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DEVELOPMENTAL ADMINISTRATION

A Pragmatic Theory of Evolution in Basic Writing

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Q: Dr. Phud, how many college professors does it take to change a light bulb?

A: What? Change?!?

CONTEXTS FOR CHANGE IN BASIC WRITING

The college is an unusual organization, a hybrid of business and charity, partly responsive to economic forces and partly insulated from them. Businesses that look only at profits change in response to what people are buying, striving to evolve swiftly in response to changing economic realities. Colleges, by contrast, answer in part to a noneconomic call to enhance human knowledge and wisdom—a difficult call that often goes against the economic grain. Thus, academe comes honestly by the notoriously balky nature of academic change. What other organizations seek to do without even thinking, we must deliberate. We maintain cumbersome processes for making curricular decisions, in part for suspect reasons like simply protecting turf, but mainly to make complex, conscious decisions about balancing economic and noneconomic interests.

Nevertheless, academe has seen a steady erosion of its ability to translate the call to wisdom into operating capital. As a result, it needs quicker, leaner methods of change that can respond more quickly to economic forces. Yet efforts to become more “market-driven” raise new problems. First, we have to question the normal demand for more of everything. We cannot insist on the special privileges of moral capital on the one hand and act like a typical business, questing unreflectively for eternal growth, when that moral capital falters. We can certainly continue to argue for the funding of the call to wisdom; but so long as that argument is losing ground, we have some obligation to consider whether colleges should simply shrink and do less. Second, shifts in the market economy typically affect the whole of academic institutions, with any specific courses largely insulated from direct economic impact. We are

unlikely to determine whether English 100 produces any net economic gains for anyone, and even less likely to determine whether changes in its curriculum might also change its economic impact. Instead, the market mostly “buys” whole degree programs based on assumed educational philosophies, then trusts the academic bureaucracy to maintain a curriculum consistent with the assumptions. The purchasing decision, further, is a loose and largely uncoordinated collaboration among students, parents, alumni, foundations, and governments. Thus, generally colleges must “sell” philosophies more than courses, and these philosophies need a broad and varied appeal. Much as college faculty seem to rue the increasing control of admissions personnel over curriculum, such personnel probably are the right rhetorical agents to translate the minutia of our curricular decisions into broad appeals to our constituencies. In turn, faculty must market our philosophies to the ever-expanding numbers of administrative officers on campus.

I have discussed elsewhere how composition programs as a whole might adopt similar lines of thinking in order to “market” whole composition programs (Rhodes, 2000). In brief, I urged that we should emphasize the rhetorical aspect of our curriculum, persuading others that we are the right people to teach much of what first-year experience courses aim to do—if with a “writing-intensive” spin. This plan entails very openly denying our ability to deliver perfectly correct usage. We would focus instead on aspects of writing that we can improve in ways that we can prove more readily (such as invention, fluency, revision, organizational purpose, and rhetorical awareness). We could simultaneously generate the “invention of the university” that both Bartholomae (1985) and any admissions staff want for first-year college students. In this chapter, I want to focus more narrowly on a more particular philosophy that basic writing programs can “sell” to their constituencies. American pragmatist philosophy, as founded by C. S. Peirce but urged upon composition most astutely by Ann Berthoff and her followers, offers an internally consistent way to think about our developmental writing curricula and their marketing. I will discuss how this philosophy has influenced decisions and changes in a basic writing program at a four-year college with an open admissions policy.

Bound up in curricular processes normally designed to retard changes, basic writing usually suffers further from being one of the few subjects in which nearly everyone has a stake, so that several layers of administrators often feel empowered to make decisions about it. As a site of complicated struggle, basic writing can be unusually difficult to

change in small increments, and unusually subject to large-scale make-overs. It is highly likely that the current basic writing program at your school was put in place as part of a revolution of some kind, retaining in part the detritus of earlier revolutions. It can seem at times that no method can align all the stars and planets in such a way that any gradual improvement is possible. Further, writing professionals can't always instigate the revolutions they want, nor guide the results once things get going. Yet exactly because so many large, external forces have stakes in basic writing, administrators of these programs can find ways to play off the overlapping power fields to generate changes in their programs. Administrators of developmental writing programs can set in motion processes of gradual evolution by being alert to the different goals of the different constituencies, and by giving up any false ideal of seeing the program as an independent and internally consistent whole of its own. This quieter evolutionary growth is more amenable to being shaped by writing professionals as well. What is needed is the right rhetorical philosophy.

PRAGMATISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF ACADEMIC EVOLUTION

To manage administrative work's potential for cognitive dissonance, WPAs need to theorize such work as philosophical pragmatism in action, seeing the array of internal and external forces as, in Donald Davidson's potent term, "passing theories" (Kent 1993)—models of coherence that resist final synthesis and resolution, but remain temporarily useful nonetheless. Unlike visions of sheer postmodern play, pragmatism promotes a loose centering by focusing administrators on provisionally welcome results, managing the flux around the program by asking and answering key questions about the health of the program.

While this focus on "results" might smell of positivist empiricism to many a postmodern nose, there is a genuine difference between pragmatism and positivism—a difference that, with unfortunate results in our disciplinary discussions, is more difficult to see without looking through a pragmatist lens. As Ann Berthoff explains best for composition scholars, pragmatism insists that a mediating third position is always invoked by any attempted duality (1981, 41–47; 1989, 1–5). There are never only two choices, despite the natural temptation to see less orderly fields of choice in terms of poles. Simply remembering that any duality is always viewed from some perspective always gives us a third way to see a problem—as when, for instance, we note that subjectivity and objectivity are simply available methods by which to decide what we will assume to

be true for purposes of taking action. C. S. Peirce took perhaps obsessive pains to demonstrate that this interpretive triangulation (at least!) of positions as to any idea is virtually a metaphysical necessity, but for our purposes it is enough to note that one need not be either a positivist or a postmodernist, or even just the occupant of some position along a line graphing all possible positions between the poles of positivism and postmodernism. Instead we may choose places in an entire field of attitudes toward reality. A pragmatist pays heed to the durability of social conventions that a deconstructionist might be inclined to dismiss as “not real, but merely conventional”—as if that distinction made a large difference. Social conventions for interpreting reality nevertheless *persist*, regardless of our wishes about them, and so are often better treated as if “real,” regardless of our philosophies about them. The ability to demonstrate “results,” and with “numbers” when possible, cannot merely be dismissed by any effective rhetoric of administrative change—and Peirce doggedly called pragmatism itself fundamentally a rhetoric (1868).

Of course, a pragmatist administrator will not forget that the fundamental goal is to design a meaningful program, and that none of the “numbers” (or even the more general results) have truly fundamental significance. We should not fool ourselves into believing that one isolated measure has improved and therefore things are better. Yet any effective administrator must work with awareness that single measures will be interpreted for better or worse by others, and some single measures may occupy highly privileged places in the “passing theories” of others who have the power to influence our programs.

Still, I do not mean to imply that what I am calling “pragmatism” as a philosophy simply lapses into “pragmatism” in its most cynical sense. Grounding success in visible results rather than in “theoretical correctness” runs counter to trends that are popular in WPA scholarship. Yet it is not only more responsible to our students but also more likely to get us where we need to go, even theoretically speaking. If our theories are worth having, then they should eventually produce better results when they are applied. If we regard our theories as good simply because they are ours, produced by our discourse community, we design a circular logic that is easily sniffed out as merely self-serving. If our belief alone is the measure of reality, we can believe anything we like. No role would therefore be left for investigation or thinking at all, since mere random whims would serve as well. Such circular logic is incapable of generating externally persuasive arguments for doing anything at all. As Peirce constantly stressed, having a provisional faith in a reality that proceeds

in its own ways despite our ideas about it makes sense, since otherwise there is really no point in having ideas at all (1877). If there is no Truth, there is also no point worrying about whether there is Truth—no role at all for critique, falsification, and the entire apparatus of intellectual inquiry. To avoid the opposite trap of positivism, we need only realize that truth-seeking gets somewhere, but never all the way there—better, never perfect. Using pragmatic moderation instead, we can thoughtfully consider the results that would mean the most for our programs, then envision ways in which we can at once produce those results and generate information and communications that lead others to see such results as good things.

