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Stories That Shape: The Work of Writing Program Administration

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STORIES THAT SHAPE:

THE WORK OF WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

BY

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

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Abstract:

Assessment practices are part of the work of writing program administration (WPA), and the WPA function can take several forms. While some scholars champion certain constructions of WPA—be they collective, collaborative, post-masculinist, distributed, and so on—*Stories that Shape: The Work of Writing Program Administration* argues that what is most crucial isn't that a program implements a particular construction, but that the specific construction in play suits the specific context of the program in which it is located. And because programs change—because the larger field of rhetoric and composition changes—the work of WPA, and the construction of the position of a writing program administrator, must change accordingly and appropriately.

Stories that Shape outlines the history of URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric, starting with its housing in the English department, moving through the development of its major, and up through its existence as a stand-alone department that offers a bachelor of arts, situating these changes in a historical and local context. It then tells the story of the WPA work that two committees undertook. The first was the round of outcomes-based assessment of general education writing courses that the Assessment Committee orchestrated. The second outlines the changes that the First-Year Writing Committee made to the general education learning outcomes and to the department's most frequently offered course, WRT 104: Writing to Inform and Explain. These stories illustrate the department's collaborative, distributive WPA model. Further, they demonstrate the ways that WPA work is formative, generative, and rhetorical, capable of creating change at the department, program, and classroom level.

Nationally (and locally), the majority of general education courses (including writing) are taught by instructors off the tenure-track. This includes per-course instructors and graduate teaching assistants, a population whose professional identity is often in flux or under scrutiny. Gaining a sense of what the teaching majority values and believes about teaching writing is essential for anyone doing WPA work.

Through anonymous surveys and semi-structured interviews with per-course instructors and graduate teaching assistants, *Stories that Shape* explores three issues that should be of interest to writing program administrators and those responsible for WPA work. Research participants were asked to outline their own teaching objectives (as they relate or do not relate to the department's general education learning objectives); to define teachability (what they value in textbooks and teaching resources); and to reflect on the value of teaching disciplinary terms and concepts in first-year, general education courses. These instabilities can be perspectives that writing program administrators, compositions, and writing scholars use to understand the field—broadly and generally— and they can be perspectives that enable them to ask how, why, and whether or not a program or department—locally and specifically—can, should, or even wants to change.

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Introduction: A Story of Knowing

A group of faculty members in The Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island collaborated on an article that was published in a 2008 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. "Thinking Vertically" was the authors' response to "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" an essay by Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle. Downs and Wardle's essay outlines a way to and their reasons for taking a different approach to first-year composition. Conceived as "Introduction to Writing Studies," Downs and Wardle's first-year course "seeks to improve students' understanding of writing, rhetoric, language, and literacy," by making writing—the discipline, not just the practice, or the noun, not just the verb—the content of the course (552). The coauthors of "Thinking Vertically" identify problems in Downs and Wardle's approach; they saw/see things differently.

The first time I read "Thinking Vertically," it had been assigned for a graduate class at URI. The article was only two or three years old at the time, but when "Thinking Vertically" was originally published, I was in my last semester of undergraduate studies, in an English department at a state university 180 miles away. But that university, that department, that path, is not where I started, of course.

My college career started at Hudson Valley Community College (HVCC). I had no major. When I graduated, it was with an Associate's in Individual Studies. Apart from the general education requirements—a science course, a math course, a composition course, a history course—I enrolled in classes according to what I thought sounded

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interesting. I took courses like Folklore, Women's Literature, Short Stories, Creative Writing, Psychology, and Women's Psychology. I wasn't thinking about what I'd do with or because of what I learned in any of those courses, and I never thought about what I'd do with or because of my degree.

One of my instructors (I never found out who, although I had a suspicion) recommended me for a job as a peer tutor in HVCC's Writing Center. I applied for the position. I remember my interview with the Director, or at least I remember one specific moment during the interview. Mr. Labate—he let me call him Jim—asked me what I thought the most valuable trait or skill a writing tutor could possess was. I responded quickly: "Patience." Jim smiled. He hired me. Tutoring in HVCC's Writing Center was what I expected it to be: a practical way to spend the long breaks between my classes. It was a job. It was a decent job, but it was just a job—one of three I was juggling at the time. After I earned my associate's from HVCC, I transferred to SUNY Albany to pursue my BA. I didn't feel like I was done yet, though I wasn't sure what that meant.

As an undergraduate at SUNY Albany, I majored in English and minored in Education. Many of the credits I earned at HVCC transferred. At the time (though before and after is a different story), SUNY Albany's English department didn't have a writing concentration, but they did offer a variety of writing courses. All had the ENG designation. A couple of the professors, and at least one lecturer, specialized in rhetoric and composition. I took as many courses with these faculty members as I could, but I wasn't aware of any sort of disciplinary divide. I loved my lit-theory courses, I loved my poetry and fiction courses, and I loved my capital W writing courses. I didn't see/

recognize/know that these fields, the further and further I went, would move further and

further apart.

Upon transferring, I attended the English department's Open House. There, I

learned about SUNY Albany's Writing Center, and when I asked about working there, I

found out there was a required course, ENG 490. I was disappointed—I already had

writing center experience!—but I still enrolled. I still thought that tutoring would be a

decent job. In ENG 490, I had my first real experience of learning writing as content, as a

researchable and analysis-worthy subject and process. A noun and a verb. I remember

reading Flower and Hayes, and then having to conduct my own think-aloud protocol. I

remember performing my first rhetorical analysis—looking not at *what* an author wrote,

but *how* that writing worked on a particular audience, in a particular medium, and

according to a particular—but not necessarily explicit—purpose. I felt like I was pulling

back the curtain in that Emerald City tower, seeing the devices and the machinations that

transformed an ordinary man into the Great and Powerful Oz. To say that ENG 490 was a

significant course for me is a colossal understatement.

After successfully completing the course, I applied for, and was granted, a

position in the Writing Center. It wasn't just a decent job. It was an entry point. It was

learning to work with writers in ways that I thought could really matter, in ways that I

learned and read and practiced and analyzed and talked about in ENG 490. It was

becoming part of an academic world my ENG 490 professor introduced me to: rhetoric

and composition. I remember loving the way those words sounded, at least when other

people, professional people, said them. When I said them, I worried about messing up the

pronunciation or misplacing some sort of emphasis. The first time I said "rhetorician," at a pub with some other English majors, I actually laughed at myself. They laughed, too. It seemed so alien, back then. It's a little funny, in a silly and nostalgic sort of way. I don't laugh (or worry) anymore, when I say those words. Rhetoric. Composition. Rhetorician. (Though, I do get stuck questioning when and if they count as Proper Nouns.)

Working at SUNY Albany's Writing Center determined the path I took, the places I've (temporarily) landed in. I applied to SUNY Albany's MA program—again in English, but this time choosing a specialization: Writing Practices and Poetics. I stayed at SUNY Albany for my MA work because I still wanted to work in that Writing Center, because I still wanted to work with my faculty mentors, and because I'm from Albany, born and raised. It was home. It made sense. A year in, though (and, so, with a year to go), I knew that the MA wasn't enough, not for me, and not for what I wanted to do. And I knew—because I had learned—that "Writing Practices and Poetics" was not the same as "Rhetoric and Composition." I knew that I wanted to work with writers—and writing— forever, and I knew—because I had been advised—that I needed to find a PhD program elsewhere, at a university that called rhetoric and composition, well, rhetoric and composition. I learned that it mattered. That's what drew me to URI, and it took me a few semesters to begin to understand the local context. I say "begin" because I'm still learning to understand the local context, even now. It took me a few semesters to begin to understand what having an actual Writing department means, what it can mean.

Like almost everything, some of what I've learned has been through experience, some through reading and research, and some through conversation and dialog. The

moment in that grad course, when we were all collected around a conference table, prepared to discuss a week's worth of readings—"Thinking Vertically" and Downs and Wardle included—captures, in memory if not in actual experiences, how all those ways of learning work together.

I'm generally talkative in class, for better or worse, but during that seminar class, during that discussion of Downs and Wardle and "Thinking Vertically," I sat back a bit, intentionally. I remembered some sage advice from Jil, SUNY Albany's Writing Center Director and one of my mentors. Drawing on Kenneth Burke and his parlor theory (which she also introduced me to), she said something to the effect of, sometimes, the smart thing to do is to wait for the room to weigh itself. Wait for other people to stick in their oars, and then decide which way (or even if) you want to paddle.

"Thinking Vertically" is about teaching writing . . . appropriately. It's about when and why to teach writing as a noun, and when and why to teach writing as a verb. It was written by faculty I was studying under. This was the closest thing I had to an insider-perspective, the closest thing I had to an articulation of what otherwise might not have been explicit: I read what some faculty members in my department believed about teaching writing. The whole class did (if they did the reading).

It's not that I disagreed with any of the points in "Thinking Vertically," in fact (even upon my most recent review) I agreed with much of it. I don't know, though, how much of my agreement is coincidental and how much of it is institutionalized ideology: after working in and for a department for (what's now) five years, after taking courses with some of the article's authors, and after teaching a variety of the courses referenced in

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said article . . . perhaps it just makes sense (in the way that ideology always does) that my own thoughts on courses, disciplinary practices, and disciplinary values echo the words in that piece, echo their words in that piece. Or perhaps there is more to it.

I held back, in part, because I wasn't sure what the other way was. I held back, in part, because I didn't want to say something that could possibly identify me as an outsider, or worse, a fraud: pretending to be invested in a discipline, in a department, when I really might not have been. When I really might have just (still) been learning what the discipline and department values. I held back, in part, because I wanted to hear what others thought, felt, believed.

I waited for the room to weight itself, and it did. The majority of students—my peers—were in line with the authors of "Thinking Vertically." One student, however, agreed with Downs and Wardle. Although she was a PhD student, she was not a graduate teaching assistant, and she was not teaching writing courses at URI. She taught writing courses elsewhere, and she had years of experience before entering her PhD studies as a part-time student. I don't doubt (perhaps I might even take it for granted, better or worse) that that teaching experience, at that school, in that department, shaped her own perspective in ways I might never fully understand. But they're ways I want to understand. What's important, here, is not to explain why or how these experiences are different; it is only to show that they are different. At each university, teaching writing is going to mean something different, because the purpose of higher education, at each university, is different. It might even mean something different for each instructor.

Downs and Wardle situate their pedagogy as one that "rejects ['teaching a universal academic discourse'] as a goal for first-year composition," and they also explain that "in this course, students are taught that writing is conventional and context-specific, rather than governed by universal rules" (559). They aim to teach students,

> realistic and useful conceptions of writing—perhaps the most significant of which would be that writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent and irreducibly complex. (Downs and Wardle 557-558)

In "Thinking Vertically," the authors, "We do not [. . .] insist that the first-year course do all our educational work. To do so would demean the intellectual integrity of the discipline" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 505). The learning objectives and outcomes for the writing major are different than those for general education courses. In first-year courses, the authors explain,

> practices and strategies from our field are being taught and knowledge from the field is readily offered without miring students in the specialized discourse of an advanced discipline. (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 504)

This idea of "specialized discourse" is going to appear again (and again), and it's going to get complicated. It is complicated, because in the department's first-year writing courses, the field's concepts and terms are not entirely absent. Rhetorical knowledge and rhetorical situation—both a part of general education outcomes—*are* field concepts, disciplinary terms.

Absent from "Thinking Vertically," but present in Downs and Wardle, is an acknowledgement of university hiring practices, particularly the (over) reliance on adjunct labor. For Downs and Wardle, changing the nature and content of first-year

writing means changing (having to change some of those) those hiring practices. At URI,

this would affect the majority of those responsible for teaching general education writing

courses—and not just at the first-year. Per-course instructors, graduate teaching

assistants, and even some lecturers might not be "educated in writing studies," at least not

according to Downs and Wardle. While Downs and Wardle explain that,

> instructors must be educated in writing studies to teach the curriculum we
> suggest, and a significant portion of the national corps of college writing
> instructors do not have appropriate training to do so. In this sense, ours is a
> truth-telling course; it forefronts the field's current labor practices and
> requires that we ask how FYC students are currently being served by
> writing instructors who *couldn't* teach a writing studies pedagogy.
> (576, emphasis in original)

Downs and Wardle's writing studies pedagogy, their approach to first-year writing

courses, is one way of trying to change the function of first-year writing courses, and

they're not the first to have this conversation (see Crowley). But in "Thinking Vertically,"

the authors want to push the conversations about teaching writing outside and away from

first-year writing, not because it isn't important, but because we do more than that.

The department is able to talk about, able to explain a curriculum for, a writing

major. Not all departments can. For some, the first-year writing course is all they've got.

What's interesting, though, is despite what any department might have, regardless of

what any department might want, two themes still emerge.

The first is a binary, and it shapes these discussions. It is a question that presses: is

writing content or is it practice? Is it a noun or is it a verb? For majors in URI's

Department of Writing and Rhetoric, writing is a bit of both. As "Thinking Vertically"

explains, "we aim to introduce undergraduate students to rhetorical theories, histories,

and practices throughout their years in our major" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 508). But for

first-year, general education courses in the department, the answer is different:

> we advocate teaching first-year students to *use* and *practice* disciplinary
> concepts and principles. It is a case of "knowing how" versus "knowing
> that." (508 emphasis in original)

The second theme that emerges, the second question that presses, is tied up to what

students can learn: What can teachers teach? For Downs and Wardle, writing teachers

need to be writing specialists, disciplinary specialists. They need to have the content

mastered, and they need to be able to teach that content. What's interesting is that in

"Thinking Vertically," this mastery of content is also referenced, as it relates to teaching:

"Our teaching can be—and is—informed by our deep knowledge of the field without

limiting the course to first-year writing or any single course" (Miles, Pennell, et.al 510).

But who is this "our"? And where does the "deep knowledge" come from? How is it

constructed?

Downs and Wardle characterize their first-year writing course as a "truth-telling

course," because it will tell the truth about who is qualified to teach writing, and what,

precisely, those qualifications are (576). I wonder, though, if first-year writing might

always be a truth-telling course, because if there was ever a moment when that sort of

instructor-know-how and instructor-know-that, or that sort of students-learn-how and

students-learn-that, came under question, if there was ever a moment when the truth

about what we valued in our first-year writing courses came into question, it was in a

round of outcomes based assessment. And the truth was neither easy nor clean cut.

Nothing ever really is.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, Mary Field Belenky et.al. present a counter-point to William Perry's seminal *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. Perry's work was based on his study of Harvard students (all male) throughout their college years. He traced the ways their thinking, and their thinking about thinking, changed. Through his study, he characterizes how students develop "from adolescence into adulthood," a "path," he believes, that is "relevant outside the boundaries of the college experience" (Perry xiii). Belenky et.al. focus their work on women—not men—and discover that Perry's scheme does not—and cannot—account for "those themes that might be more prominent among women" (9). Belenky et.al. argue for a more comprehensive approach to understanding intellectual and ethical development, one that accounts for variations not just in sex or gender, but those that stem from issues relevant to class, race, formal education, and, perhaps above all, experience. Belenky et.al. explain that,

> When scientific findings, scientific theory, and even the basic assumptions of academic disciplines are reexamined through the lens of women's perspectives and values, new conclusions can be drawn and new directions forged that have implications for the lives of both men and women. (8-9)

Helping to forge those directions are the stories that women in Belenky et.al.'s study share, the perspectives that their stories provide, and the ways that their experiences shape not just who they are, not just what they know, but *how* they know. Belenky et.al. learn (and teach) "how women's self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined" (3). In terms of epistemology, this is inline with theories of constructivism, a "basic insight"

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of which is that "*all knowledge is constructed,* and *the knower is an intimate part of the known*" (Belenky et.al. 137 emphasis in original). Constructivists—including some of the women in Belenky et.al.'s study—"see that all knowledge is a construction and that truth is a matter of the context in which it is embedded," and they

> assume the general relativity of knowledge, that their frame of reference matters and that they can construct and reconstruct frames of reference, they feel responsible for examining, questioning, and developing the systems that they will use for constructing knowledge. (138-139)

I suppose that here is where I explain that I am a constructivist.

I suppose I always have been.

I just didn't always know the word for it.

I imagine (or assume) that the first time I heard the word must have been in one of the Educational Theory and Practice courses I took as an undergraduate at SUNY Albany. Or, perhaps I first heard the word during my Women's Psychology course at HVCC. I don't remember. But I do remember the first time I put this theory of learning/knowing into personal and academic context. I was a junior in an Expository Writing class at SUNY Albany, a class that underscored the learning and teaching potential of personal experience. I remember the professor explaining how every question we ask says as much about us as it does about the object of our questioning. I believed him, then. I believe him, still. Later, I would relate this concept to Kenneth Burke's terministic screen: the questions we ask are both informed and limited by our perspectives, by our subjectivities. To believe Burke, and to believe Belenky et.al., is to complicate (or deny) any claim to a

purely-objective knowledge. Further and relatedly, it is to complicate (or deny) any claim to a purely-objective research methodology.

Terministic screens can change, but they cannot come off. We cannot take them off, never fully. The most we can do is be aware of them, anticipate (and interrogate) how they shape what we see, what we know, what we ask. We can also (and we should also) remember that others have screens of their own, knowledges of their own, their own questions that are shaped by their own stories. Although Belenky et.al. don't mention Burke's terministic screens, they still discuss how screens shape what we know, what we learn. They draw a contrast between what they call "separate knowers"and "connected knowers." Borrowing terms from Carol Gilligan and Nona Lyons, Belenky et.al. explain that separation / connection is not necessarily in terms of relationships between people; what distinguishes one from the other is the relationship between the knower and the known, although the known *can*, but doesn't have to, be a person (Belenky et.al 102). They write,

> Separate knowers learn through explicit formal instruction how to adopt a different lens—how, for example, to think like a sociologist. Connected knowers learn through empathy. Both learn to get out from behind their own eyes and use a different lens, in one case the lens of a discipline, in the other the lens of another person. (115)

Crucially, what differentiates these two epistemological orientations is that for the latter, for connected knowing, "the self is allowed to participate" (Belenky et.al. 112).

And so I participate, here, because to learn from it, to construct knowledge out of it, I must. I cannot feign objectivity because I cannot get outside of my own terministic screen, never fully. I can't take these glasses off. I can't look at my topics of inquiry—

writing program assessment and administration, learning objectives and outcomes, material resources, institutional support, professionalization in writing, rhetoric, and composition—without seeing these topics, each and all, *through* my experiences. I can't separate what I learned in ENG 490 from where I found myself four years later. I can't separate who I was as a writing tutor at HVCC from who I was as a writing tutor at SUNY Albany, and I can't separate either from who I was as a graduate teaching assistant at URI.

But I can do something, still.

I can acknowledge that there is always a periphery to what I think I see, to what I think I know. There are always alternatives to the questions that I ask and the answers that I seek. More important than acknowledgement, though, is trust. I *trust* that what's peripheral to my screen is equally important, equally valuable. I trust that what's peripheral to me can, and often does, matter to others. If I aim to be empathic, then what matters to others must matter to me, too. And it does. Or, at least, I want it to.

What's peripheral, here in this research and everywhere else, are other subjectivities, other perspectives, shaped by other experiences, whether they are similar, different, or unrelated. There are other screens. At this moment, I don't know what it's like to be a tenured-track professor. I don't know what it's like to be a part-time instructor for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. I don't know what it's like to be a graduate teaching assistant on the English department's literature track. I don't know what it's like to be a working parent, trying to help provide for a family. But I do know what it's like trying to justify, to myself or to those who care about me, the hours I put into my work

that seem, sometimes, to go unacknowledged or undervalued, un- or under-compensated.

I know financial struggle. I know self-doubt. Acknowledging these and other screens is

just a start. Conducting, writing, and sharing this research responsibly also means that I

must use my own screen in ways, and for reasons, that are both critical and empathic.

Empathy is a prerequisite for connected knowing and for constructivism, as

Belenky et.al. explain:

> Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other
> people's knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for
> empathy. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can
> hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience
> that has led the person to form the idea. (113)

Empathy is also a prerequisite for the methodologies that I have gravitated towards and

that have informed this research: critical research practices and institutional critique.

Althusser taught us that *persons are written by* institutions. Patricia Sullivan,

James Porter, and others suggest that through the use of rhetoric, *persons can re-write*

institutions. We can, if we want to, re-write ours. We can, if we want to, re-write

ourselves. In Belenky et.al.'s work, the "constructivist women aspire to work that

contributes to the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life for others" (152);

in critical research practices, "social change [is, or perhaps should be] the appropriate aim

of research praxis" (Sullivan and Porter 20).

I'm not objective, but I aim to be empathic.

I'm not criticizing, but I aim for critique.

This makes it all *critical*.

I'm an endless optimist, and I believe that improved communication can happen in every exchange: between deans and administrators, between administrators and faculty, between faculty and students. Because my research grows out of an educational setting, *of course* there are educational threads: learning conditions, empowerment of students—undergraduate, certainly, although I focus more on graduate teaching assistants —and empowerment of part-time faculty . . . these concerns are absolute and inherent.

In critical research practices, the researcher must make constant efforts to be self aware. She must pay attention to and consistently critique her own position/positionality. It is paramount, for critical researchers, "to keep themselves alert to those elements in their practices that adopt positions or attitudes or actions without reflection" (Sullivan and Porter 16). The researcher's position—*my* position—matters, and she/I should acknowledge it *and* interrogate it; she should do this because her position contributes to the knowledge she constructs. In my effort to acknowledge and interrogate, I tell my own story/stories, an effort to identify my position, reflect on it, in hopes that not only will doing so draw my own attention to the shape of my terministic screen, but it will provide, for readers, the shape and scope of that screen. I don't want you, necessarily, to see what I see, but I do want to make transparent *why* and *how* I see what I see. I include it all here because I need to see it, too, in *this* context. In some cases, what I saw before—while I was composing survey questions, analyzing survey results, conducting interviews, listening back to interviews—isn't the same as what I see now. In revising this work, in *recursively* revising this work, there were some things I did re-see. There were some things that I re-saw again.

In critical research practices, praxis is paramount. As broadly-defined as possible, praxis is the recursive interplay of theory and practice. It's the name for the way(s) that each can and does circle back to the other, the way(s) that each can and does filter into the other. Broadly defined, praxis is the blend of theory and practice, though sometimes blending isn't enough. When Sullivan and Porter nominate praxis as the essential component and method of critical research, they show that more is possible; they provide an alternative to the blending. In critical research practices, praxis "recognizes the 'inseparable relation between reflection and action'" (26-27). When research is praxis, it aims to be,

> a reflective, thoughtful practice that has critique and questioning built into its operation, an activity that merges theory and practice, and that adds to repeatability and transferability a further notion: revision. (Sullivan and Porter 22)

Research-as-praxis means re-theorizing and re-practicing, not just examining *how* or watching the ways *that* theory and practice blend. Research-as-praxis means that the researcher intervenes and participates in that merging. And she merges, too. She applies the critique and questioning. She applies the reflection and revision. And she understands that none are always (only) what they first seem. To revise isn't just to re-see. To revise is also to *re-make*. To reflect isn't just to look back. It doesn't have to be so solo, private, or individual. To reflect can also be to mirror back or to bounce off. And in those acts, something else has to be involved.

We might change our practices based on learning new or different theoretical frames or approaches, but that's only half of it. We must be *as open* to changing our

theoretical frames or approaches based on what we learn through reflective practice.

That's harder even than it seems, but it is not impossible. Frames might not be easy to

break, but they are breakable. What makes frames hard to break is that they are hard to

see: we're so accustomed to s*eeing through them*, and not so practiced in *looking for*

them. To break frames, we must start by looking for them, by learning to see them.

Every research methodology needs triangulation, and Sullivan and Porter explain

one that is suitable for critical research, though it is "not the kind by which you check

results by using a variety of empirical or theoretical methods, or by collecting data

through a variety of media" (27). It's not that familiar, procedural check. Critical

research's triangulation is different. It's "a conceptual one that leads to research that

privileges neither the theoretical foundation nor the observed practice," and it is "willing

to critique both theory and practice" (27). In critical research, triangulation has a different

sort of function. It puts theory and practice "in dialectical tension, which can then allow

either to change" (27). But what does that kind of triangulation—that critical-research-

triangulation—look like? And what did I do to triangulate like that? What did I ask about

my data? What did I ask about my methods? What does that kind of triangulation mean,

for me, considering all possible subject-positions? What does that kind of triangulation

mean, for me, for this?

It depends on where I was at.

It depends on what I was doing.

It depends on who I was talking to, talking with.

