

Austerity and the Scales of Writing Program Administration: Some Reflections on the 2017 CWPA Conference

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ABSTRACT

In July 2017, Nancy Welch and I were invited to be co-plenary speakers at the annual CWPA conference in Knoxville, Tennessee. The conference theme was “Solving Problems Together: Agency and Advocacy in an Age of Austerity.” In addition to delivering plenary addresses, we were asked to deliver “fly on the wall” reflections on the sessions we attended at the Saturday luncheon. I spoke from the notes I took as I made my way through the sessions. What follows starts from those notes, but it also benefits from the time for reflection I have had since.

With the collection *Composition in the Age of Austerity* Nancy Welch and I intended to provide a political economic frame for understanding and theorizing postsecondary writing education as actually existing, everyday material practice. Chapters describe the on-the-ground effects of externally imposed assessment and curricular mandates; how budget cuts and Common Core state standards reshape community-focused and K–12 related literacy projects; and how the precarity of composition’s instructorate shapes the learning environments of postsecondary writing education. The collection makes connections across these scenes and frames them within the broader economic and cultural shifts that are transforming higher education: for instance, tracking how long-term trends in state and federal budgeting and in what is considered private and public responsibility play out at particular sites with particular people. So the collection encourages readers to do composition theory through seeing composition work across scales.

As I have had the opportunity to reflect on the sessions I attended at the 2017 CWPA conference, I find myself again continually returning to

questions of scale. The scales of WPA work are concurrently material and temporal (“space/time”)—simultaneously grounded in singular places and moments, and extending outward to broader frontiers that are consequential yet murky. WPAs are responsible for tens, often hundreds, of sections of writing involving thousands of students each year. We are tasked with leading the development of curricula and conducting program assessments, and we are in ongoing dialogues with students, teachers, departments, colleges, and whole institutions. We use various methods and frames to track and reflect on what is happening with student learning; we fight instructional budget cuts and course cap expansions and try to forecast and adjust to their effects; we look for alignments and incongruities across stated curricular philosophies and placement assessments; and we respond to economic and institutional imperatives over which we often have little or no control. Because thinking and working across these space/time scales is a substantial part of what WPAs do, when we encounter important new ways of understanding aspects of composition education, we can’t just consider how *we ourselves* feel about them, or stop at wondering how they might shape *our own* research and the courses we ourselves teach: we are also obliged to consider how they might influence the curricular articulations, procedural mechanisms, and pedagogies of entire programs. Though it is not often acknowledged in the scholarship, if ideas emerging within research in writing studies are to have much influence on *actually existing* pedagogical practices, they must somehow be scaled across the stressed, economically and politically troubled apparatus of contemporary writing programs.

As unwieldy as they are, the space/time scales of writing programs are made even more complex by their subsumption within accreditation organizations, state systems, and cross-institutional curricular and assessment regimes. Depending on the site, some of the most familiar forms that WPA work assumes—curricular descriptions, outcomes statements, program assessments, professional development workshops—can serve as channeling mechanisms for these varied, sometimes uneasily melded, interests. This is evident, for instance, in polyvocal materials like syllabi and outcomes statements, which can contain directly copied or patchworked bureaucratic passages with origins and intentions unknown by even the teachers using them. Because WPA work is positioned at the nexus of these various, unwieldy scales of influence, it affords a unique perspective on postsecondary writing education as actual happening but that can easily become bewildering and overwhelming. Attending sessions at the CWPA conference in Knoxville and hearing about the thoughtful, innovative things people are doing under often difficult circumstances emphasized for me the importance of focus-

ing on how to understand more about, and gain purchase on, the ways that ideas, languages, people, and organizations relate across places and times.

On the first day of the conference, Aubrey Schiavone was presented with the 2017 Award for Graduate Writing in WPA Studies for her dissertation, *Understanding the Literacies of Working Class First-Generation College Students*. Schiavone's research highlights the unique competencies of a student population that is too often either institutionally overlooked or, when acknowledged, categorically distinguished by its perceived deficiencies. She found that the students with whom she worked in her study were particularly adept at financial literacies, rhetorical listening, invitational rhetoric, and audience awareness. Due in part to their experiences as workers outside of school, participating students had a generally more expansive understanding of writing and rhetoric than those who have had little or no work experience. Schiavone's research highlights how different literacies and the lived experiences, cultures, and identities with which they are related, can be valorized or made to seem irrelevant depending on when, where, and how they manifest. In this way, her work relates to a rich body of scalar scholarship in literacy studies, sociolinguistics, and mobility studies. Among the concerns of this research is how political and social processes shape learning environments and how language practices in one space/time connect to resources and competencies that have originated elsewhere. Scalar research also examines how individual experiences with literacy and language are translated into bureaucratic discourses, how bureaucracies use standardized mechanisms of valuation (such as assessments) to extend their authority and influence, and how particular ideas, practices, and regimes of valuation gain "weight" or authority through their uptake and recontextualization across space/time (see Blommaert; Compton-Lilly and Halverson; Collins et al., *Globalization*; Kell).

