Tools of the Trade: Occupational Metaphors in the First Decade of *WPA*

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> *The journals of an academic discipline provide a clear reflection of that discipline's past, a synchronic portrait of its current state, and a glimpse of its dreams and plans for the future.*

> —Robert J. Connors, "Journals in Composition Studies" (348)

CWPA as an organization began with a modestly proposed meeting of writing program directors at the Modern Language Association Convention in New York, December 1976. Ken Bruffee was hoping to gather a few souls to "cry in their beer and learn from each other"; he envisioned an intimate gathering, but the place was "papered with people" (Horner). Winifred Horner said the room where what would become CWPA first met was so electric it "could have lit the whole hotel." She credits that galvanizing moment with changing the lives of those present and of the WPAs who followed. What we should not forget nor overestimate is that our organization and its journal emerged essentially simultaneously. As confirmed in the first pages of *WPA* history, "The concern for those who packed the meeting halls at the Americana Hotel during the convention was great, and their desire both for a steering committee and some organ of communication was strong"; a steering committee was immediately formed and a *pro tempore* editorial board urgently brought to press the *WPA Newsletter* as a "way of sharing information about research, successes, and even failures in our field" ("Statement" 2). While admitting "it may seem a bit unusual for a newsletter to be issued before the structures within the writing group of MLA are fully established," the *Newsletter* argued simply and boldly, the "interests of writing program administrators should be represented" ("Statement" 2).

The *WPA Newsletter*, which with its seventh issue became a peer-reviewed journal known as *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, has been essential to the identity formation of writing program administrators and writing program administration. This historical sketch contemplates the first decade of *WPA*. Specifically, I contextualize the early work of the journal as the space WPAs used "to find out more about just who we are" (Bruffee, "Editorial" 4), address metaphor's role in discovering and solidifying views of self, illustrate occupation-based WPA metaphors in the early pages of this journal, and consider why these occupational metaphors are a productive entry point to WPA identity formation.

Editor Ken Bruffee established the crucial work of the publication in its early days, noting in 1979 that "we are literally creating a new field of interest, expertise, and value. This is an act of synthesis which is, in my view, of the highest importance to our work as professionals" (5). He emphasized the essential "bonding" function of WPA work and lives made manifest (3). The pages of our journal established relevance and context, providing a sense of belonging, investigating practically and theoretically WPA ways of knowing, and revealing and refining WPA structures, vocabulary, and desires. *WPA* provided a space and a means for professionals to map their work and represent themselves.

When *WPA* was not quite a decade old, Bruffee as former editor, surveyed early works in his article, "The WPA as (Journal) Writer: What the Record Reveals." Bruffee's article gave careful attention to the independent scholarly importance of *WPA*, particularly vital work in the context of its time. Many artifacts from the early 1980s attest to the ways composition itself was being questioned as a scholarly discipline (see Hartzog; Lauer); in such a context, establishing our scholarly literature as a serious object of study and documenting the "turn toward disciplinarity" itself was an important move (Lauer qtd. in Vealey and Rivers 172).

Like Robert J. Connors's 1984 *College English* article "Journals in Composition Studies," Bruffee's 1985 "The WPA as (Journal) Writer" illustrated the value of the scholarly record. Bruffee described the larger structures and desires revealed by the shape of *WPA*, categorized and analyzed patterns in the early pages, offered close textual study of the language of WPAs, and argued that this language had significance. Bruffee noticed three major categories of articles, focusing most of his review on those "that address directly or indirectly the issue of the professional identity of WPAs and of our national organization" (7). Bruffee described content features of such articles: conclusions about CWPA as an organization, illustrations of the nature and sources of WPA expertises, doubts, and certainties, as well as considerations of what we know of the larger role of the WPA. For Bruffee,

this scholarship of "professional self-understanding," was "capable of being read as a special type" and served as "a mark of considerable professional maturity" (3, 7, 8).

