
# Writing Program Administration

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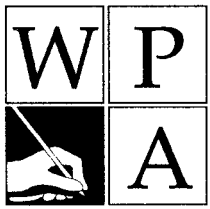
*Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*



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Council of Writing Program Administrators


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**Land Acknowledgment:** We acknowledge that much of the work of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* is done on the traditional lands of the Tuscarora People, the Steh-Chass band of the Squaxin Island Tribe and Nisqually Indian Tribe, the Dakota Nation, the Cherokee People, and other Indigenous Peoples. While the work of a journal is multivocal, collaborative, and now often virtual, we believe it is important to recognize that each participant labors within space that was often unceded by its ancestral peoples. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to mindful and equitable scholarship. We also invite you to review the list of resources used to craft this statement on the WPA website.

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# Guide for Authors

*WPA: Writing Program Administration* publishes empirical and theoretical research on issues in writing program administration. We publish a wide range of research in various formats, research that not only helps both titled and untitled administrators of writing programs do their jobs, but also helps our discipline advance academically, institutionally, and nationally.

Possible topics of interest include:

- writing faculty professional development
- writing program creation and design
- uses for national learning outcomes and statements that impact writing programs
- classroom research studies
- labor conditions: material, practical, fiscal
- WAC/WID/WC/CAC (or other sites of communication/writing in academic settings)
- writing centers and writing center studies
- teaching writing with electronic texts (multimodality) and teaching in digital spaces
- theory, practice, and philosophy of writing program administration
- outreach and advocacy
- curriculum development
- writing program assessment
- WPA history and historical work
- national and regional trends in education and their impact on WPA work
- issues of professional advancement and writing program administration
- diversity and WPA work
- writing programs in a variety of educational locations (SLACs, HBCUs, two-year colleges, Hispanic schools, non-traditional schools, dual credit or concurrent enrollment programs, prison writing programs)
- interdisciplinary work that informs WPA practices

This list is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive. Contributions must be appropriate to the interests and concerns of the journal and its readership. The editors welcome empirical research (quantitative as well as qualitative), historical research, and theoretical, essayistic, and practical pieces.

## *Submission Guidelines*

Please check the *WPA* website for complete submissions guidelines and to download the required coversheet. In general, submissions should:

- article submissions should be a maximum of 7,500 words. Submissions for the "Everything Is Praxis" section should be a maximum of 5,000 words. Please see the WPA website for full details on submitting to the "Everything Is Praxis" section.

- be styled according to either the *MLA Handbook* (9th edition) or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th edition), as appropriate to the nature of your research;
- include an abstract (maximum 200 words);
- contain no identifying information;
- be submitted as a .doc or .docx format file; and
- use tables, notes, figures, and appendices sparingly and judiciously.

Submissions that do not follow these guidelines or that are missing the cover page will be returned to authors before review.

## *Reviews*

*WPA:Writing Program Administration* publishes both review essays of multiple books and reviews of individual books related to writing programs and their administration. If you are interested in reviewing texts or recommending books for possible review, please contact the book review editor at wpabookreviews@gmail.com.

## *Announcements and Calls*

Relevant announcements and calls for papers may be published as space permits. Announcements should not exceed 500 words, and calls for proposals or participation should not exceed 1,000 words. Submission deadlines in calls should be no sooner than January 1 for the fall issue and June 1 for the spring issue. Please email your calls and announcements to wpaeditors@gmail.com and include the text in both the body of the message and as a .doc or .docx attachment.

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*WPA: Writing Program Administration* is published twice per year—fall and spring—by the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Members of the council receive a subscription to the journal and access to the *WPA* archives as part of their membership. Join the council at http://wpacouncil.org. Information about library subscriptions is available at http://wpacouncil.org/aws/CWPA/pt/sp/journal-subscriptions.

