

Flat and Fertile: A Conversation About the Writing Program at Illinois State University

Shirley K Rose and Joyce Walker

Shirley Rose (SR): Thank you, Joyce for taking some time out to talk with me about the writing program at Illinois State University. This interview is the fourth in a series *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has devoted to conversations about the writing programs at the home institutions of the WPAs who serve as local hosts for the summer conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. I'm looking forward to coming to the Bloomington-Normal area for the conference this July and I'm eager to hear about ways you think the writing program there reflects its institutional and geographical location. First, I want to start with some basic demographic information about your writing programs at Illinois State University. What are the programs and how are they organized? Who leads them and how does the organization of the writing program reflect the larger institution?

Joyce Walker (JW): The writing program that I direct is a general education writing program, so we handle the general education writing requirements. We teach four courses: English 101, which is the first year writing course that all freshmen students take unless they have done a dual enrollment in their high schools, and English 101-10, which is the same course but it has a writing consultant that's attached to the course and smaller course size so that students can get one-on-one help as they go through the course. We have also an English 145, which is an intermediate level writing course that's not taken by all the students across campus. Certain majors have their students take intermediate writing with us and other majors have intermediate writing courses within the major; we serve a lot of different majors in that course but not all the students on campus; then English 145.13 which is specifically an intermediate writing course for all the majors in the College of Business.

In addition, our English Department has tracks in both undergraduate and graduate programs that focus specifically on writing and/or on rhetoric and composition. So, our program is really intra-disciplinary. We are an English Studies program rather than a traditional English Department, so students are often interested in different combinations of study that have to do with rhetoric and/or writing. For example, they might be studying creative writing and publishing or technical communications and rhetoric and composition, so it is actually quite a bit different from other institutions where majors might be tracked more strictly in their own area.

SR: You said that it is an English Studies department and not an English Department...

JW: We think that makes a difference and what that basically means is this: About 25 or 30 years ago the department made a very specific decision to think about how to integrate the different areas of English and allow students, both undergraduate and graduate, to move across different areas rather than tracking students rigidly into single areas. It is a little more obvious in our graduate program; our PhD program is specifically an English Studies program, so students can take courses across the board in linguistics, rhetoric and composition, technical communications, English education, creative writing, and in literature and cultural studies. So, all of our students have had at least some coursework in other areas, rather than just in their own specific scholarly interests. And I think that changes the dynamic of the department quite a bit. It changes how we hire. It changes a lot of things. It's quite a bit different than other programs that I've been associated with because that constant focus is to say "Well how can I make connections across these boundaries?" rather than "How do we strengthen these boundaries between programs?" So, for example, for a lot of our hires we are thinking across three or four different areas to try to figure out, "Well if we got a hire who could do these three things then he or she would be able to teach classes over here and over here." So it is different than other institutions where I've worked.

SR: I can certainly see at the graduate level how different that is, and for undergraduate majors as well. Do you see ways that that set of attitudes is reflected in first year writing as well? Or in those intermediate writing courses that are for other majors?

JW: The writing program at Illinois State University is, I would have to say, a relatively new kind of program compared to most writing programs, and I don't want to get really enthusiastic about it because it's my thing so I could talk about it for days. But, we do what we call a

genre studies/ activity theory focused writing course. It focuses on literate activity in ways that I think can be interesting to teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds. Also, there are two other things going with our program that affect the graduate students who teach with us. One is the intra-disciplinary focus, so you very rarely get a grad student who would say “Well, I don’t care about teaching composition at all. That’s not interesting to me.” Second, our program as well as ISU as a whole, has this very strong education and teaching focus and because of that our program actually advertises our interest in pedagogies across all the different disciplines. Students come in very interested in pedagogy, and that helps us to create coherence and enthusiasm for the program.

SR: You mention the strong teaching focus at ISU. It’s known as the oldest public university in Illinois; and, as the name of the town where it’s located signals, it was founded as Illinois State Normal School, a training school for teachers. I know the university motto is “Gladly we Learn and Teach.” How are the university’s late 19th Century roots as an institution focused on teacher preparation evident in the English Department’s 21st Century academic programs?

