussions of graduate writing are underway, more research into appropriate programmatic responses is needed. As this article’s title states, graduate writing support is, indeed, a “problem,” but it is a problem with the potential to galvanize our field’s research and pedagogy.

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Notes

1. A similar discussion on dissertations in the humanities emerged in a session at the 2012 Modern Language Association convention in Seattle, “The New Dissertation: Thinking Outside the (Proto) Book.” This discussion prompted an Inside Higher Ed article—Jaschik’s “Dissing the Dissertation”—and a provocative string of posts on the WPA listserv (e.g., “The Dissertation is a Bogus Requirement”). Jaschik, summarizing the views presented in several MLA sessions, reported that “too many dissertations are indeed governed by out-of-date conventions, leading to the production of ‘proto-books’ that may do little to promote scholarship and may not even be advancing the careers of graduate students.”

2. Writing studies, particularly the rhetoric of science, has had an academic interest in the scientific article and advanced academic genres (e.g., Bazerman; Myers), but this research has not prompted systematic attention to graduate writing pedagogy nor encouraged writing programs to pursue it. Also, some attention has been given to graduate literacies in our own and similar fields, such as Berkenkotter and Huckin’s study of “Nate” (Genre; “Initiation”), though again such studies stop short of exploring broader programmatic graduate writing support. For a more thorough history of research on graduate writing support, see Lee and Aitchison, “Writing.”

3. It is difficult in our institutional context to speak of the writing program, the TC program, and the writing center as distinct entities due to faculty overlap. We have five tenured or tenure-track faculty and four to five non-tenure-track faculty responsible for all the writing and upper-level technical communication courses. Most tenured and tenure-track faculty teach in both the writing program and the TC program. The TC program director also directs the oral presentation center (part of the writing center), and the writing program administrator teaches upper-level TC courses. While I am writing center director, I am also a tenure-track faculty member responsible for courses in both the TC and writing programs, and I am responsible for assisting with program development.

4. For example, one communication course linked with a required graduate quantum mechanics class shared two writing assignments: a larger course paper and a short homework response explaining "quantum measurement" to a non-specialist audience, arguably one of the more difficult quantum mechanical concepts. Students also participated in a mock “double-blind” peer review process modeled after academic peer review and presented a version of their final paper to the entire physics department. These courses purposefully blend materials intended for native and non-native English speaking audiences. My course, for example, uses both The MIT Guide to Science and Engineering Education (Paradis and Zimmerman) and Science Research Writing: A Guide for Non-Native Speakers of
English (Glasman-Deal). Everyone reads and benefits from both books, and issues of language and cultural diversity are discussed throughout the class. For more information on this class, see Simpson, “Graduate,” available at this url: http://newsmanager.commpartners/tesolswis/issues/2011-02-28/1.html

5. LaTex is a code-based document preparation system preferred in many STEM fields that make frequent use of equations and complex derivations. Most journals in astrophysics and atmospheric physics, for example, expect LaTex journal submissions.

6. The TC professor who taught the fall 2010 Communication in Engineering course was asked to serve a dual appointment in technical communication and mechanical engineering. This shift opened up room for the TC program to hire another tenure-track TC faculty member.

Works Cited


The Companies We Keep Or The Companies We Would Like to Try to Keep: Strategies and Tactics in Challenging Times

Linda Adler-Kassner

In an address at the University of Michigan on January 27, 2012, President Obama hinted at his administration’s potential plans for higher education. He began by linking education and economic achievement. “The degree you earn from Michigan,” he said, “will be the best tool you have to achieve that basic American promise—the idea that if you work hard, if you are applying yourself, if you are doing the right thing, you can do well enough to raise a family and own a home and send your own kids to college, put away a little for retirement, create products or services—be part of something that is adding value to this country and maybe changing the world. That’s what you’re striving for. That’s what the American dream is all about” (Obama). Obama then sketched the outlines of a new initiative, a college version of Race to the Top. Although he linked it to affordability, this initiative also includes elements of what in the post-Spellings age can be called accountability. Obama called for “a new report card for colleges. . . . From now on, parents and students deserve to know how a college is doing—how affordable it is, how well are its students doing? We want you to know how well a car stacks up before you buy it. You should know how well a college stacks up” (Obama).

The question of how well students are doing is one that has been asked with increasing frequency in public venues since the publication of the Spellings Commission Report in 2006. I’ve argued elsewhere that this report reflected—maybe even signaled—a moment where a number of people, forces, and organizations coalesced around a particular narrative. The purpose of postsecondary education, this story said, was to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy by equipping them with the skills and knowledge to become economically competitive agents (Miller et al.). This narrative is analogous to what educational historian David
Labaree has called the “social mobility” model of school, in which the purpose of education is to train students to be individual economic competitors (Labaree “Public”; Someone). As the Report told it, though, faculty didn’t understand what was necessary to achieve this purpose and that, as a result, institutions of higher education were no longer successfully training students to fulfill it. They had not, in the words of the Spellings Report, “confront[ed] the impact of globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, an increasingly diverse and aging population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs and new paradigms” (Miller et al. ix). Thus, the Spellings Report said, intervention was necessary. Among other things, colleges and universities needed to be accountable—they needed to outline what students were learning to be prepared for the 21st century economy, how, and why.

As Obama’s remarks at the University of Michigan demonstrate, this narrative has become considerably more powerful and focused in the last six years, especially around two key points: what “preparation” means and how “how well” will be indicated. In the first part of this article, I’ll consider how a number of organizations and movements loosely affiliated with education—organizations who upon first thought we might say are seeking to keep company with us—are seeking to define the meaning of “preparation” and how “how well” prepared will be indicated. Definitions of these elements reflect what students will be taught and how their knowledge will be assessed; thus, they will affect every aspect of instruction. Then, I’ll step back to consider how WPAs and writing instructors might work from principle to develop strategies for action in these challenging times.

Companies—and Non-Profits—and Keeping Company

I’ll begin, then, by updating the narrative that I’ve contended extends from documents like the Spellings Report. This narrative says that the purpose of postsecondary education is to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy, but that faculty aren’t doing a good job with this preparation because we don’t understand what’s necessary for success.

As I’ve said, answers to two key questions—what is meant by “preparation?” And how should “how well” be indicated?—are critical, because the responses provided to these questions will shape curriculum (and assessments). I want to talk about five players offering responses to these questions.

The first of these players is the American Legislative Executive Council, or ALEC. Journalist John Nichols describes ALEC as “a critical arm of the right-wing network of policy shops that, with infusions of corporate
cash, has evolved to shape American politics. . . . Corporate donors retain veto power over [the language in ALEC’s motions and platforms], which is developed by . . . secretive task forces” (Nichols). ALEC drafts model legislation and then distributes it through its members and networks to state legislatures.

In the last three years, ALEC has taken a keen interest in education. At the higher education level, ALEC’s interests take a number of forms. For instance, they have drafted the Higher Education Scholarship for High School Pupils Act, which would guarantee any high school student who graduates early and receives a “proficient” ranking on state tests a 50% tuition scholarship to college (ALEC, “High School Pupils”). It also includes the Credit Articulation Agreement Act, which would mandate that four-year institutions may not require additional coursework from two-year transfers unless explicitly required for a degree, and even then it could not add time to the achievement of the degree (ALEC, “Credit Articulation”).

ALEC has also drafted sample legislation that defines what “preparation” means and how “how well” should be indicated in its Academic Accountability for Higher Education Act. The draft of this Act circulated to members as part of the 2011 States and Nation Policy Summit Policy outlines these definitions clearly. Section 1 of the draft Act, “Annual Assessment of Core Collegiate Skills,” says that institutions must assess “the level of student learning gains in core collegiate skills.” It mentions only one specific skill, though—writing. Section 2 says that “institutions will conduct their assessments with their choice of one or more of the three standardized, nationally-normed instruments now widely in use: the Collegiate Learning Assessment, administered by the Council on Aid to Education; the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, administered by ACT, Inc.; or the Proficiency Profile, administered by Educational Testing Services, Inc.” Section 3 says that “[i]nstitutions have the option to choose a longitudinal assessment system to follow a group of students from freshman through senior status or test randomly selected cohorts of students of statistically meaningful size, in accordance with guidance from the testing companies” (ALEC 2011 States and Nation Policy Summit memo, October 27, 2011). For ALEC, then, answers to the question about “how well preparation is being done” lie in students’ performances on one of three tests: the CLA, the CAPP, or the ETS Proficiency Profile. The companies designing the tests determine what “preparation” means, even if institutions should choose to develop some supplementary longitudinal assessment.

If your institution participates in the Voluntary System of Accountability, the second player I’ll discuss, the details of ALEC’s model legislation probably sound familiar. The CLA, the CAAP, and the ETS Proficiency
Profile are the same three assessments included in the VSA. But where ALEC’s intention is for its act to become mandated by state law, the VSA is voluntary—at least, for institutions it is—and it doesn’t preclude additional institutional assessment. It also includes a variety of other factors in its metrics, including information on student perceptions and learning outcomes. Answers to questions about what “preparation” means and “how well” it is being achieved in the VSA, then, are, several steps removed from the model ALEC legislation, though still tied to standardized tests (see, for instance, VSA, “Overview”). It’s hard, though, not to notice the overlap between ALEC’s model legislation and the language used in the VSA, which was in place before the sample legislation was drafted. This might—and I emphasize might—be because the VSA and ALEC are connected through the Lumina Foundation, the third player I’ll discuss here. Lumina Program officer Kevin Corcoran was a member of the ALEC Education Task Force in 2010 and 2011 (ALEC Education Task Force Roster). Lumina was also a “Chairman” level sponsor of ALEC’s 2011 conference, pledging $50,000 to sponsor the speech of Bob Wise, the President of the Alliance for Excellence in Education (ALEC Exposed). Lumina also provided startup funding for the VSA (Voluntary).

Of course, many of us know Lumina. In fact, some of us may have received funding from Lumina. They, along with Gates, have been identified by education researchers Cassie Hall and Scott Thomas as one of two “megafoundations” engaged in what they call “advocacy philanthropy,” efforts that “emphasize broad-scale reform initiatives and systemic change through focused, hands-on public policy work” (2). Hall and Thomas observe “a shift in the focus of [these] foundations toward issues of completion, productivity, metrics, and efficiency” (12). And Lumina has enormous financing to back their interests. According to Hall and Thomas’s investigation, Lumina gave $25,543,238 to initiatives linked to postsecondary preparation and success 2009 and $25,654,300 in 2010 (12).

Among the efforts associated with Lumina’s attempt to define “preparation” is the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), the fourth project I want to touch upon. Modeled on the European “Tuning” process, the DQP attempts to define “preparation” by outlining five, complementary domains for learning: Applied Learning, Intellectual Skills, Specialized Knowledge, Broad, Integrative Learning, and Civic Learning. Within each of these, the DQP identifies degree-level goals for the associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s. These definitions are farther still from the tightly controlled metrics included in the ALEC legislation or even the VSA. The section focusing on “Communication Fluency” under “Intellectual Skills” says that students will produce writing in a relatively narrow band of modes—argument or
narrative for two year students; argument, narrative, or explication for four-year (14). We might say that on *initial* examination, these don’t seem so terrible, especially when compared to ALEC’s ideas about what “preparation” means, though I will return to this point shortly.

While the DQP provides a somewhat more nuanced vision—at least, relative to ALEC—of what “preparation” means, it doesn’t address “how well.” But it might not need to. That’s because several regional accreditors including the one in my region, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), are running voluntary pilots investigating whether the DQP might serve as a useful starting place for degree-level outcomes (Western Association). If institutions do decide to adapt (or adopt) the DQP outcomes as their own, they will then need to demonstrate how well these outcomes are being achieved through their assessments, and these assessments will invariably shape classroom practices. WASC has adopted this strategy in part to avoid the political heat that has been applied since the period around the publication of the Spellings Report, when the Higher Education Act (which in part authorizes the system of postsecondary accreditation that exists today) was renewed.

Since that time, accreditors have been repeatedly slapped for three things: allowing institutions to set their own learning standards and develop their own assessments; the lack of consistent outcomes across institutions; and the lack of comparable data. These were often accompanied by charges that some institutions were not ensuring that students experience the kind of intellectual rigor that they should in college. I point to you the example of *Academically Adrift*, for instance, as the latest instantiation of these accusations. However, they have been much more consistently expressed by people like Anne D. Neal, a longtime member of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), which approves accreditors. You can read about her concerns in a piece called “Seeking Higher Education Accountability” in an October 2008 ALEC Policy Forum (Neal). The DQP, then, along with the very process of postsecondary accreditation, might be another constellation of entities seeking to define “preparation” and “how well.”

Finally, I will point to the granddaddy of all efforts defining “preparation” and how “how well” should be indicated, the Common Core State Standards (Common Core). For those unfamiliar with them, the Standards have been adopted by 45 states and three territories. Adoption, in fact, was mandatory if states wanted to apply for Race to the Top funds. The Standards’ definitions of “preparation” in writing do include actual writing, for which we can be grateful. Through them, students will focus on argumentative writing, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative writing from
kindergarten through 12th grade. The Standards do mention the words “purpose and audience”; they do say that sometimes, writers blend these modes.

I don’t want to get too far afield here, but I do want to talk a bit about one of the major sponsors of the CCSS, Achieve, because they are a significant player in defining “preparation” and how “how well” will be indicated. Briefly, Achieve came to prominence in the early 2000s through another effort, the American Diploma Project (ADP). This was an attempt by Achieve and other partners including the National Governors’ Association, another of the Standards’ primary sponsors, to create common standards for English Language Arts and mathematics education. ADP involved “working” with teachers within the states to craft the standards—though that “work” was guided with an iron hand and a set of draft standards developed with organizations like ACT. ADP also introduced a new phrase into the discussion of education as part of its efforts, “College and Career Readiness,” and a story about teachers that accompanied this phrase—that teachers didn’t understand how to make students “college and career ready.” ADP was there to fill in the gaps, along with partners like ACT and the College Board, who had assessments at the ready.

Flash forward four years, and Achieve was centrally involved in the development of the Common Core Standards. Drafted by a relatively small group of educators (largely administrators) and professionals, vetted with minimal input from professional organizations like NCTE or even MLA, the Standards went from draft to final version in about 14 months (see Hesse for a discussion of the drafting process).

How the Standards are implemented in the educations of the millions of students whose experiences they will shape will really depend on the assessments that are developed to indicate “how well.” Almost all of the states that have adopted the Standards have joined one of two assessment consortia: SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, which is coordinated by the State of Washington, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, or PARCC. PARCC is coordinated by Achieve. Achieve, then, has been at the center of many mixes of those seeking to define “preparation” and how “how well” should be indicated in the last five or six years. Its influence and its funding have also grown considerably since the ADP. According to the organization’s 2009 Form 990, the form required of all non-profits by the IRS, Achieve’s 2005 grant revenue was $5,501,678. Its 2009 grant revenue was $12,507,312, a more than 50 percent increase in grant revenue over a five year period (Achieve). Over that same period, Achieve received over $20 million from the Gates Foundation and over $200,000 from Lumina.2
While the definitions of “preparation” and “how well” that will ultimately be shaped by Common Core Standard assessments are still unfolding, we know that the assessments will be machine scored (see ETS, for example), and we know from research in the field about correlations between machine scoring and very tightly constrained writing assignments (e.g., Whithaus). We also know that the intent is for assessments developed for Grade 12 students to serve as placement tests for colleges. According to a blog entry by Allison Jones, the Vice President for Postsecondary Collaboration at Achieve, posted on Getting Past Go (a project which, by the way, is partly funded by Lumina),

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) college ready assessment will be used to determine whether a student will be “placed” into remedial courses or enrolled directly into entry-level, credit-bearing courses. . . . Thus, the PARCC college ready assessment, and that of SMARTER Balanced, too, will be used by colleges and universities as a “placement test” that determines into which course a student will be placed—remedial or credit-bearing.

Let me pause, now, and summarize where we are. First, we know that questions about what “preparation” means and “how well” preparation will be indicated are very much with us. Second, we know that there are a variety of answers being provided to these questions by groups like ALEC, foundations like Lumina and efforts they fund like the VSA and the DQP, and think tank/actors like Achieve. These answers are also tightly wound through the Common Core and its assessments, which will have a profound effect on the experiences of K-12 students and might also bear significantly on college writing placement. Third, we know that these organizations are connected—sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely, as is indicated in Figure 1. Finally, we know that these groups, foundations, and think tank/actors have considerably more power, reach, and money than do K-12 teachers, college instructors, or any of our professional organizations.
The question, then, is how can we faculty members enter these discussions in order to make a difference for our students and our programs? I think that we can make a difference. The question of “how” lies in achieving a balance between identifying our principles and enacting tactics that reflect them. By “principles” I mean beliefs and values that lie at the core of what we do and represent ideas that are foundational for our work. I think here of a phrase I’ve cited before from the legal scholar Karl Llewellyn: “Strategies without [principles] is a menace, but [principles] without strategies is a mess” (sic) (Llewellyn qtd in Adler-Kassner, 5). Llewellyn’s quote reminds us of the constant need to identify what we believe, to name what motivates and inspires us, and to work smartly and strategically with those principles in mind. I’m going to focus on just one of those principles here, one that I think is critical as we move forward. To explain it, though, it’s important to take a step back from the day-to-day discussions of what “preparation” means and how “how well” will be indicated and look at some broader context.
What we are seeing in this moment in time, I would contend, is a tension within the currently dominant narrative about the purpose of education. This narrative, as I’ve said, suggests that the purpose of education is to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy by teaching them to be economic competitors, what Labaree called education for “social mobility.” In a separate analysis, Labaree has also identified two simultaneous movements within higher education that are currently occurring within this purpose (“Mutual Subversion”). The intersections between purpose and narratives create both problems and potential for us, so I need to explain these movements to illustrate the point.

The first movement within higher education, says Labaree, is from liberal education to professional training. That is: learning at the undergraduate level has come to center on equipping students with what are seen as the “skills” necessary for professional success. While Labaree says that this shift isn’t very recent at all, I would argue that it is more noticeable of late because of the dominance of the “college and career readiness” frame.

Existing simultaneously with the movement from liberal education to professional training, Labaree argues, is a shift from professional training to liberal education. That is: the professional training that institutions provide is primarily focused on attributes associated with liberal education: the ability to communicate effectively, think critically, and so on.

In the end, Labaree contends that liberal education has won. In other words, while higher education might seem to be professionally oriented when it speaks to “career readiness,” that definition of “readiness,” especially when it’s posited by people in the academy, reflects the perspective of and attributes associated with liberal education.

Our initial reaction to what Labaree represents as the victory of liberal education over professional training might be to celebrate. But when this victory is situated within the purpose of social mobility, the triumph of liberal education becomes problematic. That’s because within it, school is less
about education and more about credentialing for the purposes of vocationalism ("Mutual Subversion" 12–13). The content of learning is no longer important; it's the development of strategies that will lead to career success that is. As a result, as academics seek to emphasize strategies like critical writing, reading, and thinking that are seemingly applicable across contexts, especially in making the appeal that they apply in “careers,” the actual content of academic disciplines and the connections between that content and those strategies is disappearing. As Labaree puts it, “the content is liberal, but credentialism means that the content does not really matter” ("Mutual Subversion” 15). So while we might celebrate the elevation of something like critical thinking in this new era of vocationally-oriented education, it’s increasingly seen as something that can be developed apart from specific disciplinary content.

Ultimately, then, Labaree’s analysis helps to put the challenges I’m outlining here into a broader context: Increasingly, higher education has claimed that it provides strategies and even “skills” associated with liberal education in order to prepare students for life beyond the academy. Within the social mobility narrative, though, this claim is frequently associated with a content-vacated vocationalism that I would argue is reflected in the phrase “career readiness.” It is also reflected in definitions of “preparation” and how “how well” will be indicated held by the entities that I defined earlier. Among all of them is the idea that in college, students should develop skills and strategies that they can use to compete in careers after college.

This content-vacant, vocationally oriented perspective on education is abundantly evident in Obama’s remarks, in the ALEC legislation, and in the Voluntary System of Accountability. I’ll skip over illustrations from these, in fact, because it’s so easy to see this perspective in them. It’s seen in documents like the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), which some might consider (at least upon initial reading) as somewhere between “okay” and “perhaps not so bad,” where the particularly invidious consequences of content-vacant liberal education can become more apparent.

First, I’ll remind you of the DQP’s explicit writing outcomes, which focus in part on the production of modes. At the associate’s level, these outcomes say that writers should “present[] substantially error-free prose in both argumentative and narrative forms to general and specialized audiences” (Lumina 13). Bachelor’s level outcomes include:

- Construct[ing] sustained, coherent arguments and/or narratives and/or explications of technical issues and processes, in two media, to general and specific audiences.
• With one or more oral interlocutors or collaborators, advancing an argument or designs an approach to resolving a social, personal or ethical dilemma. (Lumina 14)

While these might not seem terrible upon first or even second glance, they do primarily emphasize the production of a particular kind of form. As scholars from Anne Beaufort to Anis Bawarshi to Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have argued, putting form at the center of writing instruction is highly problematic because it negates the content of writing, a point to which I will return shortly.

It is when the DQP implicitly includes writing, though, that things become more problematic. I’ll mention just a few outcomes from four of the document’s five domains focusing on writing to illustrate the point. These say that the student and/or the student’s writing:

• Describes the scope and principal features of his/her field of study, citing at least some of its core theories and practices, and offers a similar explication of at least one related field (10).
• Defines and properly uses the principal specialized terms used in the field, both historical and contemporaneous (10).
• Demonstrates fluency in the use of tools, technologies and methods common to the field (10).
• Evaluates, clarifies and frames a complex question or challenge, using perspectives and scholarship drawn from the student’s major field and at least one other field (10).
• Constructs a project related to a familiar but complex problem in his/her field of study by independently assembling, arranging and reformulating ideas, concepts, designs and/or techniques (10).
• Constructs a summative project, paper, performance or practice-based performance that draws on current research, scholarship and/or techniques in the field (10).
• Produces, independently or collaboratively, an investigative, creative or practical work that draws on specific theories, tools and methods from at least two academic fields (11).
• Incorporates multiple information resources presented in different media and/or different languages, in projects, papers or performances, with citations in forms appropriate to those resources, and evaluates the reliability and comparative worth of competing information resources (13).
• Presents a discrete project, paper, exhibit or performance, or other appropriate demonstration that links knowledge and/or skills acquired
in work, community and/or research activities with knowledge acquired in one or more disciplines; explains in writing or another medium how those elements were combined in the product to shape its intended meaning or findings; and employs appropriate citations to demonstrate the relationship of the product to literature in its field (17).