When I turn from other philosophies to pragmatism, I turn immediately—and not accidentally—to communication. Pragmatism shares with postmodernism a healthy pluralism when it comes to using results in social interactions. That is because language, always a central concern of pragmatists, always proceeds by way of social mediation. As Davidson perhaps explained best for us under the informed questioning of Thomas Kent, pragmatism holds that language is neither a system of signs without referents nor a direct indication of reality. Instead, language relates to deeper “passing theories” of reference—always somewhat unique, always evolving, but nevertheless recognizable by those who hold “nearby” theories.

To see reality in a pragmatist way, we should imagine a graph with ranges of disparate points grouping into rough coherence around central concerns—passing theories collecting into what Peirce called “interpretants,” or broadly shared structures of meaning. While Peirce’s term “interpretant” seems rather more idealized than Davidson’s passing theories, Peirce probably meant something not much different than Davidson does, in that he often knowingly conflated the conceptual “interpretant” with an individual interpreter to get the right effect (Anderson 1995, 143). As Peirce put it, in his dauntingly formulaic way, a word or other sign “is an object which is in relation to its object on the one hand and to an interpretant on the other, in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object, corresponding to its own relationship to that object” (Colapietro 1989, 6; quoted in). Interpretants, then, are like “social constructions,” but grounded in both experiential testing and at least the possibility of underlying, universal constructs of meaning-making. As Davidson’s more poignant term “passing theory” reminds us, language users may never operate from exactly the same theories of reference, but “nearby” and frequent passings

give us a base of experience by which to interpret what is meant. Shared experiences, and here Peirce would include virtually the experience of the cosmos as part of the context, construct “interpretants,” or widely shared ways of interpretation. We do not merely pass each other; we signal and respond, developing ways to understand each other. What Peirce and Davidson offer, then, is a means to understand how it is that discourse communities construct shared meaning that works, avoiding both the positivist trap of an ultimately perfect, asocial meaning and the relativist trap of an ultimately meaningless tyranny of the socially empowered.

Unfortunately, such insights into the pliability of language and meaning are not commonly held, even among colleagues on campus. Thus, while composition administrators must not lose sight of such understanding, neither can we forget that many with whom we must communicate will assume that their interpretations are *the* interpretations of meaning and language. I have gone on this long about pragmatism and language because I believe even a simplistic pragmatism is superior to a dangerously relativistic postmodernism when it comes to understanding and influencing our more positivistic peers—and superiors. For those who desire a more thorough version of this argument cast in relatively familiar terms, Ann Berthoff’s *The Mysterious Barricades* (2000) is the single best source. In my own nutshell, composition administrators need to be aware that we are engaged in shared processes of making meanings that *by their nature* are partly lost in the translation; and yet we cannot be so smug in the superiority of our philosophy that we forget to apply it to ourselves. There are consequences to pragmatic philosophy when it comes to making changes more effectively, perhaps most importantly changes in attitudes toward ourselves. To guide evolutionary change, one must lose the “I’m OK, You’re Not” attitude that so often leads us to vilify administrators. Postmodernism superficially offers a sort of refuge of victimized subjectivity that can encourage composition administrators merely to decry the harm they see being done by more powerful administrators, maintaining an illusory purity of mind and “clean-ness” of hands by protesting without effect. To become instead an active, evolutionary pragmatic administrator is necessarily to be troubled forever by unresolved matters of conscience and complicity. That often is the cost of getting things done.

Still, a focus on action evokes Peirce’s point (1878) that clarity of meaning comes largely from clearly understanding the consequences of the actions described. To be consistent, I should start grounding this theory in a context for action: basic writing.

PRAGMATIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF BASIC WRITING

First, I hope I can make quick work of the idea that “basic” writing is always local and situational. Mainly, I will focus on problems that have more to do with the situation of basic writing than with the abilities of the students. The words “basic writing” might indeed seem like words without referents if we look basically at student abilities, such that writing pragmatically about the *pedagogy* of basic writing may be logically impossible. Nevertheless, the *situation* of basic writing programs offers several general problems that cross institutions and form the basis for coherent “passing theories” of basic writing. First, composition administrators have to be ready to say whether there should be basic writing programs in the first place; and experience teaches us that no matter how durable or strong a local commitment to basic writing might seem, that commitment can evaporate overnight. This permanent instability at the foundation of basic writing programs adds stress to other matters of commitment, such as whether basic writers should have highly qualified teachers, small class sizes, or writing centers. Further, since there is always a question whether we should permit basic writing, there is also always a question how to define those who will be either excluded from college entirely or admitted only on condition of passing basic writing. Then there is the question by what means we will decide that students have passed this requirement. By no means do I insist that a model of placement and exit testing must happen, or even that it is the best result. It is certainly possible to imagine, and even justify, permitting voluntary placement in an elective basic writing class and a voluntary decision when to leave it; still, the “basic” instability caused by the question whether there should be basic writing makes such a loose structure politically unlikely. Thus, we find instead a general model for basic writing programs that is remarkably consistent across a wide range of institutions.