Bruffee's article drew special attention to the WPA discourse that "helps us tells ourselves who we are" (7). My own reading of the early pages of *WPA* suggests that a distinctive strategy used in such WPA discourse is metaphor, specifically, WPA metaphors constructed with an occupation-based vehicle: We figure our job in terms of another job. Metaphor, as I discuss below, is a particularly ripe figure for coming to new and deeper understanding of self. But WPA discourse in the early years of *WPA* may have been especially primed for metaphor given that metaphor as a conceptual strategy for advancing the field was being directly invoked in the halls of composition. The value of metaphor for the discipline was a key message of the 1977 Chair's Address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication: Richard Lloyd-Jones argued, "Metaphor crafting is the ethical badge of membership in our guild" (25). Lloyd-Jones saw metaphor as a collective way forward: "In a metaphor we assert the-thing-which-is-not, that is, we lie in order to get at knowledge and perhaps a larger truth. *One* metaphor lies, but several in concert *lead*" (25). While metaphor theorists might take issue with the concept that a metaphor at base is a lie, Lloyd-Jones was getting at the way metaphor is a kind of discovery-based artistic proof involving logos and pathos to represent ethos. He was broadly calling the body of composition to metaphor as the *WPA Newsletter* was going to press.

The early years of *WPA* also saw a boom of academic books on metaphor including the still influential George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Lakoff and Johnson argued the significance of metaphor is not just that it fosters new understanding, but that it invites potential action based on new understanding: "in getting us to try to understand how it could be true, [metaphor] makes possible a new understanding of our lives" (175). Aristotle similarly viewed metaphor as particularly educational because its $A = B$ structure forces us to hold both parts in mind and consider the ways A truly is B and what can be learned from and done with the new understanding derived from that figure.

Since the power of a metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson detailed, is in the "perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it" (158), the question is: what are the perceptions and inferences, the messages and actions invoked and sanctioned by WPA occupational metaphor in the first decade of *WPA* and beyond? Because it is the nature of metaphor to help us understand something (or part of something) we don't fully understand via something else we more certainly do

understand, WPA metaphors have the power to show us something about the WPA position, capture something of how WPAs feel in that position, and imply something about our relationships to WPA work. Consider the following examples of occupation-based WPA metaphors from the journal's early pages (individual citations are offered, but variations on a theme appear across the years of *WPA*): the WPA is "coach" (Rankin 32); "engineer" (Gracie 24); a miller asked to "spin gold out of straw," "marathoner," "elder statesman" (Zelnick 12–13); keeper of "public hygiene" (Trimbur, "Students or Staff" 34); "caretaker" (Smith 5); "flak-catcher," "ambassador," (Maimon 9); short order cook "gather[ing] the ingredients—texts, syllabi, standards" for wait staff who "sling literacy like hash" (Diogenes, Roen, and Swearingen 51); "architect," "playwright," assistant in "laboratories" (Bullock 14); "trade union bureaucrat" (Trimbur and Cambridge 16); one who "keeps a good house" (Olson and Ashton-Jones 23). Implications in these earliest metaphors are echoed in later pages: the WPA is "day laborer" (White 48), "servant" (Bloom and Recchio 23), "bandmaster" (Kearns 50), "chief information and morale officer" (Hall 76), "bogeyman" (Gunner 10); "seasonal workers or moonlighters" (Hesse. "Letter" 6), "gatekeeper" (Reynolds 19), "therapist" (Bishop and Crossley 70), "conqueror, diplomat, Peace Corp volunteer, and missionary" (Roen 81), and the maker of glue (Roen 82). In 1999, Bruffee described what he noted as the earliest occupational metaphors of WPA as "back office schedule filler," "bean counter," and "shop steward" ("Thoughts" 60–63), the same year Diana George's book surveyed the discourse so far to establish the occupational metaphor trio of WPAs as kitchen cooks, plate twirlers, and troubadours.

Metaphor is productive for developing apperception, deepening understanding, and calling us to action. It makes sense that in the early days of discovering and establishing ourselves, WPAs would turn to occupational metaphor to explore our work. As a construction that helps us understand one thing in terms of another, often pointing to the affective, metaphor is a productive entry point into how WPAs understand and explain WPA identity. In naming our job as another job, we present a point of view and argument about who we are.