- Completes a substantial field-based project related to his or her major course of study; seeks and employs insights from others in implementing the project; evaluates a significant challenge or question faced in the project in relation to core concepts, methods or assumptions in his or her major field; and describes the effects of learning outside the classroom on his or her research or practical skills (17).

Again, these outcomes might not seem problematic. In fact, they could even be read as supporting writing in multiple sites, courses, and for multiple purposes. We like that, to be sure. But at no point does the DQP suggest that writing might be something other than a tool, a strategy. To give the document its due, it also doesn’t do this for any other field. But no other academic field except, maybe, math, is considered by people outside the field—and, I would argue, sometimes inside as well—as a discipline whose subject is in service to other disciplines.

Because of this perception, a perception that is reflected in the DQP and, I think, in some first year composition courses, responding to questions of what “prepared” means and how “how well” should be indicated from our perspective becomes especially difficult. This is because from a content-vacant, skills-oriented perspective, our discipline of Writing Studies is erased. Until we develop and act from principles about the meaning of what composition and writing studies is as a discipline, and then link what happens in composition courses—which exist within our discipline—to those principles, we are at the mercy of the companies seeking to keep our company. And to me, that’s a problem.

Principles and Strategies: For Now

Our challenge, then, is to develop strategies to navigate a course through these challenging times. Returning to the Llewellyn quote for a moment, I believe these must extend from our principles. The first principle, and I think the most foundational one, is to clearly define what Writing Studies is, what it does, and how we know that and then to make sure that this definition is clearly reflected throughout all of our work. This echoes Richard Haswell’s call for RAD research (Haswell) and Chris Anson’s for empirical

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work (Anson), but speaks to something *sui generis*, too: an idea of what we are about.

Fortunately, abundant work in our field by many researchers—including (but not limited to) Chuck Bazerman and Paul Prior, Anne Beaufort, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, and Kathleen Yancey—speaks to this issue. Through their research, we can identify long and short form definitions of what Writing Studies *is* and what it *does*. In the interests of time, I’ll skip to the short form of this definition:

**Writing Studies focuses on three things:**

1. The roles that writers and writing perform in particular contexts;
2. The values reflected in writing and in those roles, and
3. The implications extending from relationships between roles, writing, and values.

The principle from which we must proceed, then, is that we must work from a definition of what Writing Studies *is* and what it *does*—if not this definition, something similar to it. From it, students—and also administrators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders—can study and practice with the writing in specific contexts, and also examine questions that involve the study of writing, values, and relationships in those contexts. Research tells us that this combination of study and practice contributes to the development of writers’ abilities, development that is predicated in part on engagement with the very questions at the core of our discipline illustrated in Figure 3.

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**Figure 3. Questions at the core of Writing Studies/Study of Writing.**
But without proceeding first from content and then to questions, study, and practice, we become nothing but strategy—and our field disappears.

I’ll end, then, with three strategies extending from this principle that I think can help us to navigate through narratives currently shaping education, narratives that present distinct definitions of “preparation” and “how well.”

1. No Vampires Policy

First is what I think of as the “no vampires” policy. This is: Writing classes, especially first year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always about the study of writing. They should not, as I heard recently and anecdotally, engage students in writing about vampires—nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about writing. In Writing Studies classes, students study writing and the intersections between writing and values within specific contexts. At the same time, that immersion helps students develop strategies that they can apply in other contexts, whether other classes or workplaces or community sites. I am certainly not the first person to make this suggestion, but I want to reiterate it here.

We can debate the limits of what this idea of “the study of writing means.” In my own first year classes and some others in the writing program where I work, it means asking students to study writing by focusing on a specific context, then using that as a site to learn how to learn about writing. Downs and Wardle work from the same principle with writing about writing; Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak do the same thing in their teaching for transfer model. Through these approaches, students learn to identify the boundaries of contexts, study and practice with conventions shaping writing, and understand and act upon values linked to those conventions and boundaries.

To illustrate strategies I’ve developed extending from this principle, I’ll give you two brief examples. One is from an assignment I’ve used with great success; one is a strategy for public presentations that also has worked remarkably well. The assignment, usually the second of three in a one-quarter general education first year writing class, introduces students to one of two related learning theories: “literacy practices” or “threshold concepts.”

They do some reading on either of these core concepts (if literacy practices, an excerpt from Barton and Hamilton’s *Local Literacies*; if threshold concepts, a chapter from Meyer and Land’s work on threshold concepts). Following this reading, students identify either appropriate literacy practices or threshold concepts in another class they’re taking by analyzing texts (syl-
labi, assignments, textbooks) from the class; interviewing faculty, TAs, and/or other students; and conducting observations in the class. Then, students take writing they’re doing for that class and examine how the literacy practices or threshold concepts they have identified through their research are or aren’t represented in their written work.

I did the “threshold concepts” version of this assignment last winter in my Writing 2 course. Just to illustrate one of its effects, I’ll quote here from an email I received at the end of the school year from one of the students in the most recent version of this class, Evan Pretzlaff. (It’s worth mentioning that Evan took this class during Winter quarter, which ended in March, but he sent this email in June, following the end of Spring quarter):

As a side note, one of my friends and I were going over a paper we both had to write for my upper division Religious Studies course. What I noticed was how your major really does affect how you write. I could see he had been doing psychology just by the way the paper flowed and how he analyzed the people[,] whereas he could tell I was a History major by the way I did my analysis and how it all interconnected. This email suggests that Evan is studying writing from the perspective of Writing Studies—and that study is helping him make choices about completing writing in different contexts, too.

I also use the principle of acting on what Writing Studies is and what writing studies classes do when I give public presentations to audiences from parents, to foundation boards, to teachers. I’ve done this for years and I don’t think it’s anything new, but it illustrates the point well. Before I begin, I ask members of the audience to think about two very different things they’ve written in the last week. Then I ask them to write down answers to two questions: 1) What were the things that they wrote? 2) What did they need to know to do a good job with them? We all know the answers to these questions: they had to think about the conventions of the genre, the purpose for writing, the audience, the context, the situation. And every audience member knows the answer, too. So they respond, and then I use that as a launching point to describe how we Writing Studies researchers and teachers study these things, how they are at the center of our teaching, and how they are also at the core of discussions about writing in public contexts right now. The last time I did this kind of presentation, with an audience of UCSB parents, the questions shifted from ones like, “Don’t you think technology is ruining writing?” at the beginning of the talk to “How can we work with our kids to help them make connections between all the kinds of writing they do?” at the end.
I recognize that this idea of putting writing studies at the core of all that we do might represent a shift in the way that we conceptualize and teach writing classes, especially at the first year level. But this shift, I think, is critical. As Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, the co-director of the National Writing Project, put it recently, “the narrow or formulaic types of writing that we worry standards and assessments value in K-12 did not emerge *sui generis* and [are] not unknown at the college level, either” (Eidman-Aadahl). In some senses, we are reaping what our field collectively has sown by teaching writing classes about things other than writing, or by teaching a set of modes, or by seeing writing as a series of building blocks. These approaches feed directly into the content-vacated, vocationally-oriented frame that undermines our credibility and our field. Without this field, we have no firm ground on which to stand to participate in discussions about what “preparation” means and how “how well” should be indicated.

I also recognize that other people have different interests and approaches to this way of studying writing, so I invite you to think about how you and others in your program might work from this position. The key is to frame the study of writing within the larger principle: that writing classes focus on the study of writing within particular contexts, the values reflected in that writing, and the implications of relationships between writing and values. Not vampires.

2. Define “College Readiness” (without cringing)

Strategy two: If the “college and career readiness” is the frame within which discussions about education are taking place, and we know that it is, we need to be the drivers of the meaning of “college readiness,” and our definition of what that means must reflect what Writing Studies *is* and *does*. Note that I’m not saying we need to reframe the orientation toward college and career readiness, no matter how problematic we find that frame to be. But right now, in this moment, we simply don’t have the power or the money to do that. That said, within this exceptionally dominant frame, we are the college people—so let’s own it and go from there. We need to outline what we think is critical for students to be prepared for college level writing.

This position was originally suggested by NWP’s Eidman-Aadahl when we started to think together about the document that ultimately became *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council). As you probably know, the Framework outlines the habits of mind that students need to be prepared for credit-bearing college level writing courses and the critical writing, reading, and analysis strategies that can help students cultivate those habits. This month’s *College English* includes a symposium on the
Framework; two of the articles included in the symposium are quite critical of it (Severino; Summerfield and Anderson). Although I helped to draft the Framework, I don’t necessarily think it needs to be the answer, or the only answer, to our current challenges (though I will say that I think some of the critiques included in the symposium work against some of the principles that I’m laying out here—though this is a topic for another day). But it does offer a statement of the possible, not a vision of the not-possible/don’t-want/doesn’t-work. Additionally, the Framework was developed with input from hundreds of K-16 teachers nationwide, and has been used very broadly since its publication about 16 months ago. I’ve been querying people about their uses of the Framework since before CCCC this year. Between responses to my emails and searches of the web, I’ve learned that it’s been used as an institution-wide professional development resource in high school English departments and college writing programs/departments large and small (e.g., Schell; Rose); it has appeared in hundreds of NWP summer institutes. It is referenced in dissertations (e.g., Davis) and articles (e.g., Kirschbaum). Many incorporated it into presentations at CCC (e.g., Dryer; Thaiss and Childers); some used it in presentations at the WPA 2012 conference (e.g., Elder, Paine, and Poblete; Delli Carpini). It has been distributed by two state departments of education (Kentucky and Maine) and a multi-state consortium. Interestingly, it is also cited in SMARTER Balanced “rationale” for the SBAC assessments for the CCSS (SBAC, 45).

If the Framework doesn’t work for people—as it seems not to have for some of the authors of the College English responses—that’s fine. But in this specific instance, as in all others where people are looking to define what “preparation” means and how “how well” will be indicated, we’d better come up with what we want in response to these questions, not what we don’t want. Furthermore, these responses about what we want must strike a balance between content knowledge connected with Writing Studies and those strategies that can help students as they move through college and into careers. Because if we don’t do this, as I tried to illustrate in the first part of this talk, there are plenty of people who will do it for us.

3. Build Alliances

Finally, a point connected with the one I’ve just finished. We must build alliances with colleagues who are immersed in efforts to implement the Common Core State Standards in Writing, especially K-12 colleagues, no matter how problematic we find those standards to be. Unless we can find the educational equivalent of the 2000 year old man, K-12 teachers will be thinking creatively and hard about how to make their ways through
the morass of new standards and assessments that accompany these standards—and we need to think with them. This means, for instance, discussing how the Framework might deepen and broaden the Common Core State Standards in Writing, not focusing exclusively on the issues that we might have with those Standards. Here, too, I use the Framework only as an illustration of the point: we need to speak to what we want to happen in a way that reflects our principles, at the same time listening to and acknowledging the positions of others and attempting to make connections between our principles and theirs. Is this an entirely comfortable position? No. But will it enable us to move between our principles and others who are wading through the realities of public education today? Yes. If we have a chance to make our case, then make it we must. If we can’t, we probably want to pack our bags. But in making that decision to pack, it’s important to recognize that there is a significant cost attached—because right now, ours is hardly the loudest voice in conversations about what “writing preparation” means, and how “how well” that preparation has been achieved should be indicated.

Conclusion: Principles and Strategies in Challenging Times

It’s not hard to look around and recognize that these aren’t the brightest days we’ve seen for writing or education more generally. We can point to MOOCs, to for-profit universities, or to refinements in machine scoring as only a few signs of a movement to “educate” (and I use the term loosely) more people, often in less time, generally for less money; we can look at any number of efforts at the K-12 and postsecondary level to find evidence of what is now broadly referred to as the accountability agenda for education. The organizations and entities I’ve described here—the American Legislative Executive Council, the Voluntary System of Accountability, the Lumina Foundation, the Degree Qualifications Profile, and the Common Core Standards—are illustrations of just a few of the entities seeking to participate in a number of related movements to reshape education by influencing definitions of what “preparation” in writing means and how “how well” that preparation should be indicated as part of this transformation. As I’ve tried to indicate here, these movements are larger, more powerful, and better funded than any writing teachers, or even any group of writing teachers, will ever be.

But while this analysis might seem slightly pessimistic, I don’t believe that it should be. We writing teachers have a lot to bring to the table, too, as I’ve tried to illustrate here. Every day we work with students, on writing, with ideas. This work leads us to a kind of connection that just isn’t
accessible to those who don’t have day-to-day contact with students. We also bring a passion and a commitment to writing that extends from those experiences. If we work from strategies extending from a central principle that reflects our passions and ideals—defining what writing is and what it does, and then acting on that in all that we do—I believe that we can and will navigate these tricky times.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. This Act, along with all other ALEC model legislation affecting education, is available thanks to the work of The Center for New Media and Democracy and Common Cause. Acts can be found at alecexposed.org/wiki/Bills_Affecting_Americans’_Rights_to_a_Public_Education; ALEC meeting agendas can be viewed at www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQLwG&b=8072485 (or from the link on the front page of the CNMD ALEC site at alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_exposed).

2. Form 990s and other tax reporting information on many non-profit organizations are available at Guidestar.org.

3. I use the name “Writing Studies” to refer to the field in this discussion; I am equally comfortable with (and sympathetic to) the name “Composition and Rhetoric” to refer to it—and the same principles apply.

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Let’s Face It: Language Issues and the Writing Program Administrator

Paul Kei Matsuda

One day, during the first week of classes, a seasoned writing teacher—I’ll call her JoAnn—walked into my office. She told me that she had a student in her class whose writing looked “different” from other students she was used to working with.

“He is a great kid,” said JoAnn. “He has lots of interesting stories to tell—how he left his country to come to the United States. It’s just his grammar he needs to work on.”

After listening to her descriptions of the student and of his writing, I gave her a copy of Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom (aka, the “green book”), a resource book that included the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers and a host of articles about working with second language writers in the composition classroom (Matsuda, Cox, Jordan and Ortmeier-Hooper). I also offered to look at the student’s writing to assess the kind of challenges the student was facing, but she declined.

“I’m a good writing teacher,” she assured me as she hurried along to her next class. “I will work closely with him and give him lots of feedback.”

That she was a good writing teacher I had no doubt. She had many years of experience in teaching first-year composition, and her students adored her. Almost every time I walked by her office, she was there conferencing with a student. She was also a mentor to many novice teachers. Yet, she had no background or experience in working with second language writers. I asked her to keep me posted.

About half way through the semester, I ran into her in the hallway.

“How are things going?” I asked.

“Well, do you remember the student I told you about?” Without waiting for my answer, she continued: “He is failing my class.”
The student was failing, she explained, because he had numerous and persisting errors in his writing, despite her providing frequent feedback on the same set of grammar issues. I asked her if grammar was the only problem, and she said that the student had great ideas and interesting details, which seemed to suggest that the student was communicating his ideas fairly well. If so, why was he failing?

“I suppose I could be more lenient,” she explained. “But you know, his biology teacher isn’t going to be as forgiving.”

“Are you saying that you are failing this student because he may fail a biology class in the future?”

“Well, I don’t know,” she mumbled. “If I didn’t fail the student, what would faculty from other departments think?”

In my attempt to find an appropriate response, I quickly ran through several studies of second language writing in my mind that seemed relevant. I thought of Ann Johns’ case study of Luc, a Vietnamese resident student who was excelling in his major but had repeatedly failed the state-mandated writing exam that prevented him from graduating. I also remembered an error-gravity study by Terry Santos that showed that faculty members across the discipline are “willing to look beyond the deficiencies of language to the content” in texts written by second language writers (84). But there was no time to share these research insights with her. She had to get to her next writing class.

This story is fairly typical. When I served as the WPA at the University of New Hampshire and later at Arizona State University, I had similar conversations with writing instructors almost every semester. These issues are becoming more pressing as the number of second language writers in U.S. higher education continues to increase. Writing teachers at colleges and universities across the United States are routinely encountering second language writers in their classrooms as institutions aggressively recruit ethnic minority students (who contribute to the visible diversity of the student population) and international students (who pay out-of-state tuition and, at an increasing number of institutions, thousands of dollars in additional fees). At some institutions, it is no longer unusual to find writing classes where second language writers constitute a majority.

While second language writers bring rich linguistic and cultural resources, among other assets, a growing number of students also face serious challenges because of their English language proficiency, as Doug Hesse described in his post to the WPA-L:

. . . faculty across campus—and in the writing program—are concerned about a large number of student speakers and writers. I’ve looked at enough of their writing to agree that this isn’t just a case
of obsessive profs going nuts over prepositions and articles; there are fluency and intelligibility issues for even an enlightened and charitable reader. (Hesse)

As he explained, the University of Denver, like many other colleges and universities across the United States, has recently admitted “a significant percentage of international students” who “have satisfied the school’s cutoff scores on IELTS or TOEFL,” but whose “scores don’t accurately reflect the comprehension, speaking, and writing skills the students actually possess.” Hesse, like many other well-informed WPAs, also recognizes “ethical and professional” issues involved in working with second language writers in writing programs:

There are undoubtedly problems with our admissions processes. And when governmental funding for many of these students depends on their earning credits for [a] degree, we can’t simply put them into a language institute for a year, for example, and there are only so many mathematics and science courses students can take as they work on language skills. Failing them and sending them home with an “oops, we screwed up in admitting you” is doubly problematic. (Hesse)

Recognizing the complexity of the situation, Hesse asked what policies or guidelines might be appropriate in grading second language writers who are struggling with the English language. This essay is my attempt to address this important question that many conscientious WPAs and writing teachers are facing.

**Instructional Alignment and Language Issues**

In the field of education, there is an age-old concept known as *instructional alignment*. According to curriculum design specialist S. Alan Cohen, it refers to the degree to which “intended outcomes, instructional processes, and instructional assessment” correspond with one another (19). It would seem like a no-brainer: The intended outcomes defines what students are supposed to learn in the course or the program; instructional processes provide knowledge, skills, strategies and awareness that are necessary for students to reach the intended outcomes; instructional assessment measures whether students have achieved the kind and degree of learning stipulated by the outcomes.

The term instructional alignment “represents a well-established phenomenon in the history of instructional design” (Cohen 17), and its basic tenets have been widely accepted in the field of rhetoric and composition as well. As a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) position statement on writing assessment states: “Best assessment
practice is informed by pedagogical and curricular goals, which are in turn formatively affected by the assessment.” It continues:

Teachers or administrators designing assessments should ground the assessment in the classroom, program or departmental context. The goals or outcomes assessed should lead to assessment data[,] which is fed back to those involved with the regular activities assessed so that assessment results may be used to make changes in practice. (Writing Assessment: A Position Statement)

This notion also resonates with the idea of criterion-referenced writing assessment, which assesses what individual writers can do in reference to the predetermined set of outcomes—as opposed to norm-referenced assessment, which assesses how an individual student compares to all other students taking the same test.

In the context of writing instruction, perfect alignment is hard to achieve because, as Janet Emig famously put it, students do not always “learn because teachers teach and only what teachers explicitly teach” (135). Indeed, it is important to build a mechanism in assessment to account for incidental learning. It is also true that the teacher does not always need to provide everything that is stipulated in the intended outcomes because students are not blank slates. Students do bring what they have learned through previous instructions and experiences. The job for the teacher is to start from where students are at the beginning of the semester, and to bring them to where they need to be—as defined by the intended outcomes. The teacher, of course, does not shoulder the entire burden; this goal cannot be achieved without the students’ good-faith effort. As teachers, we cannot make students learn; we can only create a condition in which learning can happen. Still, the principle of instructional alignment reminds us not to punish students for what teachers do not teach or for what cannot be learned even with the best intentions of both teachers and students. In other words, the outcomes to be assessed must be achievable with instruction and students’ good-faith efforts.

What happens when some students come with a different level of prior learning in comparison to the traditional student population? In keeping with the principle of instructional alignment, one or more of the elements—intended outcomes, instruction, or instructional assessment—needs to be adjusted. In some cases, providing additional or different instruction for students with varying learning backgrounds may help them achieve the intended outcomes. In education, this practice is known as “differentiated instruction” (Tomlinson and Allan 2). If the level of preparation or the nature of preparation is such that differentiated instruction cannot
produce the desired outcomes, the outcomes and the assessment need to be reevaluated in response to the needs and aspirations of the current student population. Without such adjustments, the gap in prior learning becomes an *achievement gap* for the students. If, however, the curriculum is designed in such a way that some students cannot achieve the intended outcomes even with their best effort, the gap really belongs not to the students but to instruction—or to the outcomes-assessment combination.

As Cohen points out, “[t]eaching what we assess, or assessing what we teach seems embarrassingly obvious.” The key question, he suggests, is “What’s worth teaching? This is the same question as: What’s worth assessing?” (19). In the context of U.S. first-year composition, what is worth teaching—and therefore what is worth assessing—is most definitively outlined in the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (WPA OS)*, a highly influential statement providing guidelines for first-year composition programs in colleges and universities in the United States. Here is what the *WPA OS* says about language issues under the category, “Knowledge of Conventions”:

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The *WPA OS* explicitly includes the control of “syntax” and “grammar” as part of the intended outcomes for students in first-year composition courses. Many institutions have either adopted this statement or developed localized versions. My own institution, Arizona State University (ASU), is no exception. The current ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives, which is developed based on the *WPA OS*, also mentions grammar: “Throughout the semester, students will learn to . . . use grammatical and mechanical conventions of a variety of discourses in appropriate ways” (*ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives*). From these policy documents, it seems clear that students are expected to learn grammar by the end of first-year composition. (For a thorough critique of the *WPA OS* from a second-language perspective, see Matsuda and Skinell.)
WPA Outcomes Statement and Language Assessment

When it comes to assessment, however, it is not always clear to what extent students are expected to learn grammar. The WPA OS provides what categories of knowledge and skills are to be addressed but does not stipulate the level of attainment. As Kathleen Blake Yancey, Mark Wiley and others have pointed out, the lack of specific target level is by design—to avoid creating arbitrary standards when students’ writing proficiency levels vary widely from one institution to another. Furthermore, the WPA OS does not stipulate how much weight should be assigned to each category. While some institutions may have developed explicit guidelines as to what percentage of individual paper grades can be based on grammar, not all institutions have clear guidelines. For example, the current version of ASU Writing Programs Teachers’ Guide states: “Individual paper grades must not be based strictly on grammatical issues.” This statement seem to presuppose that grammar can be part of individual paper grades, but it does not set a specific limit—as long as it does not count for 100% of the grade.

