

AFTERWORD.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

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Graduate students taught roughly a quarter of the FYC courses in the departments Anne Gere surveyed in 2009, and 75% of those were appointed by English Departments (which still comes to about 10,000 sections). Each fall, some large percentage of those sections is taught by the new TAs with whom this collection is concerned and whose undergraduate degrees – unlike TAs in, say, biology, history, or engineering – are largely unrelated to the subject they have been assigned to teach. This curious situation is exacerbated because, unlike their biology, history, or engineering colleagues, these TAs are not “assisting” a faculty member who *is* an expert in the field; they are the instructor of record. Yet their lack of content-knowledge about writing is usually occluded from their students and themselves by mutual, if tacit, agreement on a cultural mandate to defend prestige varieties of English, their own usually unchallenged identity as a “good school writer,” and their understandably intense need to legitimate their unearned authority (in this volume, see esp. Lugg; Mobley Finn).

As a thought-experiment on “the accidents of institutional history” that deposit such teachers into such classrooms, imagine a primary school student whose reading habits gave them a precocious vocabulary or a willingness to experiment with figurative language, for which they are rewarded by their overworked ELA teachers as “good at English” and tracked for an AP curriculum that fetishizes swift on-demand production of superficially fluent prose (Phelps 313). Even a middling AP score would be sufficient to catapult this student past first-year composition and into the English major, in which persist assumptions that “the history of ‘literature’ by definition must be told as the history of authorship,” that said authors are “imagined as in control of language,” and their works are to be discussed as if they had been “purposefully engaged in self-conscious artistic and public documentation of their ‘thought’” (S. Miller 27). Given writing studies’ current distance from those assumptions, it’s difficult to imagine a *less* suitable candidate to staff one of these 10,000 sections of composition.

I should talk. After all, back in Fall of 1996 I was one of those candidates myself, and almost certainly you were (or are) one, too. Offered two sections of FYC some instructor had abandoned at the last moment, I called the WPA on a payphone in the neighborhood I’d just moved to, who asked if I was OK with

the textbook this instructor had already ordered or wanted something else. (*How do you go about selecting a textbook? Was there a shelf of them or something I could look at? But how would I know a "better" one if I saw it?*) "No, no," I said, "I'm sure what she ordered is fine." I got through that semester just as Cole reports doing (Yancey et al, this volume), cobbling together an approximate impersonation of former teachers, selecting readings I thought would be provocative, preparing bracing lectures on "critical thinking" and having students write papers on topics of their choosing, on which I reiterated—often word-for-word—comments written on my papers when I took composition at a different institution six years previously. I simply did not know what else to do.

Which didn't stop me from confidently doing what I thought I was *supposed* to do. I castigated bullshit, struck out overwriting, demanded certainty where I sensed waffling, and indignantly corrected spliced commas. I didn't even *know* that I didn't know what I was doing. Students loved it (or claimed to—I was probably what they'd been prepared to expect of a college composition teacher); I even got a teaching award for it. So I recognize the choices confronting teachers like "Ava," "Michelle," "Lily" and "Joseph" and the reasoning they produce when asked about them. But wait—1996 was more than 25 *years* ago. What's going on here?

What's going on is that most of the room we need to get together, discuss findings, design and test curriculum, compare notes, develop scaled-up inter-institutional and longitudinal studies—that is, most of the room we need to develop a coherent subdiscipline of WPE—is arrogated by a sleeping elephant. Although there are risks to waking it, we should also count the risks to our students, to our careers, and to WPE of continuing to step gingerly around it. I'll kick each of its legs in turn: institutional history, personal memory, recruitment, and method.

INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

The intergenerational contradiction that defines our working conditions is well documented by our field's historians. Very briefly, once the care of undergraduates' writing was lodged with departments busy seeking their own disciplinary identity in the formation of a national canon after the US Civil War (see T. Miller), the compromise hardened into *détente*: they (literature) provide us (composition) with teachers seeking graduate study of literature; we (composition) provide them (literature) with the means to a graduate program. If no reader of this collection needs the inequities of this codependency rehearsed, it's striking how well we sustain the terms of our great-great-grandfathers' bargain.

De Piero and Johnson (this volume), for example, rightly critique the limitations of the "nuts and bolts" practicum that new TAs continue to believe they want (see also Anglesey, this volume; Johnson), one that helps TAs "get through"

their teaching without troubling them unduly with theoretical infrastructure. Robert Hunting could not agree with that mode more: firmly making a case for a noncredit-bearing “training” course in 1951, Hunting’s first curricular principle was that the “amount of work demanded by this training course should not seriously interfere with the normal pursuit of graduate studies. Those studies should, still, come first” (5). It was Hunting himself who hired the first WPA at my institution in 1972, who fought doggedly for decades to overturn his principle: first securing the one-hour practicum an actual course number and title, then graduation credit, then a grade, then an additional two hours – just like any other seminar. And even today, the voices of certain of my colleagues – unborn when Hunting wrote those words but now nearing retirement – drift down the hall, assuring our students that their fiction or their scholarship “comes first.”