It depends on what I was reading, what I was writing.

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When I was developing questions, critical-research-triangulation means I began with one set of tightly focused research questions (because that's what's supposed to happen). It means that I thought about why I asked and why I wanted to ask those particular questions. It means that I kept myself suspicious of—or, at least, that I kept trying to be suspicious of—why I wanted answers to those/these questions. When I was collecting, reviewing, and making sense of survey data, critical-research-triangulation means that I used the answers that were surprising and unanticipated as springboards for interviews. It means I kept interrogating my survey questions, even after I collected results.

Critical-research-triangulation means that I conducted interviews individually and distinctly; in each conversation, with each of my colleagues, I tried to learn as much as possible about his or her terministic screen, as much as possible about the experiences and beliefs that shaped said screen, and as much as possible about what I didn't know— what I couldn't have known, without asking them. It means that I tried to understand each story as *a* story. But here's the catch: we're not isolated incidents; we're not entries in an encyclopedia. We're an anthology. We're in this together, and there's something that unites us. And so I conducted interviews also trying also, at the same time as I tried to respect their individuality, to put together a matrix: to take a thread from one person's story and to see if it had a place in another's, not just allowing for but making sure that what I learned from one would shape the questions I asked another. I thought about those responses—those stories—in contact and contrast with my own: what I already believed, what I read, and what I wondered.

I thought about those stories, and their place in the field, in contact and contrast with my own story, my own place in the field.

I entered into conducting this research, and I entered into writing it, understanding that the questions I ask are informed and motivated by my values, beliefs, and experiences: I served first on the Assessment Committee, then on the First-Year Writing Committee. I was present at every stage of the curricular changes I outline. I was part of each conversation. Results and recommendations from the Assessment Committee were passed along to the First-Year Writing Committee, who used those results and recommendations to change the department's most frequently offered general education course: WRT 104: Writing to Inform and Explain.

As I thought about assessment results, I asked about pedagogical approaches. As I asked about pedagogical approaches, I questioned material resources. As I questioned material resources, I wondered about institutional support. And then emotional support. And then the trials of graduate study. And then the nature and function of adjunct labor. And then the effects that adjunct labor has on adjunct laborers. And then the meaning of, and the role and purpose of, professionalization. And then the connection all or any of it has to teaching writing.

In critical research practices, triangulation means never staying put, never being certain. Critical-research-triangulation means I took nothing for granted, and it means I take nothing for granted still. And so I don't have easy answers to my original research questions because there are no easy answers to my original research questions, and

because my questions, like my theories and my practices, changed. In the elegant phrasing of Belenky et.al., "simple questions are as rare as simple answers" (139).

When URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric asked if students enrolled in general education writing courses were meeting a crucial learning objective, it wasn't a simple question, and the answer they got wasn't so simple, either. Outcomes-based assessment revealed that 80% of students enrolled in general education writing courses were not demonstrating awareness of rhetorical situations, so it asked another question: What can we do?

Chapter 1: A History of Us

In the fall of 2013, The Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island implemented changes in its most frequently offered course, WRT 104: Writing to Inform and Explain. One change was the adoption of a new textbook. Members of the First-Year Writing Committee, myself included, believed that the new textbook—*The Harbrace Guide to Writing* (*The Harbrace*)—was more sophisticated, less introductory, than the textbook it was replacing—*The Norton Field Guide to Writing* (*The Norton*). We chose *The Harbrace* because the majority of us believed that out of all the textbooks we reviewed in our search, it most successfully included the features we determined were essential. The majority of us believed *The Harbrace* was more rhetoric-centric, while *The Norton* was too tightly and too narrowly focused on genres.

Curricular changes matter, though I think they matter in bigger, farther-reaching, deeper-meaning ways when the course itself is bigger, farther-reaching. As the Writing and Rhetoric department's most frequently offered general education course, WRT 104 is likely to be the only writing course many students outside of the major or minor will take. In that way, it is representative: WRT 104 shows, presents, introduces students to this thing—this noun and verb—called writing. And at every university, within every department, writing—the noun and verb that it is—doesn't always mean the same thing(s).

One of the criticisms against national educational initiatives and standards is the inability for such endeavors to take into account local issues, and local issues should be primary. Accounting for a student body, the teaching staff, material and financial

resources, community membership, involvement, support . . . the list could go on and on.

In the scholarship and literature on assessment (as an educational initiative), there are

repeated calls for taking contextual concerns and local issues seriously, not just

accounting for them, but building assessment through them. Carter wrote that,

> institutional context is [. . .] critically important. The particular history and
> ethos of a college or university shapes its writing and/or speaking
> programs in particular ways. (269-270)

I agree with Carter, and part of what makes up institutional context is history. Sometimes

we might forget that institutions do not exist apart from or outside of the people and the

stories that create and shape them. Sometimes, we might forget that institutions are

changeable, that they exist within—not outside of—historical and local contexts.

In their overview of institutional critique, James Porter et.al. explain that

institutions need to be understood "as *also* operating locally," and that doing so helps to

make "visible [the] contexts within which we conduct our lives and, again, have our lives

conducted for us" (621 emphasis in original). To see, and to think about, institutions as

local entities—instead of seeing them or thinking about them as "monoliths") is to begin

to recognize them, to begin to see them, as and for what they are and always were:

discursive spaces. To understand institutions as discursive spaces is to "make them more

visible and dynamic and therefore more changeable" (621). The institution, here, is the

Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island. While it might be

similar to other academic departments, writing or otherwise, it isn't other academic

departments. It has its own, complicated history, and its past, present, and future are

influenced by the department's own, complicated particulars.

Before I outline the work of the Assessment Committee, before I explain the results of our general education outcomes based assessment, before I retrace the work that the First-Year Writing Committee undertook, I want to map out some of those complicated particulars, some of that local context. It is important to understand that history, to understand the department's genesis, its undergraduate major, and its graduate specialization within the English department. You can't say what writing is, means, or does, across campuses; you need to determine what it is, means, and does at a particular campus. For all his tracing of historical shifts and changing perspectives, Richard Fulkerson missed this.

In "Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Pragmatic Diversity," Fulkerson outlines four elements that make up any "theory of composition," that is, any theory about what good writing is, how it's produced, how to teach it, and "what counts for knowledge" (410-411). Respectively, he calls those elements theories of axiology, process, pedagogy, and epistemology. He takes the time to situate each of these theories in a historical and *somewhat* holistic narrative—or, at least, a narrative that prioritizes holism. Fulkerson looks at composition studies—as a whole—in effort to identify what *we* do, what *we* value, what *we* teach, and why *we* teach it. Although he permits multiplicity in theories of processes, pedagogies, and epistemologies, what he seems to want (and what he nearly celebrates) in the article is a unified and unifying axiology: a shared, disciplinary position on "what good writing is." He writes, "I am not claiming that in the nineties we all accept a common paradigm. I am maintaining that we

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are much closer to accepting *one* portion of it than we were a decade earlier" (424 emphasis in original). For Fulkerson, it seems, "closer to one" is a good thing.

He revisits these ideas, this argument, in his 2005 essay, "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century." Here, Fulkerson has changed his mind about where *we're* heading, and he claims, "that composition studies has become a less unified and more contentious discipline early in the twenty-first century than it had appeared" to him before (654). The "controversy," as he puts it, is "*within* the field, not in the eyes of the public, the administration, or the legislature," and it's "not just methodological, but axiological, pedagogical, and processual" (679, 681 emphasis in original). The controversy is about the entirety of "the goal of teaching writing in college" (679). For Fulkerson, this controversy is problematic, not productive. He explains that,

> if a university or a department is serious about seeing writing courses as constituting a "program" or some portion of a larger scheme of "general education," some degree of commonality is likely to be required. (680)

Where Fulkerson sees the variations as "dangerous," I'm not so easily rattled (681). To be fair, though, it's no longer 2005. I'm not looking at the same field as Fulkerson was, and even if I were, my terministic screen wouldn't permit me to see the same things he saw, in the same ways he saw them. Like writing itself, writing departments and writing classes all, and also, have their own contexts, their own purposes and audiences. They have their own rhetorical situations. This isn't something *bad*, and it's not necessarily dangerous. Acting on or responding to these variations doesn't have to be a process of ironing out their differences. As I'll argue in Chapter 4, it can be a process of navigating and negotiating them. For the university, for the department, for the course, for the

instructor, and for the students, there's a better, more workable, approach: make the writing class in question (or the writing program in question) do what all *good* writing does: work within its idiosyncratic, ever-changing, ever change-able rhetorical situation.

How URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric came to be is a long story, and for some it is a contentious story. Many histories are. Although I didn't live through or experience that history, I do hope the following provides an adequate account of the rhetorical situation of URI's Writing and Rhetoric department, and thus, perhaps, an adequate frame for understanding the WRT 104 course.

I've stitched together everything I could find and I tried to learn from everyone I could talk to. Casual conversations, proposals, memos from ad hoc committees, old syllabi and course descriptions . . . I use them all to provide, next, an overview of the department's formation, the genesis of its undergraduate major, and its service to the university through the general education program.

The Story at URI

The Writing and Rhetoric Major is currently part of the Harrington School of Communication and Media. They join four other undergraduate majors (Communication Studies, Film/Media, Journalism, and Public Relations) and two masters programs (Communications, and Library and Information Studies). At the undergraduate level, the Department of Writing and Rhetoric has no ties with the English department, but that hasn't always been the case.

In 1979, the College Writing Program was established by the Faculty Senate Curricular Affairs Committee, who made the College Writing Program "part of the English department" at URI ("Executive Summary" 3). The College Writing Program was URI's response "to a need for increased writing instruction" ("Executive Summary" 3). Prior to the College Writing Program, there was a writing program called SCRATCH, and it worked independently—that is, apart from the English department, who had previously "abolished its composition courses" ("Executive Summary" 3). The Faculty Senate Curricular Affairs Committee "defined many but not all of the terms of the relationship" between the College Writing Program and the English department ("Executive Summary" 3).

Twenty-three years later, in 2002, tensions were high between the College Writing Program and the English department. As the College Writing Program Faculty explain in their "Executive Summary of the CWP Self-Study and Program Review," it was the relationship between the College Writing Program and English—or the uncertain terms of that relationship—that would, at least in part, lead to the College Writing Program's need to separate from the English department:

> Faced with changes in the humanities generally, and between literature and composition more specifically, faculty and administrators can no longer ignore the growing differences between Writing and English. (3)

Their "Executive Summary" works to place these tensions both nationally and locally. They note the ways that "the discipline known as English has changed dramatically in the last few decades in response to changing social conditions," and one of those changes, nationally, involves rhetoric and composition studies "[becoming] a large and important

discipline in its own right" (3). Their summary also points out how, at URI specifically,

the College Writing Program is not the first sub-discipline to break off from English;

other programs include "women's studies, African-American studies, and film studies,"

fields that, they explain, might be "related to some areas of literary study but [are] also

unrecognizable to traditional specialists in literature" (3). The English department at URI

is/was concerned with literature.

The tensions between the College Writing Program and the English department

made it difficult for the College Writing Program to do the work and perform the services

they were developed to do and perform. In their summary, the College Writing Program

faculty state that answering to "the Faculty Senate's *ongoing* charge to 'provide a more

diversified writing program which can better serve the needs of URI students,'" is

"impossible," given the "current conditions and practices within the English

department" (3, emphasis in original). Part of those impossible conditions had to do with

resources, and part of those impossible conditions had to do with the program design,

development, and growth (or lack thereof). In their summary, the College Writing

Program faculty argue that,

> Despite a persistent view that the CWP has "grown," or is in continually
> expanding, the College Writing Program has seen virtually no growth in
> FTE faculty resources and in course offerings from 1979 to present day.
> [. . .] The CWP has added only one new undergraduate course of its own
> design, Writing in Electronic Environments. The CWP has made
> remarkable contributions and has persevered to offer innovative courses
> *without new resources*" (3 emphasis in original)

The lack of growth in the College Writing Program wasn't due to a lack of imagination or

design on the faculty's part. In 2001, the semester before their "Executive Summary,"

College Writing Program faculty collaborated on a "Curriculum Revision Proposal." This was composed for and delivered to English department faculty, and it,

> developed out of [College Writing Program faculty's] concern for students' varied needs, responsiveness to the new writing minor, respect for the writing focus in the English major, and attention to disciplinary developments. (1)

The "varied needs" of students included not just first-year writing students but students in the writing minor, which had been in place for a year. Course offerings, the College Writing Program faculty argue, were inadequate. At the first-year level, there was only WRT 101: Composition. In their Proposal, College Writing Program faculty explain that in rhetoric and composition, "the nature of the first-year course has evolved" (3). They imagine replacing this one, broadly conceived course with three more specific courses from which students could choose. The courses would all "provide instruction in composing, language use, and grammar," but each would do so within a different emphasis (3). The proposed courses include WRT 101: Writing to Inform and Explain; WRT 103: Forms of College Writing; and WRT 105: Writing from Field, Print, and Electronic Sources. Regardless of which first-year course students chose, they would "receive similar instruction in crucial basic material upon which they can build solid writing skills" ("Curriculum Revision Proposal" 3).

Beyond the first-year level, the College Writing Program had only two courses. The first was WRT 201: Intermediate Writing: Academic Contexts. The second was WRT 301: Advanced Writing: Special Contexts. In their "Curriculum Revision Proposal," College Writing Program faculty explain that these two courses, as they were constructed

at the time, were "so broadly conceived that their distinctive content is hidden" (1). They

argue that the course

> titles and course descriptions obscure the fact that the field of composition
> studies has extensive, varied, and specific subject matter to offer students
> who seek to develop their skills beyond the first-year level. (1)

College Writing Program faculty wanted, again, to "replace these 'blanket' courses with

more specific, clearly defined courses," and they provided several possibilities

("Curriculum Revision Proposal" 1). They re-imagined WRT 201: Intermediate Writing:

Academic Contexts as WRT 203: Writing Argumentative and Persuasive texts. They

imagined replacing WRT 301 with four courses, "each with clearly delineated

content" ("Curriculum Revision Proposal" 12). Travel Writing, Writing Culture, Public

Writing, and Writing for Community Service would, together, replace WRT 301:

Advanced Writing: Special Contexts.

Having "clearly defined courses," beyond the first-year especially, is important.

College Writing Program faculty explain that,

> At the 300-level, courses in any field should be advanced in content and
> skills, their subject matter should be somewhat narrowly focused within
> the wider specialty, and the field's generalized or basic content should be
> eliminated or held to a minimum. This is true for all disciplines at the
> university. Our courses at the advanced undergraduate level are
> specialized, different from each other, and based upon an expectation that
> there will not be a review of basic writing skills. ("Curriculum Revision
> Proposal" 12)

In their defense of creating upper-level courses that are more specific, College Writing

Program faculty draw on the fact that rhetoric and composition is a "field," itself,

separate from English, and that it has its own "subject matter," separate from the "basic writing skills" that students will learn in first-year writing courses.

But despite the arguments made in the "Curriculum Revision Proposal," the College Writing Program saw little change in the courses they were able to offer for general education students or writing minors. This frustration no doubt led to their request to separate from English and become an independent academic unit. The "Executive Summary" was part of that argument. The College Writing Program wanted the ability (and the resources, and the space) to oversee all that was or should have been part of the College Writing Program: curriculum, admissions, hiring, advising, scheduling, "and service at the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty levels" (4).

As an argument, it worked. The English department and the College Writing Program voted ("unanimously and with acclamation") to create a new Department of Writing and Rhetoric. The Board of Governors approved this change on October 30, 2003, a move that would "establish the College Writing Program as a separate academic unit" (Warner). By April 2005, the College Writing Program would be ready for another transformation. They would propose the development of a major: a Bachelor of Arts in Writing and Rhetoric.

The BA in Writing and Rhetoric was designed "for undergraduate students who seek a career in professional writing, teaching, or publishing," and "for students who want a liberal arts degree that also emphasizes the applied arts and the technical skills that employers value" ("Proposed Instructional Program Change" 1). Although imagined as a new department—The Department of Writing and Rhetoric—the College Writing

Program would still be responsible for what it was already responsible for, including general education courses, the Writing Center, and the Peer Consultants Program (2). But the name matters, as College Writing Program faculty explain:

> The change from College Writing Program to Department of Writing and Rhetoric marks an important change from a program often associated with service courses to a degree-granting department of a distinct academic discipline, rhetoric and composition studies. Departments of Writing have been established at approximately 15 colleges and universities nationwide. (2)

The "Proposed Instructional Program Change" gives a rationale for the program, describes the institutional role of the program, shares inter-institutional considerations, and provides a (detailed) overview of the program proposed. It lists the faculty and staff assigned to the program, describes the students who the program will work with and attract, and explains administrative structures and responsibilities. It also lays out financial resources, equipment needed, and evaluation procedures for program success.

In the two years that passed since they had received approval to separate from the English department, the College Writing Program had already put much of these details in place, or at least set the groundwork for successfully transitioning into them. They were offering the writing minor, offering a specialization within the English PhD and MA programs, working with Learning Communities and the Honors Program, and offering specific courses for the College of Business Administration ("Proposed Instructional Program Change" 4). The College Writing Program already offered twelve courses beyond first-year writing, and of the five courses that would become requirements for the major, only two were newly-proposed (6). In terms of faculty, the College Writing

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Program anticipated that "once the program reaches the estimated 70 students, then additional *part-time faculty will be needed to cover five sections of WRT above the 100 level*" (11 emphasis in original). The estimate they reference was the number of majors they anticipated by September 2009.

In terms of administration, the College Writing Program explained that "the new department will be administered using the same administrative structure as in the current College Writing Program" (13). This included only two positions: the Chair, and the Director of the Writing Center. Functionally, if not technically, the College Writing Program already had a chair, but she was referred to as the "Director," as the "Proposed Instructional Program Change" mentions (13). The College Writing Program's proposal was successful, and the Department of Writing and Rhetoric was named, and they began offering a BA. In their "Proposed Instructional Program Change," the College Writing Program couldn't have foreseen or planned everything. Other factors would influence the growth of the major, the courses offered, and the resources needed.

Presently, there are currently two courses available at the 100 level (although there used to be three), and students can decide, to some degree, which course they'll enroll in. By a long shot, WRT 104 is offered most. In the fall 2014, for example, there were 42 sections of WRT 104, and 18 sections of WRT 106. The following spring, there were 67 sections of WRT 104, and 13 sections of WRT 106. Both WRT 104 and WRT 106 work to fulfill a general education requirement, but first-year courses aren't the only ones to do so. Some programs at URI require their majors to take additional writing courses, beyond the first-year writing course.

The Department of Writing and Rhetoric still offers a number of 200 and 300 level courses that also serve general education purposes. There's WRT 227: Business Communications, a required course for Business majors. Other general education courses include WRT 235: Writing in Electronic Environments; WRT 302: Writing Culture; and WRT 305: Travel Writing. Some of these courses, while serving as general education purposes for other majors, are required courses for the Writing major. WRT 235, for example, is one of the five core courses for the major. In total, there are ten courses offered, from the 100 to 300 level, that can satisfy general education requirements, but the department doesn't define itself through this function.

At the 400 level, some courses are cross-listed with other departments within the Harrington School, and so other Harrington School majors or minors are also able to enroll. For example, in WRT 442: Strategic Media Communications, enrollment is restricted to students majoring in Writing, Communication Studies, Public Relations, or Journalism. Other 400 level courses, such as WRT 495: Capstone in Electronic Portfolios, are designed specifically for, and offered exclusively to, writing majors.

Having a writing major has allowed the department to have different kinds of conversations, with different kinds of audiences. The department is able to have and to join conversations—sometimes debates—about the role of the first-year writing course, for the discipline of rhetoric and composition and not, say, for the discipline of English (where many other writing programs are still housed). The debates can be about first-year composition as a service course and about its role in a major/minor curriculum—as was the case when some of the faculty members in the department collaborated on "Thinking

Vertically," the response to Downs and Wardle's essay. Where the department members who co-authored "Thinking Vertically" part ways with Downs and Wardle is in the role and place of writing content in undergraduate courses, whether or not writing—as a capital D discipline, as a researchable field—is appropriate in the first-year writing course.

To be clear—well, maybe I'm trying to be *fair* more than *clear*— "Thinking Vertically" is collaboratively authored, but don't gloss over what collaboration is, means, does. Collaboration has its own constraints and possibilities, and both are important. In a practical sort of way, there's not enough words or space to say or write what everyone wants to say or write. If the collaboration is to be coherent (especially for anyone outside of the collaboration) some ideas and some positions—perhaps the ones that don't line up so neatly with the others—probably won't make it to the final draft.

So, addendum #1: While "Thinking Vertically" was collaboratively authored by the department, I can't say, and I won't say, that the essay fully and completely, or honestly and accurately, represents each individual author's—each individual faculty member's—entire position or perspective. There's no way it could.

Addendum #2: This one might be a problem that's always part of anything in print. Once something is published, it's published. When or if ideas change, and when or if one wants to explain those changes, the only option is to write something new.

While I don't know whether or not any of the authors of "Thinking Vertically" have changed any of their ideas, I can say that some things have changed since the essay's publication and that the changes matter: today's Department of Writing and

Rhetoric isn't the same as 2008's Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Not all of the

authors of "Thinking Vertically"—that is, not all of the faculty members that spoke/wrote

on behalf of or as the department—are still faculty in the department. Out of the eight

authors, two have left (one retired and another took a position at a different university).

There are also new faculty members, three on the tenure track and one full time lecturer.

In that sense, the department isn't the same department, not anymore. It couldn't be. It's

likely, then, that some of the ideas in "Thinking Vertically" *could* change, that some of

the ideas—finalized then—have changed, now.

At each university, teaching writing is going to mean something different, because

each university has its own purpose for (or defense of) higher education. I'm going to

pick Fulkerson back up and say this: perhaps teaching writing at *every* university is

different.

Downs and Wardle situate their pedagogy as one that "rejects ['teaching a

universal academic discourse'] as a goal for first-year composition," and they explain that

"in [they course they designed], students are taught that writing is conventional and

context-specific, rather than governed by universal rules" (559). They aim to teach

students

> *realistic and useful conceptions of writing*—perhaps the most significant
> of which would be that writing is neither basic nor universal but content-
> and context-contingent and irreducibly complex. (Downs and Wardle
> 557-558 emphasis in original)

In URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric department, there are similar learning

goals, similar objectives. Every general education course in the Department of Writing

and Rhetoric, from the 100 to the 300 level, is *supposed* to meet the same objectives. The department conceives (and conceived of) first-year writing courses as "rooted in the concept of 'rhetorical situation,'" and students enrolled in WRT 104 or WRT 106 can expect to—and can expect to learn how to—"approach different contexts and tasks from different directions" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 504). All of the department's writing courses —from general education to advanced courses in the major—aim to develop and or build on this foundational outcome. The building is a matter of degrees, but it is also a matter of depth. Downs and Wardle's approach puts the weight of the discipline into one first-year writing course, and *this* is the bit that the authors of "Thinking Vertically" took issue with.

For the department, and in the essay, thinking vertically means building a comprehensive curriculum—not designing *one* course—in which *all* courses build on both concepts and practices introduced earlier. A vertical curriculum relies on and builds from repeated exposure, but each moment of exposure also introduces depth, layers complexity. The idea that the department's general education outcomes are the same throughout 100, 200, and 300 level courses is evidence to the vertical curriculum; it demonstrates the first of three "guiding principles" to thinking vertically: "recursion over time" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 505). As the authors explain, recursion over time means that,

> at the 100- and 200- levels, rhetorical concepts are introduced and practiced. At the 200- and 300- levels, those same concepts are reinforced through repeated, yet situationally different, practice. And the 400- level courses deepen, complicate, and extend the students' understanding of the core rhetorical principles underlying our curriculum as a whole, with its entire menu of options. (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 506)

That's the first guiding principle of a vertical curriculum. The other two are: "core courses common to all majors," and "situated production in a variety of contexts over time" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 506). The department explains, "We do not [. . .] insist that the first-year course do all our educational work. To do so would demean the intellectual integrity of the discipline" (Miles, Pennell, et.al. 505). The Writing and Rhetoric major isn't simply just the most-vertical-extension-possible of those general education objectives. The major's learning objectives and outcomes are different than those for general education courses.