Writing
Program
Administration

Journal of the
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## Contents

# From the Editors: Gratitude, Greetings, and Gatherings

Tracy Ann Morse, Patti Poblete, Wendy Sharer, and Kelly Moreland

Our editorial board serves many purposes. We rely on them as advisors to us as editors. On occasion, we ask them to mentor writers to get their manuscripts ready for review. For previous editorial teams, the editorial board helped make tough decisions. We would like to thank those members who moved off the editorial board July 1, 2023: **Chen Chen** (2020-2023), **Casie Fedukovich** (2013-2023), and **Amy Ferdinandt Stolley** (2013-2023). In our attempts to continue to be more inclusive and represent diversity in many different ways, we welcome three new members to the board. **Wonderful Faison** is the director of the writing center at Jackson State University. Her research interests are in writing center administration and antiracist writing program administration. **Erin Lehman** is associate professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College and faculty lead for Arts, Sciences, and Education for Ivy Tech Community College, IvyOnline/Systems Office. Her areas of expertise are two-year college issues within WPA work and online course design. **Amy Vidali** is chair of the Writing Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research areas are WPA work and disability studies. Please watch our social media accounts for features of our editorial board members, their picks for favorite *WPA: Writing Program Administration* articles from the archives, and WPA hacks.

## In This Issue

### *Everything Is Praxis*

We're thrilled to continue our "Everything is Praxis" article category in this issue. We begin with a contribution from Anuj Gupta, Gail Shuck, and Christine Tardy. "Using Case Studies for Training WPAs in SLW Issues: A Dialogic Exploration" provides readers with a sample case study that Gupta developed to help future WPAs assist second-language writers while also navigating the expectations of university administrators. The authors provide contextual framing for the case study as well as materials that readers can use in graduate courses in their own programs. Case study materials include model responses from Shuck and Tardy to a hypothetical (but very realistic) scenario involving two seemingly incompatible demands placed on a WPA: a petition from students calling for an end to writing teachers' practice of using grammar as a grading criteria because that practice

unfairly disadvantages students from diverse linguistic backgrounds; and emails from upper administrators expressing grave concern about the petition in light of expectations for "standard English" use in the global economy. While the case study is presented as an activity for use in a graduate course context, we believe that the background information and the sage advice that Shuck and Tardy have crafted in responses to the scenario will be valuable to all WPAs.

The second "Everything is Praxis" piece is Heather N. Hill's "Moving Away from ACT for Placement: A Three-Year Journey to Implementing Directed Self-Placement." In the article, Hill guides us through her program's journey as they dealt with a challenge faced by many of us as more and more institutions make standardized tests like the SAT and ACT optional for admissions. When those scores—long used to place students into seemingly appropriate introductory writing courses—are not available, what metric should then be used? As Hill acknowledges, standardized tests have always been an imperfect measure, but other pressures as well as institutional inertia have often kept them in place as "good enough." By guiding us through the process of pivoting to directed self-placement, Hill grants us a deep look at the assumptions being challenged and the iterations played through in their program reform. This article provides a clear guide for the steps to take when developing and implementing directed self-placement for a writing program with, perhaps most valuably, frank identification and discussion of mistakes made along the way, particularly when accompanied by the specter of scheduling efficiency.

*Essays*

In Reno this past July, the Council of Writing Program Administrators held its annual conference, once again face-to-face! As part of the theme, "Social Justice WPAing: Talking the Talk AND Walking the Walk," Dominic DelliCarpini shared a keynote, "Students' Right to Their Own Language: The Gordian Knot of Social Justice for Writing Program Administration." In this written version of DelliCarpini's talk, we're treated to a historical view of the delicate and sometimes hesitant ways WPAs have woven concerns about social justice into the work they have done. DelliCarpini suggests that acting on behalf of justice, however, should be done with more vigor: "The things we do aren't just professional acts. They are social acts" (44). While he doesn't go so far as to discuss CWPA's recent history, we should take his narrative as an exhortation: The ways we address our past and present, the ways in which we choose to acknowledge (or not) the wrongs we have done, aren't just empty rhetoric. DelliCarpini provides us

with a long view of concerns while hinting at the needs of the present, but the conversation is urgent and must continue—we hope you'll join in this conversation as we move forward.

In "Exclusive of Ourselves: Private Multilingualisms in the Writing Center," Lizzie Hutton shares information collected from a mixed-methods study of undergraduate and graduate consultants in an English-dominant writing center. After reporting on survey data and information gathered through interviews of both undergraduate and graduate writing center consultants, Hutton asks writing center directors, and WPAs in general, to challenge standard language ideologies and to question assumptions about monolingualism among writing center consultants and students. Informing her findings on "multilinguistic conceptions and identities," Hutton works with research on multilingualism and language differences.