Given that both the WPA OS and ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives list grammar as part of the intended outcomes, and given that ASU Writing Programs Teachers’ Guide allows for grammar to be part of the paper grades, it would seem natural to assume that grammar is being taught in the classroom. It is not the case, however, according to this writing instructor: “When I try to teach mechanics or grammar or vocabulary, the Writing Programs here at ASU tells me not to” (An ASU writing instructor, 2008). This comment comes from an institutional survey of writing instructors’ perceptions of the presence and needs of second language writers, which was conducted in Fall 2008 (Matsuda, Saenkhum, and Accardi). This instructor seems to be under the impression that she is not allowed to teach grammar or vocabulary. It is not the case that she does not want to or is not able to teach grammar to second language learners; although she does not have a specific training in second language writing, she does have a master’s degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). I must also note that there is no official policy at ASU prohibiting the teaching of grammar; yet the sentiment against grammar teaching in the composition classroom is somehow in the air. In the same survey, only 9 out of 74 respondents (12%) indicated that they addressed grammar issues in their writing classes. If writing instructors are not teaching grammar, how are students supposed to “learn to use grammatical and mechanical conventions” as stipulated in the intended outcomes?

I do not mean to single out ASU Writing Programs or any particular writing instructor; the situation described above seems to reflect the gen-
eral attitude toward grammar instruction in the field of rhetoric and composition. In fact, at a recent conference that focused on language issues in rhetoric and composition, one of the senior members of the field expressed his reluctance to address language issues, proclaiming that he was “a compositionist, not a linguist.” This sentiment also reflects the general consensus that has emerged in the field. In fact, the history of the field of rhetoric and composition is punctuated by a series of attempts to address issues of grammar development—promptly followed by efforts to shoot down those efforts (Matsuda, “It’s the Wild West”).

**Language Pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition**

As Robert J. Connors (*Composition-Rhetoric*), Susan Miller and others have pointed out, the creation of U.S. college composition courses in the late nineteenth century was an attempt to address the presence of language differences among native English speakers (Matsuda, “The Myth” 638). During the 1920s, Fred Newton Scott and his students, such as Sterling Andrus Leonard (*Current; “Old”) and Charles C. Fries (*American; “What”), sought to improve the teaching of grammar to those students by replacing prescriptive grammar—an idealized standard based on Latin grammar and literary usage—with descriptive grammar—a description of what language users actually do (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*). With the professionalization of rhetoric and composition during the 1950s and the 1960s, however, the focus on grammar in the composition classroom came under critical scrutiny. The campaign to apply insights from descriptive linguistics was greeted by emotionally charged attacks from humanities-oriented writing teachers who reacted to descriptive linguists’ preoccupation with the primacy of speech and to their scientific inclination (e.g., Sherwood; Tibbetts, “The Case,” “New Grammarians”). Somewhat ironically, the teaching of grammar was also dismissed by composition researchers in social scientific traditions. In synthesizing research conducted up until the early 1960s, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer concluded that grammar teaching had “negligible” or even “harmful effect on writing”—harmful because they took time away from other, ostensibly more important aspects of writing (37–38).

During the same period, U.S. higher education saw an increase of international students, most of whom came from countries where English is not the dominant language. Although institutions initially sent students to preparatory schools and intensive English programs before they were allowed to matriculate, the presence of those students became too visible, and some institutions began to create special sections of writing courses starting in
the late 1940s (Matsuda, “Composition” 709–710). After the Second World War, the influx of international students also prompted the discussion of second language issues at CCCC (706–710). Yet, by the early 1960s, the interest among composition specialists in addressing the needs of international students had begun to wane. With the creation, in 1965, of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages as a professional organization apart from CCCC and NCTE, second language issues disappeared completely from CCCC for about a decade (710–713).

The growing linguistic diversity in the 1960s and the 1970s, brought about in part by the civil rights movement and the advent of open admissions, also prompted attention to language issues. In the mid-1960s, Francis Christensen sought to apply Noam Chomsky’s transformational-generative grammar to devise a method of developing sentences and paragraphs (“Paragraph”; “Sentence”). A decade later, Mina Shaughnessy, Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, and others borrowed error analysis from applied linguistics to address language issues among basic writers at open admissions institutions. Frank O’Hare and others also applied transformational-generative grammar to develop sentence-combining exercises as a way of helping students achieve syntactic maturity. Although O’Hare’s focus was on high school students, the teaching of sentence combining was extended to college-age students by Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek and Max Morenberg (“Sentence; “Sentence”). These efforts were also met with strenuous attacks from various perspectives. Christensen’s rhetoric of the sentence was attacked for its alleged lack of form-meaning connection (e.g., Johnson; Tibbetts, “On the Practical”). In the late 1970s, Shaughnessy’s influential work, Errors and Expectations, was also taken to task for its apparent preoccupation with sentence-level errors (Rouse) and for its failure to consider larger ideological contexts of basic writing (Lu). Sentence combining pedagogy was also chastised for its formalism (e.g., Elbow) and scientism (e.g., Holzman).

Another important language-related movement came from a different ideological perspective. Geneva Smitherman and others brought insights from sociolinguistics to argue the legitimacy of African American English (AAE), and their efforts led to the development of a 1974 CCCC resolution, the Students Right to Their Own Languages (SRTOL). This progressive statement, however, was way ahead of its time. As Smitherman has described, the very process of getting the resolution adopted by CCCC and NCTE was riddled with controversies (“Historical”; “Students’”). The controversial nature of the document is also evident in the markedly lengthy background information that accompanied a one-paragraph resolution. Furthermore, Scott Wible has documented that an attempt to put
the SRTOL to practice encountered resistance from composition specialists who argued the need to help students write in a privileged variety of English—even while the field as a whole had been eager to embrace the position that grammar cannot and should not be taught in the composition classroom. In “The Erasure of Language,” Susan Peck MacDonald attributes the negative reception of SRTOL and the subsequent decline of language issues to several factors, including: the lack of clear implications for pedagogy and teacher preparation; the racialization of language as Black-and-White binary while failing to anticipate the further diversification of the U.S. college student population; and the outdated, narrow definition of language studies as well as the overemphasis on an equally-outdated ideas about grammar teaching (604). MacDonald also documents the sharp decline of language-related sessions at CCCC since 1975 (589), following the publication of SRTOL, which seems to have created more resistance than understanding or acceptance.

**The Demise of Language Pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition**

As Connors pointed out in “The Erasure of the Sentence,” sentence pedagogy in rhetoric and composition was beginning to wane by the 1980s. In 1985, Patrick Hartwell drove the last nail in the coffin with his *College English* article. In “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” he argued that the knowledge of grammar—or rather, grammars—was too complex for teachers and students to understand, teach or learn. He also argued that students already have grammar in their heads and therefore grammar teaching was unnecessary. Based on these assumptions, he urged writing scholars and teachers to leave grammar behind and focus on other, more interesting topics. During the five-year period following the publication of Hartwell’s article, the number of language-related sessions at CCCC plummeted further (MacDonald 589). Then, in 1989, Sharon Crowley published what amounts to a damning obituary for sentence pedagogy. In “Linguistics and Composition Instruction: 1950–1980,” she argued that attempts to apply linguistics has failed because “Contemporary linguists have chosen to confine their work to areas of language study that are susceptible to mathematical or empirical validation; until recently, they have shown little interest in moving beyond study of the sentence” (499). Lester Faigley also wrote that

> The demise of the influence [of linguistics] results not so much from the lack of substance in recent work on written language as it does from the lack of a dominant approach within linguistics that is applicable to the study of writing. Researchers of written language do not
share common goals and methodologies, nor use the same terms, nor recognize common research issues, nor even agree about the nature of language. (80)

I could not agree more with Crowley and Faigley—if we were to define linguistics in its narrow sense of general linguistics that seeks to develop theories of language in and of itself (which has been the domain of general linguistics since Saussure). While general linguistics may provide interesting insights into human mind and the nature of language, abstract theories of language are not useful for writing instruction because language users do not and cannot recognize those rules without years of training in linguistics. As Frank Parker and Kim Sydow Campbell have pointed out in their response to Crowley, however, the limitations of general linguistics—and the conflation of general linguistics with other areas of language studies—has led to the dismissal of various insights from language studies that can inform the study and teaching of writing.

There is another, more serious problem with the dismissal of insights from language studies—especially applied linguistics—that is particularly relevant to second language writers: Both arguments for and against sentence pedagogy in the composition classroom have been thoroughly grounded in the myth of linguistic homogeneity—“the tacit and widespread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English” (Matsuda, “The Myth” 638). As I documented in “Basic Writing and Second Language Writers” (75–77), for example, Shaughnessy was concerned primarily with native English users—or at least students who have had years of exposure to the English language. In fact, she described the student population as “native to the United States, where they have had from twelve to thirteen years of public schooling, mostly in New York City” (Errors and Expectations 7). In arguing for the end of grammar teaching, Hartwell was thinking only of “native” English users, as he wrote: “[t]he rule, however valuable it may be for non-native speakers, is, for the most part, simply unusable for native speakers of the language” (116). He even dismissed the significance of differences among different varieties of English, as he wrote: “Native speakers of English, regardless of dialect, show tacit mastery of the conventions of Standard English, and that mastery seems to transfer into abstract orthographic knowledge through interaction with print” (123). Crowley’s historical review of grammar pedagogy also focused on those who “endorsed the application of linguistics to the acquisition of native-language literacy” (480). With the presence of an increasing number of second language writers in writing programs, the whole issue of language pedagogy needs to be revisited.
Language Pedagogy and Second Language Writing

In second language research and instruction, where the need for students to develop the grammar of the target language seems obvious, the importance of teaching grammar has been taken for granted for the most part. Yet, the conceptions of grammar and grammar instruction have changed drastically over the last century. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, the teaching of second language was dominated by structural linguists who insisted that the teaching of English to nonnative users should be based on the application of insights from linguistics (Matsuda, “Composition”). They were “applied linguists” in the literal sense (i.e., linguistics applied). Although the grammar was usage-based (as opposed to mental grammar which is not teachable), it focused on the structure without much attention to the social function of language, and the descriptions were based largely on spoken language. Furthermore, the teaching of grammar was implicit, and relied largely on pattern practice. In the 1960s, Noam Chomsky challenged structural linguistics in favor of mental grammar, but his version of grammar was based on the hypothetical notion of “ideal native speaker” who had the innate and mysterious ability to acquire a native language. He did not provide an alternative theory of language or learning that was viable for adult second language instruction.

In the meantime, there were some important shifts in the study of language that were linked to the emergence of applied linguistics (i.e., applied studies of language, rather than linguistics applied), a new intellectual formation concerned with issues related to language—both form and function—as well as its users and uses. First, the structural view of language as its own coherent system apart from the context of use has been replaced with functional and usage-based grammars—such as cognitive grammar, systemic-functional grammar, and construction grammar—that see language as discursive resources that are tied to meaning. As Rod Ellis, one of the leading second language acquisition scholars, puts it, “the choice of which type of grammar to use as a basis for teaching is not a major source of controversy; descriptive grammars that detail the form-meaning relationships of the language are ascendant” (87). While learning these grammars in their entirety may not be practical for writing teachers or students, it would be useful to become familiar with pedagogical grammar—a set of teachable and learnable rules that are informed by usage-based descriptive grammars (e.g., Azar and Hagen; Celce-Murcia, Freeman, and Williams; Swan; Thornbury). Pedagogical grammar can help raise students’ language awareness and function heuristically to facilitate language development or
editing and proofreading, depending on individual students’ developmental stages. (For a discussion of pedagogical grammar, see Odlin).

In the classroom, reflecting the situated and functional view of language, the traditional course organization based on a pre-determined sequence of grammar lessons has declined, and the organization of materials based on communicative situations and functions has become widely accepted (Van Ek and Alexander; Wilkins). More recently, and especially in the context of second language writing instruction, genre has become a major guiding principle for the clustering of language resources, reflecting the emphasis on recurring communicative situations (Hyland; Tardy). In the writing classroom, the best way to address language issues that are situated and relevant to individual students is to address them through feedback on student writing. As Ellis writes, contemporary grammar instruction “involves any instructional technique that draws learners’ attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it” (84).

That second language writers need to acquire the grammar of the target language goes without saying. Yet, the efficacy of grammar instruction has been challenged in the field of second language acquisition as well. One of the most vocal opponents of metalinguistic awareness in the 1980s was Stephen Krashen, who argued that the metalinguistic knowledge and tacit grammatical knowledge were separate and that the former did not facilitate the latter. He argued that second language acquisition happened primarily through comprehensible and meaningful exposure to the target language. Other researchers have argued, however, that, although input is crucial for second language acquisition, metalinguistic awareness does speed up the process (Long, “Does Second Language”). More recently, researchers have explored additional factors that may contribute to second language acquisition, including output (Swain and Lapkin), noticing (Schmidt), and interaction (Long, “The Role”)—which translate to writing, metalinguistic awareness, and communication with audience, respectively.

**Recent Research on Grammar Feedback in Second Language Writing**

In the context of second language writing research, the strongest statement against grammar teaching has been made by John Truscott. In his 1996 review article, published in *Language Learning*, Truscott echoed a long-standing argument in rhetoric and composition in arguing that grammar instruction is not only ineffective but harmful to second language writers.
and should therefore be abandoned. Initially, he did not clearly define what he meant by “grammar correction”—whether it referred to direct corrections only (such as crossing off unnecessary morphemes, words or phrases, inserting missing words or phrases, changing word order, changing word forms) or whether it included indirect feedback that pointed out where the error was but without providing specific suggestions for changes. He later conceded that his definition was all-inclusive—encompassing both direct and indirect feedback. His unequivocal rejection of grammar feedback stimulated much debate and subsequent research.

Dana Ferris, in a series of studies, examined the effects of various types of written corrective feedback on revision. In one study, for example, Ferris and Barrie Roberts examined the relative efficacy of different types of feedback: underlining with codes to indicate the type of error, underlining with no codes, and no correction. They found that the groups that received feedback performed better in revising the text than the control group. Truscott pointed out, however, that the evidence in support of grammar feedback was based on its effect on revision but not on long-term language development. In support of this position, Truscott and Angela Yi-ping Hsu conducted a study to examine the impact of direct grammar correction on both revision and a subsequent writing task. They found that the group that received grammar feedback performed better in the revision task than the group that did not receive any feedback, but both groups did not differ significantly in their performance in a subsequent narrative writing task. Thus, the locus of the research on grammar correction was shifted from revision to acquisition.

A growing body of research has shown that the long-term efficacy of error feedback is related to metalinguistic awareness. Jean Chandler compared the long-term learning effects of students who were required to revise based on grammar feedback with students who were not, and found that the former group showed long-term development while the latter did not. In another study, John Bitchener and Ute Knoch showed that students who received feedback with or without metalinguistic commentary performed better in immediate post-test than the control group, but only groups that had received metalinguistic commentary retained the effects until the delayed post-test. Younghee Sheen investigated the relationship between learners’ language aptitude and the efficacy of two different kinds of focused grammar feedback: direct correction only and direct correction with metalinguistic commentary. She found that, in the immediate post-test, both groups performed better than the control group who did not receive any grammar feedback. In the delayed post-test, the group that received metalinguistic commentary performed better than the correction-
only group. The improvement was also linked to the students’ aptitude for language analysis, and the connection was especially strong for the group that received direct correction with metalinguistic feedback. In other words, metalinguistic feedback is effective for all students but especially for students who are better at language analysis.

The effect of grammar feedback is also mediated by other factors, such as the type and quality of teacher-student interaction. Bitchener, Young and Cameron found that corrective feedback is more effective—at least for some types of errors (in this case, simple past tense and definite articles)—when students receive both oral and written feedback. One of the possible reasons is the interaction that helps to focus students’ attention and clarify the nature of feedback. Another possibility is attitudinal. In a case study of a Korean English teacher and two of her students, Given Lee and Diane Schallert also found that the quality of revision was affected by the presence or absence of trusting relationship between the teacher and students. Another distinction is that between focused and unfocused feedback. The former involves providing grammar feedback on a limited number of error types whereas the latter addresses various kinds of errors at the same time. The aforementioned study by Sheen as well as another study by Bitchener examined the effects of focused grammar feedback on the referential uses of articles (a and the), and both studies showed the long-term effects of focused grammar feedback. However, a study by Rod Ellis, Younghee Sheen, Mihoko Murakami and Hide Takashima compared the efficacy of focused and unfocused feedback, and found that both types of feedback produced significantly better results in immediate and delayed post-tests than the control group that did not receive any grammar feedback.

**Language Pedagogy and Instructional Alignment**

As we have seen, recent research suggests that grammar feedback can facilitate revision and long-term language acquisition, especially if the feedback is accompanied by metalinguistic commentary. Yet, there are a few caveats: Both from research and experience, we know that the development of grammatical competence in a second language is a slow and incremental process, and even though the process can be sped up somewhat by instruction, there is no guarantee that students will be able to learn what is being taught. The current research (with the exception of Ellis et al.) has also tended to focus on a limited set of grammar features, such as articles and verb tenses; the extent to which grammar feedback can affect various language features is yet to be borne out. Furthermore, even for second language specialists, predicting readiness to learn a particular grammar item
is extremely difficult, if not impossible. As Ellis puts it, “instructed learners generally achieve higher levels of grammatical competence than naturalistic learners” but “instruction is no guarantee that learners would acquire what they have been taught” (85). If that is the case, we have a dilemma: If grammar feedback does not guarantee learning, is it fair to hold students accountable? If we take the principle of instructional alignment seriously, the answer would have to be negative, and we need to stop punishing students for what they do not bring with them.

One way to accomplish this goal is to put grammar learning into the category of incidental learning—to facilitate learning and reward success but not punish students if it learning does not happen. In practical terms, we need to shift the emphasis from summative assessment (i.e., grammar grading) to formative assessment (i.e., grammar feedback). Summative assessment is the terminal evaluation of student performance; grading is a form of summative assessment. It tells students what they can and cannot do or what they have and have not accomplished, but it does not necessarily facilitate their future performance. Formative assessment, on the other hand, focuses on letting students know where they have been, where they are, where they need to be and how they can get there; grammar feedback is a kind of formative feedback. To facilitate learning, writing teachers need to continue to provide grammar feedback for second language writers along with metalinguistic commentary. Although it does not always lead to immediate improvement or long-term acquisition, it may contribute to the development of language awareness that can eventually facilitate learning. To improve the odds, writing teachers need to develop an understanding of pedagogical grammar, which is essential in providing metalinguistic commentary.

Some teachers may worry that, if we do not grade students on the basis of grammar, students may not take grammar feedback seriously. I would not worry. Most second language writers do take it seriously; in fact, it is usually more difficult to get students not to think about grammar. Students already value grammar because it can help them convey their meaning more effectively, and providing grammar feedback can reinforce the value. Furthermore, grammar grading can discourage grammar learning by encouraging avoidance strategies—students may avoid using structures that they are not already comfortable with in order not to be graded down for errors, effectively reducing opportunities for learning. Even if grammar is not graded, grammar learning can be facilitated in other ways. Keeping a grammar learning log throughout the course and reflecting on language development at the end of the course can help facilitate metalinguistic awareness. Discussing the process of second language acquisition explicitly may help students understand the principle behind the development
of grammar knowledge. Explaining the rationale behind the type and frequency of grammar feedback as well as assessment policies may also create a better understanding of how to incorporate feedback.

It is also important to discuss implications of grammar errors. As Larry Beason’s error gravity study has demonstrated, business executives use errors to judge the writer’s credibility as a person, writer and organization representative. (It is important to note, however, that Beason’s study was based on native English users.) Yet, that does not mean there is no hope for students who do not have a native-like proficiency. Santos’ error gravity study showed that faculty members across the curriculum were able to overlook language issues and focus on the content. Donald Rubin and Melanie Williams-James have also shown that raters evaluated student writing higher when they believed that it was written by a student from Bangkok than when they thought it was written by a student from Chicago. This study seems to suggest that readers can understand and appreciate the efforts to learn and use English by students from non-Anglo American backgrounds. It is also important to emphasize that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable uses are not always clear in the case of different varieties of English that are closely tied to identity. Raising the awareness of these different responses from the readers and providing strategies for negotiating language differences can help students make more agentive decisions about second language learning and use (Matsuda and Matsuda).

What if, by institutional policy or other external forces, WPAs and writing teachers are not allowed to drop grammar grading? There are alternative ways to contain the impact of grammar grades. The key is to focus on the development of linguistic resources rather than to focus on deficits. This principle can be enacted by, for example, using the point-addition system (rather than the point-deduction system) in which students earn points for evidence of successful learning rather than losing points for making errors. Another strategy is to provide grammar grades as extra credits. To avoid holding students accountable for instructional inadequacies, grammar grading should also be limited to what Dana Ferris calls “treatable errors.” Treatable errors are those that can be learned through relatively simple, teachable and learnable rules, such as “verb tense and form; subject-verb agreement; article usage; plural and possessive noun endings; sentence fragments; run-ons and comma splices; some errors in word form; and some errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.” In contrast, untreatable errors are idiosyncratic and recognizing them requires the language intuition that takes years to acquire. Examples of untreatable errors include: word choice errors, with the possible exception of some pronoun and preposition usage, and unidiomatic sentence structure (e.g., problems with word
order or with missing or unnecessary words)” (Ferris 23). Grading students on untreatable errors is unrealistic and unfair because it amounts to holding students accountable for what is beyond their control.