In November of 2005, when the Writing and Rhetoric department (still called the College Writing Program) submitted their "New Program Proposal," they detailed the major they were asking to develop. They crafted objectives and outcomes for the major that differed from the general education courses' objectives and outcomes. Both are included in the "New Program Proposal." As the two lists functioned in that proposal—to illustrate the differences between general education in an area of study and concentrated education in a field—so, too, might they function here. In the "New Program Proposal," when the Rhetorical Knowledge objective is broken down into outcomes for general education students, those outcomes are different than they are for majors. A side by side comparison:

	Outcomes for General Education Students	Outcomes for Majors
a.	Students **recognize** different situations for writing and responding, building situational sensitivity.	Students **identify** varied rhetorical situations calling for a wide range of appropriate responses.
b.	Students **practice** different types of writing appropriate to different situations.	Students **demonstrate** a command of different rhetorical theories and approaches.
c.	Students **reflect** on the appropriateness of the choices they make for the rhetorical situation.	Students **apply** various rhetorical theories, putting them into practice in a range of situations.
d.	n/a	Students **evaluate** the appropriateness of rhetorical choices in light of anticipated consequences.

figure 1

The verbs in figure 1 are bold, and that's not arbitrary. It's crucial. When departments, programs, and faculty articulate objectives—to say what, exactly, students are supposed to be able to *do*, having learned concepts or habits of mind—verbs need to be chosen carefully. Students who successfully complete a general education writing course should be able to demonstrate their rhetorical knowledge through *recognizing*, *practicing*, and *reflecting*. Compare that to the ways that majors—having successfully completed their coursework—are expected to demonstrate their rhetorical knowledge. Not only are majors expected to do more with their Rhetorical Knowledge, quantitatively—there's four outcomes articulated for them, where the general education had three), but Writing majors are expected to use and apply their Rhetorical Knowledge more substantially. Where general education students are expected to be able to *recognize* rhetorical situations, Writing majors are expected to *identify* them. That's the difference between familiarity and innovation, between "I've seen this before" and "Look at what I've

found." It's that sort of development, that sort of growth, that sort of depth and layering of complexity, that the vertical curriculum aims to make possible.

The variations in the order of these objectives on these two lists matter, as do the variations in terminology. Some objectives are more important (or only important) for writing majors. One objective, though, is primary for both, and it occupies the first spot on each list: Rhetorical Knowledge. If objectives are conceptual, and if Rhetorical Knowledge is an objective, then outcomes related to the objective will ask that students demonstrate their conceptual understanding of it.

But what happens when they don't?

Chapter 2: Styles and Stories of Writing Program Administration

In "Who's the Boss?: The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Collaborative Administration for Untenured WPAs," Eileen E. Schell discusses the scholarship on writing program administration styles by distinguishing between two types. The first she characterizes as "might and right," and the second as "collaborative action." Scholarship that falls into the first category—might and right—positions the Writing Program Administrator (WPA) "as a powerful director with tenure in a hierarchical administrative framework," and it is "a leadership style [. . .] that does not question traditional lines of administrative authority" (66). The second leadership style—collaborative action—"constructs administrative power as a capillary, not individualistic, practice," as the "administrative power circulates among and between administrators, teaching assistants, and instructors" (66). The distinction isn't Schell's attempt "to create a neat binary [. . .] or to elevate one over the other;" rather, she considers this separation a useful way to look at the "particular challenges" that WPAs who are untenured might face as they determine and test out different leadership styles (66-67). I reference her terms of separation, here, not in light of those challenges, but in light of the challenges that a program might face, if and when the program lacks an official WPA. Whether or not a program *has* a WPA is as critical a question as whether or not that WPA is tenured.

The University of Rhode Island's Department of Writing and Rhetoric does not rely on a single, individual WPA, but that doesn't mean the WPA function is outside of or exempt from considerations of administration style. URI's Writing and Rhetoric department relies on a distributed model—a combination of individuals as well as a series

of temporary committees that, at times together and at times separately, perform multiple WPA functions. In a way, anyone/everyone who is part of the department—from the chair to lecturers, from GTAs to per-course instructors—has, at some point, either an obligation or an opportunity to participate in WPA work.

To determine which leadership style is at play—might and right or collaborative action—Schell suggests that one must ask questions about where "power, authority, and responsibility for writing program leadership" are located (66). Such questions include:

> In whom is the authority for the writing program invested? Is the WPA position conceived of as a directorship through which an authoritative individual exercises or wields power *over* others in a hierarchical structure? Or is the leadership of the program shared by an individual or a group who has power *with* others to make decisions about writing program policy? (66)

These questions might suggest that leadership styles are easy to identify as either might and right or collaborative action, but the answers to these questions (and, thus, the administrative styles their answers illuminate) are not so easy to determine. Chances are good that the two styles blend, as Schell admits, "most WPAs employ a mixture of leadership styles to fit a given economic, political, institutional, and historical context" (66). When a program lacks a WPA, and when the WPA function operates instead through collaboration and distribution, these questions are directed not at a single person, but at the work that individuals and committees take up and who is responsible for coordinating the work within (and among) the committees. At URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric, the department chair and the first-year coordinator take on a considerable amount of responsibility for this work, in addition to their other

professional, scholarly, and teaching responsibilities. In the 2014-2015 academic year, there was also a JWPA—an advanced PhD student who assisted the first-year writing coordinator. Though committed to her work, her position as JWPA was outside of her research interests.

While Schell identifies two styles of administration, Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill, in *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*, look at the strategies that WPAs employ in their work. Borrowing from community organizing strategies, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill outline three methods of alliance building: interest-based, values-based, and issue-based (91-99). All three models assume a single organizer. In the interest-based model, the organizer could be "the program director, department chair, or writing instructor" (92-93). In the values-based model, the organizer could be an "instructor or program director" (94). And in the issue-based model, the organizer could be a "writing instructor or program director" (96). In all three, organizing/alliance building is initiated by a single individual, *a* writing instructor, or *a* Writing Program Administrator (in the strict sense of the term).

It is important to note, though, that titles matter, institutionally. A director is not the same as a chair, and an instructor is different from both. However, in my explanation of each model below, I'll refer to the organizer as the WPA for two reasons: 1) to enable a stronger understanding of what each model would look like or do in a writing program, and 2) to draw attention to the WPA's initial, individual efforts.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill focus, primarily, on building extra-departmental alliances, not necessarily inter-departmental ones. I recognize this risk of generalizing,

this trouble with un-complicating, but I'll reluctantly call those with whom the WPA

works "constituents," a word that presumes two factors that probably shouldn't be

presumed: first, that each voice has a say in the whole, and second, that each voice

matters.

Interest-Based Alliance Building begins with a WPA asking constituents two

questions: "What do you care about, and why? What motivates you to action around these

issues?" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 92). Interest-based alliances can work to help

"people quickly establish their connections to one another," although, Adler-Kassner and

O'Neill note, "the projects that extend from it might be very short-term and not lead to

sustained alliances or actions" (91). In a sense, these alliances are targeted towards

problem-solving: There is an issue, a problem, that the constituents care about. The

WPA's efforts bring constituents together, and they act together to address the problem.

Once the problem is solved, the constituents might not have any more shared interests.

Thus, this model doesn't necessarily create alliances that are sustainable; they're often

temporary.

Values-Based Alliance Building begins with the WPA identifying her own values

and then "cultivating shared values" with constituents by "listening and/or looking for

deeper frames, deeper values, underscoring [the constituents'] passions" (Adler-Kassner

and O'Neill 93). The WPA and constituents, together, "[act] upon those shared

values" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 94). The underlying premise is that "from values

extend actions, and from actions come change" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 94).

Although the WPA in this model builds alliances, what she prioritizes sounds a little

suspect:

> Her role is to make sure that her values remain primary; to do so requires
> her to endorse the importance of those values over other values and to
> persuade others that those values are more important. (Adler-Kassner and
> O'Neill 94)

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill point out that this "approach has very little room for strategic

engagement or for compromise," but "it has enormous room for accommodating one's

principles and values" (95). Those principles and values belong to the WPA, not to the

constituents or to the WPA's allies.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill seem to find the most value—practically and ethically

—in the final strategy they discuss, *Issue-Based Alliance Building*. This strategy

somewhat "blends" the other two, as the WPA still explores values and identifies interests

(her own and those of others), but she must also "consider questions of power and

ideology," as they relate to *everyone's* values and interests (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill

96). The WPA must, "identify short-term, tactical actions that might represent both her

own interests (and values) and those of potential allies" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 97).

Further, the WPA must always look toward "the long-term, values-based implications of

these actions," in order to help her "make conscious decisions about how, when, and

whether to take particular actions" (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill 97). It is an approach that

is both pragmatic and hypothetical: one makes decisions in the present moment, in light

of what one hopes to accomplish in the future, or in light of what one hopes the future

will permit.

For a program that lacks a specific, official WPA, long-term visions for the program become a little problematic because participation—even by department chairs, committee chairs, and program directors—is not guaranteed to be long-term. When committee work rotates and is a matter of members electing to take part, then the "long-term, values-based implications" of the "short-term, tactical actions" become difficult to see.

What all models/strategies share is the belief that through a WPA's work—or, through WPA work more broadly—change is not only possible, but systemic: the work of writing program assessment, and the work of writing program administration, can be the work of change. It might happen slowly, piece by piece, but writing program assessment can change a writing program. The changes to WRT 104 that The Department of Writing and Rhetoric implemented in the fall of 2013 are bound to, and the result of, the work of writing program assessment. They are influenced by the moment at which they take place. It's not coincidental that *The Harbrace*, the textbook chosen by the First-Year Writing Committee to replace *The Norton*, is so rhetoric-centric. Throughout all its chapters, it underscores and integrates rhetorical situation—a concept that directly connects to the learning outcome that a majority of students enrolled in general education courses were not demonstrating.

But changes in one dimension affect (or necessitate) changes in others. The adoption of a new textbook wasn't the only change made to WRT 104. The department's learning objectives and outcomes were also changed—revised and condensed. Another change was in the major projects for WRT 104. Each of the five major projects was re-

considered in light of *The Harbrace*. For example, the literacy narrative—covered in *The Norton*—was revised in light of *The Harbrace's* food memoir. In WPA work, nothing happens in isolation, outside of issues or concerns of context, influence, effect. WPA work is work that revisits itself (that must revisit itself). It is work that reminds itself (that must remind itself) of its history as much as it looks ahead at its future. WPA work is work that circles back, and comes back again.

In light of this predisposition to interconnection, it is difficult to tell a local story of writing program assessment chronologically. While decisions made in one moment might be influenced by what came before, they are also (sometimes) looking ahead at what might or can happen next. Sometimes, what happens next asks questions of the past —questions not considered before. For clarity's sake, what follows is a timeline of the major events that are part of the department's most recent assessment story, the story that this research was inspired by.

Spring 2011	• Reflective introductions are collected from the final portfolios submitted in all general education writing courses
Fall 2011	• Assessment Committee forms, orchestrates Assessment Day
Spring 2012	• 1/31: Assessment Committee submits its report to the Office of Student Learning, Outcomes Assessment, and Accreditation
Fall 2012	
Spring 2013	• First-Year Writing Committee forms, meets, takes up charges
Fall 2013	• WRT 104 adopts new textbook for all course sections • All General Education courses use Learning Outcomes

figure 2

That is the chronological story of what happens at URI, when the Department of Writing and Rhetoric sought to find out if students in their general education courses were learning the concept of rhetorical situation. Outcomes-based assessment, in part, instigated the work of the First-Year Writing Committee. The latter worked to change the WRT 104 curriculum and the general education learning outcomes.

But I see the story not in terms of chronology. I see it in terms of concepts, of further, prior, and ever-present questions. That's the story I want to tell, because that's the story I see. Instead of events unfolding on a line, I see clusters of issues, topics, questions, and—always—constituents, and the arrangement of those clusters changes depending on the issue I begin with. One of the most pressing issues, during the time I spent working with the Assessment Committee, was that of specialization or expertise. That issue was there, still, when I worked with the First-Year Writing Committee, but something else—relatedly—came into question: the purposes and functions of standardized course materials. Later, when I began interviewing per-course instructors and GTAs, I thought (and re-thought) about both of these issues, but I also started wondering about terminology, ideology, and professionalization.

The story here is not just chronological, and the changes made to WRT 104—the new textbook and the revised outcomes—are not just material, and they are not just textual. They are rhetorical and ideological, able to shape content, form, and behavior. The changes affect the content, skills, and strategies that students are expected to learn, just as they affect the content, skills, and strategies that teachers are expected to teach. The changes also affect how students and teachers both are expected to use resources.

When changes are made to a course, those changes can represent larger values, and when the changes are material and/or linguistic—as they are in textbooks and outcomes—then those changes can—through use—teach those values to others. At least we think so. At least sometimes.

Standard(izing) Courses, Teaching Teachers

Ronda Leathers Dively tells the story of standardizing ENG 101 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). While the required composition course had "department sanctioned objectives [. . .] it did not impose genres, topics, or sequences of assignments, nor did it prescribe classroom activities at any level" (Dively). This resulted in a "considerable disparity between the courses numerous sections," and it was questionable whether all of those sections were working to meet, or succeeding in meeting, ENG 101's learning objectives (Dively). At SIUC, the majority of course sections were taught by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who were new to the program, and who had, Dively writes, "an initial lack of specialized knowledge in composition pedagogy." For SIUC, implementing a standardized syllabus for ENG 101 seemed like an appropriate, coherence-making move. Dively explains that,

> direction in the form of a standardized syllabus not only helps to ensure that instruction, on large scale, remains consistent with program objectives, but it also drives inexperienced instructors beyond their own comfort zones, *compelling* (rather than merely encouraging) them to experiment with models and strategies for effective composition instruction that are informed by scholarship in the discipline. In other words, they are obliged (not merely invited) to develop their "composition literacy" or knowledge of the academic community that informs their teaching so that their capacity to reflect critically on their pedagogical

practices, to enact appropriate practices in future contexts, and to articulate the rationale behind those practices will grow. (emphasis in original)

What gets standardized at SIUC isn't just the syllabus or the course; the instructors—the instruction—also gets standardized, not in the sense that everyone turns into the same thing, but in the sense that everyone comes to learn the same things, comes to know what "models and strategies" enable "effective instruction;" the GTAs overcome their "initial lack of specialized knowledge," when they "are obliged" to learn something about "the academic community that informs their teaching." This is reminiscent of Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's Values-Based Alliance Building: the constituents, in this case, would be the GTAs responsible for teaching ENG 101. The WPA/organizer's job would be to determine the values that GTAs bring to their teaching, and (in some cases) to rehabilitate GTAs, to teach them the values of the discipline—values that may or may not be aligned with their own. To do so, the WPA/organizer relies on a crucial material resource: the standardized syllabus for the standardized course.

The standardized course affects student learning, but it also, ideologically, (and ideally) affects teachers' teaching—at least, according to Dively, for the GTAs teaching ENG 101 at SIUC. Writing four years after the standardized syllabus was implemented in ENG 101, Dively explains,

we can be more certain that the assignments, activities, and readings that undergraduates encounter are collectively giving due attention to the entire set of 101 course objectives and that "best practices" are more consistently in play.

This strategy claims to have powerful ideological functions, and Sidney Dobrin would agree. In "Finding Space for the Composition Practicum," Dobrin explains that because

the teaching practicum is often a required course for GTAs, it is "one of the most powerful and most important spaces of occupation in composition studies" (21). It is powerful and important because not only do GTAs learn about "teaching methods and theories," but the practicum

> more often than not serves as an introduction to composition theory, to research methodologies, to pedagogical theories, to histories of composition studies as a discipline, and to larger disciplinary questions about writing, not just to teaching writing per se. (Dobrin 1-2, 19)

This, Dobrin argues, makes the practicum "a device through which ideologies are reinforced and programmatic cultures are created and maintained" (4). The practicum, through content, practice, and context, works to define, represent, and re-create the field of writing and rhetoric. Again, this is reminiscent of Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's Values-Based Alliance Building.

Dobrin writes that the teaching practicum is "a site where theory can be used coercively," for example, in the course texts that are chosen for GTAs to read, or the writing projects they are asked to complete (25). This action, these decisions, implicitly suggest what counts as reading, or what counts as writing. If a GTA practicum relies on reflection, for example, or incorporates reflective practice into the work that GTAs are asked to complete, then the practice of reflection is legitimized, made relevant, valuable and valued. It suggests that, for writing and rhetoric, reflection matters; it is a worthwhile, productive activity. Or, at least, that's what Dobrin argues. Others would disagree.

In their collaborative, multi-location study, E. Shelly Reid, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir follow cohorts of teaching-assistants (TAs) enrolled in teaching

practicum at two universities. Over the course of three years, the authors/researchers conducted forty-one interviews and eighty-eight surveys, all in an effort to capture the ways that TAs "views of teaching writing" might change because of the pedagogy education they received/participated in (32). In light of what Dobrin and Dively argue, Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir's four major findings are unexpected:

> 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. (32-33)

But Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir don't use their findings to suggest giving up on teaching education programs or putting practica aside. Instead, they conclude that teacher educators need to re-think their teacher education programs. At the start of their study, Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir "assum[ed] that one key goal of the education process is to effect change in the teachers, their goals, their concerns, and their reflective practices" (37). But their study changes something else: "the way [Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir] view [their] own teaching" (49).

Thinking back to Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's strategies, the one most suited for the work Reid, Estram, and Belcheir anticipate might be Issue-Based Alliance Building. As a blend of the other two models, this strategy explores the values of all parties involved as it also "considers questions of power and ideology" (96). If teachers are to re-

think their teacher education programs, their consideration must include the values that GTAs bring with them as well as the the function (or mis-function) of ideological work.

While there's no consensus about the degree to which standardized course materials or teaching practica *work* to prepare (or indoctrinate) less-experienced writing teachers, it seems like both still offer up something productive: the opportunity for reflection. And perhaps reflection, itself, can instigate change.

At URI: Outcomes-Based Assessment, Standardized WRT 104

In order to assess their general education courses, URI's Writing and Rhetoric department orchestrated a round of outcomes-based assessment. As Michael Carter explains, outcomes-based assessment "invites us to view our courses and curricula from a different perspective," and it changes—if not the ways we think about education—at least the "assumptions" we might make about it (268). He writes,

> We assume that the inputs we provide for students will lead to certain outcomes, the knowledge, skills, and other attributes we believe graduates should possess. However, an outcomes-based approach does not rely on assumption. By that method, faculty identify the educational outcomes for a program and then evaluate the program according to its effectiveness in enabling students to achieve those outcomes. (268)

Outcomes-based assessment doesn't assume that the program is working as-is, that it's "enabling its graduates to attain the outcomes;" and, crucially, outcomes-based assessment doesn't even assume the outcomes themselves (Carter 271). It doesn't assume that "inputs" lead to (or are able to lead to) direct outcomes, but, paradoxically perhaps, outcomes-based assessment doesn't assume that the results of assessment can't have a

direct impact on classroom practices. All of this needs to be addressed, interrogated, asked-questions-of. And this asking can happen at any point in the loop. It's recursive like that, maybe because assessment itself is recursive. The asking is also generative: it makes us try to find or develop responses. Moreover, the asking is reflective in at least two ways: 1) we must identify and reflect on what otherwise would be assumptions, and 2) we must reflect on assessment results, because the results don't show only what happened; they can show (or suggest) more: what can happen next, what can happen because-of. This connects to what Carter identifies as outcomes-based assessment's "primary purpose [. . .] to provide program faculty the opportunity and the data for improving their programs" (271).

Outcomes-based assessment doesn't assess students, even "though it is likely to incorporate some materials produced by students," and in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, outcomes-based assessment did use student work (Carter 283). Relying on the reflective introductions that students composed for their final portfolios, (these were made anonymous in terms of both writer/student and instructor, but they were not made anonymous in terms of which general education course they were composed for) the Assessment Committee went in search of finding out how well—or whether or not—students enrolled in general education Writing courses were meeting the department's general education learning outcomes. Put another way, we asked what Carter calls outcomes-based assessment's "central question": "To what extent is the full program enabling students to attain the outcomes designated by program faculty?" (283). It's an important question, and examining student work is one way of looking for an answer.

Portfolios are a common means of evaluating student work, and they are a

common method to demonstrate learning (Elbow and Belanoff, Yancey, Reynolds). One

reason portfolios are popular for/in writing courses is because they can capture some of

what the discipline values: process, revision, peer feedback, collaboration, and reflection

(Elbow and Belanoff 99). As a means of assessing students' writing in process-based or

genre-based courses, the portfolio is more comprehensive than a single essay could be

(Elbow and Belanoff, Yancey). Portfolios can include a variety of drafts, and these drafts

can represent a variety of process stages—from exploratory to polished—and they can

include drafts that represent a student's work in a variety of genres. In terms of assessing

students, Kathleen Blake-Yancey calls the portfolio "the preferred technology of the third

wave [of assessment]" (138). These waves, for Yancey, are the historical shifts of

assessment, the ways the field has/had understood, used, and valued assessment. She calls

them waves because, like tides, they are not distinct or clear cut. One flows into another,

one is formed by what came before, and each continues to form what comes next.

Elbow and Belanoff outline a process of collaboratively grading students' final

portfolios. In their model, student work is assessed, but instead of individual teachers

performing the assessment, it is a group endeavor. Instead of using rubrics to rate the

portfolios, the Elbow-Belanoff model uses a

> simple decision [. . .] pass or fail. The raters were not trained to agree, as
> in the holistic scoring model, but rather released to read, to negotiate
> among themselves, "hammering out an agreeable compromise." (Elbow,
> quoted in Yancey, 138-139, emphasis in original).

Yancey explains that the model that Elbow and Belanoff use "functions [in] three ways: (1) as a sorting mechanism (pass-fail); (2) as a check on practice; (3) as a means of faculty development" (139-140). In URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric, the outcomes-based assessment functioned in Yancey's second and third sense. Passing or failing, for students, had already happened (the portfolios' reflective introductions were collected and graded before the outcomes-based assessment took place). Passing or failing, for instructors, wasn't part of the purpose or the design of the outcomes-based assessment (which is why the reflective introductions were made doubly-anonymous). But the outcomes-based assessment did provide for the department "a check on practice," and, further down the line, changes were made to the curriculum that, it was hoped, could provide "a means of faculty development," similar to the way it did for Dively and ENG 101 at SIUC.

At URI: Outcomes-Based Assessment

The reflective introductions were collected in the Spring of 2011, and the outcomes-based assessment took place the in the fall of 2011. At the time the reflective introductions were collected, the department had twenty-one learning outcomes, organized under five learning objectives. The difference between objectives and outcomes is one of "broad goals" versus "operational definitions," respectively (Carter 273). Objectives define "in relatively general terms the knowledge and skills the program faculty will help the students to attain," but because objectives are so "broadly stated, they do not provide enough detail to be teachable and measurable, that is, to guide

teaching in the curriculum and to be reliably assessed" (Carter 273). That's were

outcomes come in; they are "operational definitions for each of the objectives" and they

are "written in a way that is demonstrable" (Carter 273). Outcomes, because they are

operational (i.e., they have verbs), are teach-able, for teachers, and they are show-able,

for students.

The Assessment Committee began by narrowing in, identifying and deciding

which small piece of the whole the outcomes-based assessment would focus on. Not only

would the search for all twenty-five learning outcomes be unwieldy, it simply wouldn't be

practical: not all of the learning outcomes would be demonstrable through the artifacts

collected (the portfolios' reflective introductions). The Assessment Committee chose

outcome 1C, which was part of the *Rhetorical Knowledge* objective. At the time, this

outcome was articulated as, "Students reflect on the appropriateness of their choices for

the rhetorical situation." The Assessment Committee chose this outcome because they

"suspected [they] were not doing well with it," and because it was an outcome that could

be measured through the artifacts they collected (Miles).

The verb used in outcome 1C is reflect, and so the showable or demonstrable

activity of 1C is reflection. But in this sense, in this outcome, and in the reflective

introductions that (should) demonstrate it, reflection has a lot to do with the student's

understanding of revision, as it informs and is informed by the rhetorical situation.

Students are expected to understand (after having learned) the purposes of their

revision(s), and they are expected to understand (after having learned) the effects that

their revision(s) can make, even though *Composing, Revising, and Editing Processes* was its own objective, #2, with four outcomes that could demonstrate it, labeled A through D.

This isn't to say that there was somehow a mistake in the organizing or phrasing of objectives, and it isn't to say that this was some sort of redundancy, because in this case, I don't think there was (though, I admit, others might think differently). In the *Composing, Revising, and Editing Processes* objective, the outcomes speak to processes, not necessarily choices. Perhaps the most obvious example is outcome 2B: "Students practice multiple rounds of invention, research, feedback, and revision." Outcome 2D focuses on the final portfolio, and situates it as "finished" and "polished," two characteristics of final draft work. So while revision is related to the reflection that the Assessment Committee was looking for, it is not in the sense of process, not in the sense of stages. For outcome 1C, reflecting on the choices that informed their revision, students (ideally) would be demonstrating their awareness of rhetorical situations. Ideally.