As her title suggests, in "Where Have You Been? Where Are You Going? Reconsidering Literacy Narratives in the Context of Neuroscience Research," Irene Clark articulates the value of literacy narrative assignments in composition courses by connecting the recollective and reflective aspects of such assignments to the furtherance of neuroplasticity, an essential bio-cognitive component of critical thinking that also enables writers to recognize and challenge linguistic injustice. Clark provides us with neuroscientific research that reinforces current calls from scholars in writing studies to explore and teach diverse personal stories because of their capacity to promote empathy and deepen understanding.

As first-year writing courses have included more and more multimodal composing, Ryan P. Shepherd, Rachael A. Ryerson, and Courtney A. Mauck reminds us in "Scarier Than It Seems: Multimodal Composition in GTA Training" that little research exists on training teachers to teach multimodal assignments. Shepherd, Ryerson, and Mauck share information collected from interviews with eight new graduate teaching assistants before they taught, while they taught, and reflecting after they taught multimodal assignments and offer us suggestions to help teachers new to teaching multimodal assignments.

### *Reviews*

The issue concludes with two book reviews. First, Lauren Fusilier highlights the practical applications for WPAs included in Staci Perryman-Clark's *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum: Diversity and Inclusion, Collaborative Partnerships, and Faculty Development* (2023). Fusilier's review provides a helpful overview of the book while emphasizing the particular ways WPAs might use or adapt Perryman-Clark's recommendations for

collaboration between writing across the curriculum and centers for faculty development, particularly for the purpose of enriching diversity, equity, and inclusion goals on college campuses. Fusilier recommends that WPAs interested in exploring such collaborations and initiatives use *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum* as a resource for enacting positive and meaningful change.

Finally, Skyler Meeks's review of *Radiant Figures: Visual Rhetorics in Everyday Administrative Contexts*, edited by Rachel Gramer, Logan Bearden, and Derek Mueller, focuses on both the content and unique organization of the text, published by Computers and Composition Digital Press in 2021. Meeks underscores the book's central argument that WPAs can, might, and do employ visual rhetoric as an administrative strategy by providing useful examples from a variety of the book's chapters, which demonstrate visual administration from programmatic marketing campaigns to assessment and beyond. He also highlights the editors' recommendations for reading the text, which provide several different approaches with which WPAs might take on the book's content depending on their own goals for using visual rhetoric. Meeks's review of *Radiant Figures* presents a productive introduction to the book for WPAs looking to learn more about the role of visual rhetoric in writing program administration.

## Conclusion: To Future Generative Gatherings

Conferences, both in person and virtual, regional and national, are chances to reconnect and inspire each other. And as many of us face, almost unbelievably, the end of another academic year, we might also consider what insights the year's challenges have brought to us, and what wisdom we might share with our fellow WPAs. We look forward to gathering with and learning from many of you in Spokane at the CCCC meeting. Too, we are excited about the innovative ideas that emerge from this coming summer's regional WPA conferences. More information about these regional events will be available on the CWPA website soon, if it is not already there by the time this issue goes to print. Be sure to check out what meetings will be held in your area of the country. If you attend a gathering, please consider sharing some of the knowledge that you gain from the event by submitting a full-length article or an "Everything is Paxis" piece to the journal!

We know that travel, even for one-day gatherings in your region, is a cost many cannot take on now, particularly in light of limited (or non-existent) travel budgets. We hope those of you who cannot attend an in-person event will take the opportunity to share your wisdom and learn from others through our various social media initiatives, including Throwback

Thursdays (in which members of our Editorial Board share their favorite past articles from the journal archives), Editorial Board Highlights (which provide glimpses into the professional and personal lives of our Editorial Board members), and Conversation Starters (brief videos that feature WPAs discussing pressing issues facing the field right now and which invite conversation and insight-sharing through comments and replies). Please reach out to us if you have an important Conversation Starter you want highlighted on our social media: we are happy to create a virtual gathering place to talk through ideas.