Although grammar continues to be a challenge for second language writers who are actively developing their language proficiency, it is only part of what it means to be literate. Many second language writers also bring various linguistic and rhetorical resources from their previous literacy experience in other languages. Furthermore, some writing teachers argue against the teaching of grammar because grammar is not important in improving writing quality; if that is the case, that argument should also inform assessment practices as well. Limiting the percentage of grammar grades (e.g., up to 5%) can also prevent grammar from affecting students’ grades disproportionately. As a rule of thumb, the proportion of grammar grades should not exceed the proportion of grammar instruction provided that can guarantee student learning. If, for some reason, the program or the institution deems it important and necessary to assess students based on the myth of linguistic homogeneity—that is, to demand that all students meet the standards that can be expected only of life-long users of the dominant variety of English—then reasonable provisions need to be made to accommodate those who do not fit the profile, including second language writers and users of non-dominant varieties of English.

Implications for WPAs

As I have argued, the field of rhetoric and composition has dismissed language pedagogy based on the assumption of linguistic homogeneity—an assumption that is no longer tenable. Given the obvious language learning needs of some second language writers, and given the mounting evidence suggesting the efficacy of grammar feedback that raises metalinguistic awareness, all writing teachers need to learn how to provide effective metalinguistic feedback. Yet, there is no guarantee that students will be able to acquire any particular language features based on the feedback—at least in the immediate future. To avoid punishing students for what teachers are not able to teach, grading criteria need to be revised thoroughly. The issue of grading, however, has important ramifications that are often beyond the control of writing teachers. Some writing teachers, especially those on short-term contracts, may fear that their job security might be in jeopardy if they did not hold students accountable. To ensure that teachers can focus on effective teaching and students on learning, issues related to grading—especially one that is as complex and technical as grammar issues—need to be addressed at the policy level. That is where WPAs come into the picture.
The most obvious action WPAs can take is to create explicit policies about grammar teaching and grading. In the absence of clear policies, the burden is placed on writing teachers who are not necessarily prepared to make those difficult decisions. A helpful policy would specify how much and what kind of grammar teaching and assessment should take place, if any. It is also important to create ongoing professional development opportunities for all writing teachers. Those opportunities may take the forms of workshops on grammar feedback and assessment as well as a professional resource library including books on pedagogical grammar, second language writing instruction, and other relevant topics. Another possibility is to identify courses on pedagogical grammar and second language writing instruction that are available locally, and to encourage writing teachers to take them. It may also be advantageous to hire writing teachers who already have additional expertise in second language writing because these individuals can be versatile in staffing mainstream sections and second language sections. WPAs who teach at institutions with graduate programs need to prepare all TAs to work effectively with second language writers through TA training and practicum. It is also important to work with other faculty members to integrate second language perspectives into the graduate curriculum in rhetoric and composition. At ASU, for example, we offer a practicum and a graduate seminar on teaching second language writing every year, and both are required for all TAs who teach second language sections of writing courses.

Implementing these policies and opportunities requires extensive knowledge and experience of second language writing and writers; it also requires some knowledge of second language acquisition and pedagogical grammar. While a growing number of WPAs today have a background in second language writing, it is not part of the traditional professional preparation for WPAs. Even with the expertise, it is often difficult for WPAs to attend to these issues adequately while carrying out all other administrative duties. For these reasons, some institutions have created an additional administrative position, held by second language writing specialists who have professional preparation in both rhetoric and composition and second language writing. With the growth of the field of second language writing and the recognition of the importance of language issues within rhetoric and composition, the number of individuals who can take on this task is increasing. In the long run, it will also be important to prepare future WPAs—and rhetoric and composition specialists in general—by providing opportunities to develop additional expertise in second language writing—both in graduate programs and through workshops at professional conferences such as CCCC and CWPA. The *CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing*
and Writers urges all writing teachers and programs to embrace the presence and needs of second language writers. WPAs can help make this happen by striving to lead by example.

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Works Cited


Serving Those Who Have Served: Preparing for Student Veterans in our Writing Programs, Classes and Writing Centers

Marilyn J. Valentino

Thank you for inviting me to speak today about serving those student veterans who are now entering our institutions by the hundreds of thousands. Current figures estimate that there are over 2.5 million Gulf-War era II veterans now separated from service with more coming as troops withdraw from Afghanistan (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Table A-5). Over a half million veterans and their families are taking advantage of the new Post 9/11 college plan (Shinseki). And because these benefits stay in effect for fifteen years, veterans who currently have jobs are also returning to college to further their education. Right now, veterans represent about four percent of all undergrads (Bonar and Domenic). We in community colleges especially have been aware of their presence, and expect a 10% increase next year (“For War Veterans”). Part of the reason for the increase is the alarming unemployment rate among recent veterans in this recession, 12% overall in 2011; as high as 29.1% among males ages 18–24 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Table A-5). But we aren’t alone. The new GI bill also pays the entire tuition to four-year public institutions. Its special Yellow Ribbon Program opens the doors to private schools as well, which means that this increase affects us all.

As writing teachers, we often serve on the front lines as students’ first point of contact and often most personal college experience. Thus, we have a direct responsibility to be prepared ourselves in order to help veterans stay in college and be successful. We should take them into account when we decide what kinds of reading and writing we assign, and what conferencing and writing center support we provide. So, this afternoon, I want to give an overview of issues some student veterans face when they come to college. I will share with you important research and resources in our field and then describe some programmatic initiatives that you may consider developing.
Why all this effort? What do our returning soldiers want? They certainly don’t need us to “fix them.” They don’t want our sympathy, either, but they do appreciate our support. Scott Ury from the University of Missouri, St. Louis declares: “I don’t need special preference. . . . But in the same breath, I am appreciative of teachers who say, ‘yeah, this is a veteran and they are not a traditional student and they require special attention’” (“Veterans Returning to College”). What we can do, then, is to be alert for at-risk veterans, and provide appropriate, respectful, empowering environments to ease their transition.

I must stress at the outset that all veterans are not the same. Not all need or want special attention. Despite the “damaged soldier” or “Rambo” types spotlighted in the media, the vast majority are indistinguishable from other college students. Veterans may be the ones who sit right up front in our classrooms, openly identifying themselves, like a student I’ll call Joe, who proudly stated he was a vet the first day of class. More often, they decide to park themselves anonymously in the back row. Or they may remain invisible, literally, in our online classes. Student veterans do not have to disclose their status or disabilities, so we have no real way of knowing who they are. And, even if they do reveal their service, we can’t make assumptions about their present condition or combat experiences. Some may have never been in combat. Some may still be traumatized by their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. But not all. Others may have to deal with the added peril of being recalled for a second or third tour of duty. Many are trying to manage the tensions of changing family relationships, shifting experiences of authority in civilian life, or general feelings of alienation and depression. Our classes include their sons and daughters, even parents, who may be sensitive to the ways soldiers are depicted in course literature or discussions. And we shouldn’t overlook recent refugees, those survivors of other wars, as in Sudan and Burma, who may be dealing with similar traumas. With these diverse populations, we have every reason to be mindful about what and how we teach.

Let me start with a general profile of veterans we will see in the coming years. The 2010 National Survey of Student Engagement, which included over 500 colleges and 11,000 veterans, found that most student vets are:

- Male, older, part-time, 1st-generation, and distance learners, who are “less engaged with faculty” than non-veterans (Moltz)
- 1 in 5 cited at least 1 disability compared to 1 in 10 non-veterans (Vance and Miller 21).
The ACE Report of 2011 described the following common physical disabilities of veterans of current wars:

- loss of limbs
- severe burns
- deafness
- vision difficulties, and
- traumatic brain injury, usually from a blow to the head. Some TBIs are treated within six months, but others, more severe, last much longer (Accommodating Student Veterans 5)

We also know that psychological or emotional issues appeared in a third of males, and over 10 percent in females (Vance and Miller 21), and that these symptoms, which can surface years after discharge, can be exacerbated by the pressures of academic life. Potential difficulties include:

- survivor’s guilt
- health issues
- sleep deprivation with nightmares
- alcohol and drug abuse
- anxiety over redeployment or separation from unit colleagues
- death of a colleague, and
- issues of reintegration into family (Accommodating Student Veterans 4).

Almost half of veterans reported contemplating suicide with 7.7 percent making an attempt (National Center for Veterans Studies in “Operation Promise”).

Cognitive problems, including learning disabilities, are the most widespread disability (40 percent) and can affect:

- “attention and concentration,
- information processing,
- learning and memory deficits,
- sluggish abstract reasoning,
- slowed executive functions (problem solving, planning, sequencing), and
- time management difficulties” (Accommodating Student Veterans 3).

Finally, it was reported that, in general, veterans have weaker skill levels: 20% had “C+” averages or lower (Berrett). Writing, of course, demands that all these cognitive areas are functioning properly. Remember Joe? He
probably had a learning disability before the service, but after a poor essay grade, I asked him to check with our Special Needs Office. He had never heard of it, but he returned with the realization that he needed and was entitled to accommodations. A few weeks later, though, he came late for a test, with a full cast on his arm, the result of a bar fight. Now he couldn’t write or type, and his mind was fuzzy from medications. “I had to protect my wife,” he explained, “and now she’s mad at me. I’ve got my homework from last week, but could I take the test tomorrow?” Of the three veterans in class, Joe was the only one who required flexibility, but he did pull it together and passed.

While I just gave a long list of possible challenges veterans could face, the realm of disabilities, we know, is not specific to veterans. Not all are a liability. In fact, they often possess positive traits we welcome in any class. According to the American Council on Education, they demonstrate “a degree of maturity, experience with leadership, familiarity with diversity, and a mission-focused orientation that exceed those of nearly all their peers” (Accommodating Student Veterans 1). In fact, when my one class was analyzing intercultural communication barriers, Joe gave specific examples from his army training and experiences in Afghanistan. Knowing this fuller picture of student veterans, we don’t have to be overly anxious. However, adjustments to our programs and courses may improve their chances of retention and success.

At the macro-level, all of us can help establish veterans’ learning communities, student VA chapters, counseling and tutoring which offer resources and support. Take note, however. Vet centers alone are not a panacea. Not all veterans go through the VA, and not all female veterans feel safe in the male-dominant setting. In what other ways can faculty help? As role models, we should challenge any inaccurate stereotypes of soldiers, veterans or student veterans, found anywhere in our readings, in class discussions, or in the hallways.

As writing program administrators, you can make a special impact. After all, you work with writing and literature faculty, writing center staff, WID and WAC instructors, Directors of Special Needs Services, and hopefully Veterans Administrators. You can share information with all these groups about veterans’ general expectations, skills and challenges, potential stressors, and how injuries can affect cognitive processes needed for oral, written and interpersonal work in writing classes. You are in a unique position to recommend effective pedagogical approaches, writing assignments, and learning environments. At the very least, you can educate others to avoid these three blunders: profiling all veterans as unstable, outing them in class (even with good intentions, even after they have told you of their
status), or politicizing them or the war in discussions. So that we don’t do more harm than good . . . as in the following case.

It was the fall of 2010 at the Community College of Baltimore County. In his composition class Charles Whittington wrote the following about his experience in Iraq: “Killing is a drug to me. . . . At first, it was weird and felt wrong, but by the time of the third and fourth killing it feels so natural. . . . That’s part of the reason why I want to go back . . . because of this addiction” (“Veteran’s Essay”). Whittington’s instructor gave him an A for the piece and told him to publish it, which he subsequently did in the college paper. But that very same essay caused his expulsion. He was not allowed to return to campus unless he submitted to a psychological evaluation. He never came back (Berrett). He did offer to show a prior positive evaluation from a counselor. Despite that and a clean college record, the administrators, concerned with campus safety, held their ground and gave him incompletes for the term. Yes, his narrative described some disturbing scenes; however, the college authorities had neglected to notice this other, more telling section of Whittington’s essay: “. . . I still feel the addictions . . . but now I know how to keep myself composed . . .” (“Veteran’s Essay”). Then when ABC News gave the case national coverage, online responses by veterans went viral. One warned: “. . . let a vet write a paper and he is trouble [sic] this is why some vets break. He made mistakes . . . but he is still human and was educating people on what war is like. Hats off to him and sorry for the ignorance around you” (online response by Sarge68 found in Carollo). Other veterans, rather than being empathetic, angrily questioned whether Whittington’s story was true and if he had seen combat at all. An extreme case, surely, but it shows how unprepared his teacher and college were for this student and this kind of writing, and how misperceptions, inappropriate approaches, and unmeasured responses can lead to unforeseen consequences and a public backlash. We don’t want this unfortunate experience to happen to us. So, do we shy away from assigning personal war narratives? Do we counsel students to keep these distressing essays private? Or, do we refer them to public programs that would give them a voice within a safer space?

There certainly is much good work being done across the nation in community-based writing centers. Maxine Hong Kingston was one of the first to start a writing community of Vietnam veterans in San Francisco in 1994 to help them in “processing the chaos” (1). Residential centers, like Veteran’s Sanctuary in New York, sponsor workshops for writing, as well as music, and the arts. The NEA-sponsored Operation Homecoming archives recent soldiers’ letters (“For War Veterans”). And the Warrior Writers Project in the New York City area gives veterans “space for community build-
ing, healing and redefinition.” (Incidentally, the term “warrior writers” was coined in 2008 by some Iraq Vets Against the War in their book Warrior Writers: Remaking Sense). The problem is that workshops may not be available in every town, and not every student may want to join such communities. Soldiers’ writings, though, can be useful as online sources for class readings. The Warrior Writers website, for example, has been used by Karen Springstein at SUNY Pottsdam. In one project, she transforms material from veterans’ own uniforms into paper, which is made into books for their own poetry and prose. As program directors, you might think about which extracurricular or programmatic venues you could establish. Here are some questions and models to consider.

Decision 1: Can We Offer Extracurricular Campus Writing Experiences for Student Vets?

Some universities have developed writing groups for veterans, weekly writing seminars, and writing conferences within their institutions but outside the classroom. Regrettably, Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson in their 2011 CCCC study of institutional support in writing classrooms found that only about 3% of the 439 CCCC members surveyed were aware of any such groups on campus. In contrast to previous wars, soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been used to writing essays, poems, and stories in journals, e-mails, and on Facebook as forms of expression or entertainment. One way to continue avenues for self-expression would be in dedicated forums. Western Connecticut State University devoted a special issue of its literary journal to writing by veterans. One Army reservist, Gregg Taylor, who suffered from PSTD, informs us of the value of his writing: “the hardest thing about going to war is coming home. . . . I had anxiety issues, a lot of pent-up aggression from my experience in Afghanistan that I learned to apply to my writing” (“For War Veterans”). If writing groups are already established on your campus, though, you might want to focus attention on dedicated writing classes instead.

Decision 2: Can We, Should We, Offer Dedicated Writing Classes for Veterans?

One way to ease the transition from combat to the classroom is to create a cohort group of veterans who take their first term classes altogether. Cleveland State University’s SERV program did just that, with the University of Arizona, Eastern Kentucky University, Youngstown State University and others following. In particular, veterans-only writing classes have been developed by many institutions, perhaps your own. Sierra College allows
veterans to write about their military experiences in a Boots to Books class. Austin Community College, Northridge created a vets-only Comp I and Writing Memoir course, wherein writing about war experiences is voluntary. One advantage of cohort classes is that they reduce anxiety in the class environment; classes are generally smaller, and they feel that their buddies can understand what they are writing about. Because they learn in the military to be on time and ready, they don’t have to be irritated by traditional students’ perceived apathy, unpreparedness, or texting (Hart and Thompson “Institutional”). Veterans know they have only thirty-six months of funding, so they don’t have time to repeat courses with families depending upon them. Specialized classes also build camaraderie that eases their transition into academic life.

For those veterans who have weak academic skills or gaps in their education, and need developmental courses to catch up with general writing and research skills, cohort classes may be ideal. Their professors, some veterans themselves, have an awareness of special needs, for instance, anticipating absences for VA appointments and training. However, writing program administrators may determine that the money used to benefit a few might be used to impact more in tutoring services or faculty training. If classes aren’t filled or funding is cut, as in the case of Cleveland State, the program may be dropped. Another disadvantage is that veterans may be further stigmatized as reclusive outsiders. Many veterans simply want to blend in and do the work. As a compromise, some colleges have created small cohorts within a regular section. In this way, younger students may have the opportunity to meet veterans, who bring leadership skills, maturity, a strong work ethic, and more depth in their writing that can be emulated. And a final plus is that interactions with other students can help break down stereotypes as they come to understand military experiences on a personal level.

**Decision 3: Should We Assign Readings, Films, and Essays on War in Mixed Composition Classes?**

Should we require all students to write about war—not just in the abstract—but now as lived experience? As a profession, 4Cs adopted a resolution in 2003 that writing teachers should “engage students and others in learning and debate about issues and implication of the Iraqi war and any other acts of war” (Resolution 3). Our goal was, and is, to get college students to think critically about global conflicts and our roles in the world. Even without any veterans in class, we still have an ethical obligation to help students—as citizens—critically examine the issues as well as empathically understand the moral dilemmas soldiers and war survivors
have encountered. To that end, American University assigned David Finkel’s acclaimed non-fiction work, *The Good Soldiers* (see Recommended Further Reading at end). Last winter, The Ohio State University offered a multimedia, multi-period global study of war for all students, with one section reserved for veterans only. Still, many veterans are uncomfortable with the topic. Are we prepared for the changing dynamics and potential debates in the classroom and for the kinds of support necessary for some “warrior writers”? What, how, and where to teach become complex issues.

Helen Benedict, author of *The Lonely Soldier,* believes that “The cultural gap between the military and civilians, filled as it is with suspicion and mistrust, must be bridged—for the sake of healing war-traumatized troops . . . and for the sake of our collective future.” Reading about war, she continues, “can indeed open the eyes of civilians enough to make them feel sympathy and compassion—even about combat, even about sexual assault, even about war trauma” (“Final Thoughts”). In an article in *Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)* magazine, Brett Holden explains that films are one of the avenues through which civilians understand combat life (15) and they do convey “the unexpected pain of being ‘in-between’ war and home” (18); however, much of what is seen is incorrect (Gibson 15). As a result, we have to be wary of novels and films that portray invincible heroes from past wars or only images of the “broken soldier” that feed on inaccurate myths.

As a precaution, we should make evident all texts and films in our syllabi, giving options for readings and writing. A veteran on my campus dropped her composition class when she discovered in the syllabus that her professor was going to show *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.* Obviously, this film isn’t war-related; however, she knew that the screaming would be an emotional trigger. Happy to be forewarned, she easily added another class. During class discussions on war-related material, our role should be to present literary/historical background, keeping the focus on the characters in the text. If we go outside the text, we may want to compare characters and themes in the work to those in other, non-combat works to normalize it.

**Decision 4: Should We Assign Personal Essays on War Experiences?**

The majority of respondents in the Hart/Thompson college study said they teach personal narrative, which can be problematic for veterans uncomfortable revealing their status and stories to other students. Compositionists acknowledge that the practice of writing about traumatic experiences as a therapeutic way to disclose or express emotions has support from many psychiatrists. James Pennebaker has documented how his subjects who wrote
about emotional topics for a few days “showed improvements in physical and mental health.” Furthermore, a study of 169 college essays found that writing about trauma as a dialogue with a known or imagined person promotes greater affective experiencing and cognitive processing than a direct narrative (Burke and Bradley 141). Shane Borrowman’s anthology *Trauma and the Teaching of Writing* is a valuable resource as well. Not all of us agree with this practice, however. Marcy Bauman says that she would “never ‘assign’ writing about war.” She argues from the perspective of power differentials, that professors’ higher status may inhibit how students will think and write about a topic; e.g., they may be afraid to agree with an unpopular war. And we can’t make the leap that any veteran even in a segregated class cares to write about military life.

Often psychological, social, and economic difficulties don’t fully manifest until a student is engrossed in or in conflict with an assignment. I know what you are thinking. I’ll just stay away from personal narratives and the war, and I’ll be OK. Well, Robert Hazard at the College of DuPage thought he’d be safe, too. His 30-year-old, two-tour veteran sailed through his literature class, but in the next term’s Comp class “just disappeared”—even though Hazard hadn’t required personal writing. Of course, we know that any writing can release repressed emotions and memories. English teachers, as I’ve often said, are not therapists. Some critics have even questioned our motives. Are we being voyeurs? And, how do we respond to writing about savage acts? Do we want another Whittington case? It would be helpful to talk about these subjects in workshops with faculty and tutors.

**Decision 5: How Do We Prepare Faculty to Avoid Potentially Unsettling Discussions of War?**

Dan Fraizer in an issue of *Composition Forum* believes that controversial topics should not be shied away from but used as “critical inquiry” and “a form of social action for students in their communities.” We know that class discussions even without veterans present can be tense when students discuss the topic of war. Soldiers may be very guarded in discussions about Iraq and Afghanistan. While some may feel they were sold a bill of goods in the service and just want to move on, others may feel they are under attack. Some professors may speak against the war or make derogatory statements about the military, inadvertently causing veterans to feel more isolated. They may not speak up even though they feel students and professors lack accurate information. We surely don’t want to re-traumatize them, potentially resulting in misplaced anger, lack of concentration, absences, or withdrawal from the course. Then again, we don’t want to suppress discus-
sions, for veterans can shed light on topics based upon their knowledge. It’s how we navigate these discussions that counts. One way is to separate government political decisions from the efforts of soldiers on the ground. When analyzing a war character, we ought to specify that this is an individual’s decision. Not emblematic of all. We also don’t want to pick out the veteran to speak for all veterans. Finally, we want to keep discussions balanced and check one-sided comments, reinforcing rules, especially for online commentary.

Avoiding the topic of war altogether does not free us of our responsibilities, for general discussions can become awkward in small groups with veterans. As older students, veterans do consider themselves more mature and experienced, although in college, they certainly are experiencing a loss of status. Military culture affects their perceptions. For instance, they don’t like students who talk disrespectfully. They like order. They get frustrated when the professor isn’t in control. They may openly challenge teachers in class, particularly, says Lisa Langstraat, if the instructor is a grad assistant and female. Do you see how this information and the chance to share experiences and resolutions would be useful in faculty workshops?

Another area to consider is the rhetoric veterans are comfortable using from military life and how that can be misinterpreted as disrespectful or contentious in class discussions. Galen Leonhardy warns that competitive “banter” expresses “serious issues while leavening emotional intensity. It can sometimes produce disquieting moments, however” (344). Veterans used to being direct can also shut down other students in peer review groups. Conversely, veterans can shut down when they hear the stupid personal questions students sometimes ask. You can find examples on You Tube. Here are some: “Have you ever killed anybody?” “I would have joined, but, you know, I got into college.” “You’re a vet? So, you’re a lesbian?” (“Shit Civilians Say”). Students can be naïve. But soldiers tell me they are used to it. Operationally, as I have said, we should set ground rules for open discussions, encourage a wide range of views, and, I contend, not impose or share our own views of war.