(Standardizing) Reflection and Revision

Reflection and revision were built into the WRT 104 curriculum. One of the resources available to all WRT 104 instructors was a standardized syllabus, which the department posted each semester to its online instructor resources. Instructors were expected to use this syllabus, although slight modifications—rearranging the sequence of projects, switching or adapting the supplemental readings—were permitted and probably expected. For example, one of the five projects that were part of WRT 104's curriculum was a rhetorical analysis. The standardized assignment sheet mentioned three article

authors: King, Gould, and Silko. The syllabus and schedule, however, leaves those

authors out, saying only that there will be a "quiz on all three readings" (Dept. of Writing

and Rhetoric). When I was enrolled in WRT 999: Methods of Teaching College Writing,

the course that all incoming GTAs must take while they teach their first section of WRT

104, I was encouraged to choose articles or essays that I knew well. This flexibility

permitted me to teach rhetorical analysis more confidently, as I selected readings I had

already thought long and hard about. I didn't have to scramble to do the homework

before I asked students to do the homework.

In the standardized syllabus for the 2010-2011 academic year, the year in which

the reflective introductions were collected for outcomes-based assessment, the course

was explained, via the standardized syllabus's *Course Description*, as such:

> All first-year writing courses at URI require five major projects plus other
> brief or informal writings; a focus on revision, with peer review and
> formative teacher response; a class session with a reference librarian who
> introduces the use of reference databases; the use of research to inform or
> persuade; and a final portfolio prefaced by a reflective introduction. In
> completing this course successfully, you will become more confident in
> using a number of writing strategies; you'll be able to respond effectively
> to the writing of others; you'll recognize different genres and purposes and
> be able to adapt to different audiences or demands. Generally speaking, at
> the end of this class, you'll be better prepared to face any writing task.
> (Dept. of Writing and Rhetoric)

The standardized syllabus also contains a schedule, broken down by class meetings,

integrating work from three textbooks, and outlining the activities in each class meeting.

For each of the five projects, there are workshops and peer review sessions before the

final draft is submitted. On the days that the final drafts are submitted, the schedule

explains that the draft should be "revised after [class meeting's] workshop" (Dept. of

Writing and Rhetoric). Revision is there, at least in theory. But it's unclear what might revision might have meant, or what revision did mean, in practice.

In "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," Nancy Sommers explains how the students in her research "understand the revision process as a rewording activity" (326). Her student writers do not conceive "revision as an activity in which they modify and develop perspectives and ideas," and they lack "strategies of handling the whole essay. They lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers" (Sommers 327). For these student writers, revision is somewhat superficial in that it focuses on a text's surface level features.

The "experienced adult writers" in Sommers's research, however, conceive of and practice revision differently, and these writers have two concerns: one is "a concern for form" and the other is "a concern for their readership" (Sommers 329). The concern for form is a concern for structure, not necessarily a concern for/of genre or medium. All writers in Summers's study were tasked with writing in the same three essay genres: "expressive, explanatory, and persuasive" (325). The concern for readership, though, approximates rhetorical awareness, even though Sommers doesn't call it that:

> The experienced writers imagine a reader (reading their product) whose existence and expectations influence their revision process. They have abstracted standards of a reader and this reader seems to be partially a reflection of themselves and functions as a critical and productive collaborator—a collaborator who has yet to love their work. The anticipation of a reader's judgment causes a feeling of dissonance when the writer recognizes incongruities between intention and execution, and requires these writers to make revisions on all levels. Such a reader gives them just what the students lacked: new eyes to "re-view" their work. The

experienced writers believe that they have learned the causes and conditions, the product, which will influence their reader, and their revision strategies are geared towards creating these causes and conditions. (329)

Sommers characterizes the revision strategies of the experienced adult writers as "strategic attempts" that "[they] use to manipulate the conventions of discourse in order to communicate to their reader" (329). She doesn't argue for writing instructors to teach rhetorical awareness, at least not in those terms. Sommers's concern is one of process, and she argues that the main difference between the revision strategies of students and those of experienced writers is how they enact that process, its steps or phases. She identifies four kinds of revision: "deletion, substitution, addition, and reordering," and they can happen locally or globally (325). She argues that experienced writers operate in these steps recursively and strategically, keeping their imagined audience in mind.

Writing in 1992, Toby Fulwiler, like Sommers, prioritizes the role of revision in writing instruction. He explains that "teaching writing is teaching re-writing," and that, "for novice writers, learning to re-write is an alien activity that doesn't come easily" (1). While Sommers identifies the types or stages of revision, Fulwiler outlines some techniques, some strategies. He argues that revision should be "provocative," that is, it should provoke the kinds of changes that will result in the "evolution, maturation, and improvement" of "both thinking and writing" (1). In this way, he both adds to and steps away from the kinds of revision Sommers identifies—deletion, substitution, addition, and reordering. Fulwiler's strategies include: limiting (in terms of time, place, and action;

and/or scope and focus); adding (dialog; interviews); switching (point of view; voice); and transforming (3-12).

Fulwiler's revision seems largely concerned with genre, as the example he gives is of a group of his students "transforming" their collaborative research report into a "script for 60 Minutes." If Sommers's revision was process-centric, Fulwiler's is genre-focused. While Fulwiler and Sommers present revision a bit differently, their works share two important arguments: revision is related to development of writing and thinking, and revision doesn't happen via sentence-level word choices. Revision is bigger than that. We'd be hard pressed to find a writing or composition scholar who would debate that, as this position is somewhat ubiquitous.

In the standardized syllabus for WRT 104, the schedule included work and reading assigned from three different textbooks, and although there's no way to be certain that all instructors assigned those readings (and we can be even less certain that, if the readings were assigned, students actually read them), some of those readings did cover revision strategies. The primary textbook for WRT 104, *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*, did contain a section on revision, and revision was presented as a set of strategies (some less "provocative" than others) for student writers to use.

It's not necessarily the act of reflection that's important, but what a student is able to identify and explain via reflection. That is, what's important for the student to demonstrate, through reflection, is his or her changing understanding of rhetorical situations. In reflective introductions, students were supposed to identify the contents of their final portfolios (which essays they chose to revise); explain how the drafts in their

portfolio differed from earlier drafts (narrating their revision processes); and articulate

why they made the changes they did. The showable or demonstrable element of outcome

1C was reflection, and that's what was supposed to happen, that's what the Assessment

Committee hoped to see, in reflective introductions—though, admittedly, we weren't very

optimistic.

At URI: Outcomes-Based Assessment and Learning (from it)

At the Assessment Committee's first meeting, we reviewed the results from the

department's previous outcomes-based assessment (that is, we looked at our previous

loop), and we decided which outcome and objective we would narrow in on this time.

There were five people on the committee, and they represented *somewhat* of a spectrum,

though, admittedly, not a very colorful one; that is, there weren't too many shades

represented. There was one associate professor, one assistant professor, one full time

lecturer, one recent PhD student who graduated halfway through the process (but

continued her committee work), and there was me. I was the newest to the specialization,

the newest to the program. At the time, I was a second-year PhD student, still in

coursework. I had taught three sections of WRT 104, but that academic year, I was

teaching a Short Story class for the English department.

The make-up of the Assessment Committee isn't arbitrary. The perspectives and

positions we each held—our terministic screens—were significant in shaping what we

looked for and what we didn't, what we valued and what we didn't, how we talked about

it, and what we didn't think to say. There were no part-time instructors, no PhDs who

specialized in Literature, and no MA students. Without *those* perspectives, without trying

to line up *those* screens, who knows what we didn't see? My guess is that we didn't see

just how much we took for granted: shared disciplinary values, shared pedagogical

beliefs, shared language. In every sense of the concept, we were engaging in normal

discourse. Kenneth Bruffee, drawing on the work of Richard Rorty, explains that normal

discourse,

> applies to conversation within a community of knowledgeable peers [. . .],
> a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same
> paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions. (642)

Although we weren't peers in the strict sense of the term (we didn't all occupy the same

institutional position), we were peers in Bruffee's sense of the term: we shared the same

field, we were all invested in it, we all valued it. There was no one in the committee to

challenge those values, no one to ask why they were values to begin with, no one to

question the worthwhileness of our work. There was no one to disrupt our normal

discourse, no one, that is, to make abnormal discourse.

Abnormal discourse happens "when consensus no longer exists with regard to

rules, assumptions, goals, values, or mores;" it's "'what happens when someone joins the

discourse who is ignorant of' the conventions governing that discourse" (Bruffee 648).

Although he focuses on collaboration in the classroom (i.e., students collaborating),

Bruffee's discussion of the learning and teaching potential of abnormal discourse applies

here, too. He explains that abnormal discourse,

> serves the function of helping us—immersed as we inevitably are in the
> normal discourse of our disciplines and professions—to see the provincial
> nature of normal discourse and of the communities defined by normal

discourse. Abnormal discourse sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority, that is, the authority of the community which that knowledge constitutes. (648)

Bruffee claims that abnormal discourse is "necessary to learning," but I wouldn't go that far (648). I think abnormal discourse might be necessary for a *particular type* of learning, not necessarily for *all* types of learning, because I learned a lot through the Assessment Committee's conversations. I learned a lot through reflecting on what we did as well as what we talked about—in our normal discourse kind of way. We talked about the purpose of the general education course, what we want our students to learn, what they should be learning via our projects and assignments, what might really matter, and what might not matter so much.

Yancey called writing assessment rhetorical, by which she meant that it is "positioned as a shaper of students and as a means of understanding the effects of such shaping" (144). Writing Program Assessment is an activity rooted in practices: the practice of teaching, the practice of reading, the practice of change, the practice, ultimately, of reflection and critique. Writing Program Assessment "reflects back to us that practice, the assumptions undergirding it, the discrepancy between what it is that we say we value and what we enact" (Yancey 494). Assessment is one practice, one space, that is particularly potent as a space for reflection, critique, praxis. It's one space for change.

At a local level, at the department or program or classroom level, assessment can and does offer space for reflection, critique, and change. It's not *merely* or *only* grading. Grading is an end: a last word, a letter or a number that we put on a product we probably

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won't see again. Outcomes-based assessment doesn't expect (or want) the final word, doesn't expect (or want) not to see "it" again. Outcomes-based assessment is generative, looking for growth, change. It's not a line, but a loop, a circle, whose curves can always change. In this way, outcomes-based assessment is, as Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell define the concept, more like *evaluation*, and evaluation is not the same as grading. Evaluation asks different kinds of questions:

> Evaluation requires us to answer all the hard questions that students should ask but often do not know, or dare, to ask: What, specifically, seems strong about my work? What is not so strong? What might I do to make some progress, either in revising this draft or in working on a comparable assignment in the future? (viii)

Outcomes-based assessment asks similar questions, but not of students' submissions, necessarily; it asks them of our program, our curriculum. Recasting Cooper and Odell's questions in outcomes-based assessment terms:

> What, specifically, seems strong about our work? What, specifically, is not so strong? What can we do in the future to make some progress on teaching our relevant learning objectives?

Outcomes-based assessment can supply answers to the first two questions. Answers to the third, though, can't come from assessment results alone. This is where assessment gets used, where it opens up possibilities for change, where it starts to show some possibilities, and where (perhaps) it starts to shut others down.

At URI: Asking and Answering, "What, specifically, is not so strong?"

The outcomes-based assessment took place in the fall of 2011. The Assessment Committee collected 1412 reflective introductions, from eleven different general

education Writing courses at the 100, 200, and 300 level. From those 1412, we selected a stratified sample of 308. We predicted, perhaps even hoped, that 50% of students would meet expectations of Outcome 1C (Rhetorical Knowledge: Students reflect on the appropriateness of their choices for the rhetorical situation). We didn't think this prediction was *good*, but it ended up being generous. Of the stratified sample, only 20% met expectations. When that sample was filtered to include reflective introductions only from WRT 104, the percentage of students who met expectations was still low: just 23% (Miles). That the percentages *of this outcome* were so terribly low was "devastating," because the rhetorical situation is a concept that the Assessment Committee, in its report, characterized as "the most important one that we teach" (Miles). Roughly two-thirds of students enrolled in general education writing courses were not meeting this objective.

If the results of the outcomes-based assessment yielded the unfortunate fact that students weren't learning what the department wanted and expected them to be learning, then it also proposed a risky, disconcerting questions: are instructors teaching what the department wants them, expects them, to be teaching? If not, what can the department do about it? How can the department better align its instructors with its ideals? Should it try to?

The Assessment Committee's report explains that 70% of the department's general education courses "are taught by instructors who neither have nor are seeking an advanced degree in our discipline" (Miles). This percentage accounts for non-tenure track lecturers with advanced degrees in fields other than Rhetoric and Composition, for GTAs who are not seeking a Rhetoric and Composition specialization, and for those part-time

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instructors who have at minimum a master's degree, although their advanced coursework wasn't necessarily in Rhetoric and Composition. These employment conditions are typical. And they provoke two questions:

- What counts as specialization?

- What does specialization mean (or what should it mean) when it comes to teaching writing?

One functional, forward-looking effect of outcomes-based assessment has to do with the interpretation of results, and using those results to implement change. Outcomes based assessment revealed crucial places for improvement, in learning and in teaching, and it opened up possibility for curricular change, institutional change. Of all the recommended changes in the Assessment Committee's Report, two were addressed by the First-Year Writing Committee, which was organized in January 2013.

At URI: The First-Year Writing Committee (and Learning from it)

The First-Year Writing Committee was organized in January 2013 and, similar to the Assessment Committee, was coordinated by a tenure-track professor. Like other collaborative action styles, the one at URI "is a reconception of the single directorship model" (Schell 69). There are several potential benefits to re-conceiving that model, and the benefits can affect both professional and personal life. Anne Aronson and Craig Hansen, in "Doubling Our Chances: Co-Directing a Writing Program," relay the benefits of their co-directorship, which they describe as an "arrangement [that] has resulted in

personal, departmental, or institutional benefits" (23). Using the terms "co-directing" and "co-chairing" interchangeably, they explain,

> co-chairing a writing program has allowed us to shift responsibilities between us, to accommodate the demands of our individual workload or professional lives. On a departmental level, co-chairing depersonalizes the role of chair or director, reducing political risk for the co-chairs and fostering a departmental identity separate from the person of the chair or director. Finally, co-chairing challenges some traditional notions of bureaucracy, and in our own case, offers some interesting insight into cross-gender, shared leadership. (23)

The situation Aronson and Hansen describe is not a distributed model, even though, they admit, "when we introduce ourselves as co-chairs to people who don't know us, we typically make some distinctions in our roles" (24). Such distinctions, they go on to explain, are only "apparent division[s]," because "the vast majority of what we do is shared," and "we frequently shift duties to meet our individual needs" (24-25). This makes their arrangement more collaborative than distributive, more shared than separated.

A reconception of administrative models or styles does not count as a revolution of said models or styles, as even a collaborative action model cannot escape what Schell calls the "material conditions of its practice" (69). Referencing Marcia Dickson's feminist model of administration, Schell explains:

> Dickson's theory of ideal administrative practice is premised on the idea that writing faculty (whether they are non-tenure-track faculty or teaching assistants, or tenured faculty) will be willing to work together to form and enact program policy and make curricular decisions. This is an admirable egalitarian assumption, but a writing program—like any institutional structure—is not a level playing field where all faculty members have equal time, energy, expertise, or the material incentive to participate fully in shared leadership. Thus the key issue is not should writing faculty

participate in collaboratively administering a writing program, but *how* can such a collaboration be structured equitably? In what ways will collaborative structures possibly overextend and exploit overburdened teaching assistants and non-tenure-track faculty? In what ways will tenure-track faculty be compensated for their administrative work? (69)

These questions were not on my mind when I volunteered to participate in the First-Year Writing Committee. They were not on my mind when I volunteered to participate in the Assessment Committee. They became questions I asked only in hindsight, as I was sorting through and trying to make sense of notes, memos, emails, and conversations . . . the documents that captured my committee involvement and the involvement of others, people who represented a variety of institutional positions, people who didn't all have the same (or the same access to) material conditions.

Where the Assessment Committee invited participation from graduate students on the Rhetoric and Composition track, the First-Year Writing Committee invited all graduate students to participate, including those on the literature track. The Assessment Committee, arguably, did not fully represent the teaching population, but the First-Year Writing Committee was more diverse, representing a greater variety of (though still not all) institutional positions. For example, there were no part-time instructors on the committee—there were no part-time instructors on either committee.

There were six members in the First-Year Writing Committee: A tenure-track professor, who was working as the First-Year Writing Coordinator; two full-time lecturers, one of whom was also responsible for coordinating the high school writing program; a MA student, who was working as Assistant Director of the Writing Center; a

first-year PhD student specializing in Literature; and myself—at the time, a third year

PhD student. That academic year, I was teaching upper-level Writing courses.

With the exception of the MA student/Assistant Director of the Writing Center, all

committee members had experience teaching WRT 104. Kim M. Mooney, in her chapter

in *A Guide to Faculty Development*, draws on the work of Reder et al., and encourages

those who work in faculty development to include "*un*usual suspects" as members of

their committees, or at the very least to go out of their way to invite them to participate

(emphasis in original 55). She argues, "the importance of diverse and representative

committee membership [. . .] cannot be overstated" (56). One benefit of such diversity in

membership—at least for Mooney's audience, those working in faculty development—is

a diversity in perspectives, a multiplicity that can "challenge one's own thinking in

productive ways" (56). This axiom shows up again and again. For Adler-Kassner and

O'Neill, they write about those "interested others." In both cases, what's made possible

by variety of perspectives (or so the authors would argue) is abnormal discourse. The MA

student/Assistant Director of the Writing Center might seem like an *un*usual suspect or an

interested other, but her role and work in the Writing Center exposed her to the same

writers that the rest of the committee worked with: student writers.

Despite the different institutional positions of the members of the First-Year

Writing Committee, and in addition to the fact that each of us volunteered to participate

(some perhaps under obligation, perceived or actual), we had something else in common,

something important: we were all, to greater or lesser degrees, practitioners in the way

Steve North defines the term in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an*

Emerging Field. The overarching question that practitioners ask is a pragmatic one:

"What do we do?" (North 3). What practitioners know "is driven, first, by a pragmatic

logic: It is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching,

doing, or learning writing" (North 23). These *are* the questions that the First-Year Writing

Committee took up, following the results of outcomes-based assessment, and based on

the recommendations from the Assessment Committee's report, although the First-Year

Writing Committee was not given the report in full. Instead, our tasks came via an email

from the department chair in which the recommendations were summarized, synthesized,

and presented according to priority. This isn't to suggest there was something kept from

or hidden from the First-Year Writing Committee. As Kathryn M. Plank and Alan Kalish

point out, when it comes to assessment,

> No matter how much data one collects, in order to be useful the data must
> be interpreted and presented succinctly to those who will use it. Audience
> is a crucial consideration when interpreting the data. Faculty developers
> will likely have both internal and external users of their assessment results.
> (145)

The Assessment Committee's Report, in its full and original form, was not composed for

an internal audience. It was not meant to be shared with the greater teaching body—full

time, part time, or GTAs. The report, after the Assessment Committee finalized it, took a

quick tour through a bureaucratic hierarchy. While a copy went to the Writing and

Rhetoric department chair, the report's first stop was at URI's Office of Student Learning,

Outcomes Assessment, and Accreditation (SLOAA), who answers to the Faculty Senate.

SLOAA reads the report (and other assessment reports like it), grades it (according to a

rubric) based on the assessment's methods, timelines, and recommendations. The report

then gets forwarded to the Dean (in this case, it was the Dean of Arts and Sciences), and then the journey stops. Who knows if the Dean reads it, or if the Dean only takes note of the grade it received from SLOAA? On the possibility that the Dean does read it, what message is most important to convey? What possibilities can a department or academic program hope for? What might they say they need? What did this department say they needed? Staffing. Funding. More full-time positions and less (over)reliance on adjunct labor. That is what the Assessment Committee's report underscored, highlighted, emphasized, with arguments like this:

> the over-reliance of part-time faculty trained in other disciplines is negatively impacting student learning. Without the ability to hire permanent staff more highly trained in our discipline, we see little chance of improvement. (Miles)

New faculty lines weren't likely—at least not to any degree that would have a marked effect on the course's core teaching population, and so the Assessment Committee did make other recommendations in its report, ones that were more possible, in part, because they were changes the department could make on its own, changes that didn't need funding or a Dean's approval. These recommendations were what were shared with the internal audience: those who taught for the Writing and Rhetoric department.

At URI: The First-Year Writing Committee and its Work

The First-Year Writing Committee was nudged in a productive, pragmatic, direction. The department chair asked the First-Year Writing Committee to "continue looking at ways to improve our FYW courses and the experience of both students and

instructors," an admittedly "huge charge" (Reynolds). The synthesis of the Assessment

Committee's report and recommendations contained four total tasks, two of which were

additional—to be taken up only if the First-Year Writing Committee had the time and the

inclination. The other two charges were more pressing, "most urgent" (Reynolds). The

first task, characterized as "the most obvious" way to "improve" the course was for the

committee "to consider new textbook choices" (Reynolds). The chair asked,

> Are there any new books on the market that will give our 104 course a
> fresh approach? Are we committed to genre-based instruction, or is there
> something that would put more attention on rhetorical situations? Is there
> a new textbook that would address our learning outcomes more directly—
> or might inform revision of those outcomes? (Reynolds)

Related to selecting a new textbook (and related to deciding what the Committee valued

in/about a textbook) was the First-Year Writing Committee's second task: revising the

General Education Learning Outcomes. The chair explained, "It seems clear that we

have, overall, too many outcomes; that they are redundant and simply not 'student-

friendly'" (Reynolds). These two tasks—selecting a new textbook and revising the

general education learning outcomes—were interconnected, and the committee worked

on them recursively. We discussed outcomes and objectives at the same time as we

evaluated textbooks, with one conversation's insights informing the others.

To help guide our review of textbooks, the First-Year Writing Committee

developed a list of criteria, features, essential and preferred—we imagined an ideal WRT

104 textbook would have:

Essential Criteria
Genre-Based or multiple genres and kinds of writing described
Rhetorical appeals defined and integrated through the text (particularly audience awareness)
More rhetoric throughout the text, beyond appeals and rhetorical situation (e.g., rhetorical analysis, invention, delivery)
Reading strategies (summary, paraphrase, what a text *says* vs. what a text *does*, etc.
Some readings (though likely not a "with readings" version of a text—variety and quality matter much more than quantity
sections on introductions and conclusions
sections on thesis statements

figure 3

Preferred Features
Visual rhetoric and the changing nature of "text" (digital rhetorics, for example)
Meaningful research support (library and beyond!)
Citation information ——>MLA, etc.
(free) online component or supplementary material (e.g., sample papers, not exercises)
Relatively light, portable
Support for peer-review
Distinction between revision and editing
Affordable
Collaborative Writing

figure 4

In total, the First-Year Writing Committee reviewed twelve textbooks, evaluating them in light of the above criteria. We kept track of our reviews online, using a shared Google-doc spreadsheet. Some evaluations are more in-depth than others. One reason for the variations in length/detail is that there were a few textbooks that were cut from consideration early in the review process, when the reader felt that a primary or essential feature was missing. For example, one textbook was "all about academic writing—writing academic essays. No other genres," and the reviewer asked, "Cut on that basis?" ("FYW Textbook Review"). And the First-Year Writing Committee did.

Some textbooks were reviewed by two or three committee members, while others were reviewed by only one. Some reviews were shorter than others, as some reviewers were brief (responding to questions of criteria with only a "Yes" or a "No"). Some reviewers also reviewed more textbooks. The First-Year Writing Committee narrowed twelve potential textbooks down to three contenders—*Everyone's An Author*, *Writing Today*, and *The Harbrace Guide to Writing*—and in conversations, the committee weighed the pros and cons of each. Not all committee members were thrilled with the final decision—not all committee members wanted a new textbook. But when it came time to communicate with the rest of the program, we did so as a unit, a group, with one vision.