# Using Case Studies for Training WPAs in SLW Issues: A Dialogic Exploration

Anuj Gupta, Gail Shuck, and Christine M. Tardy

## Abstract

*Motivated by a need to provide WPAs-in-training with more practice and experience-oriented resources for supporting second language writers, this article shares a case study module in which students strategically respond to a hypothetical conflict related to grammar instruction and linguistic diversity. Specifically, we provide background information (including relevant scholarly references), a hypothetical scenario, implementation guidelines, and two sample responses to the conflict from experienced WPAs, all of which can be used for WPA preparation or professional growth. We frame the case study through our discussions of the activity's educational goals, our reflections on our own responses to the case study, and a rationale for the value of adopting a case study approach to WPA training.*

## Introduction

Despite numerous publications on the intersection between writing program administration and second language writing (SLW) (e.g., Matsuda, 2012; Miller-Cochran, 2010; Shuck, 2006; Tardy, 2011), pedagogical resources that can prepare graduate students and future WPAs to face SLW-related challenges are limited (see Matsuda, 2012; Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, & Lamm, 2006; Miller-Cochran, 2010; Sánchez-Martín & Walker, 2022). If writing programs do not adequately account for language diversity among the students they serve, the consequences for students from marginalized language backgrounds can range from not understanding culturally specific texts to being dismissed from the institution. These students may have little co-curricular language support and be unfairly penalized for unconventional grammar, have insufficient time to complete assignments, or have strengths and knowledge that go unrecognized. As Miller-Cochran (2010) argues, WPAs have a responsibility to ensure that instructors in their programs are prepared for the complexities of a linguistically diverse student population. However, many WPAs have not had in-depth discussions of those complexities. To address this gap, we present a case study approach to WPA training in SLW issues as a low-risk, high-impact strategy for

providing experiential learning opportunities. Case studies offer hypothetical scenarios inspired from real-world challenges, the responses to which are developed collaboratively using existing scholarship.

In the case study module below, developed by Anuj, graduate students or workshop attendees role-play responses to a hypothetical conflict between pro- and anti-grammar teaching at their institution. In addition to the scenario, we include guidelines on how to use the scenario in a graduate-level class, along with a bibliography, reflective questions, and guiding responses from two senior WPAs, Chris and Gail, who specialize in SLW. Our collaboration brings together various perspectives and experiences: Anuj (the developer of the case study) is a PhD student in rhetoric and composition with writing program administration experience in India; Gail is the director of English Language Support Programs at her university, working closely with writing programs to advocate for second language writers; and Chris has writing program administration experience specifically supporting second language writers in first-year writing. Chris and Gail are white, native English speakers from the United States who have learned other languages, and Anuj is Indian and multilingual, growing up with English, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi.

We begin by describing Anuj's development of this particular case study. We follow this with the module itself and then guiding responses from the two WPAs' responses that we developed independently but that revealed significant overlap in their guiding principles. We conclude with a rationale for implementing similar experiential resources in WPA training.

## The Development of the Scenario

Although a number of scholarly works connect writing program administration work to SLW principles and research, the use of case studies for this kind of professional development may not be common. Such scenarios might have given Anuj a foundation for curricular decision-making in the multilingual Indian context where he had been a WPA, and so he desired more practical writing program administration resources. When he later took Chris's Second Language Writing doctoral course, the readings made him realize that even United States-based WPAs face similar struggles (Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, & Lamm, 2006; Matsuda, 2012). In 2006, Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, and Lamm had edited a special issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* to address this need, noting that a major challenge was that few courses in second language writing existed in rhetoric and composition programs (p. 12). In a later article, Matsuda (2012) shared an archetypal WPA experience to shed light on how even such courses do not necessarily

help in communicating directly with faculty outside their programs looking for advice on whether to fail a multilingual student or not based on their lack of standard English grammar skills. Many WPAs with some SLW expertise try to share various research studies they have read, but the faculty in question have no time to engage with this literature (2012, p. 142). This description of the situation led Anuj to see that this common means of training WPAs in SLW—reading research articles—may be insufficient for building crucial skills like stakeholder management and the strategic communication required to tackle problems they faced in their administrative roles.