JW: It’s very connected, because most of our graduate students, coming in, have already expressed an interest in teaching, and then in our Writing Program, they get a very strong grounding in pedagogies that relate to the study of literate activity of all kinds. So, many of our teachers are able to incorporate things they learn in the Writing Program into other classes they teach. Also, because we’re a teaching-focused institution, grad students get a chance to teach at least one or two courses that are in their area, and that means they come back to the writing program with all kinds of knowledge from these areas and then incorporate that into their teaching in our program. So it is almost like we have a writing across the curriculum program within our department, and I think that has a big influence on how writing is taught in our department.

SR: That is really interesting because it seems like you’re describing a set of attitudes that probably are part of that theoretical approach to your curriculum that is mutually reinforcing.

JW: That’s the reason I came to ISU, because I was really interested in building a certain kind of writing program and ISU provides enormous support for the first year writing program. We have a full time assistant director, an office manager who manages the business end of the program, and eight graduate students who are assigned to do program work as part of their assistantships. For the size that we are,

I don't know of any other WPA who has this same level of support. We're also given a lot of freedom (and responsibility) to think about what our writing program should be doing and teaching, rather than simply being asked to follow the dictates of the University. I know there are programs where WPAs really struggle with trying to balance the requirements of the institution with their own knowledge about what works for writers, but at ISU, especially within the department, there is a focus that says "No, we should be theoretical about what we're doing in this course, we should be on the cutting edge, we should be thinking ahead about how it is that people really become literate and about how that would impact what we would want to teach in a course like this." I've been really encouraged to do that here. The graduate students I work with at ISU are so interested in pedagogy that they are really willing to read a lot of theory and research scholarship on literacy and learning. I know that some WPAs can find it difficult to promote a really rigorous, scholarly approach to teaching writing. So I think it does make a big difference that at ISU we can be rigorous in adopting a theoretical and research based approach to teaching first year courses.

SR: Yes, it does if they're coming in with an orientation toward pedagogy and the entire department culture and institutional culture is supporting teaching as a serious intellectual activity that is informed by theory. So, I can see how that would make a significant difference. I agree with you about the wonderful amount of support you have for the program...you said something about "considering the size"—how many students do you have in first year writing?

JW: We serve about 3,000 students a year, so it is not a small size but it is not nearly as big as even the University of Illinois, certainly not as big as Arizona State University. It is a relatively medium sized institution, around 20,000 total enrollment.

SR: What do your—was it eight or nine—program assistants do?

JW: Eight graduate assistants.

SR: What are their duties?

JW: I'll digress for a minute by saying that when I came into the program the assistants all did basically the same tasks: they served as mentors, they observed classes, and they ran workshops. I think this is similar to what many programs do. However, over the last couple of years, we've made the positions more specialized and focused on teaching them professional skills in certain areas. This helps them when they go on the job market, we think. So, our eight positions include three "Teaching Coordinators," one for each of the courses that we teach

(two levels of first year writing and one intermediate writing course). Each of these coordinators helps to develop materials for our new instructor orientation, and works one-on-one with all the new teachers in their first semester teaching, as well as mentoring and assisting more experienced teachers. These positions are all also starting to do some Writing Across the Curriculum work. Then we have an “Outreach Coordinator” who does a range of different tasks related to our community outreach: she works with K through 12 teachers, trying to create bridges with K through 12 teachers in the region, especially schools that feed a lot into ISU to talk with them about what our expectations are. We’ve done quite a bit of work actually with small groups of teachers on the common core and also with some community colleges in the area, including Heartland Community College. She also handles other kinds of outreach, like our Grassroots Writing Research Scholarship program, and our visiting speaker series. In 2013 Anis Bawarshi was our speaker, and he was awesome.

SR: I saw that on the website. That’s great.

JW: We also have a person who primarily does data gathering and assessment, our “Data and Research Coordinator.” And we have a “Technology Coordinator,” because all our writing classes are taught in computer classrooms. We also have a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* editor who serves as the associate editor for our journal, which you can find out more about, if you want to, on our website: [<http://isuwriting.com/grassroots/>]

SR: I found the link for *Grassroots* and took a quick look. The journal’s title is a nice reminder of the prairie that makes up so much of the Central Illinois terrain, though I suppose there is not much original native grassland still uncultivated. Who coordinates the efforts of all of the people who contribute the work that goes into an undergraduate research journal?