We announced our decision to the entire teaching population via email and invited instructors to peruse the book (we left copies of it in the department office). We explained that, as a committee, "we gravitated to texts that were more different than our status quo,"

and we described the provocation for our committee work and the mainframe we shared

(to greater or lesser degrees) as we entered into our review of textbooks:

> Among the reasons for considering a textbook change is a renewed departmental focus on enhancing the rhetorical approach in our first year classes. We determined that while many of our faculty teach the course rhetorically, not every instructor has the experience and foundation to do so, and *The Norton Field Guide* was perhaps not providing as much support for a rhetorical approach as a textbook could. We also determined that we wanted to keep the course genre-based. (Hensley Owens)

We also introduced the rest of the department to the book we chose, *The Harbrace Guide*

to Writing. We explained,

> *The Harbrace Guide to Writing* won us over because of its deeply rhetorical approach to writing, including several chapters on rhetoric, sections on analyzing the rhetorical situation embedded in each genre chapter, and peer review questions that draw responders' attention to the rhetorical situation and rhetorical features of students' texts in ways no other textbooks seemed to. We were very drawn to the extensive rhetorical positioning and the language of genres as 'real responses to real situations,' rather than as checklists of features. We felt this textbook's pedagogical approach best matched the vision we have for WRT 104, and that it would provide instructors and students alike with a foundation and a vocabulary for thinking of and approaching writing truly rhetorically. Additionally, the instructors' guide offers extensive bibliographic information for instructors inspired to learn more. (Hensley Owens)

But choosing a new textbook was only half of our task. While we were reviewing and

deciding on a textbook, we were also revising the general education outcomes.

(Revising) Outcomes

When outcomes are "well-crafted," they can "constitute a common language that

clarifies what we mean by effective performance" (Hokanson 150). The clarification isn't

just or only for the students' sake. It's not just or only students who learn from (or based

off of) outcomes, and it's not just student performance that outcomes help shape.

Hokanson explains that the shared, common language that outcomes help determine "benefits everyone involved in the learning process" (150). This includes faculty, as one of the benefits of outcomes is that they can "provide a basis for coherent curriculum design and informed pedagogy" (Hokanson 150). Understood this way, outcomes can aim to ground instructors in disciplinary values and the practices that might best translate them. Or, at least, we assume. In light of Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir, this assumption is questionable.

The First-Year Writing Committee worked to make the general eduction outcomes and objectives more teachable, approachable, and learnable. By revisiting and revising outcomes, we had the opportunity to look at how we articulated those values, the opportunity to ask how we might be able to articulate them more effectively (if not more representatively). Articulating, developing, or revising outcomes is a reflective and generative process—for departments, instructors, and students alike—because it "encourages engagement with fundamentals" (Harrington xvi). It asks questions about the aims of the courses, the purpose of experiences, the nature of learning, and how that learning should be sequenced (Harrington xvi). Outcomes are "shaped by the expertise of writing specialists in dialogue with the disciplines, professional areas, and the various publics with which the institution is engaged," and they "can be used to define a range of theory and practice that constitutes a working consensus on what writing means on a campus" (Hokanson 157).

Key here is the "working" that modifies "consensus," and so is the specificity of location: what it means on *a* campus. A working consensus is always underway, influencing and influenced by the changing demographics of a campus, the changing needs of students, the changing nature of a discipline, and the changing population that represents it, and the changing population responsible for teaching it. Consensus is always underway because context is always changing (or, at least, always susceptible to change, expected or otherwise). To that extent, there will never be an absolute or entirely settled consensus, and that's not such a bad thing. Hokanson admits this, and he even encourages it; outcomes statements are a "continuing dialogue," and he explains that this dialogue,

> can help maintain awareness and develop understanding of the role of writing (and effective writing instructions) in college-level learning—both for newer faculty and on a continuing basis. (157)

He mentions newer faculty as an aside, though maybe he shouldn't.

Who Are You? (Who Are We?)

Doug Downs begins his essay, "What Is First-Year Composition?," with an answer that someone who doesn't teach composition might find a little cheeky: "It depends whom you ask" (50). Providing a brief sketch of the variations of "whom," Downs identifies five possible answers: the institution; parents, politicians, and the public; other professors; students; and graduate teaching assistants (50). Not included in his list, but brought up several times throughout the essay, is another whom: "expert practitioners" (51). Via a historical overview, Downs traces the ways the answers to the

question of "what is first-year composition?" have changed, in part an effect of (or at least related to) the answer to another question—"What does *good writing* mean to stakeholders?" (54, emphasis in original). For Downs, "stakeholders" are those "interested others" that Adler-Kassner and O'Neill mentioned; they're the "public," at least in as much as they are not themselves compositionists and writing instructors.

These two demographics—the stakeholders and the "experts"—have diverging views of good writing. The former, Downs writes, carry "convictions that writing is the basic, transferable, grammatical skill of transcribing speech to print, a skill essential to both social standing and employment prospects" (54). For the latter, though, for the experts, good writing is quite a bit more nuanced than that. Downs outlines the values/ beliefs that unite compositionists, the values/beliefs that, together form what he calls "the heart of composition" (58). The heart's chambers are what the field values, a sort of code of ethics, and Downs identifies five: access, interaction, voice, textual production, and rhetoric (58-59). He explains that,

> first-year composition *is* these principles. Every one [. . .] shows us something of what FYC, in its best moments, teaches. Rejecting a misguided and impossible mission, we do something else. We teach students that there's nothing "basic" about writing—that writing is *supposed* to be difficult, and that to have difficulty in writing is to be a *writer*, not a failure. That writers don't write alone. The power and importance of voice. We teach how texts are produced and how writing is technological. We teach rhetoric. (59, emphasis in original)

But it's unclear—or at least never precisely identified—who all is included in Downs's "we." The truth is, first-year writing is not taught exclusively by compositionists—not if those are the values that mark a compositionist, not if those are the qualifications and

terms of their identities. Of particular concern, here, is the last value that Downs identifies: rhetoric. Later in his essay, he says a little more about the "principle" of rhetoric, telling readers to "Emphasize rhetoric ceaselessly," to "embed texts, both the ones students read and the ones they write, in rhetorical situations [. . .] and have students articulate their details" (60).

What Downs describes sounds an awful lot like what the Assessment Committee was looking for during the round of outcomes-based assessment. It sounds an awful lot like what the First-Year Writing Committee (or members of it) valued when reviewing textbooks and revising learning objectives and outcomes. But were other writing teachers looking for it? Did other writing teachers value it? If not, what did they value?

Chapter 3: Teachers and Terms of Departure

The changes made to WRT 104 were, in part, instigated by the report released by the Assessment Committee in the spring of 2012, and they were designed, in part, by The First-Year Writing Committee in the spring of 2013. In the fall of 2013, these changes were implemented. This marks another important moment for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, perhaps not as significant (or not as significant *yet*) as the moment when the department separated from the Department of English, or the moment when Writing and Rhetoric developed their major. But the changes made to the WRT 104 curriculum are, and this moment is, significant enough. The changes affect the course, the many students who enroll in it, and the many instructors who teach it—the 30% who are tenured or tenure-track as well as the 70% who are neither.

Kathleen Blake Yancey wonders "whose needs does [. . .] writing assessment serve?" (498). It is a complicated question because "needs" is a complicated term, and, really, who gets to decide what those needs are? Who decides who needs what? Instead of trying to answer Yancey's query, as she articulates it, I sought to look at smaller pieces of the question, trying to identify the factors or conditions possibly at play, possibly at stake, when needs are at play, at stake. I wanted to know about the teaching majority—the per-course instructors and graduate teaching assistants who make up that 70%.

I began with a cross-sectional, anonymous survey, administered online via Survey Monkey. I wanted to collect general characteristics about per-course instructors and graduate teaching assistants who taught WRT 104 under both of its designs (pre- and post- the round of outcomes based assessment). An online, anonymous survey made

sense for several reasons. Because it was online, those who chose to respond could do so if, when, and where it was convenient for them. Anonymity assured that their responses would not be traced back to them, a security and a safety measure. The institutional positions of Graduate teaching assistants and per-course instructors are not stable or secure. I did not want survey respondents to worry they were jeopardizing their positions —unstable as they are—by responding, and by responding (I hoped) honestly and candidly.

I wanted to know what per-course instructors and graduate teaching assistants thought about the changes that were made to the WRT 104 curriculum. The survey asked questions about their use of, reliance upon, and feelings about the new textbook (*The Harbrace*); the revised learning objectives and outcomes; and the new menu-packet approach to major course projects. Because they make up such a large portion of the teaching body, and because they are required to use the textbooks and resources, it just struck me as . . . fair. I wanted to know if the resources the First-Year Writing Committee selected were appreciated, and I wanted to know if the resources available to graduate teaching assistants and per-course instructors were helpful. I also wanted to know if the resources were used at all.

I sought insights, specifically, from those who had experience teaching WRT 104 under both of its designs (pre- and post-outcomes based assessment). I searched through E-Campus, URI's online course scheduling system, reviewing three years (or six semesters) of course offerings. I began with the fall semester of 2011 and traced names through the spring semester of 2014. I did not include tenure or tenure-track faculty in my

search. Over the span of six semesters, WRT 104 was taught by sixty-five different instructors. Out of that sixty-five, eighteen had taught WRT 104 under both of its designs. I emailed an invitation to participate to each of the eighteen, potential participants. I did my best to assure him/her that survey responses would be anonymous and untraceable. I also sent one follow up email after the initial invitation, as did the chair of the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. In total, ten respondents completed the survey, answering all thirty-nine of my questions.

Interview Design:

For the second stage of my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews. To solicit interviewees, I returned to the list I had generated for the survey. Between April and May of 2014, I emailed fifteen of the eighteen potential participants, a few at a time, trying to get a variety of perspectives. I wanted to be sure I spoke to graduate teaching assistants on the Literature track, graduate teaching assistants on the Rhetoric and Composition track, and per-course instructors. I sent each possible interviewee an individualized email. I introduced myself (again) and asked if s/he would be willing to speak with me about the changes made to WRT 104.

I didn't ask (and I didn't aim to discover) if the colleagues I spoke with also completed the survey. In some conversations, they would reveal this, usually in passing. I did tell each of my colleagues, when we met individually, that I had used results from the survey to formulate some questions. At times, I used the space of the interview to ask questions that I didn't ask in the survey because they might have been more sensitive

(like questions about what the Department of Writing and Rhetoric could do, specifically, to better support them in their teaching, and what the University could do, specifically, to better support them in their teaching). Each of my colleagues agreed to have our conversation audio-recorded, and each chose a pseudonym. The pseudonym was another step to try and preserve their anonymity.

Although I had a set of standard/basic questions prepared for all, I did not ask all colleagues the same questions. Some questions were skipped—either because I overlooked them, or because they weren't necessarily relevant—and some questions were asked on-the-spot, as the conversation provoked them. Sometimes I didn't get answers to questions because I failed as an empathic listener, not picking up on conversational cues that my colleague *didn't want to* address the question (cues that sometimes became apparent in listening back, again and again, to the recording of the conversation). The adaptability of the semi-structured interview arguably made for more engaging conversations, though it does mean that not all of my colleagues responded to the exact same questions. So I don't have everyone's words on everything. But this approach—the semi-structured approach—made sense for my research. I was aiming to hear what my colleagues thought about the changes to WRT 104, and because they didn't all have the same opinions, we didn't all talk about the same things.

Meet the Participants

What follows are introductions to the colleagues I met with. I provide some background for each of my colleagues. I share their teaching goals, as they expressed

them (when asked to). I explain a little bit about what their lives are like, in as much as they were willing to talk about them.

Although I firmly believe that voice (transcribed or otherwise) contributes to character, I have edited any extra-, non-, and/or sub-textual details. These details are perhaps too telling, and eliminating them is another effort to preserve the anonymity of my colleagues.

Morgan
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Rhetoric and Composition track

Morgan, a third-year PhD student, came to URI after completing her MA. She had taken a pedagogy course while she was an MA student, but she had no formal classroom teaching experience when she began her PhD studies as a graduate teaching assistant. That academic year, Morgan had sat for and passed her comprehensive exams, worked on her submittable article, her oral exams, moved, TA'd a course, and had to give up her outside-of-the-university work (this provided her some extra time to focus on academics and teaching, but it had a serious drain on her financial stability).

Morgan and I were friendly even before she agreed to participate in my research. Although we were part of separate cohorts, there was a year of overlap in the time we each spent in coursework. We were in at least two courses together. And during one semester, our office hours overlapped.

My initial impressions of Morgan—as a classmate, as a colleague—were positive. I admired her. I thought she was clever, and I thought she was careful in the best kind of

way: when she spoke in class, I could nearly *see* her considering her words, as if she was

weighing the possibilities of each available option, determining which selection was most

appropriate, most accurate, most able to communicate what she intended to communicate.

Morgan is not the blurting-out type. In class, she didn't speak just to speak. She spoke to

ask questions, to garner insights about topics, readings, or other peoples' comments. Like

I said, I admired her. I admire her still. I also sympathized with Morgan, not just as

classmate or a colleague, but as someone who knows what it's like to feel anxious about

what you cannot control, or who knows what it's like to feel like your colleagues have

more experience than you do, or who knows what it's like to struggle as you try to

support yourself. Some of the themes that became relevant in the conversation with

Morgan stemmed from these worries. Morgan talked about funding and finances,

struggling to balance work and not-work, and developing a professional identity.

On May 7, 2014, Morgan and I met at a small, independent coffee shop just at the

edge of URI's Kingston Campus. Our conversation lasted about eighty-minutes. At one

point, I ask Morgan, "What do you want students to learn, having taken WRT 104 with

you?" She responds:

> I want students' knowledge of rhetorical situation and their knowledge of
> different writing processes to make them feel more confident and capable
> of writing in any situation.

Morgan provides a succinct, amenable articulation of her teaching objectives, her

teaching goals are in-sync with the Department of Writing and Rhetoric's general

education learning outcomes. But the question was phrased in a way that specifically

addressed WRT 104. That's not the only course she has taught at URI, so we talk about

those other courses, those teaching goals, too:

> **m:** You taught other courses in the Writing department. What are your teaching goals for those courses, and are they similar?
> **Morgan:** Oh, yeah.
> **m:** What do you want students to leave those courses, having learned from you?
> **Morgan:** They're pretty similar. I want to tell you about one of my larger overarching goals.
> **m:** Let me hear it! Let me hear it!
> **Morgan:** Because I have to, because I can't have this conversation without just saying what it is.
> **Morgan:** Um, let me just gather my thoughts for a quick second.
> **m:** It's okay.
> **Morgan:** Above, as a teacher working with students who are writing, and who are learning that their voices matter, and that their voices can be heard through their writing. I want to teach my students to expect to be taken seriously,
> **m:** Yes.
> **Morgan**: and to expect to be treated as individuals, in a civil and courteous way. I want my students to go out into the workforce and to have standards for how they want to be treated. That is the most important thing to me. Completely.
> **m:** mm hmm
> **Morgan:** And to have standards for how they want to treat others. So if students come into my class worried about finicky details like spelling and grammar, and all of this stuff, they're going to start to realize that by doing that in a peer review, they're not showing respect for somebody else's ideas.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Morgan:** Right? So I want them to leave having a standard for wanting to treat other people's ideas with respect and courtesy.

Morgan values civility, kindness, and she sees the opportunity to develop these social

skills in Writing courses, just as she sees the risk of developing their opposite: disrespect.

When students respond to other students' writing by focusing on "finicky details," it

demonstrates a lack of "respect for somebody else's ideas." In Morgan's classes, she

wants students to understand that writing is about writers. She wants them to learn (if they don't already know) that a writer's ideas are more substantial, more important, more worthy of attention, than the purely-textual expression of those ideas.

Margot
Per-Course Instructor, PhD student, Rhetoric and Composition track

Margot is a fifth-year PhD student. She had a teaching assistantship for four years—the standard at the University of Rhode Island—but spent the current academic year working as a per-course instructor for the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. In this way, she represents a unique position. Margot is not necessarily a bridge between the two (otherwise separate) demographics I sought out, but she does extend across them, in something like a straddling act.

Margot came to URI after completing MA work at another state university. She brought three years of college-teaching experience with her. At URI, she's taught at least six sections of WRT 104, but she also has experience teaching other classes, including WRT 106 and WRT 201.

As was the case with Morgan, Margot and I are part of separate cohorts, but our time in coursework overlapped. I can remember being enrolled in at least one class with her, though it's possible there were others. Before any shared-classroom experience, though, I met Margot in contexts and at gatherings that were more social. Some were University-sanctioned, like the Department of English's Graduate Student Orientation, or the all-staff meeting that the Department of Writing and Rhetoric holds at the start of each

semester. Other social contexts were more casual, off-campus get-togethers, like the holiday party during the fall semester of my first year.

I remember how animated, how upbeat, Margot was. She spoke fast and (somewhat) loud, but she laughed and she smiled. She probably talked to everyone that night—not that there was more than a dozen of us—and it didn't take her long to approach me, trying strike up a conversation. She made me feel less like I was new to it all, new to them all. She was friendly, easy to talk to, and she asked questions that demonstrated a genuine interest in getting to know me. She was nice. It was nice. But that wasn't always the Margot I worked with in class, as a fellow-student. Margot in class was anxious. And sometimes I found that anxiety contagious. Sometimes, I would catch it.

When we met on May 9, 2014, both of those Margots showed up. At times, she was the friendly, personable woman I remembered from the grad-student holiday party, the one who made me feel like we were just two people talking, two people relating. Other times, she was the nervous, cautious student I worked with in graduate classes, the one whose anxiety wasn't just palpable, but somehow . . . pressing for space of its own, like it wanted a seat at the small table we sat at. As we tried to talk about teaching and textbooks and outcomes and objectives . . . there was this poltergeist, shaking our small table. And, like a ghost on an EVP, that anxiety is in the audio-recording of our conversation.

Margot and I met at the same small coffee shop that Morgan and I met at, just two days earlier. I purchased a peanut butter cookie, perhaps an iced coffee, too. Margot

brought a bottle water with her. When I offered to purchase something for her—a small

act of gratitude for her taking the time to meet with me—she politely declined.

In as far as what strategies work for students, what students might need, and what

resources are more or less helpful, Margot speaks passionately about teaching. But

something is different when she talks about her teaching goals. To be fair: something is

different when I asked—and when I keep asking—Margot about her teaching goals. Here

is how that part of our conversation starts:

> **m:** If we were to think about these outcomes—and maybe this isn't
> wrong. This is how I see them—as being the department's goals for
> Writing 104, right?
> **Margot:** Yeah.
> **m:** That's what they want all students to learn.
> **Margot:** Sure.
> **m:** What would be your own teaching goals for writing 104? Or in other
> words, what do you want students to leave Writing 104 having learned?
> **Margot:** I like these. I mean, this is really what I'm going for. I'm very
> much in line with them.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Margot:** I would say, again, maybe parse them out a little bit more. Like,
> "Standards of Correctness." Maybe that's just a language thing, and I'm
> being nit-picky. But . . . then again . . . "Standards of correctness, usage,
> style," you know, "as appropriate for the rhetorical situation." But I'm on
> board. I think these are really good goals, and for a class in writing
> rhetorically, these are the things that they should walk away with.
> **m:** Yeah.

During the conversation, what struck me about Margot's response, and what I've

continued to notice and think about since, is that Margot didn't *exactly* answer my

question. She didn't tell me what her own teaching goals might be, separate or distinct

from the department's, at least not for WRT 104. Knowing that she had experience

teaching courses other than WRT 104, I ask about those:

> **m:** Are your teaching goals different in those courses than they are in WRT 104?
>
> **Margot:** Well, I do use the genre as my, you know, base all the time.
>
> **m:** uh huh.

From here, Margot begins to explain how she breaks down assignments in classes other than WRT 104. She talks about presenting different stages of research to students, often situating those stages as "sub-genres," each with its own set of rules and conventions, its own expectations, its own appropriate style and tone.

Along with issues related to, and struggles stemming from, funding and finances, Margot spoke often and in detail about the lack of community, the lack of support, she experiences at URI.

Lucy
Per-Course Instructor, MA in Literature

Lucy started teaching college courses when she was studying at another university, working on her MA in English. She had two semesters of teaching experience when she started teaching per-course at URI, and although she has been teaching at URI for three years, she still feels "relatively new" to teaching. That semester, she was also taking classes at a fine arts and design college, working towards a certificate in illustration.

On the afternoon of May 19, 2014, I wasn't exactly sure who I was looking for when I entered a small cafe on Route 2. I arrived first, but not too much earlier than Lucy did. I set my things down on a large round table in a room filled with mostly-empty tables.

Unlike the colleagues I had met with so far—Morgan and Margot—Lucy had never been a classmate of mine. We had never shared office space. We didn't have the overlapping experiences of PhD work in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric or in the Department of English. We didn't attend the same off-campus social events. In essence, I was meeting a stranger, and so was Lucy. But once she walked in, I immediately recognized her—perhaps from the start of the semester meetings that the department of Writing and Rhetoric holds, or perhaps just from the halls of Roosevelt. Whatever the case, Lucy is recognizable. She has a certain, warm sophistication about her. As she walked in, she smiled, I smiled in return, and we exchanged versions of, "Oh, I know you's."

Lucy and I talk about some of the same things Morgan and I talked about, some of the same things Margot and I talked about. Some of the issues that relevant to Morgan, to Margot, are also relevant to Lucy. Our conversation brings up issues of workloads, community, and teaching-resources. When I ask about her own teaching goals, Lucy says she had two. The first:

> **Lucy:** I just would really like to be able to make students comfortable in the writing classroom.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Lucy:** I mean, a lot of them just come and they're nervous. They hate writing. They don't like it. They haven't had good experiences in the past, and so just for me, personally, I always try to find ways to make them feel like they shouldn't be afraid to share their writing.

For Lucy, making students comfortable is primary and possible, and it's connected to—if not a prerequisite for—her second teaching goal: Lucy wants students to be more willing to make mistakes, more invested in revising and rewriting:

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Lucy: Like, you know, it's okay to make mistakes and write a really bad draft and then go back and fix it later, and they're just not used to that concept of, you know, Anne Lamot's "shitty first drafts."
m: Yeah, she's great, isn't she?
Lucy: Oh, love her. Yeah.
m: She's great.
Lucy: So we always talk about that, and that seems to just loosen them up a little bit.
m: mm hmm
Lucy: And, I don't know, from what they say in their reflections, I mean, it seems to help them just let go a little bit, and if they're willing to take the the process and write another draft, of course. But, yeah, so that's a big goal. Just making them comfortable and then helping them to see that revision is different than editing.
m: Oh, that's big.
Lucy: Right?
m: If you can make that mental flip.
Lucy: Right.
m: That's huge.
Lucy: And that's, like, an amazing accomplishment.
m: uh huh.
Lucy: So yeah, make them comfortable in a writing class, help them to see that writing is a process.

Lucy's two primary teaching goals both center on making students comfortable: first in the Writing classroom, then, and from there, in the writing process. And the connection between these two stages or phases of comfort makes sense to me: it's unlikely that students would be comfortable sharing messy, in-process drafts with their peers and with the teacher if they don't, first and already, feel comfortable with their peers and the teacher. It's a type of trust, and Lucy seems committed to building it.

Vance
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Literature track, MA in Literature, MFA in Fiction

Even though we were not in the same cohort, and even though we were not on the same

specialization track, I knew who Vance was before he agreed to speak with me. Vance is

remarkably warm and friendly, even if you catch him when I did: at the end of a busy,

challenging, high-stakes semester. Comprehensive exams, oral exams, teaching . . .

Vance had a lot to do that spring. He's active in his program, assisting new graduate

students through their first-year, and he's also a resource for not-so-new graduate

students, like myself. He's worked closely with the Graduate Student Union, and he's

acted as a representative when outside agents have visited the college for program

evaluations.

On the bright and sunny afternoon of May 21, Vance and I sat at a picnic table

outside of that same little coffee shop, not far from campus. It was the longest

conversation I ever had with him, and I found out that he's really funny, in a light-hearted

and easy-going kind of way. His humor is the kind that lets him laugh at himself, and

when he laughs at himself, it's easy to laugh with him—out of camaraderie, of course. It

happened when we were talking about how teaching practicums (such as WRT 999 or

ENG 999, which we both had taken) sometimes provide just as much emotional support

as pedagogical support:

> **Vance:** And I remember just really needing that a lot.
> **m:** Yeah, yeah.
> **Vance:** Even now I sometimes feel like, "I'm not giving these students the
> education that they paid for," like " I'm not living up to—"
> **m:** Sometimes, I'm like, "Okay, we had fun, but did you learn anything?"
> **Vance:** Right? Yeah, exactly! It's like, "Yeah, Louis C.K. is great, and I
> want to keep watching him, but I feel like I have to . . ."
> **m:** "Are you learning? Are you learning?"
> **Vance:** Right. "Just, like, give me a nod?"