While serving as a WPA, Anuj learned how impactful an experiential workshop could be when he attended one conducted by Aniha Brar at Ashoka University (Brar, 2018), in which participants were given hypothetical crisis situations that professionals in their field might face. Each group had to study their crisis situation and craft an appropriate communication strategy. Later, when given the opportunity to develop a project for Chris's SLW course, Anuj proposed creating a similar case study that could support WPAs in developing critical communication skills. He decided to focus on a topic that had troubled him as a teacher and a WPA in India: Should multilingual students be encouraged to learn standard English grammar, or should they be supported to feel confident about their own ways of using English (Gupta, 2019)?

Anuj invited Chris and Gail to write responses as though each of them was the WPA in an institution where this hypothetical conflict arose. These sample responses from SLW professionals would be the jumping-off point for discussions during a case study-based workshop. After the invitation to craft their responses, Chris and Gail shared with Anuj how little practice they had had as graduate students addressing various scenarios they have had to engage with as professionals, without the immediate consequences of having to address them "live." This article compiles the case study and responses, aiming to offer a practical resource for graduate students and WPAs who may not have access to formal training or mentorship to develop experiential, embodied knowledge in a low-risk environment. We hope that the collaborative nature of Anuj's original workshop design will underscore the value of discussing previous scholarship and of collaboratively responding to a case study. After Chris and Gail discussed the similarities in their responses, it became clear to all of us that we would likely consult with others at our institutions about how to address such a scenario should it arise at our own institutions. People have valuable vantage points, expertise, and insights, and we do not lose access to those when we receive our degrees.

## The Case Study Module

Below, we represent the case study module in a format that can be shared with students or professionals in a workshop on language diversity in writing program administration work. Therefore, the second-person referents throughout the next section are the students and WPAs participating in this proposed workshop.

*Grammar Crisis at the University: What Can the WPA Do?*

### Learning Objectives

- Building familiarity with language policy and approaches to grammar in second language writing
- Learning how to develop a stance using that knowledge to tackle real-life situations in the workplace
- Learning how to communicate with stakeholders in high stakes conflict situations.

### Background and Suggested Readings

If you are new to the teaching of writing and/or to writing program administration work, it might seem absurd to question whether or not students should be taught how to use grammar correctly in a writing course. It seems commonsensical to include grammar in a course that seeks to develop students' writing skills, right? But common sense is often a lot more complicated under the surface. Assumptions about the naturalness of grammar teaching have been at the heart of much debate in the field of writing studies, notably resulting in the resolution, "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974), and in the emergence of various subfields like second language writing and translingualism in the United States. While several in-depth literature reviews chronicle these debates (see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2013; Matsuda, 2020; Tardy, 2011), table 1 offers a list of suggested readings to introduce the most prominent points of debate.

Table 1
Suggested Readings for Discussion

| Can grammar be taught? | Should grammar be taught? | Which grammar should be taught? | What can/should WPAs do? |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Truscott (1996)<br>• Ferris and Hedgcock (2013) chapter 8 | • CCCC (1974)<br>• CCCC (2020)<br>• Ferris and Hedgcock (2013) chapter 9)<br>• Matsuda, Fruit, Lee, and Lamm (2006) | • Canagarajah (2006)<br>• Matsuda and Matsuda (2010)<br>• Young (2010)<br>• Atkinson and Tardy (2018) | • Matsuda (2012)<br>• Tardy (2011)<br>• Miller-Cochran (2010)<br>• Shuck (2006) |

## Key Areas for Reflection

What follows is a hypothetical situation where WPAs apply knowledge from the readings in table 1 and from their own intuition to respond to the challenge. While reading this case, consider the following guiding questions:

- Who are the main stakeholders? What are their relationships and what does this tell us about the institutional ecosystem?
- What kinds of communication processes exist among these stakeholders?
- What are the root causes of the conflict?
- What kinds of roles, responsibilities, and challenges does the WPA have?
- What powers and constraints do they have?
- What skills should WPAs develop to tackle such situations?
- Is it possible to develop certain guiding principles that WPAs can use while making decisions in such conflict situations? What would these look like?