Moreover, the WPA penchant for occupational metaphors may reflect our intentionally blue-collar roots. We know from Christine Hult's oral history, "Evolution of a Journal," that the WPA brand was "deliberately chosen for its echoes of workers and the common people," a direct invocation of the Works Progress era of ordinary citizens building up themselves and the national infrastructure through public projects. In 1998's "Good-bye and Thanks," Hesse alluded to the worker-inspired "tradition" of *WPA*'s original red cover (216), and in 2015's "The WPA as Worker," he addressed

more directly the significance and solidarity of the red branding "chosen very deliberately as a worker's color" (134). Built into our WPA heritage is an interest in the very idea of work, and we can see in the opening of the first *Newsletter* the articulation of a WPA ethos of working together to solve "common problems" and a direct invocation of a *WPA* "house style" that reflects our investment in collaborative problem solving ("Statement" 2).

The *WPA* "house style" is naturally steeped in solidarity because as the first *Newsletter* poignantly captured, "the problem of isolation is acute" ("Statement" 2). WPAs from the beginning have had a sense that others cannot readily see nor understand what we do. We see this frustration and worry clearly in the ways early occupational metaphors are not just illustrations of how WPAs see themselves but how WPAs fear others see and (de) value our work. Metaphor based in specific occupations we know or think others know may help us face our uncertain status by "'defining, redefining, and attempting to exercise control over'" the WPA position, a position we understand to be "educationally and institutionally unique" (Bruffee, "The WPA as [Journal] Writer" 5; Bruffee, "Thoughts" 62). It has long been a staple of WPA discourse that the WPA is a "hybrid identity," with a "unique teaching-administrative function" (Trimbur, "Affiliate News" 60; Bruffee, "Editorial" 4). Metaphor in the early pages of *WPA* may be a particularly productive way to try to make sense of an identity without ready equal.

Our occupational metaphors show us negotiating an identity that may be fundamentally different from other positions by using recognizable work to highlight and emphasize the truth and breakpoint in the construct. Metaphor, of course, has limits. *A* is not *B*. The contexts and realities of one cannot fully contain the other. The metaphor starts to break down when we get that flicker of doubt that the metaphor can explain or hold the truth of our position. All our WPA occupational metaphors may have the same fault line: if "WPAing tends to replace the slash that separates alternatives with hyphens that ally them" (Bruffee, "Thoughts" 58), are our occupational metaphors hyphenate enough to hold? The beauty and success of occupational metaphor in the early pages of the journal, however, is not in the metaphors themselves, but in the fact that naming the complexities of identity in *WPA* opened disciplinary, professionalized space to embody and study WPA work. It has been within and through the pages of *WPA* that many of us have come to know writing program administration, and across those early pages, we can see WPA occupational metaphor as one of our ways of knowing.

At CWPA's twenty-fifth anniversary, Linda Peterson addressed the "Professional Development of the WPA," wondering if we had lived up to

our original call to action. Looking ahead to the organization turning fifty, she asked, "what does it mean to become middle-aged?" What does it mean to see, for a moment, CWPA or *WPA* as a middle-aged entity, and to open, through that metaphor, a consideration of the vitality, viability, pace, precaution, maturity, regret, vision, and second chances that come with middle age? With *WPA* at 40 we can look back at who we said we were at work, who we feared we were, who we scoffed at being, who we hoped we could become, and why we thought it mattered what others might think of us. We can see that WPAs like us and not like us cared about this work. We can read their occupational metaphors and wrestle with what we hate and love about the metaphors that still feel true. We can read the record of WPA life in the pages of *WPA* and be grateful for the record itself and for what it reveals. We can in common cause from here consider new metaphors for who we see ourselves to be and what we know of the work we do. Because *WPA* opened and still guards the space, we can read our yesterday and we can write from today our tomorrow.

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