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m: I totally hear you. I totally hear you.

On the surface level, Vance and I were turning our insecurities into jests and making caricatures out of our teaching-selves, but maybe there's more to this exchange than comic relief. Or, maybe this comic relief served multiple functions. Arguably, it made each of us feel more at ease, as it lent something light-hearted to the context and content of our conversation: One PhD student on the Rhetoric and Composition track, posing questions to another PhD on the Literature track, questions about a course that, technically, his specialization wasn't responsible for. At the same time, though, I think the humor also worked to democratize our teaching experiences, despite our separate tracks and despite the fact that Vance started at URI already having considerable experience teaching undergraduate writing courses (composition as well as creative writing), while I started with none.

Joking about teaching, and talking seriously about teaching, was easy with Vance. So was agreeing with him. His approach to WRT 104 made sense to me. His teaching goals made sense to me:

> **m:** If we think about the learning outcomes and objectives as kind of being the department's goals for Writing 104, what are your own teaching goals? What do you want students to learn?
> **Vance:** I think that when I set standards for myself, it usually boils down to maybe two general things. And it's one: to be able to think critically, to engage critically with texts, and I use "texts" very broadly, too—like we had talked about before—like your visual surroundings, what you might hear on the news, what your friends might say at the cafeteria. Just the way that we can kind of approach things with a little bit of skepticism. So to think critically about things.
> **m:** Sure.
> **Vance:** And secondly is to be able to articulate that. You know, to find a balance there. Students can analyze a situation and they can also articulate

those ideas, whether that's through an essay or through a short documentary, or even an email or a text message or something. I think that that's probably my two general goals.

Lucy's two primary goals—making students comfortable in a writing classroom and making students comfortable with a writing process—were connected, and she saw the former making the latter possible. Vance's two primary goals aren't just connected, but interdependent. He wants students to be able to think/engage critically with texts (broadly defined), and, then, he wants students to be able to articulate what they learn via that engagement, creating their own texts (broadly defined). But there's a major (and interesting) distinction between Lucy's teaching goals and Vance's teaching goals. Vance said nothing about process, drafting, revising, or comfort. Lucy did. Lucy didn't talk about the many kinds of texts students can analyze, engage with, or create on their own. Vance did.

Vance's approach to WRT 104 is rhetorical, far more rhetorical than I expected. I'm not sure exactly what I expected his teaching goals to be, but I imagined they would be informed more by his specialization, tailored more to the Literature track he's on. Our conversation continues:

> **m:** Are those goals similar to or different from the goals that you have for other courses that you teach?
> **Vance:** You know, that's a really good question, because I feel like, now, I feel like it should be different from teaching Writing and Literature.
> **m:** I don't know.
> **Vance:** I should be doing different things, but I don't. You know, the difference with literature is that I'm allowed to teach—I'm allowed to narrow in on—I'm still asking them to think critically and articulate their ideas clearly. But there's probably a little more emphasis on the teaching —or teaching to think critically. And also it's a lot more specific, what they should be thinking critically about.

m: Sure.

Vance: But yeah, in a general way, I do feel like I'm teaching them the same things.

m: Yeah.

Vance: It's just that with the Literature courses I have the freedom to use the texts that I'm, at the time, thinking critically about myself.

m: mm hmm, mm hmm

Vance: And so yeah, there's a little bit more of a specific focus on it. And it changes. The rhetorical situation changes a little bit, when you're analyzing Hawthorne stories or something. As does the assessments. But yeah, I guess I think that I have the same kind of expectations in that way.

It's interesting that the skills and habits of mind that Vance wants students to learn are not text-bound. It's interesting that Vance's teaching goals are not text- or even subject-bound. In Literature courses, Vance might direct students' focus more, aiming their practices in critical thinking and articulate writing more "narrowly" towards particular authors or texts.

One more interesting detail: When Vance talks about teaching Literature courses, he mentions, first, what he's "allowed" to do. A few lines later, he talks about "the freedom" he has when he's teaching Literature courses to use texts that he's "thinking critically about" himself. These quick moments are the closest Vance gets to anything like a complaint about WRT 104 using a standardized textbook; they're the closest Vance gets to anything like complaining about having to use a standardized textbook when he teaches WRT 104.

My guess is because no matter what text he uses in/for a class, and regardless of whether that text is "broadly defined" or narrowly restricted, Vance is teaching skills, practices, habits of mind that are consistent. And they're consistently rhetorical, consistently analytical.

Amy
Per-course instructor, MA in English

Although she wanted to teach after earning her MA in English, Amy "ended up in the

work world" for a number of years. She left her full-time job when her children were

young, not just because she "needed a break," but also because she wanted to be a

(mostly) at-home mom. She's been a per-course instructor at URI for eight years, and at

the time of her initial hire, the part-time work fit her life well. But that was eight years

ago, and some aspects of life have changed for Amy. What hasn't changed, it seems, is

Amy's desire to teach.

On June 10, I met Amy at a popular cafe-chain about twenty-five minutes away

from the Kingston Campus. This was the first time we'd met. Vance and I used humor to

create a comfortable conversational space, and this happened again when I met with

Amy. But Amy and I didn't joke about feeling incompetent. The jokes in our

conversation were more anecdotal: stories about unfortunate or silly typos we've found in

student papers (like "tortellini in the eyes of the beholder"). Amy and I also talked, less

humorously, about other aspects of teaching, managerial ones. Amy was the only one of

my colleagues, for example, to bring up how often students use their cell phones in class,

or at least how often they try to hide using their cell phones. I think these were moments

that were necessary—necessary for Amy and I to find points of connection, necessary for

Amy to feel comfortable talking to me. I asked Amy, towards the end of our conversation,

what motivated her to want to meet with me, to want to talk to me about the changes

made to WRT 104. She said it might have something to do with sympathy: she

remembered what it was like to be a student, and she wanted to help. She also mentioned

that she hoped it would matter, that something(s) about WRT 104 would change (again).

I ask Amy about her teaching goals, about what she wants students to learn. This

is the exchange that follows:

> **Amy:** I want them to engage. I want them to have fun. I want them to feel
> my enthusiasm even though they don't always think it's fun. I want them,
> I tell them, "At the end of the semester, if you walk away with even a
> better understanding of how to communicate, and you've polished certain
> things that you'd never thought of before—
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Amy:** "certain skills. When you can speak and write in a more direct,
> concise . . ."—I say, I use the word "professional," because that's what
> they're going to be—"way, that you're in tune with that, I'm happy with
> that." And that, and that is much less said than this. But it's the truth.

This moment happens 68 minutes into a conversation that lasts just over two hours. It's

close enough to the halfway point, and Amy and I have already talked about so much: the

differences between *The Norton Field Guide* and *The Harbrace*, the assignments she's

chosen from the menu-packet, the turnover rate for per-course instructors, the

shortcomings of peer review, the revised outcomes and objectives . . . yet Amy is still

hesitant, at least initially, to tell me that she wants WRT 104 students to learn to write in a

more "professional" way. This matters, because in our conversation, I learned just how

much language matters to Amy. In the last line above, Amy says that what she wants

students to learn, and what she explains to students about what they can learn, "is much

less said than this." The "this" she's referring to is the list of revised outcomes and

objectives. I'll say more, and more in-depth, later, but Amy has strong opinions about the

language of the outcomes and objectives. She finds it all too disciplinary, too specialized.

The language represents (or reveals) what Amy sees as a very real disconnect between

what "academics" value about teaching, and the actual world her students will enter (the

"work world," which Amy has experienced, which she wants to help prepare students to

succeed in). She tells me a quick story in which this discrepancy plays out:

> **Amy:** I was at Camp Harrington—do you know that thing they do?
> **m:** Yeah. Yeah yeah yeah.
> **Amy:** A couple years ago. I think I was the only per-course instructor there, for the round that I went in. But there seemed to be such a reticence to talk about education that—higher ed, our level—connecting to the work place.
> **m:** There is.
> **Amy:** There were people in the room that were just . . . And there was someone from the work place, someone that knew Dick Harrington, that he has asked to come in. Owned his own business, and he kept saying, "I need to hire people that can do this and this and this." And people were getting into the kind of esoteric discussion about, "Well, higher education isn't just servicing the workforce, you know? It's about these goals." And I'm thinking, "Really? You think these parents are paying forty grand just so that their kid can be . . ."
> **m:** Liberalized?
> **Amy:** I mean, you do want them to be. I want them to be educated and well rounded. So that's my goal, I think. How I say that doesn't always include all this.

Amy sees differences between herself and others in the academy. She sees differences

between what she knows about the world outside of academia and what others seem to or

claim to. And Amy sees differences between how she talks about—the words she uses to

explain—WRT 104's learning outcomes and objectives and the actual wording of the

outcomes and objectives themselves. As a per-course instructor with real, work-world

experience, Amy has started to wonder, after teaching at URI for eight years, if she is

wearing out her welcome.

On "Teachability"

Apart from "Do you agree to the consent information listed on this form?," the very first question I asked survey participants was: *How teachable do you find The Harbrace?* After collecting and reflecting on survey responses, I had a response of my own: "Oops." I didn't recognize the ambiguity until I compiled survey results and saw a greater variety of responses than I anticipated. I had to wonder, what does *teachable* mean? What did I mean by *teachable*? What did those who responded to the survey mean by *teachable*?

One way to tease out teachable is to turn to *The Harbrace* itself—but not in the way that students might turn to the textbook if, say, they wanted to learn or review characteristics of a critical analysis. Instructor Guides or Instructor Editions are common complements to student editions. *The Harbrace* has an Instructor's Manual, although it was not provided to The First-Year Writing Committee as we were selecting a new textbook, and it was not provided to those who taught or have taught WRT 104 since the changes were implemented. But *The Harbrace* has a Preface,[1] signed by the author, Cheryl Glenn. The Preface provides an overview of the textbook: what's in it, how to use it, how it connects to the WPA Outcomes. It also includes a list and brief descriptions of supplemental resources, included the Instructor's Manual, CourseMate, and a Multimedia eBook.

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[1] the Preface is included in the standard, brief second edition, but it does not appear in the concise 2nd edition—a version of the textbook with chapters selected by the First-Year Writing Committee and for URI specifically.

When I turned to *The Harbrace* to get an idea of what *teachable* might mean, I focused my attention on the Preface. I sought first to identify what Glenn said about *The Harbrace*, what it was about, or what it could provide, or what it could make happen. I quickly noticed what *The Harbrace* could *do.* There are a number of simple sentences in which *The Harbrace* was the subject, and in which *The Harbrace* was the agent. *The Harbrace* could *do* so much. For example:

> *The Harbrace*, Brief Second Edition, **helps** students [. . .].
> *The Harbrace*, Brief Second Edition, **distinguishes** itself [. . .].
> *The Harbrace*, Brief Second Edition, **translates** rhetorical theory [. . .].
> (xxiii emphasis mine)

That's just the first page. Throughout the remainder of the Preface, I watched as *The Harbrace* "brings, introduces, guides, presents, uses, help[s], offers, discusses, and emphasizes" (xxiv-xxxvii). If I was wondering what teachable meant, and if I was turning to Glenn's Preface for some elucidation, then what I saw was that teachable has less to do with the ability of the teacher to use the textbook in her teaching, and it has more to do with the ability of the textbook to *do* the teaching, the ability of the textbook to teach.

I noticed something else in the Preface to *The Harbrace*. Seemingly small details, seemingly small authorial choices, were constantly inconsistent: pronouns. Used consistently or inconsistently, pronouns do important rhetorical work. In some cases, that important rhetorical work happens precisely because pronouns are used inconsistently or ambiguously. In "Uncovering the Rhetoric of the Syllabus: The Case of the Missing I," Diann L. Baecker analyzes syllabi she collects from her colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. All syllabi were for composition courses. Drawing from

the work of Muhlhausler and Harre, Baecker analyzes the ways pronouns work in the

syllabi, paying attention "specifically [to] the pronouns *I*, *you*, and *we* and their

possessives" (emphasis in original, 58). Her analysis keeps Freire in mind: Baecker looks

at pronouns/pronoun-use in terms of power and authority in teaching. She pays careful

attention to the pronoun *we*. It's a slippery one. As Baecker explains, *we* is,

> an example of an ambiguous marker of power, which can be used both to
> indicate solidarity or community and as a means to coerce the audience
> into behavior that benefits the reader. (58-59)

We "can be both inclusive and exclusive, as well as coercive" (Muhlhausler and Harre,

referenced in Baecker 59). When *we* is inclusive, the writer is signifying an alliance with

her readers. When *we* is exclusive, the opposite: the writer is signifying her alliance with

a group that her readers are not a part of. But there's more: both the inclusive and the

exclusive *we* can be used coercively, because either one can be used deceptively. This is

not to say that writers always know when they are using *we* coercively (though some do).

We can be an effective way for writers,

> to distance themselves from whatever is being said, thus making it more
> palatable because it appears to come from the group as a whole rather than
> from a particular individual. (Muhlhausler and Harre, referenced in
> Baecker 59)

In her analysis of syllabi, Baecker finds that many "of the *we*s that were used [. . .] were

false or coercive *we*s" as opposed to "*we*s of genuine community" (60). To illustrate the

false *we*, Baecker includes and close-reads excerpts from a section of one instructor's

syllabus in which she outlines the "Purposes and Goals" of the course. Baecker writes,

> Midway through the paragraph she switches [from *you*] to *we*: "*We* will
> increase *our* awareness of the intimate connections among writing,

> reading, speaking, and listening . . ." This, of course, is an instance of the
> false *we*, because it can be assumed that her [the instructor's] awareness of
> the connection between writing, reading and so on has already been
> developed. (60)

We are unsure whether or not the author of the syllabus intended to use *we* coercively.

And *we* are unsure whether or not the author was cognizant of the rhetorical device she

employed, using it deliberately. But in that syllabus, as in other texts, the author's

intention or awareness isn't always—and doesn't always have to be—primary. Often

enough, what matters is the reader's interpretation. What matters is what the reader does,

feels, or thinks after having read the text. The affect on the reader can determine how,

why, and if the text works. If lessons in *The Harbrace* can serve any predictions, Glenn

might agree. One thing the First-Year Writing Committee appreciated was the way the

The Harbrace integrated rhetorical situations, including considerations of audience and

purpose.

But Glenn uses *we* in an inclusive-coercive sort of way. It's similar to the false *we*

that appears in the syllabus Baecker analyzes. Glenn's false *we* appears in the Preface.

She writes,

> [M]ore than ever before, **we** need to learn how to use language ethically,
> effectively, and appropriately to address and ultimately resolve conflict—
> so **we** can move ahead together and make our world a better place. **We**
> need to learn how to use rhetoric purposefully. (xxiii emphasis mine)

Glenn's *we* is a false and coercive *we*, because the chances are very good—one might say

they're excellent chances—that Glenn already knows how to use language ethically, that

she already knows how to use rhetoric purposefully. She wrote the book. Glenn's use of

we is a device to encourage—Baecker would say "coerce"—the audience into a false or

inaccurate understanding of kinship, suggesting to her audience that *she* will be learning alongside and with *them*.

There's more. The inconsistent use of pronouns becomes most apparent when pronouns are absent and/or when Glenn attaches pronouns to specific subjects. The inconsistency magnifies when Glenn writes more precisely, names more definitely. At times, she writes about students, like she does here: "[*The Harbrace*], Brief Second Edition, helps **students** do just that: It helps **them** use rhetoric to move forward by addressing and resolving problems" (xxiii, emphasis mine). If she was writing *to* students, to those who had yet to learn (from a teacher? from *The Harbrace*? it's unclear) about rhetoric and purposeful writing, why wouldn't Glenn substitute *you*? Why does she rely on *students*? Why does she rely on *them*?

Equally interesting—maybe even more interesting because it's more ambiguous and more inconsistent—is when Glenn does use *you* (because of who that *you* might be), and when she uses *their* (because of who that *their* might be). In some cases, the *you* seems to be the instructor, as it does here: "In this edition, **you'll** find many innovations (large and small) that help students understand [. . .]" (xxii, emphasis mine). Here, whoever the *you* is, I don't think it's the student. But if Glenn isn't writing to students, is she writing to teachers? Again, it's tough to say, because, again, her choice of subjects and pronouns is dizzy with ambiguity:

> A comprehensive and richly flexible guide for first-year writers—and their teachers—[*The Harbrace*] includes a rhetoric, a reader, a research manual, and a rhetorical handbook. (xxiii)

Perhaps this multi-pronoun-ed, ambiguously addressed Preface reveals that *The Harbrace* is a textbook-teacher: for all and for anyone who might not (yet) understand or appreciate rhetoric and purposeful writing, *The Harbrace* can help. During First-Year Writing Committee meetings, this is something we talked about. We thought that GTAs and per-course instructors could *also* learn about rhetoric and purposeful writing—maybe even enough to feel confident teaching rhetorical knowledge, that all-important learning objective. It's "the most important one we teach" (Miles).

Adopting a new textbook required modifying other instructor resources and materials. The standardized WRT 104 syllabus was adjusted, and the core projects were replaced by a Syllabus Menu Packet. At thirteen pages, the Syllabus Menu Packet for the 2013-2014 academic year contains: an overview of the menu approach; a copy of the learning outcomes and objectives; six standard assignments (from which instructors choose four); and instructor guides/notes for each standard assignment. The instructor guides/notes include a list of relevant chapters from *The Harbrace*, ideas for classroom activities, and readings/activities from the other two required textbooks, *The Little Seagull Handbook* and *Portfolio Keeping*. The second page of the Syllabus Menu Packet also contains specific instructions about what to do at the beginning of the course:

> All classes need to incorporate [*The Harbrace*] chapters 1-3
> (Understanding the Rhetorical Situation; Identifying a Fitting Response;
> Writing Processes and Strategies) on elements of the rhetorical situation
> and introduce the concept of the portfolio/incorporate Chapters [?] of
> *Portfolio Keeping* within the first three weeks of the course.
> (sic 2)

The choice of the verb "to incorporate" matters, as does the decision to make "all classes" the subject of the sentence. It's not that *all instructors* need *to assign*, or that *all students* need *to read*. If an instructor—GTA, per-course, tenure-track, or tenured—is to *incorporate* the chapters from *The Harbrace*, then the content of those chapters becomes the content of the course. It's worked with, not assigned externally. For instructors who may not be as familiar with rhetoric and purposeful writing, the required chapters from *The Harbrace* could, potentially, get them up to speed, similar to the way the chapters could teach WRT 104 students.

I asked my colleagues, the part-time instructors and GTAs I talked to, what teachable means to them.

Teachable in Focus: Language, Terms, and Translations

I asked each of the GTAs and per-course instructors that I spoke with to define teachable in their own words, their own terms. What does it mean to them? What qualities make a textbook teachable? Which textbook— *The Norton Field Guide* or *The Harbrace*—did they consider more teachable? They shared with me their insights, provided me access to their perspectives, and I worked (well, I tried my best) both to overlap and contrast their separate screens. What teachable means began to take shape; out of that fuzzy, blurry concept, I started to distinguish features. A textbook's teachability came down to the language it uses, the terminology it relies on.

The Harbrace's language and terminology received neither unanimous celebration or undivided condemnation. The GTAs and per-course instructors—as different users of

the textbooks—have different opinions of and different levels of success with this feature

of the textbook. Further, although my colleagues occupied different institutional positions

(per-course instructors or GTAs) and different institutional affiliations (Literature track

and Rhetoric or Composition Track) those variations predicted nothing. One's

institutional position or affiliation did not predict or determine his or her evaluation of

The Harbrace's teachability. GTAs on the Rhetoric and Composition track disagreed with

one another. Per-course instructors disagreed with one another. And because I was only

able to meet with one GTA on the Literature track, there wasn't another to agree or

disagree with.

To unpack what my colleagues said about teachability, how they spoke about

language/terminology, I will rely on a more precise sub-question. It's a different kind of

bite out of that larger, less-digestible question of what teachable means. Much like a book

in the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, the answer to the sub-question will make

possible, open up, a certain pedagogical path, a path that each instructor and his or her

students will (must, and did) navigate.

Sub-Question: Can students understand rhetorical concepts, in the terms *The Harbrace*

provides?

      Path 1: Yes, and the rhetorical concepts and terms help clarify class objectives

      and/or writing projects.

      Path 2: No, and the rhetorical concepts and terms over-complicate class objectives

      and/or writing projects.

For some of my colleagues, the language of *The Harbrace*—while more aligned with the language of the department's general education learning outcomes—was simply (and way) too complicated. The consequence—trying to navigate Path 2—took up valuable class time, as instructors worked to decipher the language, trying to translate rhetorical concepts into terms they felt students could more easily comprehend.

But for some of my other colleagues, the language of the rhetorical concepts— that is, the language *The Harbrace* used as well as the language of the general education learning objectives—was a *good* complication. From there, Path 1 was a pleasant and stable route to travel. It provided a solid grounding for rhetorical knowledge. It introduced WRT 104 students to disciplinary terms. The rhetorical concepts and the language of the rhetorical concepts provided the class with a shared language. As one colleague comments later, it gave the entire class a legitimacy.

For Vance, for something to be teachable, it had to meet relatively high standards. When I asked him to explain what makes a textbook teachable, he responded:

> **Vance:** For something to be teachable, I think that you have to be able to see it as multiple layers.
> **m:** mm hmm.
> **Vance:** Like, you start with a general understanding of "what are we doing in this class? Is this a writing class? Is it a rhetoric class? Is it a class where we're just gonna kind of like pump out a lot of essays, and I'm gonna watch and make sure they're clear?" I felt like with *The Harbrace*, as far as being teachable, it provided a very clear layer of rhetoric,
> **m:** uh huh
> **Vance:** and, this is something that, all semester long, we came back to that big foundation layer. And then we kind of added these layers on top. Skills you learn in research. Or, I would say, first we probably started with organization. The memoir kind of taught us how to organize a narrative,

how to put different parts together, and so those skills even though they're specific to the memoir, they became very useful when we started writing evaluations and critical analyses. So it's another layer to add on to it. For something to be teachable, there needs to be a series of layers that we can keep building on,

m: Yup.

Vance: knowing that organization isn't only for memoirs, but for everything.

For Vance, a textbook is teachable when its functions are multiple and formative. The textbook has to help identify (or cement, or clarify) the goals, purpose, and focus of the course; It has to assist in scaffolding course concepts—setting down basic principles, "that big foundation layer," and demonstrating methods that students (and even the instructor) can build on and also return to, recursively adding "layers on top" of layers. Assignments are sequenced, connected in ways that don't just permit students to draw on techniques and strategies introduced in earlier assignments, but developed and arranged in ways that require them to keep practicing, keep building. All of these features, Vance believes, are present in *The Harbrace.* He was impressed with the textbook, overall, at one point saying that, it "just suited what I wanted to teach a little more accurately," than *The Norton Field Guide* had.

But not everyone was as impressed with the textbook, so while it's important to take seriously and thoughtfully praise like Vance's, it's just as important to take the criticisms as seriously and as thoughtfully. No matter where on the spectrum of teachability my colleagues placed *The Harbrace*, that placement matters. Their reactions to *The Harbrace*, or to any major resource, matter in big, consequential ways. One such way is articulated well by Amy when she states, "Somebody may say, 'This is great.' I

just couldn't get into it. So, if I can't get into it, it's going to be hard for me to sell it to students." And it was hard for Amy to "sell it to" her students.

Amy had a lot to say about *The Harbrace*, and not much of it was complimentary. None of it, actually, was complimentary. For Amy, *The Harbrace* was a big step away from *The Norton Field Guide*, but it was a big step in the wrong direction, taking the course down a route unnecessarily complicated and cluttered with "esoteric" language. Plainly put: Amy didn't like the language of/in *The Harbrace*. She found herself on Sub-Question #1's Path 2.

The First-Year Writing Committee appreciated *The Harbrace's* focus on rhetorical situations. They (we) appreciated that it integrated rhetorical concepts—in the language that it did— throughout all chapters. It's not that Amy didn't approach WRT 104 as a class that helped students learn to write rhetorically. And it's not that Amy didn't teach students to be aware of rhetorical situations (or something like them) and to respond appropriately within their constraints. Throughout our conversation, Amy talks a lot about how important it is for students to develop sensitivity to audience, clarity of purpose, to learn how to strategize the decisions they make in word choice, in style, and in design. Amy values these course objectives, and she values teaching them. But for Amy, the language of the textbook and, consequentially if not connectedly, the language of the general education outcomes, is just too disciplinary. Amy thinks that it's inappropriate for general education writing courses (like WRT 104) to rely on rhetorical terms that are part of a language that she believes should be reserved for Writing majors and minors to learn.