Decision 6: What Do We Do with Assignments and Comments?

Be specific and concrete in criteria for assignments. Even if materials and instructions are on Blackboard, students may not be able to find them. We know that those suffering from TBI-related issues may have difficulty following complex tasks. They need step-by-step instructions. At first, they need assignments and requirements explained explicitly. According to Cheryl Branker, they are comfortable with rule-based instruction, and good
at taking orders. She says their experience writing military reports, which are short, concrete, and formulaic, is very different from writing expository essays. Providing samples and models of academic essays will help, so they don’t get angry and feel frustrated like a student at my college when his thesis statement was criticized. He said he should have been told the rules beforehand. When the teacher explained that writing is a process of feedback and revision, he said, “man, things don’t work that way in the military” (Dryden). Veterans do, however, appreciate specific comments on papers—where errors are and how to improve. It may take time to wean them away, toward a process approach and accepting fewer directed comments. Individual conferences are key in making realistic progress and transitioning student veterans to academic rhetoric. And remember to give options on topics or readings, so veterans don’t feel they have to write about war or combat.

What surprised me in my research is that many student veterans may be reluctant to seek help at the Writing Center, which is outside their “chain of command.” They’d rather go to their professor. They also may feel that others need tutoring more, the same mindset of sacrificing in battle: when wounded, to check others first. Teachers have to find ways to get them there if they need it. Online courses can be a challenge. While sometimes an online course fits into a hectic schedule, taking all online classes for some veterans, especially some struggling with PTSD, is not healthy in the long term.

A final note about self-disclosure and response. When veterans do write about horrific events, we clearly can’t just make editing marks and ignore the content. We can’t just make innocuous remarks, like “thank you for sharing.” Or even “thank you for your service,” since some veterans find that to be a cliché and dismissive, an “empty salute.” Discussions about the best ways to respond would be productive topics for faculty and writing center workshops.

In the end, how can we nurture veteran-friendly classes? To be prepared, we can take these steps. They are really no different from any good teaching practices:

1. Start with your course syllabus. There is a sample statement in the ACE report. Since veterans are used to clear expectations in the military, they prefer clear-cut syllabi. At the beginning at least, encourage a regular routine, keep up with the syllabus and assignments, don’t change assignment or grading criteria, and give prompt feedback (Accommodating Student Veterans 7).
2. Use Universal Design with its individual, outcome-based, flexible approach. Use methods to help with concentration and memory, test taking, etc. (in Accommodating Student Veterans 8)

3. Learn ways to alleviate panic attacks and stress. Some veterans may exhibit a tendency toward hyper vigilance and increased sensitivity to small events (Branker 59–66). Functional impairments from TBI, irritability, and “problems with impulse control” can surface “during times of fatigue and stimulus overload” (Vance and Miller 46). In rare instances, upon hearing a sudden, loud noise in class, some veterans have hit the floor. What do you say then, as everyone is staring? One veteran told me not to ask if the person is OK, but give him or her a minute to get it together. But a counselor would be your best resource.

4. Be sure to set some ground rules for class discussions and online comments.

5. Be careful of your own comments, written and oral.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

1. Find out how many veterans are at your institution, where the VA center is and the contact person, counselors, and emergency phone number.

2. Read David Finkel’s *The Good Soldiers* for a real understanding of soldiers’ day-to-day ordeals in Afghanistan. Read about the hardships of army wives in *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. Or *Sand Queen*, a story of a young Iraqi woman and a female U.S. Army specialist. These are all important perspectives (see Recommended Further Reading at end).

3. Design professional development sessions for faculty and tutors to understand expectations of veterans, learn available institutional services, how TBI and PTSD can affect the processes of writing and interpersonal skills, and ways to recognize signs of distress or when they could pose a hazard. Include veterans to speak to issues of class discussion. Ask counselors to sit in.

4. Attend the Veteran’s SIG, and special sessions at next year’s CCCC convention.

5. Watch for 4 C’s Veterans Committee’s white paper: “Best Practices for Assisting Vets Transition into Academic Culture with a focus on Writing Programs”

To close, I want to acknowledge that coming to college is an adjustment for returning veterans and for us. Last year, Hart and Thompson reported that 92% of the college writing instructors surveyed did not have training to ‘understand veterans’ issues in the classroom.’ With attention, our perceptions, awareness, and practice can reverse that number. As writing instructors and program administrators, we have a great responsibility. We meet students where they are, whoever they are, and we work with them to become more competent and confident writers. So, for our student veterans, I’ll ask you to be especially mindful. Be an ally. And help them be all they hope to be.

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Recommended Further Reading


The Visual and Beyond: A Symposium on Rereading, Revising or Perhaps “Hacking the Source Code” of the CWPA Outcomes Statement

Our fall / winter symposium extends our CWPA task force’s review of the Outcomes Statement now underway with an aim of acknowledging, as Sid Dobrin posits, “the role of the visual in writing.” When the Council called for the OS revision in response to Dobrin’s “Visual Rhetoric” query to WPA-L, Alice and I mused offline about remixing the OS with intellectual work near and dear to us, but truly beyond our professional interests and of concern to WPAs widely situated within the field (rhetorical genre studies, research on transfer, diversity and reading). With these constituencies in dialogue, this symposium further troubles the Statement’s content, even its epistemological undergirding in order to nudge readers beyond Dobrin’s initial question: “[S]houldn’t the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition include some acknowledgement of the role of the visual in writing?”

We asked each of our six contributors to remix the question: “Shouldn’t the Outcomes Statement include [other work]?,” and with due diligence both critical and self-reflexive, they shift subject matter, reread the Statement theoretically or revise its terms. Though visions vary, together they yet remember an original OS design principle, which Ed White invokes within the same WPA-L thread that brings us to this fall / winter forum: “The Outcomes Statement must remain a living document to stay relevant” (17 Dec. 2011).

We hope this symposium brings new and relevant life to the Outcomes Statement.

We further invite our readers to contribute to this discussion, either on WPA-L or within this symposium for our spring 2013 issue. Please submit your response to journal@wpacouncil.org.
Note


Works Cited


The Matters of Key Knowledge Domains and Transfer of Learning in the Outcomes Statement

Anne Beaufort

Those who worked on the WPA Outcomes Statement took on a Herculean task, one that must have required much negotiation and patience. Imagine wordsmiths coming to agreement on wording. Imagine composition scholars who have very different theoretical orientations that inform overarching purposes for writing courses finding common ground. And consider the complexities, cognitive and social, in teaching writing. The range of responses to the Outcomes (some favorable, some highly critical) is just one indication of the difficulties of the task (Harrington et al.).

So first, I offer appreciation for those who’ve recognized the need for some common ground in first-year composition programs and have expended much time and effort to accomplish this when they could have been doing their own research or tending their gardens. Second, I offer for consideration several key issues that have emerged in Writing Studies research that could provide some guidance for improving the Outcomes. I also raise questions about the scope of the outcomes for college students and about audience(s) for the Outcomes Statement.

Two bodies of research, both within Writing Studies and beyond, seem to merit attention in order for the Outcomes Statement to become a more useful document in Writing Studies. The first is research on the nature of writing expertise (Beaufort, Writing; Beaufort, College; Bereiter and Scardamalia, Psychology; Bereiter and Scardamalia, Surpassing) and the second, the research on transfer of learning (Beaufort, College; Devitt; Nowacek; Perkins and Salomon; Premack; Smit; Wardle).

I take up the issue of the nature of writing expertise because, without some clear sense of the knowledge and skills needed to become more expert as a writer, there is no way to measure if the Outcomes are adequate in
scope, and there is no assurance that the appropriate knowledge and skills can be transferred to other contexts for writing. Reviewing the research on novice versus expert writing knowledge and behaviors could facilitate more thorough, empirically-grounded and explicit outcomes for first year writing curricula.

Research in the 1970s and 1980s began to compare novice versus expert writing behaviors at the high school and college levels in the areas of composing processes and critical thinking behaviors needed to generate content for texts (Bereiter, Burtis and Scardamalia; Flower and Hayes; Perl; Sommers and Saltz). And in my recent research, two studies of college writers moving through their college course work and into workplace settings, I identified five overlapping and yet distinct knowledge domains that participants in the studies needed to acquire and deepen in order to become more expert writers (Beaufort, Writing; Beaufort, College).

What then is the “match” between the research on writing expertise and the Outcomes Statement? The major categories in which the Outcomes are grouped are 1) rhetorical knowledge 2) critical thinking, reading and writing, 3) processes 4) knowledge of conventions and 5) composing in electronic environments. As Liu and others have pointed out, there are considerable overlaps in the categories (Liu). For example, “genre” is mentioned in the rhetorical knowledge section and in the knowledge of conventions section. “Use a variety of technologies” is covered in the processes section, and yet a whole separate section addresses composing in electronic environments. “Conventions of format and structure” is mentioned under “rhetorical knowledge” and in “knowledge of conventions.” “Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks” is mentioned in the critical thinking, reading, and writing section and in the processes section. How does a writing program administrator or a writing teacher conceptualize the specific knowledge and skills s/he needs to address in designing reading and writing assignments when these overlaps and redundancies exist in the Outcomes Statement and the categories themselves, and the outcomes listed under each category are not clearly defined or conceptualized in relationship to each other?

In my ethnographic research, I had to wrestle with the multiple, complex and overlapping knowledge domains that more expert writers acquired and novices needed to learn. And by necessity, in order to analyze the data systematically, I needed to operationalize clear and specific definitions of the key knowledge domains that emerged from the data. Yes, there were overlaps in the domains I identified, but each was also unique enough to warrant being a separate domain or category of knowledge writers need.

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I operationalized definitions of these knowledge domains so that each domain’s distinction and characteristics could be identified as present or not in writers’ behaviors, and so that ultimately, curricula in Writing Studies could address all of these domains in more precise, overt, and systematic ways. Here, briefly, are definitions I developed of each knowledge domain based on inductive analysis of writers’ behaviors:

- **Subject matter knowledge.** This obvious element of any writing act is often overlooked or treated in a cursory manner in writing courses. Poor writing performance is sometimes blamed on poor knowledge of grammar, genre, etc. when in fact the writer simply did not have a firm grasp of the subject matter s/he was writing about. This domain can be addressed by teaching critical thinking and analytical, rhetorical reading of texts to assure that students are building a base of subject matter knowledge to draw upon when they write. Could language about acquiring subject matter knowledge replace “Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating”?

- **Genre knowledge.** Genres are complex and multi-layered. I have operationalized a definition of genre, drawing on Slevin’s and Miller’s work, as entailing 1) conventions of rhetorical purpose, 2) appropriate subject matter (including appropriate evidence to support claims, depending on the genre), 3) knowledge of the genre’s typical structural elements, and 4) knowledge of the linguistic features of the genre (Miller; Slevin). These four aspects of a genre warrant explicit instruction, and spelling out these aspects of genre could bring more specificity to the Outcomes Statement than “understand how genres shape reading and writing” and “develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics.”

- **Writing process knowledge.** Although Writing Studies coalesced its thinking in the 1970s and 1980s (based on several important research studies) on stages in the writing process and the iterative nature of the process, more recent research has demonstrated that different genres, different social contexts for writing, and different writers’ idiosyncrasies in accomplishing writing tasks necessitate teaching a variety of processes so that students have multiple and flexible processes to use. No one process or series of steps works for all writers in all writing situations. The current Outcomes Statement has clear language that addresses this: “Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading,” though other outcomes in the Processes
category seem misplaced (“use a variety of technologies”—this duplicates the technology outcome section) or vague (“understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing process”—how will anyone know either what to teach, or how to assess this outcome?).

- **Discourse community knowledge.** Considerable ethnographic or case study research in the last two decades has documented how much writing activity (and the associated knowledge and skills) varies from one writing situation to the next. But terms such as “social context” or “activity system” or “rhetorical situation” are used interchangeably in Writing Studies, each meaning something different depending on who’s using the term. Drawing on the work of Swales and Heath, I operationalized very specific aspects of a discourse community that a writer needs to take into consideration and that can be explicitly examined. I define “discourse community” as a group of individuals, always in flux but also stable enough, who communicate with each other regularly through writing (and often, using other modes of communication). A discourse community coalesces around a set of values and goals, has a set of typical genres that are used by those in the community, has overall norms for “good writing,” and defines the social roles of writers within the discourse community. The Outcomes Statement uses the terms “rhetorical situation” and “different audiences” without specifying what these concepts mean. The concept of “discourse community” is a more robust concept than “rhetorical situation” and can shed light on complex contexts for writing. The Outcomes Statement mentions “audience” and “purpose” and “rhetorical situations” (undefined) but does not directly address the fact that, in order to communicate effectively, writers need to be able to analyze the specific characteristics of the discourse community in which or to which they are writing (Beaufort, “Operationalizing”; Bizzell; Heath; Rafoth; Swales).

- **Rhetorical knowledge.** Both the concept of “discourse community” and “genre” take into account audience and purposes for writing. However, “rhetorical knowledge” I define as the knowledge of the particular audience (*this* professor, or *this* committee, etc.) and the particular communicative purpose of one specific instance of communication. This is another knowledge domain expert writers gain and use that is not addressed clearly in the Outcomes Statement.

In sum, there are traces of these five domains of knowledge that expert writers draw on in the Outcomes Statement. But terminology related to
these knowledge domains is used in the Statement without specificity as to their meaning or are given very limited definitions that do not represent the full scope of the concepts and skills associated. An articulation of a clear set of knowledge domains and the skills associated, based on current research, could lead to a Statement that could better guide writing program directors who train teachers on critical concepts for teaching writing that will in turn guide writing teachers in shaping first year writing curricula that educate students comprehensively and clearly in the knowledge domains the students need to attend to in order to become more expert writers.

If the Outcomes Statement fosters instruction and repeated practice in each of the knowledge domains, clearly defined, at appropriate developmental levels, the Statement will facilitate a solid writing curriculum. But how will students use this knowledge in other contexts for writing? The issue of transfer of learning was barely a blip in the research and theory on writing prior to the 1990s. In the two decades since, this has become a focal point for research in Writing Studies so that freshman writing is a viable course in the general education component of college degree requirements.

As far as I can see, transfer of learning from first-year composition courses to other writing situations is not an outcome addressed in the Statement, and yet, as current research in Writing Studies demonstrates and Premack says, “The objective of both education (and in a sense, intelligence) is transfer” (239). If the Outcomes Statement authors would incorporate a few key principles for facilitating transfer in the Statement, the influence and effectiveness of the Statement on the quality of writing instruction and potential growth of students as writers could multiply exponentially.

For example, if an outcome in each category of the document were “meta-awareness of the concept of . . . genre, rhetorical situation, discourse community, etc. and practice in using these concepts to analyze new writing situations,” then teachers would impart to students not just knowledge of a specific genre, or a specific discourse community, but also a knowledge of how to use these concepts as analytical tool in figuring out the conventions of new genres, understanding different discourse communities, etc. As I spell out in *College Writing and Beyond*, teaching that facilitates transfer of learning can be accomplished by

- connecting specific writing tasks and learning to more abstract principles that can be applied to new writing situations (i.e. the concept of “discourse community,” “genre” “writing process” “rhetorical situation” and “transfer of learning”)
• giving students numerous opportunities to apply these key concepts and principles in a variety of writing tasks

• teaching meta-awareness of learning, so that students become self-aware of the knowledge and skills they’re gaining and understand new writing demands in other courses, other disciplines, other social contexts for writing.

And, while we know how much freshmen in college vary in their writing skills, the skills and knowledge identified in the Outcomes, as Richard Haswell points out, need to be developmentally appropriate. For example, Haswell raises the question: “Does it profit to ‘Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power’ (in the critical thinking, reading and writing section of the Outcomes) if one does not have the power or does not doubt the knowledge?” (196). In other words, do beginning college students have a sense of how power is related to language use? And as several research studies have demonstrated, most beginning college students do not yet question the authority of texts (Haas; Sternglass). So, Haswell is suggesting that this outcome may not be developmentally appropriate for students in the early years of college. The Outcome Statement should not reach too far. Better that a few concepts and skills associated with each knowledge domain are taught and learned well rather than trying to cover too many skills and intricacies within each knowledge domain. Imagine the Outcomes Statement as a lean, elegant (as in precise, concise, clear) document that both novice and expert writing teachers could readily translate into five or six learning outcomes tailored to some degree for any given writing course.

And one final note on audience for the Outcomes Statement: as others have pointed out, the Statement assumes background knowledge in writing theory and research. This seems to be a case of preaching to the choir. Isn’t the Statement intended as a guiding document for training new teachers of writing and teaching novice writers? If this is the rhetorical purpose and intended audience of the Statement, then careful consideration should be given to clarity of both structure and terminology in the document. As Elbow says, “. . . you miss the benefits of outcomes—and indeed, the very meaning of the word—if you run away from saying what your outcomes look like in students and in texts” (Elbow).

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I’ve just finished my most successful year of teaching first-year composition (FYC). After only fourteen years of applying the rationale and pedagogical tenets of a genre process approach I posited in my 1998 dissertation (a portion of which I adapted for a chapter in *The Outcomes Book*), I am starting to get it right.

In the past I have been disheartened by certain statements in my students’ reflective introductions to their portfolios—statements such as: “I learned how to write some genres I’ve never written before like a proposal and a profile, and now I’ll be ready to write them when I have to in the future.” Despite my warnings to the contrary, such a student assumes that the purpose of my course is to teach her to write in the genres of the academy. The course is called “College Writing,” after all, and FYC is required at most colleges and universities precisely because of the widely-held belief that English departments can teach foundational and transferable academic
writing skills. However, I am aware of much current scholarship which offers evidence to the contrary. Elizabeth Wardle effectively summarizes that scholarship: in FYC “writing [is] the object of primary attention rather than . . . a tool for acting on other objects of attention” as it is in other academic contexts; therefore, “the rhetorical situations of FYC courses around the country do not mirror the multiple, diverse, and complex rhetorical situations found across the university in even the most basic ways. Transfer to such varied situations is not easily accomplished” (766).

The answer for Wardle is to “give up ‘teaching to write’ as a goal for FYC” and instead teach a course “about writing” (emphasis in original) which presents the knowledge of our discipline: that is, “how people use writing, how people learn to write, how genres mediate work in society, how discourse communities arrange language use, how writing changes across the disciplines, and so on” (784). The writing assignments in such courses would include reflective responses to disciplinary readings, autoethnographies and literacy narratives, and research projects in which students conduct primary research to address writing-related questions of interest to them (Downs and Wardle 561–62). While I can see the attractions of such an approach, and while I agree with much of the critique of current FYC pedagogies on which it is based, I haven’t entirely given up teaching FYC as a course in which students practice skills that might transfer to their future writing challenges.

I agree that we need to teach students about writing, but I also want my students to try their hand at applying what they learn about “how people use writing” and “how people learn to write” to a few new and different genres. Hence my delight and feeling of accomplishment when I read the following in a recent student’s portfolio reflection: “I learned how to look at examples of new genres like the proposal and profile, and figure out how to write in that genre. This will be useful to me in the future when I have to write in other genres I’ve never had to write in before.” The student has learned a problem-solving skill that might transfer to his future writing situations. It isn’t the genre or situation itself that transfers, but the rhetorical understanding and the ability to apply insights gained from rhetorical/genre-based reading to rhetorical/genre-based writing.

Haas and Flower describe “rhetorical reading” as “constructing a rhetorical situation for the text [being read], trying to account for author’s purpose, context, and effect on the audience” (176). Adler-Kassner and Estrem break this kind of reading down into “process-based” and “genre-based,” adding that “the emphasis is on reading to develop genre awareness so that [students] can make conscious decisions about how, when, or whether to use those conventions in their own writing” (67). Rhetorical/genre-based
reading helps students understand that texts are written by actual people and that rhetorical situations (including genre conventions) affect how real writers construct their texts. As students learn to parse a text in ways that reconstruct the rhetorical situation and the writer’s rhetorical strategies, they begin to see how they can learn from the strategic choices of other writers to more effectively address the various and new rhetorical situations they will encounter after leaving FYC.

It has taken me fourteen years to develop and refine this pedagogical approach so that I can see evidence in my students’ reflections that they might be getting the point. Does that seem like a long time? Perhaps. But I have just spent several days reading and scoring some of my colleagues’ portfolios in which I saw far less rhetorical awareness. This is dismaying, but not all that surprising given the mix of adjunct and tenured faculty who teach the course, only a handful of whom have PhDs in rhetoric and composition. For ten years, I was coordinator of first-year writing and struggled with faculty development, continually frustrated by the difficulty of bringing my colleagues into the genre fold. That frustration prompted the core of my critique of the Outcomes Statement in The Outcomes Book: many who teach in FYC programs around the country are not composition scholars but are rather (like my colleagues) a diverse group with various kinds and levels of preparation in English studies, and various levels of commitment to or support for their teaching of FYC. Few hold the “complex and theoretically informed view of genre that was at the core of the Outcomes Statement” (Liu 74). I suggested that the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) should “do more to help assure that their statement is read and applied as they would want it to be” (83–4), particularly by assisting in faculty development, i.e., “publishing collections of key articles or a readable and comprehensive guide to genre theory and genre-based pedagogies for the uninitiated” (84). I still feel that the Statement assumes too high a level of shared disciplinary knowledge and commitment among those who teach in various FYC programs (from community colleges to research universities), and I continue to see the need for the CWPA to address this reality.

My answer at this point in my own scholarly and teaching career is that there needs to be greater emphasis on genre awareness through rhetorical reading. This emphasis should be promoted within a revised WPA Outcomes Statement and—once again—through support for faculty development. In order for students to gain the rhetorical/genre knowledge called for in the current Outcomes Statement, they might be presented with readings that introduce them to the field of writing studies (as Downs and Wardle suggest); however, I also believe that students should practice rhe-
torical/genre-based reading by examining models of how diverse writers respond to various exigencies in notably different rhetorical situations. Students need practice in focusing not just on reading to summarize content or to support, oppose, or frame their own ideas (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 66), but also on rhetorical/genre-based reading that will help them develop a useful and dynamic repertoire of problem-solving strategies for reading and writing. I don’t believe one FYC course can make them accomplished experts, but I do believe it can open their eyes, instilling a nascent rhetorical consciousness that, as I’ve stated earlier, will help them understand that “learning to write is an ongoing process [and] that there is a process (or processes) involved in learning about how a particular genre functions and in then applying what has been learned to writing here and now” (Liu 83, emphasis added).