For instance, one recent scalar study by James Collins examines the effect of broad social and bureaucratic conflicts on the educational experiences of Latino migrant schoolchildren in upstate New York. Connecting macro and micro elements, Collins makes sense of particular classroom events involving migrant children through referencing regional tensions around race, immigration, and linguistic difference, and the perceptions of multilingualism and cultural identity among the children's families and the staff at the school. A study by Rebecca Lorimer Leonard uses a form of scalar analysis to examine the possibilities and limits of multilingualism as a tool for social mobility, finding that the benefits of multilingual competence are situational and uneven across contexts. Another study by Amy Stornaiuolo and Robert Jean LeBlanc offers research on how unequally distributed and ordered resources (time, space, language, technologies) shape

the interactions of a group of teachers involved in international, cross-institutional collaborations. Through making connections across space/time scales, this work challenges and enhances how we research and understand the learning environments of writing education that are our primary daily concern.

The sessions I attended at the 2017 CWPA conference reveal a strong desire among our members for more of such research that enables us to understand relationships between the micro and the macro, the granular and the aggregate. I attended a number of sessions that, similar to Schiavone's dissertation, were local in their primary focus while also being concerned with scales and mobilities. In one, presenters described the implementation of a new introductory curriculum that is intended to address problems with incivility and "post-truth" public discourse through emphasizing logical argumentation and critical thinking about sourcing. Its rationale was explained in relation to our increasingly authoritarian political context; our disciplinary concerns with rhetoric, metacognition, and transfer; and the challenges of creating an introductory curriculum that is at once politically timely, appealing to cross-campus colleagues, and capable of being promoted across large numbers of sections each semester. Another interactive session examined what can happen to curricular concepts like genre and reflection as they travel from a university curriculum to high school partners in a dual enrollment program. As those of us who attended the session discussed student reflective drafts that we were asked to assess, we also shared our thoughts about reflection as a school genre and our own positionality in relation to these students' texts. This conversation evolved into a more general discussion of teacher and institutional positionality and how dual enrollment programs create vexing issues with authority, curricular purpose, and the transfer of ideas and practices across differing educational contexts and student populations. We wondered what happens to threshold concepts—for instance, to the meanings of "genre" and "reflection"—when they travel across institutions with different goals, disciplinary moorings, bureaucracies, and assessments. These conversations are vitally important to our work at a moment in which states and private institutions are looking to dual enrollment programs as a means to make further cuts in instructional costs while generating new revenue streams that require limited overhead.

Other sessions were notably more "macro" in their scope, and focused on broad data collection and analysis. These sessions concerned how the work of teachers and students in writing programs can be related to large-scale assessment and data regimes. Several sessions described efforts to do program assessments and other forms of program-wide research using sup-

port materials, services, and data from two very prominent and interrelated national initiatives: the VALUE Initiative and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), both of which are promoted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU). The VALUE initiative is managed by a “VALUE Institute,” which involves various organizational partners. These sessions were timely. The institute’s “Written Communication VALUE Rubric” has become widely influential and is now being used in assessments of students’ work in postsecondary writing programs across the US. An overarching goal of the project is to create a national framework for reporting and cross-institutional comparison of student performances in written communication, quantitative literacy, and critical thinking. Toward that end, it aims to scale particular outcomes and an assessment regime across states and institutions and maintain a national analytic framework using locally collected “artifacts” of students’ work.

In one panel Paul Anderson described the implementation of an assessment that aligns with the AACU initiative and pointed out some of the benefits of involvement, including having a resource for comparison of student performances with a robust national dataset (Paine et al). In that same panel, Darci Thoun and Anna Knutson expertly considered their own institutional research in relation to large corpuses of data, such as that made available through the NSSE, to understand everyday teaching and program processes in order to make positive changes. However, panelists and some session attendees also astutely noted some contradictions in, and concerns with, the rhetoric and aims of the AACU project. At times, it draws its language directly from the assessment scholarship in writing and composition studies, which generally emphasizes the importance of local participation and agency in assessment design and implementation. The AACU local stance, however, is substantially muddled by the other rhetoric and stated national aspirations of this dizzyingly polycentric organizational network. The VALUE initiative is aligned with Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), which promotes “essential outcomes” for nationwide adoption. VALUE, like LEAP, functions as a mobile brand that connects with product lines in which institutions can enroll. The cost of basic, entry-level participation currently starts at \$6,000, for which the institution is supplied with “sampling plan guidance, access to a digital platform for submitting student artifacts, selection of one learning outcome with upload of 100 artifacts, scoring of all artifacts by certified VALUE scorers, templates for local reporting, [and] nationwide benchmark reports for context and comparison” (“VALUE Institute”). The VALUE institute points out that “participating states are working with their respective campuses to fold these results into state level decision making and information

about student achievement.” The importance of understanding the scales of influence in writing education could not be more apparent than in this very strategic alignment of the aims of a network of national organizations with the everyday work of teachers, students, and administrators across programs and institutions. In spite of some rhetoric that seems to support local agency in curricular goals and assessment design, the AACU and its various entities are designed and marketed for their scalability. Outcomes are externally supplied by VALUE; students’ writing (“student artifacts”) become a part of a national VALUE corpus, and after the samples are assessed by VALUE scorers, they can compare the results with the other participating institutions across the US.

