Syracuse University

SURFACE

2003

WPAs and/Versus Administrators: Using Multimedia Rhetoric to Promote Shared Premises for Writing Instruction

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Recommended Citation

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> We all know about the difficulty of trying to get students, administrators, parents, and the general public to hear what *our* idea of composition (as a field of study) is, and what *we* mean by "writing." In terms of the hated but ascendant business model, we have a PR/marketing problem. Until we try to solve it in those terms, we'll make the same headway for the next few decades that we have for the last few.
>
> —Doug Downs, WPA-L, 18 January 2002

> On our own campuses, I believe we need to teach about writing where we can—and particularly teach those in upper administration. In practical terms, this means extending ourselves considerably: asking for meetings with upper administrators, volunteering to talk about our programs at every opportunity, seeking coverage in the campus news sources, and so on. This is a tiring, slow, and ongoing business—but it can eventually pay off with administrators and colleagues who know enough to question or dismiss claims like those Stanley [Fish] makes (or seems to make).
>
> Having worked to teach these lessons to my own colleagues and administrators for almost 30 years, I . . . wonder if others have specific suggestions for how to educate those around us.
>
> —Andrea Lunsford, WPA-L, 28 June 2002

The epigraphs to this essay were written by people very differently positioned in the profession of composition and rhetoric. Andrea Lunsford is a former chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication; Doug Downs is working on his doctoral dissertation in composition and rhetoric. Their posts were made at different times: Downs' in January 2002; Lunsford's in June 2002. Yet the two share a common concern, voiced in the same place (the WPA-L discussion list for writing program administrators). And they both illustrate a concern that is "out there" in composition and rhetoric: WPAs have a compelling need to change beliefs about writing and writing instruction in their institutions, yet the scholarship of writing program administration has not yet articulated effective means for accomplishing the task.

This essay describes multimedia rhetoric as one way of addressing this need. The experience of my own writing program in using digitized video to represent itself to its institution suggests that, unlike most established means of WPA agency (e.g., memoranda, reports, and workshops), multimedia rhetoric has an emotional effect on its audience and thus has a heightened potential for effecting change in the *premises*, the *assumptions*, that people hold about the nature of writing and writing instruction.

The Need For Shared Premises

Much of a WPA's work is program-internal: training TAs, scheduling classes, choosing textbooks, designing curricula. Other WPA tasks, in contrast, involve program-external negotiations: placement tests, budget requests, WAC workshops. In the program-external negotiations, the WPA often—maybe usually—contends with discrepant underlying premises about the purposes of writing instruction. These underlying premises come in a wide range of shapes, and the lines between them are anything but distinct. They can, nevertheless, be described in terms of their two poles. At one pole is the idea that the primary responsibility of composition instruction is for grammatical and syntactic correctness, a position widely endorsed by those outside the writing program and its scholarship. At the other pole is the idea that "a focus on error can often block the attempts of beginning writers to form their thoughts in prose, and indeed that the explicit teaching of grammatical forms usually has little effect on the abilities of students to write fluently or correctly" (Harris 85). Joseph Harris's statement resonates with most compositionists' beliefs.

In much of the work that takes them outside their program, WPAs must navigate the choppy surf of these discrepant fundamental belief-systems about the nature of writing and writing instruction. To further the work of the writing program, the WPA often finds herself arguing against the

program-external tendencies to define and measure writing instruction on the basis of students' grammatical and syntactic correctness. These arguments are far more than abstract debates about theory.[1] These efforts have grave import for the material circumstances of the writing program. Staffing, budget, and curricula are directly affected by the extent to which program-external powerbrokers[2] believe that the writing program is doing its work successfully. So the definition of the "work" of the writing program is critical to its material conditions and even to its existence.