Revising the Outcomes Statement to emphasize reading would not solve the problem of faculty development, however. As Haas and Flower note, “teaching students to read rhetorically is genuinely difficult” (182), and I would add that few FYC instructors are prepared to do so. They are used to teaching students to read for content or—in Adler-Kassner and Estrem’s terms—read “to connect/refute,” “to summarize/paraphrase,” “to explore,” “to extend,” and to “support,” “oppose,” or “frame” their ideas (65–66), but not to “infer writerly behaviors,” “analyze form” or “understand the rhetorical situation” (67–68).

Although my view of the ideal approach to genre in FYC has evolved, then, my charge to the CWPA remains largely the same. We must recognize the diversity of background, experience, preparation, motivation and compensation among faculty teaching FYC around the country and provide support for faculty development activities that encourage deeper understanding and broader application of thoughtfully-developed, genre-based pedagogies. Such support would include the publication of anthologies or guidebooks geared appropriately to this diverse readership, grants from the Council to support innovative faculty development projects (or assistance in obtaining such funding from other sources), and somehow encouraging the publication of more genre-based FYC textbooks and teaching resources. Such resources would offer both faculty and their students insights into our disciplinary knowledge about writing, practice in the rhetorical reading of a variety of genres, and opportunities to experiment with applying what they learn from their reading.

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Reading to Write and the Economy of Attention

Deborah Mutnick

In 2010, curious to know more about our students’ reading abilities, the English Department at Long Island University Brooklyn decided to assess reading proficiency in the second of a two-semester sequence of developmental writing. We administered the Nelson Denny Reading Test, an imperfect but established, national instrument, to about 200 students. The results confirmed our impression that many of our students—the majority of whom are poorly prepared for college level writing by the city’s stratified public high schools—are weak readers whose difficulties with vocabulary, comprehension, interpretation, critical analysis, and application stunt their academic growth and contribute to a disturbingly high attrition rate. We found on average these students read at a 9.5 grade level.

I start with this assessment story because it marks a shift in my thinking about the role reading plays in college-level instruction in writing. Asked to participate in the journal’s dialogue forum on revising the CWPA Outcomes Statement by commenting on the section on reading, I find myself returning to three interlocking themes: the struggling college reader reflected by the Nelson Denny Test results; a seemingly national mandate for college-level writing rather than reading instruction despite persuasive arguments to the contrary (see, e.g., Bartholomae and Petrosky); and the new challenges of digital literacy as we move from an information economy to what is increasingly seen as an economy of attention (see, e.g., Lanham)
The Struggling College Reader

It happened that the Nelson Denny test was administered to one of my classes I had assigned to write a literacy autobiography, so I was able to discuss the experience of reading quite a lot that semester. What stands out most vividly in my memory is the nearly universal agreement among my 20-odd students that they loved books as toddlers and looked forward to kindergarten but by third grade—the year standardized testing begins in earnest—they had grown to hate both reading and school. At best, school had become an obligatory task they continued to engage in because they hoped it would lead to a career; now, as college students, their love of reading, writing, science, literature, history, or any other pursuit associated with formal education seemed to have been utterly destroyed. While I am invoking a specific demographic profile, I assume that a combination of forces, including the testing regime and the new digital landscape of reading, is similarly affecting the majority of college students. I also assume that the discipline-specific vocabulary and density of academic discourse have always presented formidable challenges to entering college students, ones that have neither been well understood nor fully addressed.

The Mandate for Writing

Flash backward to the early 1990s. The Writing Program I have directed on and off for many years proposed a two-semester, developmental sequence based on the University of Pittsburgh’s course in reading and writing. At one point, in addition to six hours in class with the instructor, students were required to take a four-hour weekly workshop, giving us a rare opportunity to provide the sort of intensive reading and writing instruction basic readers and writers need to succeed. A key premise of the proposal was that intensive practice is needed in both reading and writing because one is integral to the other. The themes were robust and challenging—for example, “Our Voices in History: Identity and Difference”—and the requirements substantial with four to five books, supplementary texts, and critical writing assignments.

In making the case for what now seems like an unbelievable coup in curricular revision, we cited Bartholomae and Petrosky’s argument that there is no prerequisite for reading and writing; that college students at any level need to engage in reading of and writing about meaningful, challenging texts and ideas; and that the development of writing skills and knowledge is inextricably linked to the development of critical reading skills. Had I read James Paul Gee back then, whose work has since become a cornerstone of my approach to literacy instruction, I would have added that acqui-
sition occurs mainly through practice outside school rather than formal educational settings and that more direct instruction must engage not only the course material but also meta-knowledge about it. Both are important but, as Gee notes, “acquisition is good for performance; learning is good for meta-level knowledge” (4). Unfortunately, this focus on reading had diminished by the end of the decade for reasons beyond my purpose here to explain, and it is only in light of the findings from the Nelson Denny Test that we are once again talking as a department about the centrality of reading in composition instruction and across the disciplines.

The New Challenges of Digital Literacy

I am currently involved in a three-year project with the Brooklyn Historical Society called “Students and Faculty in the Archives,” in which first year students conduct primary research in the BHS archives. Through Pathways to Freedom, a learning community about African American history in Brooklyn, our students examine artifacts such as slave bills of sale from the 18th and 19th centuries. They grapple with handwritten documents with the “s” that looks like an “f” and arcane legal locutions on yellowing, fragile paper. As they read the documents in small groups, aided by an iPad or a magnifying glass, they pore over language that at first seems indecipherable. They spend hours unlocking the chilling historical narrative of human beings buying and selling other human beings. The experience of reading these primary, historically distant documents—a distance gleaned not just via a date but also by handling the material object itself—provides an experience of a primary source that illuminates the meaning of secondary sources and genuinely motivates a search for answers to questions the artifacts provoke. The close, sustained attention needed to extract meaning from the artifact epitomizes the value of reading not only as tool for learning and communication but also as a habit of mind.

It is precisely this habit of mind that we are in danger of losing as reading increasingly takes place in the environment of the Internet. Unlike reading in the archives, which exemplifies a deliberate, concentrated focus on one specific, often enigmatic document, reading on the Web is like driving down a highway marked by directional and commercial signage. On the Web, we are traveling through cyberspace, and whether we arrive at texts by design or accident, they always exist among many other texts competing among multiple channels for our attention. I like the emphasis on archival research precisely because it contrasts so sharply with digital literacy. Archival research is vertical, slow, deliberate, puzzling, deep, and focused—think preservation, slow cooking, Internet Sabbaths. Reading
on the Web is horizontal, fast, accidental, immediate, and shallow. While these characteristics are not exclusive to either domain, the multi-channeled environment of the Web marks the shift from a scarcity of information to a scarcity of attention, requiring us to develop new strategies for sorting out and valuing massive, often contradictory amounts of knowledge that close, deep, slow reading epitomized by archival research helps balance. If we as academics trained to read and write in highly complex, demanding contexts are affected by this revolution in communication, imagine what it must be like for a first-year college student to navigate the same terrain.

However, the distractions of the Internet are not the only cause of what Alice Horning calls the “‘don’t, won’t, can’t’ problem” in millennial generation readers (“Don’t”). Ironically, no sooner had higher education in the U.S. reached the zenith of opening its doors to masses of people in the late 1960s and 1970s, many coping with academic gaps created by social inequalities, than neoliberal policies of privatization started to erode support for educational programs. We must therefore intervene at two levels: 1) working politically at the macro-level to demand reinvestment in education; and 2) working in the educational sphere to help students from diverse backgrounds become more expert readers through thoughtful integration of reading instruction across the curriculum (see Horning, “Reading” and “Manicules”).

How, then, might the section of the CWPA Outcomes Statement on “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” be revised? In addition to the existing statement of what students should be able to do by the end of first year composition, I would add:

- Develop a habit of reading via extensive opportunities for practice in and outside the classroom
- Develop meta-cognitive strategies for comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, and applying a text
- Be aware of the different strategies needed for reading in Web environments, especially identification, selection, and evaluation
- Understand how to read diverse genres, including Web-based texts, for a wide range of purposes
- Develop strategies for inter-textual reading in order to integrate, synthesize, challenge, and contest others’ ideas

We can help students become better readers by remembering reading’s essential role in gaining access to academic, civic, professional, and personal spheres of knowledge and communication, and thus integrate it into our everyday instructional practices. More specifically, we can explicitly address
the learning outcomes of developing habits of mind and strategies for reading rhetorically and critically across purposes, genres, media and disciplines. Looking forward, we can research and reflect on the implications of the new economy of attention not only for how we learn to read, read to learn, and teach reading, but also for how we deal with the quickening avalanche of electronic information transforming twenty-first century life.

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Reading Matters: Thoughts on Revising the CWPA Outcomes Statement

Cynthia R. Haller

The revision of the CWPA Outcomes Statement affords the opportunity to address an ongoing issue in composition instruction: the neglect of reading pedagogy. Currently, the Statement pays inadequate attention to reading, contributing to potential misapprehensions about how reading and writing function in contexts of human activity. Here, I am taking “writing” to be the production of text and “reading” to be the interpretation of text, with text taken in its broadest sense (e.g., image, sound, alphanumeric characters, gestures, structures, etc.). If first-year composition courses fail to ground reading and writing together within a broad perspective on meaning-making, students may perceive writing erroneously as the end goal of reading, rather than a partner process. A more balanced Outcomes Statement would resituate reading less as something subsidiary to, supportive of, and temporally prior to writing, and more as a complementary process.
that, like writing, facilitates meaning-making through use of specific media embedded within the material and social world.

Rethinking the treatment of reading in the Outcomes, though not a simple task, would help align the pedagogy of composition more squarely with its current theories. Composition scholars and instructors do understand the inextricability of reading, writing, and context. We know texts are loci for both interpreting and returning meaning to the world. We know they motivate people to think and act in ways that maintain and/or alter the state of the world—ways that may include, but are not limited to, the production of new text. How odd, then, that many first-year composition courses still treat reading as an origin point in a temporally sequenced movement from reading to writing. Though we emphasize to students that reading and writing are recursive throughout the writing process, privileging this temporal movement presents reading as if it were anchored to a linear line of rhetorical production. In truth, reading and writing are used variously (and sometimes chaotically) to connect nodes of meaning in dynamic networks of human activity.

As genre studies have amply demonstrated, the use of texts matters as much as their production. Pedagogies that situate reading as primarily instrumental to writing, however, may present genre as “merely a finite product that writers produce” rather than “an ongoing process in which writers take part” (Liu 73–4). Such approaches risk fetishizing written text, reducing it to a product rather than a force within the world. Even a “genre process approach” to writing instruction can fall prey to this problem, if it treats reading and genre analysis simply as processes that enable the production of text. Locating reading as subsidiary to writing makes texts themselves, not their effects in the world, the end goals of rhetorical production.

Granted, the Statement’s tendency to treat reading primarily as it occurs in concert with rhetorical production is understandable. Professors and students spend proportionately larger amounts of time than most people reading texts as sources for writing; and, after all, we are in the business of teaching writing. The production of text, however, is not always a teleological goal of reading; it is simply one way humans act on the meanings they construct from texts. I read a cookbook and make a meal. I read a poem and feel pleasure. I hear a speech at a community meeting and cast a vote. I read a story aloud to my child and create a shared experience, strengthening our emotional bond. I read a newspaper article and do—nothing. Does my failure to use my reading of these texts to produce another text indicate I haven’t “made meaning”? Even if I never write a response letter to the editor of the newspaper, use the article in a research paper, or bring the article up in conversation, my thinking, my identity, and my future poten-
tial actions have been altered, however incrementally, by what I’ve read. The polysemous, often chaotic cycling of rhetorical reception and production through human activity can and should be better represented in the Outcomes Statement.

The Statement, of course, already does include references to reading; but the proportion of reading-related outcomes is small. Too, reading outcomes are concentrated in the “Critical Reading, Writing, and Thinking” category. In the “Rhetorical Knowledge” category, for example, only one of the seven outcomes (“Understand how genres shape reading and writing”) explicitly mentions reading (Council of Writing Program Administrators). Assuming these outcomes and the category itself are retained in the next revision (all bets are still off), these outcomes could be redesigned to emphasize that rhetorical knowledge applies to reading as well as writing. For example:

By the end of first-year composition, students should:

- Identify the purposes of texts they read and develop clearly ascertainable, focused purposes in the texts they write.
- Adopt an open stance and multiple audience perspectives to interpret texts, and respond to the needs of different audiences when writing texts.
- Respond appropriately, through rhetorical reception and production, to different kinds of rhetorical situations.
- Identify and use textual conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation.
- Identify and use voice, tone, and level of formality appropriately in the texts they read and write.
- Articulate how genres shape reading, writing, and action.
- Use genre as a resource for reading and writing texts.

Even in the “Critical Reading, Writing, and Thinking” category, more explicit and developed reading outcomes would be helpful. Adler-Kassner and Estrem have already elaborated a critical reading pedagogy that fleshes out multiple ways students should learn to read texts. Equally useful is their offering of the phrase “grappling with ideas” as a way to think about what we want students to do with texts (61). The word “grapple” comes from the Middle English “grapel,” a derivative of an Old Provencal word for “hook.” In its literal meaning, a grapple is an anchor with hooks, used especially for “drawing and holding an enemy ship alongside” (“Grapple”). Through metaphorical extension, a “grapple” has come to mean a clutch, or
grasp, or grip, of any kind, but particularly as it occurs in a contest, such as wrestling. The verb form, too, conveys the sense of gripping or clutching an irreducible “other.” When we “grapple,” we engage with and/or against something that is not passive, but also acts on us. “Grappling” captures the recalcitrance of texts. Texts are not simply effete collections of symbols, but have consequences, especially as they are taken up in various contexts of use (Blair). They do not surrender meekly to us. They argue back, altering our thinking and actions, constraining us to take them up in ways consistent with their own material existence. The popular catchphrase “critical reading, writing, and thinking” suggests that meaning-making is a one-way, cognitive action performed on an object; by contrast, the word “grappling” captures the two-way, absorbed engagement we (and we hope our students) experience when reading texts.

To discern further possibilities for enhancing the profile of reading in the Outcomes, we can start with extant empirical and theoretical work on reading. Such studies, for one thing, confirm the need for greater attention to reading pedagogy in first-year writing courses. Research by Howard, Serviss, and Rodrigue, for instance, calls into question whether first-year composition students really understand the texts they read (189)—a question that, among others, is currently being explored in The Citation Project. Jolliffe advocates that we consider and communicate why and how students should read in our courses, since reading strategies vary greatly by purpose (474). Ideas for reading pedagogies are already out there. Horning, for example, suggests we foster three “meta-awarenesses” experts use when reading, and assign course activities that demand analysis, synthesis, application, and evaluation of texts. Helmers’ edited collection, Intertexts: Reading Pedagogy in College Writing Classrooms likewise provides innovative approaches to teaching reading in composition classrooms. This list of resources is partial, not exhaustive; many scholars have contributed to a growing body of literature on reading.

We can also look to genre studies, which provide guidance on helping students understand reading and writing as situated activities. Freadman’s work on genre uptake provides an understanding of rhetorical reception that touches on the material consequences of texts, complicating an overly simplistic link of reading to writing. Bawarshi outlines a genre approach to invention rich in its attention to the connections between rhetorical reception and production. Rhetorical scholars’ recent considerations of silence (Glenn) and rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe) may seem far afield from composition pedagogy to some, but they open up important questions about the nature of rhetorical reception, speaking to reading in its broadest sense. Finally, we need to engage the literature on information literacy. Librar-
ians traffic in both memory and delivery, two rhetorical canons sometimes downplayed in composition classrooms. As Norgaard points out, an appreciation for how human knowledge is organized, stored, disseminated, and accessed can prevent students from viewing their own rhetorical production as isolated from other texts.

The place of reading pedagogy in composition instruction is but one of many issues to be considered as the CWPA re-crafts the Outcomes Statement. Adequate attention to reading, however, is necessary to a balanced Statement. Neglecting rhetorical reception implies that rhetorical production is possible in its absence. That scenario, if it could exist, would be the end of rhetoric: a solipsistic world full of people who talk but cannot listen.

Works Cited


Engaging Queerness and Contact Zones,
Reimagining Writing Difference

Martha Marinara

Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that differences do not exist.

Audre Lorde, *The Master’s Tools*

If you close your eyes, you could just as well imagine me to be vintage Ali MacGraw, circa 1968.

Sandra Bernhard, *Without You, I’m Nothing*

When I agreed to write a short piece about revising the WPA Outcomes Statement with an “eye to queering FYC,” I had not imagined how difficult it would be to describe the performance of, rather than the state of being queer. We are used to the liberal multicultural show and tell, the this is what it means to be gay or a woman or Latina. We know the issue of silencing and making safe classroom spaces. However, the next step, engaging that otherness in the classroom, is a wicked problem; wicked because it is resistant to resolution; wicked because there are numerous perspectives; wicked because the complex interdependencies and multiple, often ambiguous causes mean that solutions will reveal more problems, and wicked because those trying to solve the problem are also causing it.

It isn’t an easy task to perform queer in the classroom. At many different moments, queerness erupts to trouble normalcy, legitimacy and signification. Queerness skews, bends, or queers the realities we construct around ourselves, and the realities that have been constructed for us to induce a heteronormative sense of stability and progress through the replication of particular kinds of people in particular kinds of families. And it isn’t only
the heteronormative that needs to be bent; all of our centers of status quo—our notions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, as well as our cultural assumptions about who owns ideas, the relationship of writers to texts, what counts as evidence, how we explain ideas to others—need to be refracted, redirected in their transparency to a burst of their colorful parts. Queering first-year writing would make it possible to question how language shapes and legitimizes communities, knowledge, and writing, to question how language defends privilege. In other words, queerness ruffles or disturbs the boundaries and borders of knowledge and practice already in place in the academy.

* Berkeley Breathed ended his celebrated critique of politics and American culture, the comic strip Bloom County in 1989. The very last strip published on August 6th of that year showed Opus the penguin packing for Antarctica to find his mother. For those of you who don’t remember or never read Bloom County, the character Opus was known for his hopeless naïveté, delightful optimism, and red bow tie. His most salient feature was his large nose which grew larger as the comic strip progressed. In this last strip, all of the other characters have left Bloom County, and Opus is intent on finding his mother. Rather than disappointing Opus (and in effect his readers), Breathed leaves us with a scene in which Opus cuddles in his mother’s lap, their noses tenderly touching, an ecstatic state of jouissance, a happily ever after on an ice floe. We know this other penguin is his mother because their noses are drawn exactly the same.

* The phrase “exactly the same” is kind of fairy tale, aesthetically beautiful and narratively pleasing; however, sameness reinforces Western assumptions about family, happiness, and other cultural narratives.

* When Mary Louise Pratt gave her keynote address at the MLA Annual Conference in 1990, an address that was later published in Profiles 91, writing instructors and composition theorists latched onto her concept of “contact zones” as a way to explain the competing differences, the identity politics in writing classrooms. Writing instructors have effectively made “contact zones” a pedagogical metaphor for the past two decades, even asking students to read the article and write their own contact zone essays. In fact “Arts of the Contact Zone” has been cited over one thousand times and reprinted in many composition readers and textbooks. All of the citations and reprints serve to highlight our anxieties about institutionalizing the sta-
 tus quo and eradicating individuality, and we use this metaphor to explain almost everything from library science to writing across the curriculum, museums to politics to students’ coping strategies.

One goal of contact-zone pedagogies has been to help students to write about their experiences with an empowering authority that would valorize their experiences and cultures of origin. We soon found, however, that constructing any pedagogy against the background of academic culture and underlying ideological assumptions about knowledge, language, and discourse, and Western notions of literacy, argument, and research often results in mimicry, resistance, irritation, and anger from the students. As Victor Villanueva, Helen Fox and others have pointed out, this approach can lead to students whose ability to accept and use academic language conventions conflicts with their underlying cultural assumptions, assumptions that may be at odds with these conventions (Fox; Villanueva; Smitherman; hooks; Jordan). And so we recognized our students’ discomfort, and then (if we are brutally honest about it) many of us did nothing to alleviate their distress and irritation except to affirm their difference, to fall back on the comfortable and declare the writing classroom a safe and tolerant space, a space that merely afforded a simple reaffirmation of existence.

The difficulty with tolerance, beyond civil behavior or good manners, is that it strives for sameness, erases difference and negates the act of questioning because sameness makes it easy for us “all to get along.”

Falling into the comfort of “sameness” with its cultural and political capital is not an option if we really want to engage diversity.

Pratt’s article, however, does not discuss safety or tolerance; instead, she asks her readers to consider a 17th century writer, Guaman Poma and his text, New Chronicles as an example of an autoethnographic text “in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). In other words, a conflicted space where the subaltern “talks back” to the empire. Pratt describes these texts as “contact zones,” as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (emphasis mine 34).

Somehow while trying to be tolerant, we have managed to overlook the very real issue of conflict, of asymmetrical relations of power, and as Gary Olson describes it, this benign forgetfulness has “paper[ed] over difference since we’re all the same inside” (48). Contact zones were appropriated by an uncritical, liberal multiculturalist movement and became apolitical, a safe kind of melting pot, a chicken soup for the classroom. The result was that the dominant culture took center stage, difference lived in the mostly
exotic margins, and writing classrooms became a third space of pluralistic tolerance.²

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About 40 miles north of where I live, a 17 year old African American man, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a member of a neighborhood watch committee. Somewhere in his life, George Zimmerman learned a method of racial profiling, wherein young black men in hoodies are probably up to no good. And like the game of rock-paper-scissors, in the contact zone of this gated, suburban community sidewalk, gun beats fist every time.