Thinking across scales, how might the VALUE initiative relate to austerity? What are we to make of economies of scale within which a student’s work/text generated for a particular class can become an artifact integrated within a large-scale assessment regime that generates aggregate data for cross-institutional comparison? How are states likely to use this work/text/artifact/data? Political economy matters in such questions. Even as the broader economy has seen a recovery since the 2007–08 crisis, funding for higher education has not. According to one recent study published by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, ten years after the recession, public funding for higher education is \$10 billion below what it was in 2007.¹ Forty-six states are now spending less per student than prior to the recession, and in twelve of these states spending continued to be cut in 2016. The need to cover costs has led to substantial increases in tuition at public institutions, which nationally has risen by 33% since 2007–08 (Mitchell, Leachman and Masterson). In addition to the tuition increases, in order to respond to austerity’s latest phase, faculty positions are being cut; courses, degree programs, and entire campuses are being eliminated; and the way that we deliver writing education continues to be transformed less by scholarly debate than by economic and operational prescription. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 was passed during my drafting of this piece. There is a great likelihood that this legislation will lead to even more cuts in funding to higher education, which has already been disciplined and transformed by decades of austerity. Austerity is no longer a temporary response to crisis with a view toward transcending it: it is now a philosophy of governance that is intended to normalize crisis in order to permanently change public services, or eliminate them altogether. The history is now clear. Large-scale outcomes assessments are not innately bad and can be a tool among others that help local administrators and teachers make education better; however, they have been used much too often to scale centralized authority and create efficiencies that erase local efforts to, for instance, develop more inclu-

sive curricula and innovate in response to current research—like that conducted by Schiavone. We need to continually be aware of how large-scale initiatives that seek to scale outcomes and assessments converge with state and institutional efforts to offset the diminishing resources for education in austerity economics.

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The shift in perspectives and concerns from session to session at a conference like CWPA could not be more dramatic. In one session you may be discussing work composed by a single student writer and talking about her stance in a text, how she has been positioned by the assignment, and how race, class and cultural backgrounds can affect how individual students perform a task like reflective writing. In the next session you might be looking at nationally distributed brochures and tables that depict, and invite comparison among, quantified indicators of student performance and assessments performed by paid evaluators hundreds or thousands of miles away from the students and where they did their work. At the 2017 conference, attendees who are not in tenured positions spoke out in general meetings about the diminished agency they feel over their work, the precarity of their jobs, and the fears they now have about addressing politically charged issues in their classes and on their campuses. They made it clear that the working conditions and precarious status of most of composition's teachers are entirely relevant to curricula, particularly those that are intended to respond to authoritarianism, the current racial climate, and the threats that many of our immigrant students and colleagues are now living under each day. How do we connect the deep concerns and precarity of composition's instructorate to national initiatives like VALUE? When outcomes and assessments are integrated into an established, national system of data collection and comparison in which institutions have investment, how are part-time teachers effected? Is space for the inclusion of diverse literacies and evolving and research-driven curricular and pedagogical innovations diminished? How, for instance, does Schiavone's research about the diverse competencies our students bring into schools gain influence within a professional scene that includes nationally scaled outcomes valuation like the one being promoted and administered by the VALUE institute? Because WPA work does not afford the luxuries of stopping at critique or settling for "ought to," but must continually be concerned with "how," these are the types of vital questions concerning materiality, work and scale in postsecondary writing education that the CWPA conference can bring to the fore.

As always, when I attended the sessions at last year's CWPA conference, I was impressed by the broad ranges of skills, the deep and sincere com-

mitments to writing education, the dedicated responsiveness, and just the sheer hard work of my colleagues. The call for the 2018 CWPA conference, which will be held in Sacramento, offers the theme “What if We Tried This?,” continuing this year’s discussion with an emphasis on critically informed innovation and experimentation. In these particularly troubled times in higher education, those who work in writing administration have unique, valuable perspectives on how to navigate the vexed and besieged learning environments in which most writing education is actually happening. After the many engaging conversations and sessions in which I was fortunate to participate at last year’s conference, I look forward to more critical explorations of the tensions and possibilities that surround our work in Sacramento in 2018.

NOTES

1. Dollars adjusted for inflation.

2. See, for instance, *Transnational Writing Program Administration* (Martins); *Composition in the Age of Austerity* (Welch and Scott); *Economies of Writing: Revaluations in Rhetoric and Composition* (Horner et al.); *Contingency, Exploitation and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* (Kahn et al.); *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* (Horner); and a special issue of *College Composition and Communication* on *The Political Economies of Composition Studies* (Alexander)—all published in the last two years.

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