For most of us WPAs, the rare successes in these efforts at persuasion are moments to be treasured—as a passage from a Keith Rhodes article illustrates:

> I will never forget a time when, the muse being with me, in three minutes flat I got a state higher education official to shift his view of composition from a site of grammar drills and error correction to one of genre analysis and rhetorical strategies. As he said, he had simply never thought about it that way before, but it made sense once he did. (57)

As we all know, though, such serendipitous opportunities will not suffice for the grave, gigantic role of change agent that perforce falls to the WPA. Multimedia rhetoric may provide a less idiosyncratic, more readily controlled way of affecting larger numbers of people.

WPAs as Change Agents: Established Methods

WPAs take seriously their need to act as agents of change in their universities, and they have offered various sound recommendations for how to accomplish that task. Joyce Kinkead and Jeanne Simpson suggest that change can be effected through a shared language: WPAs should learn the language of higher administration. Edward M. White recommends institutional change by the individual WPA's assertion of power. Louise Wetherbee Phelps alludes to what she calls familiar "transitive" activities such as "faculty development workshops" and "joint course development" and also to "unexpected ways" in which a writing program "enlarges its functions" when it "offers leadership in training of teaching assistants (TAs), pioneers ways of evaluating and supporting teaching, or brings together faculty across disciplines to share and solve common teaching problems" (307). Susan McLeod (in whose recent scholarship change has been an important theme) recommends that WPAs who are acting as directors of writing across the curriculum work to change teachers' practices; their theories, says McLeod, will follow (114). Keith Rhodes offers marketing strategies as a means of change.

In some accounts, changes in an institution's ways of thinking about writing can be effected by connecting the ideological agenda of the writing program to other established institutional discourses. Richard Miller, in Laura Micciche's account, recommends that WPAs turn their "moral outrage" into economic agendas that deans can understand (443). Jeanne Gunner advises WPAs to work for institutional change through "material agency" derived from "understanding the historical moment." Gunner continues, "Analyzing a program's ideological imperatives and its shaping historical forces, a WPA may better be able to develop a materially effective theory of program operations" (9). She suggests not only that WPAs engage in analysis of ideologies but that they then tie the writing program's ideologies to "more culturally privileged and hence more powerful discourses. [. . .] Lessening the gap between master discourses and theoretical discourses is, perhaps, one way to gain the power to enact theory in material ways" (15). Katherine K. Gottschalk takes this theme up in a different manner when she advocates making a writing program "an integral part of the mission of a university, so that it doesn't become a target when unpleasant cuts have to be made." This means moving the writing program off the margins (23)— which, in Gottschalk's account, means not so much changing the institution as changing the writing program. Then, she says, the writing program will be positioned to effect institutional change.

Notwithstanding all these published suggestions for WPA agency, Andrea Lunsford and Doug Downs voice widely held concerns when they ask how WPAs can effect institutional change. Despite WPAs' best work on the important issue of agency, the fundamental set of public assumptions about writing instruction—that it should be focused on sentence-level correctness—endures. WPAs continue to find their programs under constant pressure from the public, from their institutions, and from their students to deliver a first-year writing curriculum that conveys correct, transferable knowledge about sentence-level standards. All the reports, memoranda, ideological analysis, attention to history, moral outrage, WAC workshops, language convergence, marketing strategies, committee meetings, assertions of power, and ideological convergence haven't changed the underlying premise—that composition courses should be teaching grammar. Nor will they. Even the old anti-foundationalist himself, Stanley Fish, teaches what he wants his readers to believe is a grammar-only composition class, and he exhorts all deans to follow his lead and insist that all writing courses do the same.

WPAs are positioned to play influential roles in the university's discussions about the goals of and methods for writing instruction. But we make a mistake, I believe, if we think that our individual or even structural ethos

as WPAs is sufficient to accomplish those influential roles. The rational arguments of our memoranda and our participation on committees just don't suffice. We need more, and that's where multimedia rhetoric comes in: It's another tool, a powerful tool, one that, unlike the other tactics just described, makes ethical appeals to the emotions of its audience.