This is a contact zone where a 17 year old died because the color of his skin and his gray hoodie made him “other,” and yet the community and the media are scrambling to make this incident less about difference, and more about private property³, stand your ground laws, vigilantes and gun control, even questioning the appearance of Reverend Al Sharpton and the NAACP because they historicized the event, reminded citizens of other racial injustices. The FBI interview of Zimmerman came to the conclusion that he was not a racist, and the shooting was not a hate crime because Zimmerman had responded to the hoodie, not Martin’s skin color. This legal conclusion furthers the status quo of a color-blind America and accepts that the public sphere, the language of law is neutral and inclusive. As Phyllis Mentzell Ryder so clearly notes, an uncritical acceptance of this desire to be neutral and inclusive, “leads to a particular version of multiculturalism . . . that ignores issues of power and the institutionalization of oppression” (517).

Performing queerness carries the uncomfortableness and all the ambiguity surrounding Trayvon Martin’s death, but performing queerness also carries an inherent responsibility to question who benefits from how the story of difference is told, why some interpretations are more valid than others, and why some writers (and some audiences) are more valid than others. Performing queer strips off all the layers that have been papered over by teaching practices, which, yes, should interrogate the neutrality of rhetorical concepts such as audience, writer, and process, and most certainly should question writing conventions, appropriate responses, and acceptable formats. However, what is missing from most teaching performances is its queerness, its praxis, its interrogation of the performance itself. The contrariness of queer theory, the wickedness of a performance that knows it is a performance not only questions the normal that masquerades as truth but questions the very concepts of difference and diversity making tolerance and inclusivity untenable. After the balloons and other artifacts from Trayvon Martin’s roadside memorial are taken down, the pain doesn’t go away.
Queering or questioning the WPA Outcomes Statement leads me to consider that a list of student learning outcomes, while important to the literacy practices that will be expected of our students in their public and professional lives, hinges on a particular kind of literacy that focuses on diversity as one objective among many, the “something extra” promise of liberal humanism. What the list does not do and needs to do is question how the process of teaching and learning—the wicked problem of our teaching practices—supports and maintains the role of difference as a definition, rather than a critical process that promotes a fuller notion of literacy.

Notes


2. I am not trying to denigrate a compassionate notion of tolerance, and I applaud the work of Teaching Tolerance, a program started by the Southern Poverty Law Center, but I do want to challenge us to deconstruct tolerance as a pedagogical strategy and as a learning objective.

3. No one has publically questioned that private property only matters if you are of a certain class and own land and/or a house.

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Queering Outcomes: Hacking the Source Code of the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition

William P. Banks

Recent media coverage of Steven Soderbergh’s new film, Magic Mike, which showcases actor Channing Tatum’s early career as a male stripper, has been plentiful. Facebook chatter and copious memes have suggested that after Fifty Shades of Grey worked women up, Magic Mike came along for a much needed release. Variety reviewer Peter Debruge enthuses, “Ladies are going to love ‘Magic Mike’ . . .” While this sort of gender-based buzz is common in popular culture, what has interested me most has been the stories about how the film was marketed: the New York Times recently reported that the producers and others involved in marketing initially considered only heterosexual women as the audience, and were surprised to find that gay men were interested in the film. But once that demographic became obvious, Sue Kroll of Warner Brothers notes that “the studio coordinated a ‘well-concentrated and tailored’ campaign intended to capture gay moviegoers’ attention.” Warner Brothers even hired NYC marketing agency Karpel Group to generate buzz and energy around the film, specifically in cities with heavy gay concentrations.

Now, why in the world open an essay on the WPA’s Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition with a tale about a summer stripper film? Because for me, watching this unfold, I couldn’t help but be reminded of classroom discussions of audience in my FYC courses over the years. Here is a very successful movie company and many very successful, very experienced film makers putting together a film about half-naked men, and their assumptions about audience seem terribly small . . . at least, until Sue Kroll has a chat with a gay male friend. Even the singular assumption about “women” or “ladies” seems highly suspect these days. Do lesbians even exist for Hollywood, or are they not women? This is something I’ve seen for years in my composition courses when students try to figure out who their audience is for a particular piece; they use large, amorphous groupings, usually starting with “everyone” and finally winding down a bit to “men” or “women” after we look at different magazines and their varied marketing strategies. It takes an entire semester (or longer) to get students to think of words and ideas as being targeted in particular ways to very particular audiences, or not being, as the case may be. And about how language and intention misfire as often as they hit their mark. In the Outcomes Statement, we say we expect students to “respond to the needs of different audiences,” but what do we mean by that? What level of sophistication or nuance regard-
ing audience should students have at the end of FYC? Merely that “teacher” is not an audience, though “teacher” may be reader or evaluator? The idea that audience does not equate to “person assigning grade”?

One of the things I have appreciated about the Outcomes Statement, and the countless hours of work that smart people have put into it, is the recognition that as a national body representing writing programs administrators at a host of varied and different programs, the WPA Council really cannot create “standards” or “precise levels of achievement” for these outcomes, that such things should be worked out locally, where writing professionals and other stakeholders can scaffold student learning. At the same time, I cannot help but think that WPAs really do have more of an expectation than merely the awareness that there are different audiences for writers to work with.

The thing is, critiquing the WPA Outcomes Statement seems both overly simple and overly vexed: we’ve all got something we think should be there that is not, something that is really important to us, but when does that one-more-thing stop? Just recently, in this interchange section of the WPA Journal, Paul Kei Matsuda noted his frustration with thinking about some of the areas that the journal covers with an eye to “fixing” something missing: “It took me a while to understand why I was having such a hard time choosing a few areas of interest or suggesting additional items, but it finally dawned on me: issues surrounding linguistic diversity in the writing program permeate all of these categories” (169). So much of what we do isn’t about tacking on something extra to a list of outcomes, but about how those outcomes reflect deep, significant issues, theories, and concerns. When queer colleagues and I have chatted about the OS, a question that eventually arises is: “How can we make this work—queerness, LGBT awareness—inextricable and essential rather than optional?” But I’m not sure the OS is the place to do that, or rather, that the outcomes themselves are the place. And yet I see everywhere the need for change.

So where does this change belong? I think it’s in the foundations, the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of the OS document, what’s hidden in the framing paragraphs, and by how what’s hidden becomes visible. I’d like to devote my space on this topic, then, to asking questions about those framing paragraphs and exploring how a different set of questions or assumptions can change significantly what we come to mean by those fairly open-ended, hard-to-miss outcomes themselves.

The OS begins with an introduction which notes the dispositional setting for the outcomes themselves, not only the knowledge and skills but also the attitudes that WPAs and FYC instructors seek. And yet reading the outcomes, I begin to wonder, “What are these attitudes? Toward what
or whom?” Are these attitudes toward language, toward the acts of writing/composing, toward writers/composers? All of the above? And whose attitudes? As an organization, do we consider the attitudes of queer writers and thinkers? Writers and thinkers of color? What is different when we do? Or when we foreground that awareness rather than come to it at the end as a “revision consideration”? My fear is that very little of the research and theory that most informs my sense of self and other, my sense of writing and composing, my sense of how language works in the world, is actually in these outcomes, or that other WPAs concern themselves very deeply with them.

When Jonathan Alexander, Martha Marinara, Samantha Blackmon and I got the reviewers’ comments back on our 2009 CCC article, “Cruising Composition Textbooks,” I was both shocked and not shocked by the very different reviews. One reviewer seemed embarrassed by the essay, surprised that she had not considered the representations of sexuality in the composition texts she chose; she said the essay was a wake-up call to review the books on her shelf and ask a different set of questions about them. The other reviewer didn’t really see the big deal, suggesting our mountain was at best a mole hill. To me, these teachers are not going to read the same Outcomes Statement, are not going to value the same theories of teaching, writing, and communication, so in a sense, they are not going to use the same Outcomes Statement.

Others writing for this symposium have offered “provocations” for their readers, and I feel somewhat compelled to do the same thing. But my provocation isn’t the one I thought I might write when I said yes to the invitation—though if WPA wants to add something specific to the OS in order to acknowledge that rhetoric and discourse are inherently cultural practices and that race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, region, class, etc. are inextricable from them, not merely something “added on” as part of audience awareness in the revision stage, but something that permeates the rhetorical canons, well, that would make me very happy as well.

But, if we as WPAs have an interest in queering the Outcomes Statement, then I would argue that we need to reclaim and remediate the document with the goal of putting back in what is omitted or glossed over. A hypertextual, visual, auditory project, this new OS, this OS 2.0, would crowd source its content; the diversity among rhetoric and composition researchers and teachers could help us make visible the complexities that the OS-as-written currently makes far too simple, far too quick. I can envision a web-based text or tablet app which lets users click or tap on concepts from the OS and head down the Rhet-Comp rabbit hole in search of “what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research,
and theory.” Such a space would not stop at the “intro” figures—important scholar-teachers like Murray, Elbow, Emig, Berthoff, Berlin, Lunsford, et al—but would put those figures into conversation with recent emerging work on queer rhetorics, ethnic rhetorics, cultural rhetorics, feminist rhetorics, as well as work from neurosciences, communication, visual studies, new media studies, and other theoretical and applied disciplines which have something to say about how writing and composing happen. While I have no idea how to do this, necessarily, I can imagine that the WPA Outcomes Statement-as-portal would be a way to rethink these initial outcomes and to refigure them as growing, shifting, mutable.

While the WPA Outcomes Statement may have been very much about solidifying the field and demonstrating internal validity for writing studies, for declaring to ourselves and our various stakeholders that we are a rich and complex field steeped in a long history of research and theory—a laudable goal—I would like to see a space where emerging scholars, as well as seasoned professionals, can contribute to the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of the OS itself. Opening up the document in this way helps move it from something merely “received” toward something that we collaboratively build together and which we revise as new ideas and theories come forward. The outcomes themselves are baseline; I don’t know that they’d change that dramatically as stated. What would change, I hope, is how we as WPAs and writing teachers understand the complexities embedded in those statements.

For me, queering the WPA Outcomes Statement is as much about disrupting the theories and practices that inform the outcomes themselves as it is about asking for different or differently articulated outcomes. Both are important, both have value, but the practice of remixing the OS is really one for all of us (and our students, perhaps), one that we should all be able to participate in and learn from. Queering the WPA OS is ultimately about hacking into the code that has built the document /* and annotating it in ways that will be useful for future coders */.

Works Cited


Review


Shane Borrowman

*The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* is a remarkable collection of essays. While an earlier collection on this topic, *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus After the WPA Outcomes Statement*, does a fine job both of describing the genesis and early history of the Outcomes Statement (OS) and exploring early thoughts on its application beyond first-year composition, *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* maps territory beyond what was extant when that first volume appeared. Its chapters show a movement through the various levels of the OS, but they also reveal (and revel in) composition-rhetoric’s methods of generating and testing knowledge.

Before turning to the book, however, I find it important to place the collection in a slightly larger frame, for its subject, the WPA Outcomes Statement, fits into a master metaphor long-loved and long-lived in this field.

When he built his parlor, Kenneth Burke provided composition-rhetoric, perhaps, with our most widely shared metaphor for the swirling melee of ideas in academe generally and the English department, specifically:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depend-
ing upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110–111)

The adoption of this metaphor has been a generative one, but it has also become a progressively larger potential misappropriation of a metaphor. It is a dialectical metaphor of attack and defense, rather than a dialogic metaphor of creation; the heated discussion is interminable. Winners feel gratification, losers embarrassment.

But Burke wasn’t writing of the academy in general and the department of English in particular. Burke was writing of history. More accurately, Burke was writing, in his metaphor of the parlor, of dialectical oppositions and the analysis of history, the shared representation of the past held by members of any collective—the narratives that bind a group’s members to one another, that form their shared past and collective memory, that educate generations to come.

The problem is not that Burke’s metaphor is wrong or frivolous or misleading. The problem is that by privileging the metaphor of the parlor and its 18th-century, genteel model of symposium-like discourse, we’ve stopped retaining the discussion with which Burke precedes it. What Burke sought in his metaphor of the parlor was a description of a scene that “could encompass the scene,” a revelation of the “social structures of meanings by which” individuals and groups make meaning (108). Most importantly for our present discussion, these revelations bore direct relation to a group’s extant documentation: “Every document bequeathed us by history,” Burke wrote, “must be treated as a strategy for encompassing a situation” (109, italics in original). This notion was foundational for the Burkean parlor—acknowledging from the beginning that context is unknowable in its totality and that disputation continues incessantly—and that documents are the remainder of one-time strategies, available to be mined for meaning within understood past, knowable present, and possible future contexts.

The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later represents a reflection on one of the most influential documents produced within composition studies as a statement of its own purpose—and as a reaction to the imposition of other agendas, including those driven both externally and internally. Editors Nicholas N. Behm, Gregory R. Glau, Deborah H. Holdstein, Duane Roen, and Edward M. White divide their text into twenty chapters, moving from Debra Frank Dew’s “CWPA Outcomes Statement as Heuristic for Inventing Writing-about-Writing Curricula” to “Assessing the Impact of the Outcomes Statement,” by Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight. The book travels from invention to assessment, with stops in between for ruminations on matters such as the politics of the OS and the authority it
may—or may not—encapsulate, the adoption and adaptation of the OS both in American writing programs and internationally, and the impact of the OS on ESL students and WAC programs.

This list of topics is by no means exhaustive or all-inclusive, as readers of the collection will quickly realize. *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* defies easy categorization. Yet there is a logic to the organization, a sense of texts working in tandem with one another as they push and pull and palaver on the history, meaning, and uses of the OS beyond and behind what the editors themselves may see.

These chapters stand as documents representing strategies of interpretation and implementation as they speak to one another in Burke’s metaphorical parlor. Discussing all of the participants in this conversation on the OS is not possible here, so I focus upon only a sampling of the crosstalk that takes place within *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later*.

As the editors note in their “Introduction,” one of the most meaningful definitional aspects of the OS is the fact that its creators “worked diligently to *not* suggest standards, but rather *outcomes.* Outcomes are goals that can be met on many levels, depending on local conditions (students, teachers, curriculum, etc.); standards are points at which those outcomes can be measured” (ix-x). The value of this foundational underpinning in a professional document like the OS is great, for it gives scholar-teachers in composition-rhetoric a way to articulate the complex and kairotic nature of our work—literacy education that must be sensitive to local, regional, national, and international pressures while simultaneously being sensitive to the needs of students. As a former WPA at a small, private university and the current chair of English at a land-grant state institution, I have learned the value of a document like the OS that both frames the discussion and offers the vocabulary—a vocabulary that comes in part from the original document, in part from the earlier book on the OS, and in part from all the intervening work on outcomes in composition studies.

In “The Politics of Pedagogy: The Outcomes Statement and Basic Writing,” Wendy Olson inserts her voice into the ongoing conversation, writing that, “strategic use of the WPA OS allows [her] to position basic writing classes . . . as part of a holistic curriculum that prepares basic writing students for the expectations of first-year composition” (18). With its focus on outcomes rather than standards, the OS is a uniquely useful document, creating a framework in which a writing program can gather together its disparate parts in order to enforce not conformity but consistency. Speaking of her specific context—one common to many of us, truly—Olson describes a situation wherein the “exclusion of basic writing from the curriculum . . . was more neglectful than malicious” (24). The OS offered a way to articu-
late to those beyond composition-rhetoric the deep and abiding complexity of learning to write at all levels, and it offered this understanding in the garb of a professionally vetted position statement—with all of the authority such a document can hold within an institutional setting.

Like Olson, Paul Kei Matsuda and Ryan Skinnell, in “Considering the Impact of the WPA Outcomes Statement on Second Language Writers,” argue that the OS has been influential on basic writers, a group often used as a catch-all category for any and all writers who fall outside of the locally defined regular composition course or course sequence. But this chapter, like many in the collection, offers important criticism of the OS, and Matsuda and Skinnell note what may be one of the most important of the document’s flaws: The OS’s silence on second-language writers is deafening. In context, the OS’ discussion of “language” clearly does not touch upon second-language students: “language as it is used here seems to refer to a socio-political notion of language rather than many of the language issues that challenge second language writers who are in the process of developing their English proficiency—namely, sentence structures, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic concerns” (232). Across their chapter, Matsuda and Skinnell provide an insightful and incisive analysis of the extant literature on the OS and second-language students, concluding that the OS’s primary focus on rhetorical awareness “seems to come at the expense of language issues that a growing number of students in first-year composition courses face” (234).

In “Released from the Ghost of Platonic Idealism: How the Outcomes Statement Affirms Rhetorical Curricula” and in “Is Rhetorical Knowledge the Über-Outcome?” Doug Sweet (in the former) and Barry M. Maid and Barbara J. D’Angelo (in the latter) turn directly to a consideration of the topic of rhetorical knowledge in the OS. But even the discussions of rhetorical knowledge—the most broad-based and difficult piece of the OS—turn quickly to matters of pedagogy and theory, that place in the parlor where all discussions of composition seem to end up eventually. Sweet writes that, for example, “we can use the WPA OS as a response to the inevitable resistance we encounter from faculty, administrators, and students who still cling to notions of language as a neutral transmitter of meaning (knowledge) found elsewhere, whether that elsewhere is identified empirically, rationally, mystically, or divinely” (73). The OS is deeply enmeshed in the philosophical debates of rhetoric from the pre-Socrates onwards, but the OS, by its very nature, is also deeply enmeshed in the debates on composition, from the classroom outwards. It is the versatility of the OS, its cross-contextual value in our diverse professional settings, that is part of its strength—as virtually
every chapter in *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* acknowledges, in one context or another.

Sweet uses the OS as a way to enter the Truth/truth debate in relation to language and knowledge—and to frame a fascinating and all-too-common sort of outburst at a department meeting (71–72). Maid and D’Angelo use the same aspects of the OS to speak of their use of it to bring together the diverse elements of technical writing at Arizona State University—including the need to pursue outcome-oriented thinking with every stroke of the administrator’s or teacher’s pen. They write, of their study, “Our initial assumption was that students majoring in an undergraduate technical communication program would lean more heavily toward the outcomes related to processes and knowledge of conventions.” With no equivocation, they explain how badly this assumption worked out: “Our assumption proved to be wrong. Rhetorical knowledge clearly emerged as the outcome that seemed to outweigh the others” (266). Taught by those educated in rhetoric, within a program designed with the OS as a model, the students involved saw themselves as much stronger agents in the written world.

Readers will find the same sort of cross-talk that I have described here taking place among the other sixteen chapters. As importantly, this collection is built around consideration of a single document—one with its own history and one “bequeathed us by history” (Burke 109). It is a document that provides the vocabulary for discussing the habitual matters of composition-rhetoric and the matters that are most complex. The OS is a strategic document encompassing our rhetorical situation. Of course, in this Burkean parlor, some of the original writers of the OS are still here, still taking part in the discussion, still putting in their oars even as new voices join the conversation.

Works Cited


Review Essay: Making Our Brains

Anne Ruggles Gere


As I read the three books under review here, I realized that today’s research portrays a very different brain from the one conceptualized in what used to be called cognitive studies. *Then* the brain was envisioned as a hard-wired entity with distinct areas named and claimed like colonial territories—Broca’s Area, Primary Motor Cortex, Wernicke’s Area and so on. Researchers like Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, Carl Bereiter, Marlene Scardamalia, Robert de Beaugrande, Lee Odell, Lee W. Gregg and Erwin R. Steinberg drew on this view of the brain to show how cognitive studies could inform the teaching of writing. *Now* the brain is described in terms of plasticity, with emphasis on its capacity for growth, interconnections, and regeneration. The authors whose books I discuss take a variety of perspectives, but they all reject the hard-wired view in favor of neuroplasticity. This newer view of the brain is more than metaphorical; it represents the current state of brain research, and this research has implications for those of us who develop and teach in writing programs.

Recent brain research has been paralleled by the development of digital technologies, so it is not surprising that some considerations of neuroplasticity include technologies as well as learning, scholarship, and teaching. N. Katherine Hayles’ book, *How We Think*, a richly textured and impres-
sively researched project, puts *technogenesis*, or the idea that humans and machines are co-evolving, at the center, and asks us to think carefully about the relationship between our own and our students’ brains as well as the digital writing tools we are all using. In Hayles’ view, the machines we create (re)make us, both cognitively and physically: “The more one works with digital technologies, the more one comes to appreciate the capacity of networked and programmable machines to carry out sophisticated cognitive tasks, and the more the keyboard comes to seem an extension of one’s thought rather than an external device on which one types” (3). Drawing on studies of changes in brain morphology and functioning, Hayles offers clear evidence of this relationship between brains and digital tools.

Furthermore, she connects this concept with the observation from evolutionary biology that epigenetic changes, “changes initiated and transmitted through the environment rather than through the genetic code,” can be “accelerated by changes in the environment that make [humans] even more adaptive, which leads to further epigenetic changes” (10). In this view, the brain (re)making that results from the use of digital technologies can become part of an increasingly rapid cycle of change. This merits attention from those of us interested in writing. What can we learn, for example, when the interactions of eye, hand, and brain that we have long associated with writing become—with the use of voice recording software—technologically facilitated interactions of eye, *voice*, and brain?

Hayles expands her argument by looking at the relation between the human and the technological in the case of telegraph code books to show “the connections between epigenetic changes in human biology, technological innovations, cultural imaginaries, and linguistic, social, and economic changes” (123). Code books, which were developed by most major industries and the military from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century, compressed key phrases into a single code word, sometimes for economy and sometimes for secrecy. As Hayles shows, code construction became increasingly algorithmic, pointing “toward a dematerialized view of information that would . . . find expression in the idea that human minds *already* exist as dematerialized information patterns and so can be uploaded to a computer without significant loss of identity” (151). At the same time, Hayles acknowledges that determining the relation of the human to digital technologies remains an ongoing struggle. Writing instructors contend with this struggle in a number of ways, perhaps none more pressing than in the machine scoring of writing.

The tension between databases and narrative also receives attention from Hayles, and she shows how the latter resists the standardization of the former, but at the same time demonstrates how narrative can become more
machine-centric when authors deploy “software programs, network functionalities, and hardware that provide sophisticated cognitive capabilities including access to databases and search algorithms” that participate in the composition process (236). Always nuanced and scrupulous, Hayles offers compelling evidence that we need to think very carefully about the relationship between brains and the digital writing tools we are using.