Amy believes that students enrolled in general education writing courses, like

WRT 104, should not be bogged down by disciplinary terms. She explains that she

spends a lot of time rephrasing, rewording, or otherwise translating *The Harbrace* and the

general education outcomes into plainer English, trying to define rhetorical concepts and

terms more simply so that her students might have a better chance of understanding them.

She is not alone in her position. Amy believes that students are best served if and when

their instructors keep in mind what students need from the course. When identifying the

needs of her students, Amy takes into account what they will be responsible for knowing

and for doing when they graduate and enter the workforce. Amy believes that *The*

Harbrace overcomplicates WRT 104's primary goal and basic purpose: for students to

learn how to keep their audience in mind, how to use appropriate language when

communicating with that audience, and how to just say what they mean to say.

When our conversation moves to *The Harbrace* and *The Norton Field Guide*, it is

just after Amy remarks on the skills and abilities first-year students bring to college. Here

is the exchange:

> **Amy**: I don't know, maybe, that's the other thing. I have, in teaching
> almost eight years, I have witnessed a decline
> **m:** Have you?
> **Amy:** in the aptitude and the skill set of freshmen coming in.
> **m:** Okay.
> **Amy:** So I started eight years ago.
> **m:** Uh huh.
> **Amy:** That's, like, several cycles of high school students.
> **m:** Yeah, yeah.
> **Amy:** I just find, some of them, I've been like, "How did you even get," I
> mean URI's a state school, not that it's bad, but, "how did you get in?"
> **m:** Yeah. It can be tough.

Observations along these lines aren't uncommon. Amy's evaluation is not peculiar or odd or aberrant. I've heard and read (and sometimes argued against) similar observations before, and so, I imagine, have countless others. While I don't challenge Amy's observation, while I don't speak against it in our conversation, I also don't do much to speak to it. I don't suggest that I believe or agree with what she says. In the recording, there is an obvious awkwardness in the come-and-go of Amy's laugh. During the actual conversation, I felt as though I was working to understand her perspective, her experience. I thought I was listening. Transcribing this dialog showed me I wasn't, not *really*. But if Amy holds it against me, she doesn't do so for long. Or, perhaps she has just grown accustomed to talking with people in the department who don't see education or their work with students the way that she sees education or her work with students.

What Amy shares about the "decline" she's witnessed brings up the ways that teachers' expectations of students can influence—or at times inhibit—what students are capable of accomplishing in a class. It's possible that Amy's perspective on student-ability, and the decline she's witnessed in it, shapes her expectations of what first-year students can accomplish. It's possible this includes whether or not first-year students can learn, comprehend, use, and apply rhetorical concepts when those concepts are presented in language like that of *The Harbrace,* or like that of the general education learning outcomes. And it's possible, further, that when Amy makes these expectations (or doubts) explicit, they turn into expectations (or doubts) the students have for themselves. When students are given simplified translations of the more-complicated terms from *The Harbrace* and the general eduction outcomes, do they trust that they wont, or that they

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can't, understand the concepts in a non-translated form? Some might answer that question

with a "yes."

Ken Bain spends the fourth chapter of *What the Best College Teachers Do* looking

at the sorts of expectations teachers, effective or otherwise, have for students in their

courses. Drawing on research conducted by social psychologists and educators—Claude

Steele, Geoffrey Cohen, Larry Pinto, and Margaret Shih among them—Bain explains the

consequences of "stereotype vulnerability"—or what can happen

> when individuals feel they "could be judged or treated in terms of a
> negative stereotype or could do something that would confirm that
> stereotype" in the minds of those around them. (69)

In a number of studies, in a variety of learning environments, and with a variety of

different students, Steele, Cohen, and Pinto each

> discovered that if they can keep people from thinking that someone else
> might be viewing them through the lens of a negative stereotype, they can
> significantly change what those people accomplished. (70)

For example, in 1999 study, Steele wondered how stereotype vulnerability might affect

the performance of women who were taking the Graduate Record Examination. He

looked specifically at how it might affect the women's math scores.

> For one group, he made no special effort, and that group did far worse on
> the examination than did their male counterparts. For the other group, he
> convinced them before they took the examination that there would be no
> gender differences and there were none. (Bain 196)

It's interesting, and in a way, kind of reassuring and up-lifting, to think that students will

do well if, as teachers, we expect them to do well and if we make those expectations

clear. But it's not as simple as the short notes to Steele's study make it seem. A change in

a teacher's expectations will not result so simply in a change in student accomplishment. There are other factors at play, what Bain characterizes as a "web," or "a series of attitudes and tendencies that underlie teachers' efforts" (72). Three such attitudes and tendencies include (1)"a strong trust in their students' abilities to meet" high standards; (2) "reject[ing] power over students" by leaving them "in control of their own education;" and (3) "appreciate[ing] the individual value of each student" (72-74). During our conversation, Amy told me a brief story about one student who she didn't hold to the very specific attendance regulations set for WRT 104. In part, this was out of trust, and in part, it was out of sympathy. The story revealed Amy as a teacher who has all three of the tendencies Bain identifies. Amy appreciates students as individuals, she trusts them as responsible adults who are capable of taking control of their own education, but she also understands that sometimes, students—like everyone—need to be understood as individuals, facing and working through situations not entirely in their control.

My reference to Bain's book, and my reference to the research on negative stereotypes, expectations, and achievements is not my effort to say that Amy is doing something *wrong*. It's not to suggest that the decline Amy has perceived in student ability since she has teaching at URI has perpetuated that decline in student ability. But it's still an effort, *my* effort, to point out something I noticed, something I found interesting. Amy doesn't like *The Harbrace*, doesn't like its language, doesn't like its focus on rhetorical concepts. She considers it all too complex and too complicated for WRT 104 students. But another one of my colleagues, Morgan? She really *does* like the language of *The Harbrace,* really does like its focus on rhetorical concepts. And when Morgan talks about

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what WRT 104 students are capable of, she has a different story to tell, one characterized

more by lifts and engagement, less by slopes or declines. The first time Morgan taught

WRT 104, she used *The Norton Field Guide*. With a little more experience under her belt,

she returned to WRT 104, this time using *The Harbrace*. Curious, I ask her for an insight

not all of my colleagues were in a position to provide:

> **m:** Do you think that, if you were to compare those two books, *The Harbrace* and *The Norton*, do you think that one of them is more approachable for new or lesser-experienced teachers?
> **Morgan:** Well, let me think through this.
> **m:** Yeah, yeah.
> **Morgan:** I'll talk as I think. I saw *The Norton* as very elementary, and even in tone, it was very elementary.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Morgan:** So I felt a lot of the time that it talked down to students. I thought, it's likely that my students look at this book and think that it should be given to fourteen-year-old students. Not them. I imagined that they saw through it, that it seemed to over-simplify. Whereas *The Harbrace* complexified terms,
> **m:** mm hmm.
> **Morgan:** and, complexified rhetorical situations. So even as it offered clear definitions, and helpful examples, it didn't talk down to the audience.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Morgan:** And Cheryl Glenn very obviously has a strong voice
> **m:** She does.
> **Morgan:** and an attitude that comes through, in that text. So, it's more sophisticated.
> **m:** It is.
> **Morgan:** So thinking about your question, I would imagine, well, maybe *The Norton Field Guide* is more approachable for new teachers, and yet, I also, as a teacher, too, I want to be inspired by that text.
> **m:** I'm with ya.
> **Morgan:** And I want to be given something that really makes me think and that makes me feel like, "Oh, I'm facing a challenge here and it's a good one, and its a worthwhile one." *The Norton* didn't do that for me, either. Whereas like, hearing Glenn's voice, seeing how she dealt in depth with a lot of the different concepts and really challenges her audience in a way that *The Norton* doesn't. Personally, I would find that more

> approachable because it makes me curious and interested and feel
> challenged,
> **m:** Sure.
> **Morgan:** just like I think my students probably would from that text, too.

For Morgan, if *The Harbrace'*s content or language is a challenge, it's not an impossible challenge. It's a motivating one. She doesn't believe that it's too difficult for WRT 104 students to comprehend or to manage. On the contrary, the "sophistication" of *The Harbrace*, in terms of both content and language, provides WRT 104 students with a "good" and "worthwhile" challenge.

Lucy likes a lot of what Morgan likes about *The Harbrace*. She appreciates the language of rhetorical concepts, but Lucy doesn't talk about the textbook's appeal in the same terms that Morgan does: Lucy doesn't speak of challenges—good, worthwhile, or otherwise. Instead, what Lucy seems to find most useful, most worthwhile, isn't a challenge for students but a complement to the course, assisting not just WRT 104 students, but herself as well:

> **Lucy:** As far as, like, the new textbook goes, my favorite thing about it is
> the vocabulary of rhetoric is there.
> **m:** Okay.
> **Lucy:** So, I'm like, "Oh, this is just missing from *The Norton,* because if
> rhetoric and, you know, the whole rhetorical situation is so important to
> the department then . . ." I mean this book doesn't even define rhetoric,
> does it? *The Norton*? I don't think it does. I mean it glosses over.
> **m:** Not in the same way, as like, yeah.

Lucy disagrees with Amy, and agrees with Morgan—about the same things, yes, but for slightly different reasons. The rhetorical concepts, the language of them . . . the "vocabulary of rhetoric" is Lucy's "favorite part" of *The Harbrace*, and it was missing, at least in any helpful degree, from the resources that WRT 104 previously relied on.

In some ways, Margot's perspective on the skills and abilities of first-year students overlaps a bit with Amy's: both believe, or perhaps fear, that first-year writing students don't have knowledge of particular topics or experience with particular skills that enable them to understand rhetorical concepts, at least not as *The Harbrace* present them. Amy considers it a lack or an absence, but for Margot, it's more like a missing chunk of a timeline that students have yet to fill in. For Margot, what students don't have is knowledge of the history of the rhetorical tradition:

> **m:** What kind of skills do you think they're coming into WRT 104 with? Writing skills? Are they prepared for . . . rhetorical analysis?
> **Margot:** They have no idea what it means.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Margot:** No idea. They never even heard of rhetoric. They never heard of the rhetorical triangle.
> **m:** Uh huh.
> **Margot:** Hardly any of them know even who Aristotle is. Nobody's heard of the Sophists.
> **m:** Right.
> **Margot:** They don't know Erasmus or any of that stuff. So they come in blind, you know? They think they're writing a five-paragraph persuasive essay, and that's really all they know.
> **m:** Right.
> **Margot:** So that's why I'm saying this [*The Harbrace*] is maybe not the best, or it needs a lot of supplemental work.

Margot and Amy are both troubled by *The Harbrace's* grounding in rhetoric, although they don't talk about that rhetoric in the same sort of way. For Amy, it is terminology (rhetorical situation, opportunity, etc.) but for Margot, it is different. There's the very real possibility that this is the result of how my second version of the question is phrased. I directly named Rhetorical Analysis as a course project, perhaps steering Margot away from talking about writing skills and abilities—the initial subject of my question. What

she says after that—referencing rhetorical theorists—isn't quite what I meant. But I agree

with Margot: I don't think first-year students generally enter WRT 104 knowing about the

rhetorical tradition. But I don't know if that's a *problem*, necessarily. I'll be frank: it

wasn't until I started the PhD program that I knew (or learned) who Erasmus was. That

first-year writing students might not know, either, doesn't seem like a surprise, let alone a

challenge to overcome.

Amy's concern with student ability might not be ubiquitous, but it's certainly

familiar. It's why assessment conversations never disappear. And her concern with

student ability seems to influence her overall approach to WRT 104. When she talks

about her approach, when she talks about the purpose of the course, Amy often references

the real-world, work-world experiences she gained before she began teaching at URI. The

exchange that follows is just one example:

> **Amy**: And I sometimes think, even looking at the outcomes, we're a
> communication school. We're trying to teach students how to
> communicate well, to the point. And then we give them this. And this. And
> I think, "That's not what we're doing." And I just know they're not going
> to, most of them, like I said, aren't going to be
> **M**: Writing and Rhetoric majors.
> **Amy**: Yeah.
> **M**: Yeah.
> **Amy:** So let's give them what they need to know to be well-rounded
> students, good communicators. But then they're gonna go into a
> professional career. So I guess I may see it more plainly than a lot of
> people see it in the department, but having come from years of working
> before this . . .
> **M**: No, your perspective is a valuable one.
> **Amy**: Just give them what they need, but in an intelligent way, but not
> with a lot of hoopla around it.

When Amy cites her years of experience in the work world, it functions as her ethos: she

knows what's out there; she knows the world that students will enter into in a way, it

seems, other instructors or professors don't. Amy understands, via her lived experiences,

the demands that will be made of students and the expectations employers will have for

them and their work; she understands what it will take for them to develop into

competent workers and employees. The "hoopla" around that development, the stuff that

gets in the way of instructors providing students with the tools and knowledge they need

—and I'm interpreting here, but I think it's accurate—is all the rhetorical concepts, and

the complicated language that muddles them.

Amy's past experiences in the work world inform her current classroom practices,

and they also stretch forward, predicting workplace demands and workplace

performances. Her past experiences also span horizontally: The same sort of prediction/

projection/relation shapes the way Amy talks about how the students in her WRT 104

class—in full—respond to *The Harbrace*. When Amy talks about the textbook, she brings

up her own reading experiences, connecting them to and aligning them with students'

reading experiences. They are one in the same:

> **Amy**: So the students, there was a chapter in *Little Seagull Handbook* that
> kinda corresponded to the, you know, rhetorical situation.
> **m**: Yup.
> **Amy:** Hands down. I had them compare. I said, "Okay guys, tell me what
> you thought."
> **m**: And they?
> **Amy:** "Oh *The Little Seagull Handbook* just said it well. It just was easy
> to grasp, and it was, it's, it's even . . . the visual of it. Bold and bullets. It's
> easy to process."
> **m**: Yup.
> **Amy:** This [*The Harbrace*], I found myself just plodding through it.

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In some instances, "plodding" through *The Harbrace* means reading—over and over again—the same points or ideas. In some instances, "plodding" through *The Harbrace* means having to understand complicated phrases or comprehend disciplinary terms. For Amy, clearing up this unnecessary complication is, again, informed by her experiences in the work world. And trying to manage this unnecessary complication is, again, the same frustrating experience that her students go through:

> **Amy:** Coming from the work world, it's been like, "You need to communicate well. What am I supposed to say? Whom am I supposed to reach? How do I convince them or persuade them or inform them or touch them"
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Amy:** "in a way that, you know"
> **m:** That serves your purpose, mm hmm.
> **Amy:** That's what they need to know.
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Amy:** So sometimes—and I went to graduate school—sometimes this whole "rhetorical approach," I don't want to dumb it down, but at the same time, they're not thinking that way. And I tell them, "It just means, What are you supposed to be doing? How are you supposed to say it? What's your word choice? Choose it carefully."
> **m:** Yeah.
> **Amy:** "Get to the point. Cut out the butter. Know whom you're speaking to. Don't be off target."

When Amy brings up the fact that she went to graduate school, it's an interesting moment. It is as much as part of her ethos building as the references she makes to the time she spent in the work world. And her ethos is crafted through both. Further, the fact that she has both of these experiences, in both of these worlds, sometimes sets her apart —in a good, pragmatic, down-to-earth-and-relevant sort of way.

But just because she—or any of my colleagues—went to graduate school, does not mean they feel like, consider themselves, professional. Not in the way professionals usually do.

Chapter 4: Programmatic Visions and Professional Roles

Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O'Neill argue that writing scholars and writing teachers

need to reframe writing assessment. The concept of framing is reminiscent of Burke's

terministic screens: Frames shape what and how we see, just as much as they determine

what and how we don't see. Their reframing isn't asking just that we change how we talk

about writing assessment (although that's still an important factor); their reframing asks

that we also change who we talk about writing assessment with. Adler-Kassner and

O'Neill emphasize the importance for WPAs and writing specialists to bring their

assessment discussions out of strictly academic spaces and into more public spaces,

occupied by people who can (and do) influence larger policies. WPAs and writing

specialists need to do this, in part, because the public is (and the policy makers are)

already (always) having these conversations, without us. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill

write,

> It's likely that, as writing instructors, we think that people who actually
> teach classes (like us) should shape the stories that affect what students
> learn in our classes and how they do that learning. At the same time,
> though, it's essential that we recognize that others outside of our classes
> and programs also have a heavy investment in what happens inside of
> them. From instructors in other departments, to university administrators,
> to future employers, to policymakers, people genuinely care about what
> students learn in writing classes. (87)

Let me rely on some of their language as I work with their ideas: The challenge, Adler-

Kassner and O'Neill explain, is in the ways that the stories outside of the context of the

writing classroom (i.e., outside of the department, program, or classroom) don't often

reflect what writing specialists do and/or what writing specialists value. This calls back to

Fulkerson: our theories of composition aren't coming together, they aren't being told—

and they aren't being told in a synchronous union—in larger outside discussions.

That's not to say that others shouldn't be interested in or care about writing.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill appreciate that interest and care, and it seems they want other

writing specialists and writing instructors to appreciate it, too. The problem, they argue, is

that we, writing instructors and writing specialists, need to communicate more, and more

effectively, with those outside of our programs and classes. They call assessment "a

powerful form of communication," because "it tells a story about writing, writers and the

teaching of writing" (144). When it comes to that story, they want us to say more, explain

better, provide context to those "interested others." We need, they argue, to tell "a story of

us," one,

> that brings together the interests and values of others and the values and
> interests we hold as individuals and as writing professionals whose work
> is rooted in research-based best practices. (88)

This story of us is collaborative, and it crosses the academic/public divide—in some

cases, it has to first cross the department/university divide. A story of us is a one that

builds alliances between those who are inside the program, department, classroom, and

those who are not.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill focus, primarily, on

building extra-departmental alliances, not necessarily inter-departmental ones, and this is

where it gets a little tricky. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill, in each of the strategies they

outline, presuppose that there is someone—an individual—responsible for WPA work.

But sometimes, some departments—like URI's Writing and Rhetoric department—do not

have a WPA, strictly speaking. While the Writing and Rhetoric department succeeds in

distributing the WPA function (different individuals take up different projects, and

different committees are formed as projects or issues arise or are scheduled), the WPA

work that committee members and chairs do is *in addition* to their other work and in

some cases outside of their scholarly pursuits and/or interests. That could be

disconcerting, not only for committee members and committee chairs, but for WPAs who

(rightly) argue that WPA work is scholarly work—not merely or only managerial work or

departmental service.

Rita Malenczyk, in her introduction to *A Rhetoric for Writing Program*

Administrators, begins by discussing the exigence for the edited collection, published in

2013. She explains that "writing program administration has grown as a discipline within

rhetoric and composition over the last three decades" (3). Writing in 2009, Jonikka

Charlton and Shirley K. Rose make a similar observation, claiming that "being a WPA is

coming to mean much more than holding a particular title or performing specific

tasks" (136). Part of this growth and professionalization of writing program

administration, Charlton and Rose write, "has led to an increased awareness of WPA

work as scholarly, intellectual work" (136). This is visible in a few ways. One is in the

work graduate students do. More courses are being offered that take up writing program

administration as research-able content, and more dissertations are being written about

writing program administration, projects that "[take] the scholarly aspects of [WPA] work

seriously" (Charlton and Rose 114, 136). The second way that WPA work is visible as a

scholarly activity isn't quite so new a development, but its continued publication proves

that scholars and researchers are making knowledge in the field: the peer-refereed journal. *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has been in publication since 1978. Malenczyk looks at this history generationally when she explains that,

> Those of us who began administering writing programs in the middle to late 1990s might view our work through a more theoretical lens than those who began twenty years earlier, when they may have been appointed WPAs simply because they were the only faculty members on campus with even a remote interest in teaching writing. In contrast, WPAs beginning their work now may be markedly more invested in that work to the point of its being an essential part of their careers and identities. (5)

In the almost forty-years that *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has been in publication, the training/preparation for WPAs has changed, but so too has the work that WPAs do—in terms of their understanding of it, how others understand it, and the methods or strategies of defining and delineating it. Within ten years of the journal's initial publication, Jeanne Gunner explains,

> the initial conception of the WPA as a unitary figure-position is joined by a proliferation of studies that treat the position as a dispersed range of activities and roles, situated within and delimited by disciplinary and social forces. (32)

She calls this the "post-unitary WPA," as the WPA changed (or the conception of its function changed) "from single and static to multi-positioned and multiply located" (32). It is around the period of time that Gunner is referring to (between 1978-1988) that Linda Peterson conducted a survey of WPAs and the work they do. She published her findings in a 1987 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, titling her article "The WPA's Progress: A Survey, Story, and Commentary on the Career Patterns of Writing Program

Administrators." She asked survey participants about their "academic training, job responsibilities, rank and tenure patterns, and professional goals" (11).

Twenty years later, Jonikka Charlton and Shirley K. Rose replicated Peterson's study, asking their survey respondents the questions Peterson had asked hers, but also asking additional (and at times more-specific) questions. The similarities between the two studies, just as much as the differences, highlight the ways that WPA work has grown and professionalized—at least for some programs and in some contexts.

One of the questions on Peterson's survey asked respondents what responsibilities they had as administrators. She provided them a list of options to choose from, and she asked that they "check all that apply" (12). Her results:

> Freshman Composition: 83%
> Writing Center: 64%
> Advanced Composition: 46%
> Peer Tutoring: 46%
> Writing Across the Curriculum: 49%
> Other: 54%
> (Peterson 12)

Charlton and Rose asked their survey respondents a similar question. What they changed was a matter of specifics. They asked: "For which of the following kinds of writing programs do you CURRENTLY do writing program administrative work?" (emphasis in original 126). They teased out Peterson's five categories, adding to them "a variety of program types which either didn't exist [at the time of Peterson's survey] or were less likely to be associated with official WPA positions" (126). Charlton and Rose had eleven total categories. The results of their survey:

> First-Year Comp: 41%

Basic Writing: 23%
Writing Center: 22%
Peer Tutoring: 15%
Professional/Tech Communication: 13%
Creative Writing: 4%
WAC/WID: 31%
Advanced Comp: 20%
Undergrad Writing Major/Minor: 12%
Grad Rhet/Comp: 10%
Other: 4%
(127)

There's a lot of interesting suggestions, here. The re-imagining of the areas of WPA work

—and the representation of them in a simple list form—makes apparent two interrelated

growths: that of WPA work as a specialization, and that of rhetoric and composition

studies. What the survey results do not (and cannot) show, as Charlton and Rose explain,

is the "[frequency] of various combinations of areas of program responsibilities" (127).

For example, it's impossible to tell how many WPAs are responsible for issues related to

both Writing Center and, say, Peer Tutoring (or any combination). Neither their survey

nor Peterson's were designed to garner that sort of information—though perhaps

information like that would still be useful.

But the results do say something about changes in the responsibilities of WPAs. In

Peterson's survey, 83% of respondents were responsible for Freshman Composition. In

Charlton and Rose's survey, they distinguished between First-Year Composition and

Basic Writing. Combining the percentages of these two areas (41% in the former, 23% in

the latter), we get a total of 64%. Decreases in numbers here, as well as decreases in other

categories, "without equivalent increase[s] in other areas of administration," lead

Charlton and Rose to argue "that administrative responsibilities for respondents in 2007

were narrower in scope than those of respondents in 1986" (127). In other words, "respondents to the 2007 survey are less likely to have [an] equivalent breadth of responsibility" to those who completed Peterson's survey twenty years earlier (Charlton and Rose 127). Although the why of it is unclear, Charlton and Rose do offer a possible explanation:

> We suspect this change may reflect the hiring of additional WPAs at a number of institutions with which we are familiar: where writing center, FYC, and WAC administrative duties might have once been carried out by a single individual, these responsibilities are now distributed among two or three WPAs. (127)

With WPA growing as a researchable field, as an area of specialization within rhetoric and composition, with rhetoric and composition itself growing, and with writing programs also ever-growing, it becomes unlikely (in some cases even impossible) for one person to do all the work involved in, and to know all there is to know about, writing program administration. Charlton and Rose explain that the change in responsibilities "is also consistent with moves to a more collective or collaborative administrative structure" (127). While, in many institutions, "a single WPA is responsible for a variety of programs on his or her campus," in other institutions, "often larger universities, there are multiple WPAs serving a single program" (Charlton and Rose 124).