WPAs as Change Agents: *Pathos* and the Visual

Italian rhetorician Ernesto Grassi explains that the great success of rhetoric is its ability to reach the audience's emotions; moreover, he says, it is on emotional bases that we establish the premises of our beliefs. Here Grassi speaks directly to the concerns of today's WPAs in their struggle with discrepant premises for writing instruction. Contrasting rhetoric and dialectic, Grassi says that dialectic manipulates and arranges the premises that have already been provided by rhetoric. Working primarily from *logos*—from logic—dialectic figures out the various combinations and interactions of the premises that have already been established through the *pathos* of rhetoric.

Transporting Grassi's analyses to the tasks of today's WPAs, I would assert that all the print documents of writing program administration—the annual reports, memoranda, and curriculum proposals—are part of the logic of dialectic. These documents are more successful in negotiating the consequences of the community's already-established beliefs about literacy instruction than they are in changing those beliefs. In all their logical splendor, these print documents address—but have little transformative effect upon—the university audience's deeply held premises.

I believe we make a mistake, therefore, when we WPAs try to convey our disciplinary visions of literacy instruction solely by means of reasoned arguments. In well-established disciplinary analyses (see, for example, Clark), that mistake can be categorized as a gesture of masculinist ideology. When we rely solely on *logos*, we participate in a discipline- (and for that matter, academy-) wide prejudice against *pathos*. Micciche invokes Lynn Worsham's charge that even critical pedagogy excludes the emotional from its purview. "By doing so," says Micciche, "critical pedagogies unwittingly end up reinforcing binaries between emotional and rational discourse that serve to feminize emotion, constructing it as an 'irrational' discourse and so an unworthy one for the practice of theory" (438). Given the traditional subordination of pathos, we should hardly be surprised that WPAs have replicated the *logos-pathos* binary and have striven to change their institutions' beliefs about the nature of writing and writing instruction exclusively through the agency of *logos*. We want to win our battles; we recognize that deploying *pathos* as evidence will reduce the credibility of our arguments; and so, inescapably, we

must turn to *logos*, notwithstanding whatever ideological qualms we may have about the masculinist privileging of *logos*. Academic business just isn't conducted on the basis of emotionally oriented evidence.

In reaching such conclusions, we fail to differentiate the deployment of evidence for an argument from the development of beliefs on which arguments are based. *Logos*-devotion is not only ideologically questionable, but it is instrumentally unsound. Relying solely on *logos* may make us *sound* like our colleagues in all those other disciplines, but it also keeps us subordinate to them because it prevents us from actually aligning the members of those disciplines with the projects we wish to pursue. *We will never persuade anybody through the exclusive (or perhaps even primary) use of logos*. Hence *logos*-devotion deprives writing programs of opportunities to surmount the public perceptions that depict writing programs and WPAs on a continuum that ranges from "renegade" to "failure"—roles in which we are constructed as having refused or failed to accomplish the literacy agenda set by our colleagues, our administrators, our public, but not ourselves.

With the new technologies, moreover, the hegemony of *logos* is beginning to crack. Reasoned argument is no longer *all* we're teaching in our classes; we're also teaching multimedia rhetoric,[3] which does not operate in the reasoned, linear, logical ways that traditional humanism has represented as the only ethical form of argument. Instead, multimedia rhetoric speaks to the emotions. Richard Buchanan explains it this way: "Pathos for the rhetorician is the strand of argument that appeals to the feelings and social circumstances of the audience. It is quite similar for the designer, who seeks to incorporate features that appeal to specific groups of individuals" (195).

I am therefore advocating the persuasive power of multimedia rhetoric as an effective response to the WPA's perennial problem of public demands for "grammar," "basics," or whatever term is at the moment marking the current-traditionalism that persists in public notions of rhetoric. The multimedia rhetoric that I describe here is primarily and fundamentally visual, hence emotional, hence able to reach to the most fundamental level of belief, to the premises on which reasoned arguments are based.