JW: We have an assistant who acts as the associate editor of the *Grassroots* journal and I am the editor. We also have a professional development coordinator who coordinates all our professional development events for teachers, and we do a lot of those every semester. We do two big events at the beginning of each semester, then we have our orientation for new teachers, and then sponsor other events for teachers where they can get together to discuss an issue or create a reading group and talk about particular issues they want to explore. It’s really all part of our “grassroots” approach, which focuses on cultivating involved partners who can participate actively in shaping the direction of the

program. Rhizomatic, I suppose, as you mentioned in discussing the prairie grass.

SR: Are all of these assistants graduate teaching assistants?

JW: Yes, they are all PhD level graduate teaching assistants.

SR: I can see pros and cons to that, both coming out of graduate teaching assistants' relative transience. One advantage would be that because they are a transient population you can be more responsive to what the current needs are; but at the same time, that transience must mean that to some extent you are always starting over again and again and again with your training of them for what they need to be doing.

JW: Yes. We've learned to create what I call a documentation layer, so all of the events that we do have an "event plan" that we produce. So, for example, for our visiting speaker series we have a planning document that outlines all the tasks and provides a timeline, so that when we have turnover, the new person can pretty easily take up the task. Although most of our Coordinators take on the position for 2 years, this kind of documentation really helps with transitions, as well as helping to professionalize the graduate assistants. I think it's an important part of the work of a WPA – which I suppose connects well to this year's conference theme: The WPA as Worker

SR: I think offering these kinds of program assistant positions and mentoring the graduate students in them is an important role for the WPA of a program like yours that is located in a department with a thriving graduate program with a strong record of job placement.

JW: Yes, it's something we're thinking about trying to discuss with others at the conference this year. How to organize work hours and document the value of your work, but also to do this in ways that allow you to limit your work to appropriate work hours, and how to use training documents and documentation of practices to both streamline and limit workload. This is something we've actually been very conscious of in our writing program.

SR: Joyce, I was very interested in how you connect this to the 2014 WPA Summer Conference theme: "WPA as Worker." Would you talk about that a little bit? I know you've thought about exploring connections between things your program does and the conference theme. Did you participate in a choice of what the theme would be?

JW: No, I didn't. That was given to us by the CWPA president Rita Malenczyk. That theme is interesting to me because the conference call for proposals talks about some of the real difficulties we have as WPAs, and as people who are not official WPAs but who are writing teachers who also have to do data collection, right? Because you have

people who have positions as WPAs but then in a lot of institutions they maybe have a WPA who is only getting a single course release, and so the other teachers who teach at those institutions also take on some of the roles of a WPA. They do data collection; they do assessment stuff. When I was at the WPA conference last year, a lot of the talks that I was most interested in, in terms of data collection about student learning and other things, were done by people who didn't have official jobs as WPAs. So the theme of "WPA as Worker" I would maybe turn it a little bit on its head and say "the work of WPAs." I think that one of the things we could do at this conference is really explore how do we create a space institutionally where people can care about these topics more than just the WPA doing all the work, right? How do you create an intuition where all the people who work in the writing program have some stake in what's happening?

I think that our writing program could serve as one of the possible models for how that can be done because we really do have a lot of collaboration and the teachers feel like they have a stake in what we're doing and they have access to the data and they help us figure out how to collect the data and what kind of data we want to collect. We are trying to create consensus without doing it in a top-down way. We thought we might try to talk about that model for a Writing Program, what we call coalescence.

SR: Say some more about this model of coalescence.

JW: Coalescence means that rather than starting out by trying to make everyone do the same thing in all of our classes, we encourage teachers to experiment with different ways of reaching our learning goals, and then share their practices with other teachers. Over time, we track how our practices "come together" in interesting ways. We really try to use these grassroots models of helping people come together to see what it is they care about and how they do it. And that is connected to Bob Broad's work with dynamic criteria mapping, I think. He's going to be giving one of the one day institutes before the WPA conference. [Note: Here is a link that speaks more about that process: http://www.usu.edu/usupress/books/pdf/7308_Organic_Intro.pdf; and here is a link to information about the institute: <http://isuwriting.com/cwpa2014/>].