In the end, Hayles is deeply concerned about the growing divide between the digital humanities and the traditional humanities, especially in their differing views of theory, collaboration, databases, multimodal scholarship, and code. She argues that a union of the digital and traditional can help secure the future of the humanities more generally, even as she recognizes the difficulty in so doing. A more detailed illustration of this point appears in the chapter titled “How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine” in which she questions how the close reading long associated with literary study can be reconciled with the skimming, fragmenting, and hyperlinking of screen-based hyper reading and with machine reading. The message Hayles leaves with her readers is that close, hyper and machine reading “each have distinctive advantages and limitations; nevertheless, they also overlap and can be made to interact synergistically with one another” (74). This point convinces me especially because I have found it useful to combine the quantitative strengths of machine reading with the interpretive features of close reading in assessing student writing.

I have looked at the Hayles book in detail because it makes the most well-grounded argument of the books considered here, and in many ways the others take as givens much of what Hayles carefully explains about brain-making.

Cathy N. Davidson’s book, Now You See It, looks at the issue of brain-making from the perspective of attention, and deals with some of the same issues in a more popularized form, with engaging anecdotes and personal narratives about the importance of attention woven into discussions of research. Unlike Hayles, Davidson’s concerns are explicitly pedagogical. Framing her argument around the issue of attention blindness, she urges readers to pay attention to brains and digital technologies differently. Like Hayles, she points to the plasticity of the brain, but her goal is threefold: to reassure adults that children will not be damaged by digital technologies because that fear is based on “an old idea of neural development as fixed or ‘hardwired’” (56); to urge the value of building “cognitive reserves” (269); and to claim that learning, especially using the Internet, should continue throughout life, since “We’re never too old to learn” (276). Davidson defines cognitive reserves as neural pathways developed by learning, which can take over some functioning if part of the brain is damaged. Drawing
on her own experiences as a student, her own teaching and visits to the classrooms of others, she argues for making teaching more interactive, for positioning the Internet centrally, for fostering collaboration among those who hold different views, and for requiring students to write online to get a more compelling sense of audience.

Davidson lambastes the current emphasis on standardized tests for emphasizing lower-order thinking, and she discusses alternatives like crowd-sourcing grades, badges, ePortfolios, adaptable challenge tests, and, especially, games. Turning to the workplace, Davidson claims that “if we understand more about how we have been encouraged to pay attention for the last hundred years and how we need to pay attention now, we can begin to rethink work in the future” (170) and argues again for collaboration based on difference. Davidson doesn’t deal with all dimensions of attention but she underscores its importance. Filled with bracing admonitions, this book serves as a reminder that interest in neurological research and the implications of digital technologies extends well beyond the walls of the academy.

Indeed, there are a number of books—all addressed to broad audiences—about the brain and its relation to digital technologies. Like Davidson, Howard Rheingold urges the importance of attention and offers suggestions for managing it. Clay Shirky reminds us of the cognitive surplus available to our society if people watch less television and participate in online projects to solve problems and collaborate on civic projects. Both Mark Bauerlein and Nicholas Carr call upon brain plasticity to lament the effects of digital technologies on the brain, claiming that young people’s learning and capacity to read deeply are being diminished. Maggie Jackson and Winifred Gallagher take a similarly negative view, claiming that digital technologies undercut our ability to focus and be aware of our world. Dean Buonomano describes how the brain’s associative memory function makes humans vulnerable to the persuasions of advertisers and unable to connect events separated by time.

Most of the books published by the popular press frame the relationship between brain plasticity and digital technologies in negative terms, and together they can serve as a caution against seeing digital technologies as the solution to any number of teaching and learning challenges. Taking a longer view, however, makes their alarms seem less pressing. Compositionists were once preoccupied by cognitive processes and individual development, convinced that research in these areas could transform writing instruction. But intellectual winds soon blew in other directions, and socially-oriented perspectives on writing became more prominent under the influence of
theorists like Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Kenneth Burke, leading to investigations of collaboration, social context, and power dynamics.

Still, the fact that both the popular press and scholarly monographs are looking at current neuroscience in relation to digital technologies suggests that this is an important topic both within and beyond the academy. Overall, there is reason to be optimistic: research on brain plasticity demonstrates that our students have significant capacities to learn and develop as writers particularly if we can help them manage attention and use digital technologies effectively.

At the same time, however, we need to remain cautious about how we take up new understandings of the brain. As Catherine Malabou observes in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, the shift from conceiving of the brain as an entity of (hard) wiring as opposed to plasticity represents more than an intellectual shift. It can be conceptualized as part of the current economic and social environment’s model of multiple connected but atomistic and mobile centers (think international corporations). Plasticity is sometimes erroneously equated with flexibility, but it is important to maintain a distinction between the two because flexibility connotes acquiescence and adaptation while plasticity—in its developmental, modulational, and reparative manifestations—refers to transformative ability. In Malabou’s view we need to become more self-conscious about our own roles in “making” our brains, and in recognizing their transformative capacities. Sounds like an agenda for WPAs.

**Works Cited**


“Taking Care of” Writing

David Schwalm


In my various stints as a WPA in the 1980s and early 1990s, my primary job was to create the best writing courses I could for meeting the first year composition requirement at my institution. But then I had to turn right around and determine who could be excused from these marvelous courses because they “didn’t need” them. The students who allegedly “didn’t need” them fell into several different categories. The smallest group were those who “challenged” the course by taking the CLEP (College Level Examination Program) exam, a multiple choice test sometimes including a writing sample. Then came the slightly larger number who had scored high enough on the Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams to claim exemption from FYC. The largest group by far were transfer students who had taken FYC courses at other institutions and were, not unreasonably, expecting to receive equivalent credit for them at my institution. This was an especially large number at Arizona State University, which, in those days, had over twice as many seniors as freshmen. Although the courses that they took at the other college couldn’t possibly have been as good as ours, at least every student had had a college level writing course that met someone’s FYC requirement somewhere. Or so I thought. But hidden within the population of transfer students was a growing number of students who had earned their college FYC credits through a program called “dual enrollment,” or DE. That is, they had taken courses in high school, taught by the high school teacher during high school hours, for which they received credit from both the high school and from a sponsoring college or university. As these courses were seldom identified on transcripts in any
special way, it was difficult to identify DE credit. These students looked like transfer students, but they were different. The credit came from the college. The course was taught in the high school. DE looked less like transfer and more like AP, without the test.

As a WPA, I was not eager to exempt anyone from our FYC requirement. WPAs generally view FYC as a critical gateway course to college academic writing, not as a “barrier” course or “remedial” course to make up for the alleged failure of high school. At the same time, I knew that many students—and their parents—dismiss FYC simply as a requirement to “get out of the way,” along with most other general education course work. This attitude was picked up by college admissions people eager to use FYC exemption as a bargaining chip to attract strong students. While not impervious to such insults, I was not too concerned about the test-based exemptions because the number of students who would miss out on the ASU FYC experience was small. No one was totally exempted based on a test. We gave no credit for the CLEP but offered students with high CLEP scores, including the writing sample, placement into an “honors” one-semester composition course that met the two-course FYC requirement. A 4 or 5 on one of the AP tests (English Language or English Literature) got credit for ENG 101 and 3 hours of general elective credit, but the student still had to take ENG 102. We had a similar deal for the International Baccalaureate students, of whom there were very few. We agreed to accept FYC courses from Arizona public universities and community colleges as direct equivalents as part of a statewide transfer agreement, but we also had statewide discipline-specific workshops once or twice a year to ensure that equivalency was more than a professional courtesy. We continued to evaluate transfer work from many other institutions on a case-by-case basis, although we built a data base of past decisions to expedite the process.

But “dual enrollment” (DE) was a different creature altogether. The students who had DE credit were hard to identify. We did not know what sort of courses they had. The potential for there to be large but invisible numbers of them was huge. Finding this alarming, I thought it might be a good idea to get some professional discussion going about it. Thus, over 20 years ago (in olden days before WPA-L), Michael Vivion and I published dueling articles in an issue of WPA-Writing Program Administration about dual enrollment—specifically, the practice of giving high school students the opportunity to take courses in high school for which they receive both high school and college credit toward graduation. Although models vary, the standard dual enrollment (DE) course is taught by a high school teacher in the high school during the regular high school hours. The students enroll in the course both with the high school and with the sponsoring college. The
extent to which the sponsoring college controls curriculum and instruction varies from program to program. (The term “concurrent enrollment” applies when a high school student simply registers for a course taken on a college campus.) As first year composition is the most ubiquitously required course in academe, it is the most frequently targeted and taken course for DE, although DE courses in other subjects are offered.

In our articles, both Vivion and I were wary of this phenomenon and were answering essentially the same rather skeptical question about DE: What do we do about it? From what I had seen, I argued that we should nip this thing in the bud because it 1) confused learning with awarding credit, 2) competed with AP and IB without any common check on quality, like the AP exam, 3) reinforced the popular notions that writing is a finite skill and that the main purpose of first year comp is to remedy the failures of high school, 4) was driven more by multiple financial incentives than academic quality, 5) removed control of curriculum and instruction from college instructors, and 6) could not recreate the cultural context of a college classroom (52–53). Vivion argued 1) that it was too late, that the bud had already flowered, 2) that DE could possibly be more appropriate vis-a-vis composition than AP courses, and 3) that our best move was to embrace DE in order to ensure that it be done as well as possible since there were others waiting in the wings eager to do it badly. He proceeded to describe extensive efforts at the University of Missouri—Kansas City (UMKC) to make sure that the program was at least equivalent to what they offered on campus while helping to build a mutually beneficial relationship with area high school English teachers (57–59).

I felt that my fears were justified. In 1988, I initially encountered DE in its most rudimentary form as it emerged in Arizona. The sponsoring college had simply designated senior English 1 and 2 at some Phoenix high schools as equivalent to ENG 101 and 102 at the college. Students taking senior English who also enrolled in (paid tuition for) a “phantom” section of ENG 101 or 102 at the college got both high school and college credit upon passing the course. The college did little but collect tuition and underwrite credit. I got involved because Arizona State University had state transfer articulation agreements with the sponsoring college, and thus ASU was obliged to accept credit for ENG 101 and 102 earned through DE as equivalent to our courses. It looked like a “credit laundering” operation. Initially, Vivion had found almost the same situation in Kansas City some years earlier, but he and his colleagues had been working subsequently to build a DE program with integrity, characterized by “direct supervision of teachers, departmental approval of participating faculty, opportunities for professional development, collaboration between on-campus and high school fac-
Our shared concern was, basically, how we could ensure that DE writing courses were, in fact, genuine college writing courses—operationally defined as being equivalent to the on-campus writing courses offered by the sponsoring college. I argued that it couldn’t and shouldn’t be done. Vivion was perhaps more constructive, trying to show how it could be done and that it might have some positive features.

In these earlier days, the rationale for DE was pretty much the same as the rationale for the test-based placement/credit programs like AP, CLEP, and International Baccalaureate. It would provide an opportunity for a relatively small number of especially talented or gifted high school students to get a head start on college by completing typical freshman courses—well within their abilities—in high school while reducing the giddy ennui of their senior year. It was also proposed as a way of enriching the curriculum at smaller rural high schools that could not afford to staff advanced courses.

Now, flash forward 20 years. Published in 2010, College Credit for Writing in High School: The “Taking Care of” Business, edited for NCTE by Kristine Hansen and Christine Farris, takes a good hard critical look at the full history and current state of “college credit in high school” enterprises, both the course/test-based programs and DE. The book makes clear immediately that the modest goals and rationales for these activities have shifted dramatically in that last 20 years. Citing an influential 2007 Harvard Education Press anthology Minding the Gap: Why Integrating High School and College Makes Sense and How to Do It, editors Hansen and Farris point out in their “Introduction” that the “gifted student” rational from the 1970s and 1980s has evolved into a massive nationwide effort in which “educational institutions and state governments pay growing heed to the businesses and private foundations urging the integration of high school and college [emphasis added]”(xx). This growth has been stimulated recently since DE has become very popular among education reformers who, in these lean times, are looking primarily for ways to reduce the cost of education and increase its efficiency, but also to make the process of earning a college degree more accessible, flexible, and adaptable to an increasingly complex clientele. For years, the College Board and ETS have been lobbying state legislatures to require AP courses in all schools and even to require public colleges to award credit or placement to students scoring 3 or higher on AP tests. There are programs, such as “Early Colleges” funded by the likes of the Gates foundation, that encourage as many high school students as possible to accumulate up to two years of college credit while completing high school. In her chapter “The Composition Marketplace: Shopping for Credit versus Learning to Write,” Hansen cites a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2002–03 study showing that 71 % of high schools
offer DE courses, 67% offer AP courses, and 2% offer IB courses (8). In
that same year, NCES reported that 1.2 million students were involved in
concurrent or DE programs, 74% of those in DE (25). The narrow focus
of the program on providing educational opportunity for a small cadre of
gifted students and rural students has morphed into an effort to give all
high school students early experience with what will be expected of them
in college as a way of encouraging college attendance and persistence, with
reduced time to degree. Integrating college and high school would lead to
producing more college graduates while reducing the college success gap
between rich and poor, minority and majority students.

Following Hansen’s clear-eyed and comprehensive survey of the “mar-
kets” for composition credit (this chapter is the best concise inventory I
have seen of most of the dilemmas in which our discipline finds itself), the
first half of the book examines the history and development of course/test-
based opportunities to earn credit or placement, especially AP. There have
long been two basic concerns about the AP program in English: 1) the AP
courses—English Literature and Composition and English Language and
Composition—grew out of what composition programs may have been
in 1950 (basically writing about literature programs) and have been slow
to reflect the emphases of contemporary college composition courses, and
2) neither AP writing sample gives us much insight into students’ writing
competence. Joseph Jones writes about the origins of the AP program and
its possible misalignment with the goals of first year composition. Katherine
Puhr then describes the progress our colleagues in secondary and postsec-
ondary writing programs have made to bring both AP courses and exams
into better alignment with college gateway writing courses. Colleen Whit-
ley and Deirdre Paulsen report data they collected from students who had
taken both AP courses and college writing courses about their perceptions
of the success (or lack thereof) of alignment efforts. Steve Thalheimer con-
cludes this section with a discussion of the comparative potential of AP and
DE to contribute to students’ development as writers at the critical juncture
between high school and college. Thalheimer has taught both AP and DE
courses. This article serves as a transition to the treatment of DE.

The section on DE includes articles in which the authors discuss how
programs in which they were involved addressed, essentially, the very con-
cerns that Michael Vivion and I identified in our paired articles in 1991.
The key question is whether or how we can ensure that DE writing courses
are genuine college level writing courses (a problematic standard in itself,
an issue addressed in a 2006 NCTE collection What is “College-Level” Writ-
ing, edited by Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg and a follow-up 2010
NCTE volume What is College-Level Writing, Volume 2: Assignments, Read-
Barbara Schneider pursues this question in describing how she and her colleagues implemented a Gates Foundation-funded Early College High School Program at the University of Toledo starting in 2006, always with an eye to “broader questions about the purposes of education” (143). Joanna Castner Post, Vicki Beard Simmons and Stephanie Vanderslice, in “Round up the Horses—The Carts are Racing Downhill,” recount their efforts rapidly to implement a much-expanded DE program at University of Central Arkansas with appropriate inputs, management, and assessments in place to ensure the quality of courses. Randall McClure, Kevin Enerson, Jane Kepple Johnson, Patricia Lipetzky, and Cynthia Pope write about the advantages a DE program operated by Mankato State University has brought to students and teachers in rural Minnesota through effective collaboration between college and university partners. Miles McCrimmon argues that the partnerships resulting from well-structured DE programs can “challenge some of the persistent binaries that shape the daily work of our profession—between secondary and postsecondary institutions, between two-year and four-year colleges, and even between commerce and pedagogy” (209). Patricia Moody and Margaret Bonesteel review the history of one of the oldest and largest DE programs, Syracuse University’s Project Advance, started in 1972. They describe the complex partnerships, networks, and management infrastructure required to maintain a high quality DE program serving 6600 students in 140 high schools in five Northeastern states. Chris Anson describes efforts of the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) to establish national standards for DE programs and to set up an accreditation process based on those standards. Anson explores how those standards must be enhanced and continuously monitored to guarantee consistent quality in DE programs. The section is capped off by Christine Farris’s discussion of how the possibility of parity between high school and college courses is affected by the different cultures of high school and college manifested, for example, in the difference between teaching forms and formulas as opposed to teaching ways of thinking about things. All of these authors have first-hand experience in developing and managing DE programs, some of them very large.

In current educational parlance, DE is a “disruptive” educational innovation insofar as it attempts to break down the structural separation between college and high school. In reading through these chapters, whether about course/test-based credit or DE credit, one gets the sense that almost all writers are describing efforts to reduce the disruption, to make the best of a bad situation, to accommodate DE without conceding structural change. Students are looking for the easiest way to “take care of” the FYC requirement,
and we are busy trying to outwit them, to ensure that these evasions will be at least as difficult and educational as taking the actual courses. It is clear that no one is now going to join me in my position from 20 years ago that DE should be stopped in its tracks. We see time and again in these articles the admission that DE is an established fact. The main question now, just as it was for Vivion and me 20 years ago, is: what are we going to do about it? How can we ensure the integrity of the courses? How can we make the high school course equal to the college course? How will we know? We can demonstrate our success through assessment research showing that the work of students taking the course in the high school is indistinguishable from the work of students taking the course on the sponsoring college’s campus. And we have some successes of that kind reported. The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) has incorporated in its standards much of what the best programs have been doing to ensure the integrity of DE courses. NACEP has taken it a step forward by creating a template of best practices to guide existing and new programs and to form the basis for accreditation of such programs. And the assessment standards suggested by NACEP would have us checking to see if the performance of DE students is equal to that of non-DE students. The idea is to make the high school course be the college course. NACEP defines what a “good” DE program is. Not surprisingly, a good program is characterized by the features or extensions of the features that Vivion and his colleagues were pursuing in the early 1980s: “direct supervision of teachers, departmental approval of participating faculty, opportunities for professional development, collaboration between on-campus and high school faculty” (57). The infrastructure and personnel required are substantial. There are full-time program directors, coordinating committees, summer workshops for participating teachers, careful planning of curriculum, supervision of faculty, and monitoring of student and faculty performance.

And all of this, of course, makes sense—if the goal of DE is to provide a head start on college for gifted students anywhere. But while DE programs have been growing, the purpose of DE has long ago broadened its focus—as Hansen and Farris put it, citing Minding the Gap: “they [Hoffman, et al.] propose ‘an integrated secondary/postsecondary system, one in which a post-high school credential is the default end point, and in which the transition between sectors is eliminated to the greatest extent possible’” (xix). The change is significant. It essentially renders unnecessary most of the efforts that have gone on over the last 20 years to ensure the integrity of DE courses. The focus is now on student participation, persistence, and success in attaining some kind of post-secondary credential. “Throughput” has replaced specific learning outcomes as the measure of success. Thus, if
it can be shown that participation in DE programs—*in general*—correlates positively with high school graduation, transition to college, and college persistence, and credential attainment—*for whatever reasons*—then DE is a success. A recent example of such research is an Oregon correlation study in 2010, showing that more DE students than non-DE students went to college, persisted beyond the first year, took more credits, earned higher GPAs, and so on (North, 1–2). If we argue that the writing courses offered through DE are not really college writing courses and students aren’t learning what they should, naysayers can argue, on the basis of throughput data, either that the courses seem to be doing the job or that they are really not all that critical to achieving the larger “throughput” goals.

But it gets worse. The DE enterprise I encountered in Arizona in 1988—designating existing high school courses as equivalent to ENG 101 and 102 and giving college credit for them—cost almost nothing. Building a program with validated integrity like the programs described in this book and any that would meet NACEP’s accreditation standards costs a lot of money. If the “throughput” goals of participation, persistence, and credential attainment can be met without all of this staff, structure, and organization, there is little incentive for colleges to start or to continue to fund the infrastructure designed to maintain course quality. But wait. There’s more.

The original model of DE—courses taught in the high school during the high school day by the high school teacher—emerged because “regular” concurrent enrollment—high school students taking a course at the local college or community college—was impossible or seriously inconvenient in many places. With DE, neither students nor teachers had to travel. DE solved the access problem but raised another—the uncertainty about the alignment between the high school courses and the college courses. This was caused by “outsourcing” instruction—for purposes of convenience—to the high school teacher who was caught between high school and college cultures and objectives. Well, in the meantime online education has come of age, computer access is ubiquitous, and just about any student wanting to earn dual credit for just about anything has multiple providers to choose from online. Some might be from the local college, some from Harvard’s MOOC, and some from non-accredited course developers like StraighterLine who are working on making a place for themselves as specialists in developing high-demand online courses for colleges or individual students. Students can pursue online credits in groups in the high school lab or at home on their own or on their smart phones. Online courses are convenient. An online DE course *is* the college course taught by a college instructor. The problem of course integrity disappears. Online courses sim-
ply eliminate the need for the DE model and the complex solutions we have come up with to address the problems it raised.

*College Credit for Writing in High School*, which recently won the Council of Writing Program Administrators Book Award for 2012, is an excellent history and analysis of the major efforts over the last half century to provide students with ways to “take care of” FYC courses and similar courses that are popularly thought to “get in the way” of something; we are not quite sure of what. But there may not be much more to say. I am inclined to believe that the future of DE and test-based credit or placement programs will be very short and the hard work just reaching fruition in the NACEP accreditation program for DE will be deemed unnecessary. The newer policy focus on generating more college graduates (i.e. “throughput”), along with the ready availability and convenience of genuine college courses available online to high school students anytime or anywhere, will quickly and significantly diminish the current demand for AP, IB, CLEP, and DE, which, in their organizational complexity and cost, will be victims of Occam’s razor.

Many students will continue to participate in our traditional FYC programs. Others will find different ways to “take care of” their FYC requirements. We are living in the age of “stackable credentials,” made up of credit for knowledge that students have, no matter how they got it. It will become a fact of life, especially in public institutions, that we have less and less control over increasingly large portions of the course work we require for the credentials we ultimately award and are held accountable for. We still have the responsibility of ensuring that college graduates know how to write, regardless of the paths by which they find their way to us. They are what they are when we get them. Our emerging challenge is to give up trying to control the past, determine where our students are, and figure out how to accomplish our goals in the time we have with them. We have to find new ways to “take care of” writing.

**Works Cited**


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