Multimedia Rhetoric: A Conversion Narrative

This principle became vivid in my writing program in September 2001, when our dean invited us to do a one-hour presentation to the college's Board of Visitors, an influential alumni group involved in fundraising for the college. As we planned our presentation, we considered the possibility of having a single speaker address the group; or several speakers; maybe using handouts; perhaps mounting some poster presentations—the usual suspects. But we wanted to *reach* these people. We wanted to fire their imaginations. So we

decided that, as program director and department chair (ours is a freestanding writing program that functions as an academic department), I would do a ten-minute introduction, outlining the work of the writing program, and that we would then have three stations in the room, each with a computer running a video presentation of one aspect of the writing program's work. Human beings involved in that work would be at each station, talking, answering questions, schmoozing. Instead of handouts, we would have glossy one-page white papers.

The three areas of the writing program's work that we chose to highlight were technology, the writing center, and writing across the curriculum. We knew that these were aspects that our dean was particularly interested in, and we believed that these were aspects that were readily fundable.

We had only two weeks in which to prepare our presentation. In those two weeks, a team of draftees, volunteers, and mercenaries, led by X, Y, and Z, put together the three videos and whitepapers. Each of the videos consists of a series of clips ranging in length from 15 to 70 seconds. The video occupies only part of the screen. Under it is a caption providing the speaker's name and role ("Director of the Writing Center"; "Instructor"). In one corner of the screen is a caption identifying the topic of the whole video ("The Writing Center"). In another corner of some frames is a caption identifying a major point that the speaker is making ("Mission: To support student writing across and beyond the university"). At a few strategic junctures, slides of statistics (*logos*)—e.g., the demographics of students using the writing center—are inserted (see Figure 1).

The videos were shot in our real setting: our offices and classrooms, the writing center, the campus just outside our building. They are unrehearsed and unscripted: we did, of course, choose people who we believed would say the sorts of things we would want to include on the video, and we did an enormous amount of cutting, so that 20 minutes of raw footage becomes 30 seconds in the presentation. But we did not tell people what to say, and in fact some of the perspectives on the video are not fully in agreement with each other. These are real people speaking their real minds on topics they are involved in and care about.

We also used almost no background music. On one of the CD-ROMs, we used two clips borrowed from another unit in our university. When the presentation reached these clips, some of our audience laughed—because, we believe, these clips were so patently orchestrated for rhetorical effect—in contrast to the much more authentic footage that dominated the presentations. Although we have since invested in some very basic lighting equipment, at that time we had none, so some of our indoor shots are poorly illuminated. Because it was unrehearsed, unscripted, shot in authentic settings
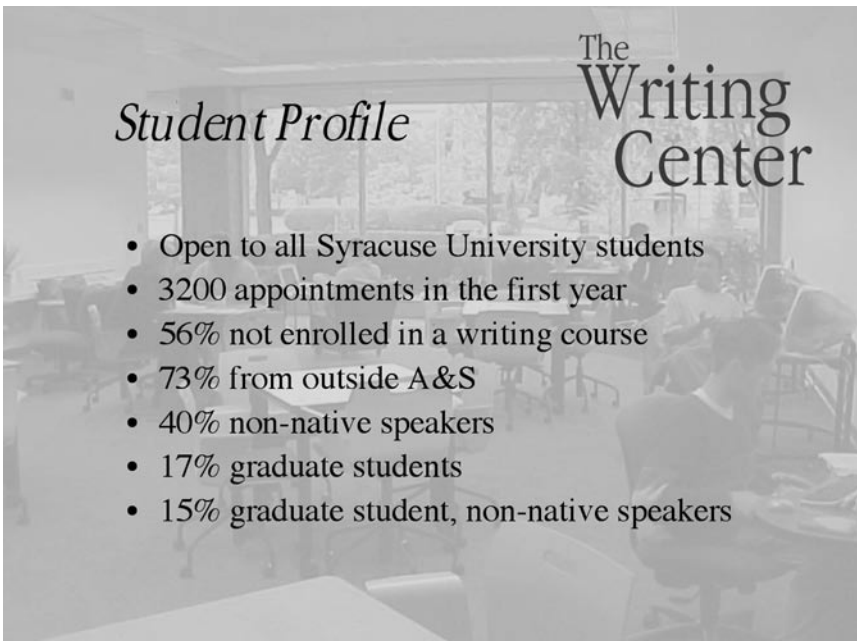
Figure 1. Student Profiles