SR: I will look forward to hearing from your writing program colleagues at the conference because that grassroots model sounds very useful. I understand what you're saying about how it is not an issue of how to manage people or how to get people to do what you want them to do,

but rather how to—the word I’m thinking of is very old-fashioned—“husband.” How do you husband your resources?

JW: And how do you create frameworks that allow for continuity? That connects to my personal interest in technology because I started out as a New Media Studies person rather than a WPA originally, and so I’m always very interested in the ways that technology can be used to help provide people with the information that they need to work together effectively. For example, we started this year doing quite a bit of assessment and data collection using Wufoo [www.wufoo.com], which is an online survey program. We’ll be presenting on that at the 4Cs Conference—we have some graduate students who are going to be presenting along with me about how we see assessment as a way to provide data for everyone, the teachers and students. We have designed our assessments so the information can go back into the classrooms as data that students can work with. Since teaching students to work with information (collecting different kinds of data and analyzing it) is a big part of our undergraduate writing program, we’ve tried to find ways of using our own data to help teachers as they work with students to learn different kinds of research methods. For me, this way of thinking about data is part of the process of thinking about the work of WPAs: how can we find ways to collect and share data that are productive for everyone.

SR: I agree that is important. I’m going to connect that back to some other questions. Everything we’ve been talking about is relevant to our central question, which is “How does your writing program reflect its location?” But let’s turn now to things that are more about regional issues. How do your teachers and students reflect the local and regional culture and economy of Central Illinois and maybe the Midwest more generally?

JW: That question is a little difficult for me based on whether I’m talking about the department or the writing program specifically. In the writing program our instructors are almost all graduate students and full time non-tenure track faculty. We don’t use very much contingent labor at all, maybe six or eight sections a year. Most of those are former graduate students that have remained in the area, and a lot of them are doing full time work and they teach a course for us here and there. So, while our non-tenure track faculty and the adjuncts that work for us are very embedded in local and regional culture, the graduate students are often regional and national. About 60 percent are from locations around Illinois, while 10–11 percent are international students, leaving about 29–30 percent who are from a range of loca-

tions within the US. This gives us an interesting mix in terms of the teachers. But, in terms of the students, they are definitely representative of the region because more than 90% of ISU undergraduates are from Illinois. Because we're a very strong teaching college and many of our students are interested in careers related to teaching in all different subject areas, not just in English, we tend to draw from a fairly specific group, a student population of people who are interested in education. So, for example, in the English Department, if students are interested in teaching as a career, they'll select Illinois State over the other schools in the state of Illinois. We will be their top choice. I have thought about this a lot, and I guess the direction I kind of want to go isn't very representative of the whole but I think it is very interesting against the backdrop of the conference and its theme, and that is the attacks on teaching in our country.

SR: The attacks do seem to be growing in frequency and intensity.

JW: Illinois State is really a great place to look at and think about how the negative focus on teaching and teachers in our country has impacted how the education of teachers is working in this country.

SR: In what ways?

JW: I don't know if you saw the recent article that came out that was based on some research about the fact that the United States is really eleven different countries. [Note: see "Forget the 50 States" on National Public Radio: <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/11/244527860/forget-the-50-states-u-s-is-really-11-nations-says-author>].

SR: No, I didn't see that. Tell me more about it.

JW: Lots of folks I know re-posted the article on Facebook, but there was an article in the *Washington Post* on it, too. The author, Colin Woodard, did research on voting patterns and attitudes and offered the thesis that divisions in the US aren't "state-based" but based on different regions that tend to have very similar views. Colin says that there are about eleven of them in the United States and they're very different from each other, and the area Illinois fits in is "the Midlands." One of the things about the Midlands is that people tend to be pluralistic and organized around the middle class, which felt very accurate to me, and which I think really describes Illinois State well.

SR: Give me some examples.