Only a few chapters acknowledge this problem. Yancey et al. (this volume) point out that some department cultures “push against the importance of writing instruction” and Wooten admits that unhappiness in teaching is more a problem of “working conditions [and] graduate school conditions” than TA failure (this volume). Leave it to TA “Beth” to put it bluntly: “it’s assumed because you’re an English major you can teach kids how to read and write. . . . And it’s not really what they want to do. They really want to be teaching Chaucer or something” (Warwick, this volume). Undergraduate and graduate coursework in English literature is not exactly characterized by processual or contextualist approaches to nonliterary writing, and “English education”—as Thomas Miller documents—was long ago exiled to an entirely different college. Given the inevitability of mimesis as TAs try to figure out how to embody a teacher (see Wooten, this volume), conflicts are inevitable.

Of course, I am not saying that there are no excellent or inspiring teachers of literature, only that pedagogy *itself* is seldom a subject of study, even—bizarrely—when many of those “in English” imagine themselves to be English teachers or professors someday. So TAs continue to ask, reasonably enough, “Are they really going to let me do this?” As WPE professionals, it’s our job to ask the substrate question: “who is this ‘they’ that allows this to happen?” It is routinely asserted that English majors are “good readers” (but of what and to what ends?) or that they “care about the language” (but what does it mean to care about it and what do you authorize yourself to do as a demonstration of your caring?).

With those questions unanswered, the present sorry state of affairs—in which an attentive FYC student in a WAW or TFT curriculum could by the end of the semester have as much declarative knowledge about writing studies as her instructor—continues. And those contradictions breed others: leaving us providing what several contributors rightly criticize as “one-shot” orientations even as we disavow lectures as the best way to deliver information, or insisting

that writing studies is a subject of study while allowing anyone with a BA in an unrelated field access to their own classroom to teach it in.

Action Item: Let's make a concerted effort to track down writing studies undergraduate majors who have accepted a TAship in FYC. Since presumably they don't have to struggle to reconcile concepts and content simultaneously, do they experience practica differently? Is their learning curve shallower? Are they less anxious? Better teachers?

PERSONAL MEMORY

Yancey et al. usefully call this “the prior”; I bring it our attention not to join many of these authors in reminding us that TAs are not “blank slates” but rather to wonder that we in WPE still cannot seem to get our heads around the fact that new TAs don't leave their pasts behind when they take up work in a FYC program. Nearly *every single* author in this volume has had to assert, rather than presuppose, that new TAs “have histories they bring with them” (Warwick, this volume); that graduate students bring their own prior knowledge about writing to their FYC training, (De Piero and Johnson); or that non-expert college instructors will likely bring their own notions of how to teach to their new positions (Anglesey).

This collection contains some excellent empirically grounded advice on making the best use of TAs' “prior”: for example, Anglesey's remediation of TAs' listening skills so that they can better hear their students' and their own positionalities, or Gramer's approach to leveraging TAs' “self-understandings” for “negotiating the lived differences and overlaps of programs and learner needs”. But what if much of what is on TAs' “slates” is in fact (and *pace* Stenberg) “wrongly inscribed” with beliefs that obstruct their ability to teach in ways consistent with what we know in writing studies, even among those eager to adopt new practices? They, as Bourdieu would say, “know confusedly” (130) that students need grammar instruction to write or even think clearly, that respect for their authority is the most salient factor in determining the ‘success’ of their classes, and that their chief limitation apart from their anxieties about their authority is their inability to offer such instruction in grammar. Read cynically, how much of the extraordinary flowering of talented, compassionate, and innovative work in WPE simply sustains the structural impossibility that keeps landing would-be literary critics and novelists in our teaching corps? Are we making a virtue of the necessity of graduate students' liminal positions (e.g., hoping that their double-binds will somehow give them special insights into disciplinary formation or lend them extra compassion for their similarly awkwardly positioned students)? How do we hasten the day in which the *limen* on which new TAs are positioned

is between “new to teaching” and “being a teacher,” rather than “new to teaching” and “new to the subject matter”?

Action Item: We face demands to provide new TAs with “safety,” “comfort,” “structure” and to defuse life-or-death rhetorics of “survival.” We need to figure out which parts of these demands are just a matter of providing the humane and responsive space any employer should provide for any new employee to grow into any new job, and which stem from the specific material condition of TAs’ under- or counter-preparation for teaching in writing studies.

RECRUITMENT

Take another look at Macauley’s and Micciche’s “Introduction” and “Foreword,” respectively. You won’t find a better synthetic overview of WPE research or a more vividly rendered account of the experience and uses of liminality anywhere. As we apply these and other readings to our local contexts, let’s always try to remember that our local phenomena of liminality are not natural and inevitable but rather *produced* in the specific processes by which our departments transform candidates from “accepted graduate student” to “teaching assistant”—processes that *may not even include the WPA*. At some point, a graduate admissions committee considered a file of transcripts, letters of recommendation, GRE scores, writing samples, personal statements, etc. to make an informed guess about an abstraction—let’s call it “readiness to do graduate work with us.” A positive appraisal on that abstraction is too-often assumed to also satisfy a very different abstraction: “able to teach composition in our writing program.” How, specifically, is it that the ability to produce adequate academic writing predicts the ability to adequately teach academic writing? Candidates, understandably delighted to have their study subsidized, won’t question that assumption until they’re already teaching, by which point it’s too late.