that are not always well-lit, and free of background music, the video that we produced for the project seemed much more authentic and therefore went beyond merely "selling" our immediate agenda (fund-raising). Our video went much deeper: it affected beliefs.

Most of the clips depict program teachers and administrators talking about their work. In some clips, peer tutors talk about what they do. A few show students in writing classes. By far the most riveting is the sequence featuring Rose Almonte, a native-Spanish-speaking English major who habitually works on her papers with a writing center tutor (see Figure 2). On a variety of occasions, over and over, I have seen this principle in action: people—students, teachers, and administrators—are most interested in and most persuaded by students' voices.

The reception of our one-hour presentation to the Board of Visitors was overwhelming. After my ten-minute introduction, we invited the alumni to move from station to station, pursuing their own interests. Some went to all three stations; others settled at one and stayed there for the remaining 45 minutes, talking with the writing program representatives, watching the video, and talking with other alumni at that station. We gave each of them a folder with the glossy white papers on the writing center, technology, and writing across the curriculum. And each folder contained a CD-ROM with copies of the PowerPoint videos.

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The Writing Center

Rose Almonte
Dual Major, English and IST
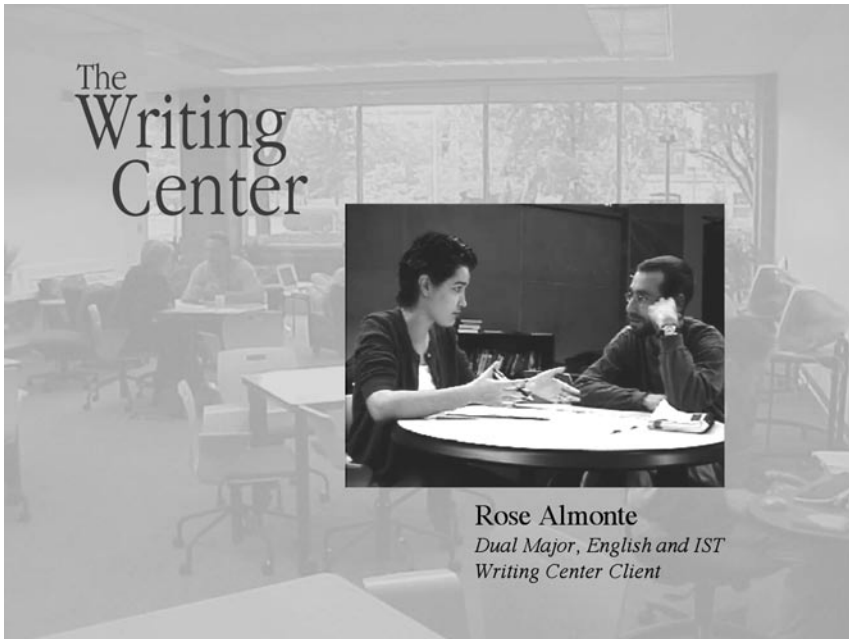*Writing Center Client*

Figure 2. Featuring Student Voices

Significantly, the associate deans of our college were at the presentation, too. They were remarkably enthusiastic. Afterwards they told us that this was one of the best presentations the Board of Visitors had ever had: it had involved them in an active way in the presentation. More important, the deans said things such as, "Now I understand what your program is doing." These were our *deans*! These were the people who'd been recipients of years of documents—annual reports, proposals, memoranda. They'd been in innumerable meetings with directors of the writing program. But it took three five-minute videos to make them feel that they *understood* the writing program.