JW: Our students are very middle class. That is a great description. Even if they're not middle class, they're middle class oriented, which is a better way to put it. And so that creates a certain flavor on campus, I think. People are practical about their degrees. They're goal oriented. They have something they are trying to do with their degrees for the

most part. They have a direction they are trying to go as undergraduates, and they are also less diverse, as is reflected by their status as middle class. It's also an orientation towards being safe and practical. But, currently in our country the middle class is endangered. It's shrinking yearly, and so the burdens on our students are related to the fact that many of them can't expect to have the kind of life that they've been trained to think about as fair. I also think it is interesting because they have a tendency to think of fair in ways that are fairly narrowly constructed. A lot of our teachers really focus on doing the work of bringing to these students a sense of national and international, global issues, ways to think about one's culture as one among many and being aware of its attitudes about economics, safety, and standard of living as a kind of a "fair" that is not applied equally to everyone. I think that's something for our students that's really important—both to get that sense of broadening out, especially since many of them are going to be teachers, and also to recognize that they have particular pressures and burdens based on who they are that have been growing over the last fifteen years and thinking about who it is they want to be and what kind of country it is that they want to live in, and to help them deal with the anxiety they feel about their futures.

SR: That's a really good point because, as you say, the middle class hasn't had to think about itself as threatened, by nature of the definition of middle class. If you have always thought that you were ordinary....

JW: Exactly. And I think that's kind of how our "Midlands" students see themselves. When I was going to school I came from a middle class home, and I'm from Illinois also, so I have a lot of affinity for these students generally because my background is similar. What I see in students now is that they have a sense of anxiety, especially also because of teaching being under attack generally in this country. These students come to us because they're really interested in teaching, which means they're really motivated in certain kinds of ways to help others, right? They're passionate about the act of teaching as a thing you do that participates in your culture and then they also have a sense of sort of safety growing up—of normalcy, speaking of Normal schools—that they associate with their own way of living. But all of that is in flux right now. I think that anxiety is really reflected in our students. But, I also think for us as WPA conference goers, this anxiety is an issue that is worth talking about. How are these changes going to affect those of us who teacher teachers, maybe in significant ways?

SR: Joyce, this leads right into another question I had. I'll try to make the connection clear. I want to know about the University's globalization plan, the big part that internationalization and globalization seem to play in the university's strategic plan. I was fascinated by this. I read your university's "Educating Illinois," the vision statement, the mission statement, and the goals, and there was nothing remarkable there. But then I read the strategic plan for internationalization, which is a separate document that is very detailed, and very specific, and very aspirational as well. I just thought, "Well, here's an institution that's not the first one I would have picked to go global."

JW: Yes, and obviously because of its geographical location, right? Its location is often clearly associated with a kind of insularity.

SR: Yes, though now that I think about it, the agribusiness that is such a big part of the Illinois economy has been international for a long time—from the international trading of commodities like the corn at the Chicago Board of Trade to the big farming machinery makers like International Harvester with their origins in Northern and Central Illinois. Could you talk about how you see the university's strategic plan for globalization?

JW: It is economically driven in many ways. I think Illinois has been a state that has been a relatively wealthy and powerful manufacturing state, and that has been in jeopardy since the beginning of the latest Recession. So you have companies like Caterpillar, with its early 20th Century origins in Peoria but now an international firm competing with other international companies, and others, like a lot of the regional food companies such as Archer Daniels Midland [in Decatur], and Kraft Foods Group, Inc. [with its cheese-processing plant in Stockton] because that's a big thing in Illinois. We produce an enormous amount of corn and soy beans, both of which are commodities that are starting to become interesting in ways beyond food, right? As potential energy resources.

SR: Good point. Archer Daniels started out as a linseed crushing business and moved from there into food processing. It shouldn't be too surprising that it is positioned now to process plant-based oils as alternative energy sources.

JW: Yes. So you have all this farm land and you have to figure out how to deal with that, and you also have this, in Northern Illinois, a very strong base for agriculture-related industry. And the state of Illinois recognizes that we're moving to a much more globally linked economy and they're hoping that helping Illinois think globally will be a way to produce more economic wealth for the state. At least my impres-

sion is that part of ISU's "global move" is driven by that. I think ISU is really trying to recognize that twenty years down the road their revenue sources from students are going to be based on a much more global economy. If they can start now, twenty years from now they'll be in place to be a strong institution in whatever that future looks like. But, they're not an institution that jumps on bandwagons and says "this is what we have to do *right now*." My impression of the strategic plan is that Illinois State is thinking twenty years down the road. They're thinking of how some of the degrees that they offer that are their most popular degrees are going to need to transition into more globally oriented degrees. So they want to be ready for that. Examples I would offer would be perhaps our Health Care programs and our College of Business.