Peterson asked her respondents to self-report on their workloads, comparing them to their colleagues who were not responsible for any WPA work. Charlton and Rose asked their survey respondents to do the same. When asked if they believed their workloads were *heavier* than the workloads of their non-WPA colleagues, 50% of Peterson's respondents answered in the affirmative. 58% of Charlton and Rose's did the

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same. When respondents were asked if they believe their workloads were *the same as* their non-WPA colleagues, 41% of Peterson's respondents answered in the affirmative, while 30% of Charlton and Rose's respondents answered in the affirmative. When asked if their workloads were *lighter* than their non-WPA colleagues, 9% of Peterson's respondents answered in the affirmative, 2% of Charlton and Rose's did. No matter how the question was articulated, then, the results of Charlton and Rose's study show that in the twenty years between these two studies, "a larger proportion [. . .] now feel they are working harder than their colleagues" (Charlton and Rose 130). While this sort of self-reporting does not (and cannot) "reflect the reality" of comparative workloads, Charlton and Rose still call the results "intriguing" (130). They write,

> We can only speculate about the reasons for this change in participants' self-reporting of comparative workload, which might reflect an increase in expectations of WPAs or increases in the administrative complexity of writing programs with a whole host of intellectual, scholarly, and practical demands. (130)

WPA work is, well, a lot of work, and saying so isn't saying anything new. In fact, and not coincidentally, the title of the 2014 Conference of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) was "The WPA as Worker." When Peterson conducted her survey, she asked respondents (former and, at the time, current-WPAs) if they believed that "writing programs are better served by WPAs who remain in their jobs permanently or by WPAs who rotate in and out from other faculty or staff positions" (16). Responses were mixed, interestingly and according to their position at the time of the survey (Peterson calls it "predictably"); of those who were former WPAs, more than half "prefer[red] rotation,"

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while respondents who were working as WPAs at the time "disagreed [. . .] with equal numbers voting for permanence, semi-permanence, and rotation" (16).

When explaining why they preferred rotation, "one common defense [. . .] is 'burn-out'" (16). But the "most common reason for rotation" was that the person serving as WPA would leave that position and enter a different one: "the typical WPA rotates *out* of the director's position and *into* another position of academic service" (16). None of Peterson's respondents—whether former or current WPAs—preferred rotation simply because it was rotation. As one of her respondents phrased it, "Rotation is better assuming the availability of more than one knowledgable faculty member; rotation from knowledge to ignorance is no help" (Peterson 16).

Some of Peterson's respondents who preferred rotation defended it because rotation gives "younger colleagues [. . .] a chance to take command of the writing program" (16). It's a sort of on-the-job training that was typical of WPAs at the time of her study. When Charlton and Rose conducted their survey, the landscape was different. They explain that their study reveals that the "emerging WPA identity is grounded to a greater degree in WPA scholarship and expertise and to a lesser degree in on-the-job experience" (114).

For all the attention that the issue of a WPA's workload receives, no one is trying to de-prioritize the work that's involved in administering a writing program; no one is saying the work isn't worth it. Conversations, presentations, and publications on managing WPA work look instead at the ways it can be configured, and there are countless configurations for WPA positions, as Charlton and Rose point out (124).

While some scholars "herald" certain constructions—collective, collaborative, post-masculinist, distributed, and on and on—I argue that what's most crucial isn't that a program implements a particular construction. What's crucial is that the specific construction in play suits the specific context of the program in which it's located. And, again, because programs change—because the larger field of rhetoric and composition changes—then WPA work, and the construction of the position of WPA, not simply the rotation of bodies into and out of it—must change accordingly and appropriately.

Tim Taylor, in "Writing Program Administration at the Two-Year College: Ghosts in the Machine," looks at some of the ways that a college's context shapes not just the WPA function, but the WPA position. He explains that,

> At some two-year colleges, department chairs or even deans work as WPAs since the majority of "English" departments at two-year colleges are essentially writing programs, and often times budgetary constraints or institutional cultures hinder the establishment of separate WPAs. (121)

Using a word like "separate" is slippery, because the ideal WPA is not separate from the program, or the department chair (be it English or Writing, wherever the program is housed), or the dean. The ideal WPA would work, if not in tandem with department chairs and deans, then certainly not in isolation from them. I think a more accurate word is *specific*: As Taylor explains, in some cases, institutional cultures hinder the establishment of *specific* WPAs. The work still happens, and it still happens in light of institutional contexts and cultures, but there is not a *specific* person who takes it up. There is not a *specific* person who is in the position to give WPA work his or her full attention— professionally, academically, scholarly. And WPA work is work that is professional,

academic, and scholarly. While it might not have always been the case—or while it might not have always seemed the case—there is growing evidence to support it. This evolution of professionalism isn't unique to writing program administration. It's familiar, and close to home: we've seen similar evolutions in the professionalism of writing, rhetoric, and composition.

In their 1998 article about the rise and fall of the University of Minnesota's independent Composition Program, Chris M. Anson and Carol Rutz begin by sharing words from literary critic J. Hillis Miller: "while literary studies are in a 'state of decline,' the field of composition and rhetoric has become 'brilliantly professionalized'" (106). Miller situates this process of professionalization as a "response to 'major social forces,'" among them, the university's (post-cold-war) mission of "'preparing a skilled workforce for competition in the global marketplace" (106). There are alternate takes on the rise of rhetoric and composition, or at least other writers will underscore other "major social forces." Regardless of the catalyst, though, one element of that history is constant: the demand for general education writing courses not only brought more writing teachers and scholars into universities, it also provided more academic space for writing, as a discipline. And as writing took up more disciplinary space, sub-disciplines, like writing program administration, also started to take up more disciplinary space—first broadly, perhaps (as Peterson's survey demonstrated), but eventually sub-categories or sub-foci began to take shape. We saw it in the breakdown of types of WPA work, from Charlton and Rose, and we saw it, also, in their argument that graduate courses about writing

program administration and dissertations about writing program administration have both seen an increase.

After laying out some of the arguments for- and against- graduate students taking on administrative roles in their departments, Anson and Rutz share a familiar insight: "By its very nature, composition unites teaching, research, administration, and service into an integrated whole" (110). The "integrated whole" bit might be easy to challenge—there's a lot to say about how one learns (or doesn't) to balance professional interests and responsibilities—but that's not where Anson and Rutz take it. Instead, they explain how the graduate teaching assistants who once participated in the University of Minnesota's Composition Program's shared governance and consensus-based management system have come to credit that participation and experience for the careers they went on to. Anson and Rutz write that "most" of their former "graduate-student-administrators [. . .] are now well-positioned in academic and professional careers" (118). The authors argue that such experience is necessary for graduate students to professionalize, and that what holds graduate students back from such "opportunities to engage" are the ways that,

> administrators and faculty in English departments continue to act upon inherited beliefs about the proper roles and work of professors. Students come to a university to learn, and faculty to teach. Each has a socially inscribed status and set of goals. To blend their roles is to blur important notions of expertise, control, and earned privileges of rank. (118)

I bring this up not to debate with Anson and Rutz (or with those they're debating with), but to point out two things. The first is the (common) practice of involving graduate students in administrative work (including writing program administration). I'll return to this shortly.

The second is to point out one way of determining the kinds of qualities or abilities involved or invoked when the issue is professionalization. These qualities are "socially inscribed" at the same time as they work to inscribe; they perpetuate those "inherited beliefs about proper roles." Those three qualities, again, that faculty have that graduate students do not (yet) have: "expertise, control, and earned privileges of rank."

Fourteen years later, in 2012, Ann M. Penrose, without citing or drawing from Anson and Rutz's article, relies on three very similar words when she takes a closer look at this thing called professional. She looks at issues related to expertise, autonomy, and community. Instead of looking at how professionalism/professionalization relates to or matters for graduate students and the administrative experiences they can or cannot engage in, Penrose looks at this concept of professional identity in a way that's arguably more comprehensive in that it accounts for more than the next batch of PhDs. She writes,

> The CCCC's 2008 survey of programs indicates that roughly two-thirds of writing instructors hold degrees other than the PhD, and these degrees are typically in fields other than rhetoric and composition. Thus, though many FYC faculty have made long-term commitments to the teaching of writing, most are not members of the established profession as represented in our disciplinary discussions [. . .]. It is worth exploring how a profession so constituted maintains itself as a coherent community, as well as how its members define themselves as professionals. The concept of professional identity is particularly intriguing in our field, where staffing practices intersect with disciplinary indeterminacy to create a teaching community comprising professionals with widely varying preparation, knowledge, philosophical commitments, and disciplinary allegiances. (109)

If this is reminiscent of Fulkerson's essays, it's not coincidental. Penrose brings him up in her work. If Fulkerson showed us a scan and left us with a diagnosis (that the field of composition doesn't agree on what it values, how to teach it, or why it matters), then

Penrose provides a way to understand and address what she calls the "often disabling

tensions inherent in our program cultures" (110). But Penrose doesn't read the "disabling

tensions" as theoretical, not in the way Fulkerson does. She reads them as professional,

and she asks: "What does 'professional' mean with one has neither the signifying position

nor the signifying credentials of the profession?" (110). It's an interesting question, and in

an attempt to tease out answers to it, Penrose works through three characteristics of

professionalism.

The first dimension of professionalism that Penrose outlines is what she calls

Professional as Expert, and she explains that, "historically, professions have been defined

most notably by the specialized knowledge or expertise that members possess" (112). But

it's not enough to possess knowledge. One needs proof. Professionals are also authorized

by professional associations; they are "credentialed on the basis of this

expertise" (Penrose 113). Not surprisingly, there's more to it:

> expertise is assumed to be dynamic rather than static: true professionals do
> not simply possess a body of knowledge but engage in continuing
> professional development and actively contribute to the community's
> knowledge base. (Penrose 113)

This is one of the qualities that makes it difficult, Penrose argues, to understand what

expert means in composition studies. She tries to work out. She admits that within this

dimension of professionalism, Professional as Expert, "the expertise of composition

teaching is difficult to describe" (113). It doesn't fit neatly within those historical

qualifications and measures. So she looks at two more dimensions.

The second dimension that Penrose works through is what she calls Professional as Autonomous Agent. She explains that, historically, and in other fields,

> Because professionals had knowledge others didn't, they were granted authority not only to apply their craft but also to develop and maintain their own standards of performance and ethics and to regulate and monitor each others work. In education, "forms of autonomy and discretionary decision making . . . have been the traditional keystones of teachers' professionalism." (Day et al, quoted in Penrose 115)

The third dimension of professionalism that Penrose outlines is what she calls Professional as a Community Member. As she defines it, community is "a profession's internal social structure and cohesiveness, including its attitudes, norms, and group identity as distinguished from other groups" (117). Penrose underscores this dimension, even placing the others within its context:

> Professional identity [. . .] is not simply accumulation of knowledge of even production of scholarship that marks one as a professional but participation in the community's knowledge building and self-definition. (118)

And a community like the one Penrose describes—wherein community members (professionals) are part of community decisions, wherein they contribute to the community's knowledge, and where the work they do is a process of engaging with others—that sort of community, I argue, is always possible, regardless of the particulars of any institutional culture or context (120).

In his work with community college WPA models, Taylor draws on the work of Victoria Holmstein, who also looks at WPA work in two-year colleges. The argument she makes is that WPAs at community colleges aren't called WPAs, or, at least, they're called other names: "'department chairs, assessment coordinators, assistant deans, writing

administrators, lead instructors, and more'" (Taylor 124). In contexts like this, the role of writing program administration gets—in Taylor's terms—"decentered" (121). In two-year colleges, this often happens "out of necessity" (Taylor 121). Taylor calls it a "paradox":

> Some two-year colleges have established "postmasculinist" models of WPA work (Miller) while yearning for a traditional WPA to hold it all together and exert power within institutions. (121)

Charlton and Rose also bring up the role of institutional context, as it relates to WPA positions. Some of the changes they made to the wording of their survey questions were due, in part, to institutional variations, recognizing that their survey participants, even though they were all current members of the Council of Writing Program Administration, "might be doing WPA work without holding a formal position" (135). Issues of context—such as the type of institution, the permanence or transience of teaching staff, and the history of the program itself—can influence not only how the WPA functions, but whether or not there is a specific WPA or specific WPAs. While there are certainly benefits to collaborative models, distributive models, rotation models . . . and all other versions of a de-centered WPA role, there are also significant drawbacks, limitations, when there is no *specific* WPA.

Adler-Kassner and O'Neill want WPAs and writing specialists to tell their "stories of us" to others, to change the ways we talk about writing and with whom we talk about writing. But if there is no specific WPA, then who could collect and make meaning of those stories? Adler-Kassner and O'Neill's most democratic organization model—Issues-Based Alliance Building—still relies on an organizer, not on an organizer function. It is this person's responsibility to know where the program has been, how it got where it is,

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and how the past and present both help determine where the program wants to go and what it wants to do (or be) when it gets there. Such information is crucial for a writing program and for all those responsible for teaching in it. Shirley K. Rose, in "What is a Writing Program History," explains this well when she writes that,

> Within a program, an account of its past has value for the former, current, and future participants in the program. A writing program's history can inform the current work of that program. Knowing how and why specific practices such as curricular models, administrative structures, and policies were originally designed can help current participants in the program recognize how the program has developed and carried out its mission in the past, and to understand as well why current practices that might seem problematic were initially put into place. Outside the program, a history of its development can serve to make the ongoing work of the program—the work of its teachers, students, and administrators—more visible to program stakeholders who may have misconceptions or misunderstandings about the program. (240-241)

Building and putting together this history is cumulative, on-going work, and it involves multiple methods of research, archiving, and documentation. In programs that rely on rotation, new/incoming WPAs don't necessarily have to start from scratch: they can pick up where others left off. But someone—someone—has to start that work, someone who is either interested in writing program administration, hired as a writing program administrator, or committed in other ways to the future of a specific writing program.

It is here, I am hoping, that I can contribute to the larger discussion of the work of writing program administration. This is where and how I want to bring up the first issue I noted earlier, from Anson and Rutz's work on the benefits of involving graduate students in administrative work. At URI, graduate teaching assistants on the rhetoric and composition track were often given opportunities to gain experience in writing program

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administration. We worked as directors and assistant directors of the writing center. We

worked as assistants to first-year writing. We worked in assessment committees and

textbook committees. Not everyone who participated in this work developed an academic

or professional interest in it . . . but some of us (like myself) did. Who is involved in a

specific program's WPA work is an important part of that program's context—

historically, contemporarily, and in light of the program's future.

When Shirley Rose defends the importance of composing/collecting a writing

program history, she takes time to explain the relation of these to—as well as how they

are different from—WPA biographies:

> Although WPA biographies are often integral to writing program histories,
> an account that focuses on an individual figure responsible for leading a
> program, without attention to other program participants, is not a writing
> program history. (240)

In the context of URI's Writing and Rhetoric department, the fact that graduate teaching

assistants were involved in the distributed work—and the multiple roles—of writing

program administration is important. Historically, it demonstrates the department's

support of the teacher/scholars in their charge. It shows (or will show) the ways that

program faculty saw such experience as valuable work for graduate teaching assistants—

not only inviting us to take part in committees, but providing us with course releases for

larger WPA responsibilities (as was the case when I was interim director of the writing

center). The fact that graduate teaching assistants were involved in writing program

administration work might even show, someday, the ways that graduate teaching

assistants shaped (or contributed to the shaping of) what the department develops into.

Althusser taught us that persons are written by institutions, but institutions are not made without persons. Patricia Sullivan, James Porter, and others suggest that through the use of rhetoric, persons can re-write institutions. We can re-write institutions. In some ways, we always (already) are.

In this work, I'm not objective, but I aim to be empathic.

In this work, I'm not criticizing, but I aim for critique.

This makes it all critical.

In critical research practices, as articulated by Sullivan and Porter, the critical means that "social change [is, or perhaps should be] the appropriate aim of research praxis" (20). They name some examples of what qualifies as social change, and many of them are relevant here:

> liberation of the oppressed (Freire), improved communicative relations (Habermas), [. . .] improvement of social conditions, improvement of work conditions (Zuboff), and, in academic contexts, the improvement of learning conditions and the empowerment of students. (20)

I'm an endless optimist, and I believe that improved communication can happen in every exchange: between deans and administrators, between administrators and faculty, between faculty and students. Because my research grows out of an educational setting, of course there are educational threads: learning conditions, empowerment of students—undergraduate, certainly, although I focus more on graduate teaching assistants—and empowerment of part-time faculty . . . these concerns are absolute and inherent.

I entered into conducting this research, and I entered into writing it, understanding that the questions I ask are informed and motivated by my values, beliefs, and

experiences: I served first on the Assessment Committee, then on the First-Year Writing Committee. I was present at every stage of the curricular changes I outline. I was part of each conversation. The Assessment Committee passed results and recommendations along to the First-Year Writing Committee, who used those results and recommendations to change WRT 104. This is the department's most frequently offered course. I was excited about the possibilities the changes opened up.

In critical research practices, praxis is paramount. As broadly-defined as possible, praxis is the recursive interplay of theory and practice. It's the name for the way(s) that each can and does circle back to the other, the way(s) that each can and does filter into the other. Broadly defined, praxis is the blend of theory and practice. But sometimes blending isn't enough, because sometimes blending doesn't really do anything substantial to the blended. Sometimes blending doesn't change anything, because sometimes it can't. That's okay, if we're not looking to make change. But if we are, we might consider other ways of influence, other ways of affecting.

When Sullivan and Porter nominate praxis as the essential component and method of critical research, they show that more is possible; they provide an alternative to the blend. In critical research practices, praxis "recognizes the 'inseparable relation between reflection and action'" (26-27). When research is praxis, it aims to be,

> a reflective, thoughtful practice that has critique and questioning built into its operation, an activity that merges theory and practice, and that adds to repeatability and transferability a further notion: revision. (Sullivan and Porter 22)

Research-as-praxis means re-theorizing and re-practicing, not just examining how or watching the ways that theory and practice blend.

Theory. Practice. Reflection. Revision.

We might change our practices based on learning new or different theoretical frames or approaches, but that's only half of it. We must be as open to changing our theoretical frames or approaches based on what we learn through reflective practice. That's harder even than it seems, but it's not impossible. Frames might not be easy to break, but they are breakable. What makes frames hard to break is that they are hard to see: we're so accustomed to seeing through them, and not so practiced in looking for them. To break frames, we must start by looking for them, by learning to see them.

Institutional critique recognizes and always positions institutions as "rhetorical systems of decision making;." they are created through rhetorical acts, and so they can also be recreated through rhetorical acts (Porter et.al. 610, 621). These rhetorical acts can have ethical implications: the consequences of those acts matter, to and for people. Institutional critique aims "to improve the conditions of those affected by and served by institutions: especially [. . .] those not traditionally served by the university" (Porter et.al. 611). This is tied to—not distinct from—the critical implications of critical research practices. The contingent labor force—here, per-course instructors—is not traditionally served by universities, though, arguably, departments make efforts and do what they can.

The question, though: Do those efforts work, for that population? And more: In what ways might those efforts—or other efforts—be able to work better? Are there other ways of doing, or being, that we haven't yet considered?

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These are questions that this research, and that this researcher, is invested in.

Porter et.al. explain "that institutions, as unchangeable as they may seem (and, indeed, often are), do contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action" (613). Institutional critique insists—even presupposes—that institutional change is possible, and "that sometimes individuals [. . .] can rewrite institutions through rhetorical action" (Porter et.al. 613). Though it hasn't always been the case, I now understand assessment as one such rhetorical action. If we understand and practice (especially if we practice) assessment as something that is useful beyond counting beans or weighing bananas, then we can appreciate it, occupy it, and use it—rhetorically. Assessment can be a space not just for evaluation, but for reflection and revision. It can create a space—a wide and open and institutionally supported space—in which rhetorical action and re-invention aren't just possible, but probable.

But this doesn't apply only to a writing program—its courses, objectives, or even instructors. Stemming from the work of writing program assessment, rhetorical action and re-invention can happen for the function of writing program administration, and it can happen for the institutional space provided for the person or people responsible for that work. At URI, and through this research—research that was informed by critical research practices and institutional critique—I've come to see something I didn't see before: a zone of ambiguity.

Institutional critique investigates "boundaries in order to interrogate zones of ambiguity" (630). I understand boundaries as both conceptual and physical, the lines between the spaces. There are conceptual boundaries—what we might call distinctions,

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classifications, divisions: the distinction (boundary) between a part-time instructor and a

tenure-track faculty member, between a part-time instructor and a graduate teaching

assistant, between a graduate teaching assistant on a Rhetoric and Composition track and

one on a Literature track. Between a specific writing program administrator and a writing

program administration function.

There are physical boundaries—actual, material boundaries: the walls that create

(or hide) a classroom, that make actions (and those who act) more or less visible.

Conceptually and materially, these boundaries are important—no, crucial—spaces. Porter

et.al. argue that the blurry spaces, the boundaries, the "gaps or fissures" discovered/

revealed through institutional critique "are often discursive (places where writing [. . .]

can be deployed to promote change)" (631). They argue that institutions "can be rewritten

[. . .] through rhetorical action" and that "a seemingly minor rhetorical adjustment aims to

effect systemic change in a large institution" (sic 610).

Some "seemingly minor adjustments" happened (are happening) in the University

of Rhode Island's Department of Writing and Rhetoric. The adjustments are material,

textual, but they are not only material, not merely textual. They're more rhetorical than

that, more discursive than that, more formative, or maybe more re-formative, than that.

The adjustments to the curriculum only seem minor, maybe. They aren't. The

changes are significant. For one: they signal a moment when the department had to

confront discrepancies between pedagogical aims and practical outcomes. Two: the

adjustments to the curriculum are significant because through them—through the

rhetorical acts and adjustments—instabilities became visible: blurry spaces, boundaries,

zones of ambiguity. Now they are visible, now they are documented—via writing. Writing that, maybe, can be used to make change.

The uncertain spaces, the unregulated spheres, are areas where boundaries and bodies are unstable: the WRT 104 classroom, the WRT 104 instructor, while institutionally organized within the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, aren't necessarily within its control, nor are they guaranteed to be zones where what's valued and what's taught is aligned with what the department values and what the department wants to teach. The greatest instability by far, however, is in the WPA function itself: there is no specific person, no specific persons, who are institutionally responsible for this formative, generative, rhetorical, academic, scholarly, professional work. And that might be a problem . . . if not know, perhaps soon.

Zones of ambiguity "highlight instabilities," and instabilities, like assessment itself, beg for reflection, critique, and change (Porter et.al. 624). These zones of ambiguity pose questions of what it means—institutionally, pedagogically, personally—to teach writing. They pose questions about what it means—for the field, for the department, for the classroom, and for the teacher—to be or become, to be treated like or feel like a professional. These instabilities ask what it means not just for a writing program, but for a writing department, not to have a writing program administrator.

These instabilities can be perspectives we use to understand our field—broadly and generally—and they can be perspectives we use to ask how, why, and whether or not we—locally and specifically—can, or should, or even want to change. Zones of

ambiguity let us ask questions. They give us access to an unstable place, one where we can put theory and practice into a dialectical tension. And that's a good thing.

Finally, and crucially, Porter et.al. lay down a ground rule:

> To qualify as institutional critique, a research project has to actually enact the practice(s) it hopes for by demonstrating how the process of producing the publication or engaging in the research enacted some form of institutional change. This proposition is, of course, a difficult one. It necessitates that changed practices be incorporated into the very design of the research project. (628)

The question ahead is one that I will not be able to answer because, like so many others who have worked and served in various WPA capacities in URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric, I will not be here to see what unfolds. As I write these words, I finished my contract and coursework with URI, and I am preparing to begin at another university. But I am not the only one.

In the span of the four years captured in this research, the faculty has also undergone significant change. Of the six tenure-track faculty members who were here in 2010, three have left. Their lines have remained open, and new faculty—with their individual interests, specialities, histories, and values—have joined in.

In 2014, the department announced its suspension of the graduate specialization in rhetoric and composition. This creates a question of what will happen to the WPA work that I and other graduate students took up—out of interest or otherwise. It asks who will take up that work, and will they do so out of professional interest or academic specialty. There is at least one hopeful sign: the university has approved the hiring of a full-time Writing Center director. This is a first for the Writing Center. This is a new institutional

space—one that is less ambiguous, less transient, than before. But there are other spaces, still, and there are still loops to close. In the work of writing program administration, there will always be loops to close.

And so URI's Department of Writing and Rhetoric must continue asking itself three crucial questions:

1. How is our WPA work functioning?

2. What does it need to do?

3. Who needs to be the person (or persons) to do it?

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