As our dean warned us in advance, it will be some time before we will know whether our presentation to the Board of Visitors will result in outside funding for the writing program. But the unanticipated benefits of our presentation were immediate. Not only did we affect our deans' understanding of our work, but they also asked that we make copies of the white papers and CD-ROMs for others in the university. We were asked to repeat the presentation for a faculty teaching circle. The director of our Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning remarked that he'd like our staff to teach his staff how to prepare such effective videos.

Now, our Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning is a technologically savvy group of people who do lots of video. At first we marveled that we might have anything to teach them. Then we realized that what the writing program folks have that others might not is highly developed rhetorical skills. As we worked on our video we knew, for example, that we should avoid overpackaging our presentation. The people talking were unrehearsed and did not speak from a script. There was no background music. No one was doing a hard sell. Sometimes the camera jumped, the lighting was far from perfect, the peer consultants weren't attired exactly as I might have liked, and sometimes the sound wasn't the greatest, either. The video was, in other words, *genuine*. We had, in Richard Buchanan's words, approached the issue of design from a rhetorical perspective (194), instead of from the *logos* of dialectic or from a sales-and-marketing perspective.

And the result is that we have found a way of affecting people's assumptions about the teaching of writing. To return to the tasks that Andrea Lunsford and Doug Downs articulated: how can WPAs affect others' notions of the writing program? My answer is, "In many ways." We can conduct writing across the curriculum workshops; we can sponsor colloquia; we can join committees and clubs; we can produce newsletters. These are all tried-and-true, valuable methods of spreading the Writing Program Word near and far. Yet we're still rasslin' with a whole cadre of Dean Fishes. Hence my recommendation that we add multimedia rhetoric to the mix. It will not "win" the debate, but it will give us a more persuasive voice in it.

Our Board of Visitors presentation was above all visual. The videos did make some explicit arguments, but their biggest argument—that writing program work far exceeds notions of student obedience to standards of correctness and that it *should* exceed them—was never stated. Instead, the videos inexorably used emotion, metaphor, and association that reached viewers' *assumptions*—their premises—about literacy instruction. This multimedia rhetoric sets aside the Cartesian rationality that Ernesto Grassi rejects, offering in its place a rhetoric of the bodies of the writing program, an embodied, hence emotional, hence effective rhetoric to which our audience could connect and in which it could *believe*. Our intended audience for the presentation was the alumni on the Board of Visitors. Our bonus audience was our associate deans: responsible, experienced administrators who know the writing program well and have paid careful attention to its *logos* over the years, yet whose appreciation of the writing program was substantially improved by the three five-minute videos.

Multimedia Rhetoric: A Prospectus

This is no easy proposal I'm making. How many WPAs know how to produce digitized video? I certainly don't. When I asked that question of WPAs assembled at the 2002 WPA conference in Park City, Utah, no hands went up, and afterwards, a couple of the most technologically adept WPAs in the audience confided that they could not single-handedly undertake such a task. The three videos produced in our program resulted from a highly collaborative effort led by X, the technology manager in my program; by Y, a faculty member specializing in writing and technology, information architecture, and humanistic informatics; and by Z, an advanced doctoral student writing a dissertation on technology in writing program administration. They were significantly assisted by many others in the program. Producing the three videos consumed well over one hundred work hours. Solving the problems of the circulation of the videos has required additional work: we used PowerPoint for the presentation to the Board of Visitors but have found it quirky when transported via CD-ROM to other machines. For my presentation at the 2002 WPA conference, we tried burning a DVD but found that, inexplicably, the DVD would only play on a machine that itself had a DVD burner. So in Utah I showed it in a QuickTime movie. The resolution in the image was not the greatest, and we also had problems with the sound levels.