SR: I think you're very wise and insightful. Given this tradition, this long time identity as a teacher-focused and teaching-focused institution, a teacher-preparation institution that is interested in teaching as an intellectual activity, how do you imagine that internationalizing that will look like?

JW: You have me there. I don't know the answer to that. From an activity theory perspective or from a genre studies perspective, when you think about literacy acquisition, it starts to become easy or way easier at least and interesting to start looking at how different people in different settings produce the texts that they produce, and acquire the literacies that they need and how those move across boundaries.

So for us in our writing program that has become a fundamental thing. It is not a reaching toward globalization so much as it is a changing of the way we think about what it means to be literate. So, for example, movements also related to World Englishes can be integrated into an activity theory model of teaching writing. There are questions that I know you probably have heard as a WPA, where the teachers are saying "but I need to teach them correct grammar because that's what will matter to them in the world." In our courses, we spend a lot of time doing pretty in-depth analysis of different kinds of writing settings and the grammars and the contingencies of those settings and how the settings are manifested in the texts that get produced. We basically say in our writing program that we are trying to turn students into writing researchers themselves. Not to make them aware, like in a writing-about-writing program, that there is such a thing as writing research but to make them into actual practical everyday writing researchers in how they go about thinking about the literate things they do in the world.

When you think about that issue and you think about globalization, the way that our program fits into that model is that once you take that approach, any setting that you move into—whether it is something that is right next door and looks like it is exactly what you already know how to do or it is moving to a different country and trying to talk with people who have learned other different kind of English or other languages – you’ll need to take a writing research approach. We look at a lot of cultural historical activity theory, so that means we’re looking at distribution and reception and the ecologies of writing settings. Our writing program applies a set of practices that can be used to engage in writing as an activity rather than a thing that you do correctly or a thing that you do wrong. So as you move into different settings, maybe different global settings, you’re not burdened with that sense of “this is the way it has to be because my teacher taught me I have to use semicolons like this.” You’re way more likely to be interested in and aware of the ways that the writing is changing.

Part of our long term goal is to think about knowledge transfer. You can’t look at knowledge transfer and not look at how it moves across unusual boundaries, not just traditional boundaries. I think our writing program participates in that larger globalization goal by taking a problem solving approach.

SR: Yes, you’ve made a convincing argument there that the writing program is already preparing the way, helping to build that culture.

JW: I think that it is really interesting, but when I was first here three years ago and I would talk to people about what we were doing in the writing program, I found there was—not necessarily a lot of resistance—but a lot of skepticism. People would say, “You’re doing *what?*” And I’d answer “activity theory,” and try to explain it a little bit. People would respond, “How do you get students to understand those complicated concepts?” That was a lot of what I heard. Now I’ve been asked to be on a writing across curriculum committee to try to develop a more robust writing across the curriculum program at Illinois State, and at the first meeting of that group I found that everyone was already saying how important it was that we do some of the things that our writing program is already doing. So when I told them about what we were doing in the Writing Program, they were receptive. And that wasn’t what it was like three years ago. I think that maybe it’s possible that the teaching focus at ISU is helping with the uptake of these ideas, because a lot of the teachers at Illinois State are aware of their own teaching practices in ways that are not necessarily the same as at other institutions...

SR: There is a kind of self-consciousness or habit of reflection about it, perhaps.

JW: Maybe, and so as I start to talk to people and I try to ease their fears about why aren't we exclusively studying grammar, they can immediately start to see some value and I don't think that's been the case in other places where I tried to start this sort of thing rolling. And maybe it is just time, too – that thinking about this issue is evolving at a lot of institutions. I think a lot of people are starting to see the complexities of genre differently than they did even ten years ago.

SR: I think that's true.

JW: Generally people are becoming more aware that writing isn't always exactly the same in every setting. That makes it easier to make that argument.

SR: I would agree that there is more understanding of that. Let's close in here at the end. This has been so interesting.