## The Scenario

You are the director of a writing program at a university in the United States and have just received a petition that grabs your attention, titled "Demand for Abolishing Grammar Racism on Campus," and signed by over 100 students. The petition argues that teachers shouldn't cut marks for grammar mistakes in their exams and assignments. Penalizing students for their grammar, the petition states, oppresses multilingual students who come from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds and unfairly privileges urban, predominantly white, standard English-educated students. For this reason, the petition demands, teachers

should develop more socially just grading and teaching practices, focusing on students' ideas rather than their grammar, instead of reinforcing pre-existing racial and linguistic hierarchies. The students end by saying that if their demands are not met, they will have no choice but to stage walkouts.

As you read the petition, two other emails arrive in your mailbox. These are from the Director of the Careers Office (DCO), who handles job placements, and from the Vice Provost (VP). The former expresses grave concerns about the grammar petition doing the rounds on campus, and the latter demands that you get rid of this matter quickly before this reaches social media and impacts future student enrollments. Both of these administrators feel that allowing students to ignore grammar will be extremely harmful. The DCO states that the global economy and academia today are dominated by standard English. All job recruiters want this basic skill from candidates of a prestigious U.S. university that ranks among the topmost institutions in the world. "If students send in their CVs and Statements of Purpose in broken English, who will give them jobs and scholarships?" writes the DCO. The VP adds that parents want their children to learn to write good, professional prose in English. "What is the point of paying so much in tuition dollars if their children come out of college writing exactly like they used to before they came in?" asks the VP.

### The Challenge

As the director of the Writing Program, you must develop a strategic response on how best to tackle the growing situation by addressing the needs of all stakeholders. Draft an email to the students, cc-ing the DCO and VP, that addresses the various concerns that have come to your table and articulates your strategy to respond.

### Writing Guidelines for Students

- Work in groups of three.
- Before developing your response, read through at least five sources in the "Suggested Readings" list.
- Analyze the case. Who are the primary stakeholders? What are their needs? What are the points of conflict and potential synergies? What other stakeholders on campus can you count on in your strategic response?
- What is your position? How will you convince your audience?

- Draft an email to the petitioning students, cc-ing the Vice Provost and the Director of the Careers Office. Minimum word limit for your email is 600 words.

## Guiding Responses

Response 1: Christine Tardy (University of Arizona)

Dear students,

I want to thank you for voicing your perspective regarding the role of grammar in the teaching and assessment of writing at our university. Your concerns are important to the Writing Program and the university community, and I want you to know that they are taken seriously. As a teacher of writing, I am heartened to see you use the power of writing to express your views and to affect change.

Your petition argues that multilingual students are disadvantaged by grading practices that privilege grammatical accuracy in writing. Your views are supported by decades of scholarship in sociolinguistics, which demonstrates the rich diversity and variation of language. English has developed a multitude of varieties because of its wide reach around the world, impacted by colonialism, globalization, and technology. While U.S. English users "go to the hospital," British English users "go to hospital"; and where an American might say "he has finished cooking," a Nigerian might say "he has finish cooking." These kinds of variations are often systematic—in other words, they follow a grammatical pattern that is used regularly within the variety. Systematized varieties of English (with unique features of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) exist in many countries where English is a dominant or official language: Australia, Canada, India, Singapore, the Philippines, Nigeria, South Africa, and Belize are some examples. As we prepare students to write in today's globalized environments, it is important that we recognize that languages are inherently flexible and constantly evolving, and that grammatical variations exist. What might be considered an "error" in one context may be a "norm" in another.

It is important to acknowledge that grammar mistakes do occur. Not every unfamiliar grammar feature is a result of a world English variety; some are simply the result of a language learner

working to use a complex language system. Many multilingual students are developing this kind of linguistic knowledge while studying in English. It is a difficult process, and research in second language acquisition shows that accurate use of a grammatical system is slow, gradual, and often non-linear. It may take some time after we "learn" a grammatical form before we are able to systematically use it in context, whether in speaking or writing. Research also shows that we often make more grammatical mistakes when writing in new kinds of texts or with challenging content.