In short, multimedia rhetoric is difficult, and it requires collaborative effort. It's not that the WPA must know how to "do it" herself; it's that she must be able to envision the project and lead the effort to accomplish it. She has to hire the people who can and will want to participate. She has to create or recognize the *kairos* for it—or listen to those who do. Most of all, she has to deploy program resources (money, equipment, time, and acclaim) to make it happen.

If we WPAs are going to be in a position to participate fully in the crucial conversations about our own curricula, helping our colleagues understand what it is our programs do and why it is valuable, we need new tools. We need to sell our own vision of our programs, so that those visions become part of the university's discussions about the goals of and possibilities for writing instruction. Hence I am advocating multimedia rhetoric, a rhetoric that works in the realm of *pathos* rather than *logos*, a rhetoric that can reach and affect the very premises that the academic public holds about the true mission of writing programs.

Is our life at Some University radically different because of the Board of Visitors videos? No, it is not. The literacy arguments already underway will probably play themselves out in the already-established terms on which the too-familiar arguments draw. I know of no ways in which multimedia

rhetoric can be deployed as evidence for an already-established argument; its emotional appeals would be rejected as inappropriate to the task. Videos like ours are instead useful in diffuse, nondirective ways: they can change the premises on which members of the academy argue about the work of the writing program, *before a specific argument gets underway*. Once one of those arguments is launched, multimedia rhetoric is an inappropriate way to advance evidence. Argument in academic culture works on *logos*.

So I am not proposing multimedia rhetoric as a solution to the public relations problems of WPAs; rather, I am proposing it as an effective means of grounding a dialectic about writing at one's institution. Those who have seen our videos are now walking around with alternative or expanded ideas about of writing instruction. Visual media reach people at the level of fundamental belief; having done that, the writing program administrator is better positioned to engage in the subsequent dialectic of annual reports, memoranda, committee meetings, curriculum proposals, and all the other well-articulated instruments for exerting agency in our institutions. Then as new arguments arise, they may proceed from premises about literacy instruction that are less dominated by visions of sentence-level drills and assessments.

Notes

[1] Underlying this statement is my assumption that WPAs actually want to change public perceptions of writing instruction; that they are not the dupes of a crass higher administration. That assumption is not universally shared. Writing in 2001, Sharon Crowley offers an insulting stereotype of WPAs: "These folks have followed the money. They give deans and taxpayers what they want: clarity, brevity, sincerity. They have no truck with invention, allusive styles, and most certainly do not contemplate any such nonsense as a critical relation to grammar" ("Judith" 166). I can only regard Crowley's remark as a deliberate use of unsupported generalization for the purpose of rallying what she must believe is an uncritical audience of compositionists to her abolitionist cause. Beyond invoking James Sledd's "boss compositionist" label for WPAs, Crowley offers no evidence for her generalization. (The following year, though, in "How the Professional Lives of WPAs Would Change If FYC Were Elective," she offers WPAs a means of redemption in their fall from disciplinary grace: they can abolish first-year composition and thereby cleanse their souls.) Nor can I supply any evidence from my own experience. While I am well aware that my work as WPA involves me in coalition-building, dialectic negotiations, and compromises, and while I am experienced in coming to solutions that do not completely cohere with my own convictions about literacy, I am unaware that I have myself ever practiced writing program administration in the way that Crowley describes, nor am I acquainted with any colleagues in the Council of Writing Program Administrators who have. So before I can take her assertions seriously

and place WPAs in the "outside" of belief-systems about writing instruction, I must await some evidence from Crowley.

  [2] *Stakeholders* might seem the more predictable term here. I choose *powerbrokers* to mark the difference between those who do and do not directly participate in the work of the writing program. Students and teachers are stakeholders; purse-string-holding administrators, however much they may care about and support the writing program, are powerbrokers. They control the working conditions of the writing program but do not themselves participate in the work.

  [3] Douglas Hesse points out that this expanded notion of the work of writing programs has surfaced as one alternative to abolitionist arguments (122).

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