This general model includes the following points:

- cheap resources—mass placement testing, lower-cost teachers and writing center directors, student tutors;
- barriers to other classes—not always barrier testing, but often restrictions like higher grade requirements for passing into “regular” composition, completion before upper standing, or simply expectations in general education classes of certain levels of competence at aspects of writing that might otherwise be irrelevant to the actual work of such classes;

- relatively little concern that the system maximizes student potential, as opposed to relatively strong concern that the system bars the gates effectively.

If all of these factors are not present at your school, you have an unusual—and possibly temporary—situation. Their prevalence indicates a deep ambivalence to basic writing. On the one hand, it would be even cheaper just to exclude such students—and to the extent the system simply milks most of them of tuition for a while before turning them away, exclusion might be genuinely kinder as well. On the other hand, both the persistence of basic writing and the passionate commitment of its adherents point to an enduring, democratic *hope* that students we would otherwise exclude can make it somehow, given half a chance.

That enduring, widely shared democratic hope is clearly a powerful force for positive change, strong enough to work against serious counterforces. Indeed, for a basic writing administrator, perhaps it is *the Force*, the one our metaphorical Jedi masters would have us trust and use—the central theory to which the broadest range of passing theories can relate. Thus, it makes sense to start a program of evolutionary, pragmatic change by seeking results that would be consistent with this hope. While different administrators might seek different ends, clearly some of the larger ones simply reverse the tendencies noted above:

- ensure that basic writing has resources equivalent to those used for similar purposes;
- replace barriers with informed choices;
- focus less on whether underprepared students might “slip through” and more on whether basic writing programs enhance their success.

The provisional goal, then, of basic writing administration might be idealized as helping students learn how to use relatively potent resources to their advantage as students, workers, and citizens. Of course such a goal warms the hearts of dedicated composition teachers, but more importantly it clearly has important corresponding goals in the “passing theories” of others on campus. Yet just as clearly there will need to be, at best, transitional stages—and most likely, compromises—along the way to this embrace of optimism. We can thus look more simply at whether our choices result in an increase or decrease in the general values of resources, choice, and development.

A CASE STUDY: RESULTS AT MISSOURI WESTERN

I had nearly an ideal test case. In my own work as an administrator of a basic writing program, I had the chance to test these ideas in fairly steady application, if for a brief time. Missouri Western State College is an open-admissions four-year school whose entering classes often have close to a majority of students who would be placed in developmental writing classes at virtually any other school, and perhaps only a literal handful of students who would escape basic writing classes at elite colleges. Its English faculty entirely embraces its role as a writing faculty. With no graduate programs, it has no temptation to justify using TAs to cover classes. Its tutoring center has a professionally qualified and active basic writing teacher assigned to a thorough paraprofessional training system for preparing undergraduate writing tutors. These tutors, as well as the student assistants who lead small-group lab sessions for basic writing, mostly come from an English Education program that strongly features informed writing pedagogy. The dean to whom I reported valued our work and understood our constraints. As a consequence, the basic writing program as I came to it was relatively robust already, and had been managed well by capable predecessors. The campus as a whole focuses on student development as its primary concern, and several well-supported offices on campus were able to assist me in studying the results of our programs. I came to Western only after having spent a few years learning the ropes and honing my philosophy of administration at another campus where managing basic writing had been a good deal easier, and where a highly effective professional colleague had managed writing placement and collaborated with me in studying the results. In sum, I was ideally positioned to aim toward ideal goals for basic writing.