We must force this question on their and their students’ behalf. There is plenty in this collection that helps us accommodate the consequences of this conflation, but I can’t find anything that helps us challenge this assumption. WPE cannot progress unless and until we interfere with the alchemical system of paperwork that turns “prospective graduate students” into “prospective teaching assistants.”

Action Item: To ensure that the writing program is part of the second decision, WPAs need to disentangle the “admit” decision from the “fund” decision. They can do this by developing separate materials to help rank candidates for TAship. Those materials should be *onerous* as departmental political will permits (an essay, a set of papers to respond to, a learning philosophy) and program-*specific* as possible (a response to an essential piece of scholarship that underpins program assumptions, an attempt to apply local outcomes to a piece of student writing,

etc.). Any progress is a win for WPE—an incremental contribution to recognizing it as its own entity with its own knowledge and set of practices, and an important lesson for candidates whether they are admitted or not or accept their funding or not: programs differ and composition is not composition is not composition.

METHOD

Although we have not quite answered Estrem and Reid’s call for “large-scale, longer-term research on the effects of WPE on TAs,” this collection makes substantial headway on their request for “comparative studies,” and gratifyingly, most are “data-based analysis” (238, 239). De Piero and Johnson in particular go beyond the local by offering us a considered construct-model that we can test in other sites (this volume). Yet material conditions conspire against our work and, cumulatively, against the emergence of WPE itself. These are more observations than action items, but they may help define the methodological challenges. The bewildering complexities of local conditions inhibit the development of robust abstractions we could put toward inter-institutional causal theories. The nature of working with a steady state of inexperience (endless pedagogical remediation and crisis-management) makes it hard to consolidate findings even year-to-year. Because little can be assumed about the knowledge that new TAs bring with them (other than that it will be an important variable in their development), hypothesis-testing remains a distant dream.

State-of-the-art is still primarily loosely coded convenience samples. It is not yet routine in WPE research to provide tables of code, percentages of transcript coverage, sample coding protocols, or resolution of boundary cases, etc. This condition makes it difficult to compile, let alone aggregate, the data we do have. Home departments viscerally disinclined to discuss composition, pedagogy, or assessment inhibit WPE from securing a critical mass of colleagues, funding, or even a space in the curriculum.

It should be clear by now that if all this kicking is to result in much more than a lazy flap of the elephant’s ear, we should focus on the last point. That will mean buckling down for the very longest and least promising haul, the one with the least certain rewards and the most likelihood of benefitting programs other than our own. (In other words, the perfect job for a WPA.)

I’m speaking of changing the English major. I wrote the outcomes for my WPE course as threshold concepts for composition *instructors* (that is, as conceptual *limens* that ENG 101 students don’t themselves need to cross, but that they need their *instructors* to have crossed in order to be assured of the best feedback, class activities, assignment sequencing, and so on). They are:

1. The “standard” is epiphenomenal and has no ontological existence; it is a perception or a feeling that arises from language users’ interactions with other language users and from their encounters with and beliefs about linguistic variation. (These perceptions and beliefs contribute to ongoing—if always ultimately futile—attempts to “standardize” language practices.)
 - Corollary 1: Institutional/cultural formations persist for reasons other than utility.
 - Corollary 2: “Standards” change and so are *changeable*; language users and language teachers can (and should) take an active role in shifting language practices to produce more just and equitable social relations.
2. Writing, like language itself, is culturally and materially mediated.
 - Corollary 1: Although some privileges seem broadly to correspond with fluency in certain privileged discourse patterns, there is nothing *necessarily* or *inevitably* liberatory or empowering about particular styles or genres or registers.
 - Corollary 2: Writing practices, conventions, and routines have consequences for identity (de)formation.
 - Corollary 3: Any utterance or inscription (a classroom pronouncement or exchange, a comment on student text, a conversation in conference) becomes part of complex ecologies of affect, power, expectations, and conventions where individual variables are difficult to isolate and simple cause-and-effect theories have little explanatory or predictive power.

It’s not necessary to agree that these are the most important threshold concepts for composition teachers. But even so, just imagine for a moment a WPE seminar in which the instructor *could simply take for granted that the new instructors know these things*. That far exceeds what is dreamt of in our current best-case scenarios (readiness to entertain these concepts, ability to eventually reconcile these concepts with “the prior”); these new TAs have already read about these concepts, written seminar papers about them, done fieldwork to test and apply them and now are ready to extend them pedagogically.

Now just *imagine* the teaching we could do.

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