I want to ask these last two questions because they are two of my favorites, if you have the time. One is this: when the WPA Conference comes to Normal this summer, what should we make sure that we see on your campus, besides your writing program offices and classrooms that will help us to understand the cultural location of the writing program or of ISU more generally?

JW: I've given a lot of thought to that question, and what I would suggest is that both work and resources are distributed across our campus. Probably the most interesting thing to do would be to talk to people because there are lots of different groups doing interesting things and they're very oriented towards accomplishing things in collaborative ways. I think what you really want to be interested in at Illinois State is the sense that we have of people working together to try to think about what it means to teach and learn. For example, our Center for Teaching and Learning is not in a fabulous, big building, but if you go in there and say, "Hi, I'm a teacher from another campus. I'd be interested in to know what you are doing here," then somebody will sit down with you and talk with you about what they're doing and how they're doing it. Claire LaMonica, who is also a member of the English Department faculty, is the director there, and she's been enormously helpful to us in the Writing Program. And I feel like I've had that experience everywhere I've gone at ISU. For example I've talked with Dane Ward, the Dean at Milner Library about collaborating to try to figure out how teachers use research in their classrooms, and he was just so approachable and interested. I feel that ISU has a fairly flat hierarchy, and that makes it easy to work and talk with people. So I

would say just take a walk around campus and you'll find a lot of people doing good work in their areas, and not just one or two programs getting all the attention and resources.

SR: Let me move on to my last question. I have a metaphor for the program that I direct and that metaphor is the ocotillo. I don't know if you've ever seen one but it grows very tall. It is a succulent that is native to the desert Southwest where I live. It can survive on very little water. When it has to do that it is straggly and deformed looking. But when it gets water, it has these thousands of tiny leaves on each branch and really amazing red flowers at the tips. It is just stunning. I think of my writing program as the same. We can get by. We can get by on really minimal resources; but when we get the resources, we can do amazing things. Do you have a metaphor for the writing program you direct?

JW: Just as you were talking I was having a moment...I had a friend when I was doing my PhD who had a t-shirt that said, "Central Illinois: Flat and Fertile." I think that based on all the things I've been saying to you, the metaphor I would use would be the land, that we are flat and fertile in that way. We are capable of producing a lot of different kinds of things, and we're fertile in that the ideas we produce are allowed to grow and change. We are a place that is nourishing, and we're not really into building hierarchies. But I don't know that I could think of a particular object that represents that to me. Except for the idea of growing things in rich soil. We do a lot of that in Illinois, and I think that is a good metaphor for what we do. But if you know anything about farming, if you know anything about ecology, there are ways that you can destroy that, by not paying attention to the needs of the whole ecosystem, by using chemicals that taint the food or the water. I would like to think of us as a program that can be ecologically resilient, that we can become inter-networked with the rest of our institution in ways that are really productive. Not necessarily powerful in the sense of controlling, but more serving as a ground that is nourishing to the people that come to us to learn about how to think like a writer.

SR: I think that's a wonderful metaphor—"flat and fertile." I read that the difference in altitude between the lowest point and the highest point in Illinois is only a thousand feet or so. There's a twelve thousand foot difference in Arizona, my state (see http://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/index.ssf/2012/04/highest_and_lowest_elevations.html). I grew up on the prairies of Colorado, so I have an affinity for the wide open spaces people describe as "flat." I like the idea of the writing program as ground that might be considered featureless and boring because flat, but should instead be valued as the best kind of space

for growing. I found a description of the geology of Illinois—admittedly, on Wikipedia—that said the abundant soil of Illinois was made up of a very thick layer of illite, the most common kind of soil in the world, on Pennsylvanian bedrock that was “here before the dinosaurs” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Illinois). So I also like the analogy of appreciating the richness of the ancient soil that makes up the writing program’s curriculum, respecting it, and being careful about the dangers of introducing various kinds of artificial fertilizers into it. I hope I haven’t carried your metaphor too far, Joyce. Thank you so much. Was there anything else you wanted to say?

JW: I really appreciate your giving me the chance to think through some of these things because some of the things I said to you were not things that I have said before. I actually said them as I thought through the answers to your questions, so that was productive for me.

SR: That’s great. It was great talking with you, and I’ll see you in Normal at the WPA Conference this summer!

JW: I look forward to that.