Here is what I found. First, I believe pragmatist thinking can support some moves if we realize, paraphrasing Pogo, that we have met the enemy, and it is us. For example, with mostly cheap resources available, our very hopes tempt us to use as much of them as we can; but as with other cheap resources (like Big Macs), more is not always better. By cutting the associated small-group lab hours from two to one per week, I was able to raise wages for the lab assistants and seek to hire only the most committed and skillful prospects, even while reducing the average size of the groups from seven to five. If there have been any reductions in student preparation as a result, we haven't been able to find them. The administration went along with this change with little comment, and no wonder: it saved money, opened schedules, helped students feel

a bit more in charge, and softened the extent and degree of student complaints about the course.

Second, pragmatic thinking permits knowing that compromises perhaps are not as bad as they seem. I have committed the heresy of participating in a change from placement by universal timed writing (with no right to challenge the placement) to placement by English ACT scores (with a right to challenge the placement by means of a timed writing). This change could be the subject of an entire article in itself, but the most interesting result is that students overwhelmingly think it is a good thing. Our students nearly all have ACT scores already, so it is not a matter of taking an extra test. They are strongly advised that they can take an extra test if they wish; but consistently with information I had gathered and studied before the change, most of them think their ACT score is reliable enough. As a result, we have simply purged the strongly negative residual influence of having a mandatory placement put students in a basic writing class. With the time and goodwill we have saved, we have been able to improve our efforts at informing students when to challenge a lower placement—and when to self-place in a lower course. It is more than just an aside to note that the successful movement toward Directed Self-Placement (DSP) has specifically pragmatist roots (Royer and Gilles 1998).

Third, since I was able to choose losses that I could suffer, I had a stronger impact when I insisted on gains, particularly in resources. Even in times of fierce budget cuts, our basic writing courses were less likely than courses in the regular sequence to be taught by part-time adjunct instructors; and the part-time adjuncts who taught the course have stronger connections with the program and the other teachers than is true in the other composition courses. In times when the department steadily lost positions (or more often their equivalent in lost released time), upper administrators agreed to hire a full-time instructor for basic writing. When highly qualified student tutors were not available, upper administrators agreed to hire qualified adjunct teachers to run the lab sessions, despite the additional cost. While this result came mostly because of good leadership before and above me, the department consistently hired candidates with genuine professional expertise in teaching basic writing. Against the tide of budget cuts, we sustained lower percentages of class-size increases than in equivalent classes even while holding on to an ideal that all basic writing students deserved a fully qualified teacher. Basic writing classes had equal priority with other nontechnical courses for being held in computer labs.

As in most of the writing world, of course, getting to an actual study of results has been the most difficult. Still, conditions were such that I could afford to find bad news. Having done things that others found sensible, I was expected to act sensibly again, whatever the results. Collaborating openly with others, I could afford to find whatever we would find because I was largely trusted to keep seeking improvements.

Yet in the middle of that process, I decided to leave my position at Western for another opportunity. I have meant the example more as an illustration than as a measure of pragmatist theory, thinking all along that many of you will be saying “but I do that”—and rightly so. Far from seeing my own pragmatism as unique, instead I see pragmatism as more coherent with what most composition administrators find they should do—simply to put a normal set of compromises and maneuvers in a more defensible, principled, and optimistic context.

CONCLUSION: A DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

Part of why academia is so slow to change is that it is so strongly idealistic. If changes don't conform with ideals, they are discounted and ignored; and sometimes opportunities slip away. Then the weight of lost opportunities comes crashing down, a crisis occurs, and change is compelled by unreasoning forces. This pattern seems much the same whether the ideals are posited as “hard” reality or negotiated as the consensus of a strong community; either way, the ideals don't permit a great deal of innovation, of counterintuitive thinking, or of getting along well with those of other ideals. Despite the common sense that postmodernism entails freedom or play, unfettered discourse communities would determine reality, if anything, more thoroughly and pervasively than any objective could. Skeptical of both positivism and nominalism, a pragmatist administrator can accept a wider range of changes and find value in a wider range of possibilities, doing so in ways that are not only highly responsible intellectually but also more genuinely “in play” than postmodernism otherwise permits. To a pragmatist, nothing is determined (yet), either by objective reality or by social construction. While by nature academics may need to remain balky, pragmatism can at least take out Professor Phud's exclamation points and ask a simple question: Change? Then it will only take three professors to change a light bulb: one to call for proposals, one to do it, and one to peer review it.