Because we know that English grammar is globally diverse and that grammatical mistakes are a normal part of language acquisition, it follows that multilingual learners (who often use global varieties of English or are still developing English grammar knowledge) should not be penalized for using grammar that doesn't conform to a single standard of U.S. English. Penalizing students for practices that are simply a part of using and learning a globalized language would be unfair. As a result, the Writing Program is currently working to establish a program-wide policy that excludes the grading of grammatical accuracy from assessment criteria for students' major papers. Such a policy will allow instructors to focus on aspects of writing that can reasonably be developed in the writing classroom and that can be fairly assessed across our student populations.

At the same time, the Writing Program understands that in some contexts the use of certain grammatical norms is important to the success of a text. For example, in a résumé, job application letter, or scholarship application, texts that use unfamiliar grammatical patterns or that display errors resulting from language learning may be judged more harshly. We also understand that many students want and deserve to learn the grammar forms that are privileged in a society, and our writing classrooms can support them in that process.

For this reason, we feel it is important that writing instruction include language instruction. Classroom activities can help students focus on grammatical choices that writers make in different contexts, for different readers, and in different kinds of texts. To improve the attention given to language within our writing

classrooms, we will be implementing program-wide support for teachers, including workshops and the creation of a resource bank that will focus on how to best support language development for all of our student writers. Our goal is to build students' language repertoires and their awareness of and strategies for how they can use language (including grammar) effectively as writers.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to me and to the university community. Your petition can provide a springboard for a campus-wide discussion about language and language diversity, including how our classes can support linguistically diverse students and also build awareness of language for all members of our community.

Kind regards,
Dr. Christine Tardy
Professor of English Applied Linguistics

**Response 2: Gail Shuck (Boise State University)**

Dear students,

I deeply appreciate you bringing your concerns about grading and grammar to my attention. I take them seriously, and I join in your desire for equity throughout our campus. Even though your petition referred to instructors across the curriculum, my role as Director of the Writing Program, with a background working with multilingual students, gives me a platform to speak on language-related equity. I definitely have a stake in this issue, so thank you for including me on this email.

The mission of the Writing Program includes giving writers of all language backgrounds the tools for deciding how to write for a variety of audiences and for developing ownership of their education. In writing this passionate, well-reasoned petition, you are revealing to me that you have taken ownership of your own educational paths.

I'd like to suggest first that any of you who signed the petition join me in a meeting this week. *I want to hear directly from you* about what prompted your decision to develop this petition,

what grammar issues you've been graded down for, and what experiences with writing and grammar grades you've had.

In order to develop policies around language, which is what you're asking for, we need to describe in detail what's happening on the ground. Prof. Christine Tardy, a specialist in second-language writing studies, has written about how critical it is that previous research and everyday language practices come together. Faculty have a wide range of approaches to grading, and probably an equally wide range of opinions about whether grammar should be graded. Finding out what those opinions are, in a systematic way, can give us a lot of guidance about what our options are for responding to this situation.

Once we talk in person, I'd like to form a Language and Writing Task Force, composed of students, faculty, and other campus leaders, including language specialists and anyone invested in this issue. A lot of research exists about whether correcting grammar improves writing, and even more about what "grammar" actually refers to. For example, research on English as a global language tells us that there are distinguishable varieties of English in many different countries, including India, Nigeria, Singapore, The Philippines, and others. Fun fact: Of the people around the world who use English regularly (not just studying it), most are not actually monolingual, native English speakers. So, the way we all use English is going to be different, even when we write for academic or professional publications. Of course, as your petition pointed out, there are also different grammar structures in different language communities in the United States. Language is, after all, a way of signaling our identities and membership in multiple communities.

I propose that this Task Force

1. gather some data about language diversity on our campus;
2. find out more about how faculty assign grades, and for what kinds of writing tasks;
3. read some of the research on language and writing, including position statements from major professional organizations;
4. discuss the implications of that research; and

5. develop a set of recommendations for the campus, maybe even developing a series of workshops for faculty on such topics as different methods for grading, forms of communication in different disciplines, and faculty responses to student writing.

Together, we should come up with priorities, not limited to the above list. I am committed to working on solutions, but I need your voices and your help. I would like to see members of this proposed Language and Writing Task Force be compensated for this work (e.g., internship credit, stipends for participating, or reassignment of employee workload), so I will follow up on those possibilities. Our Center for Teaching and Learning, which has workshops for faculty in a Writing and Learning series and a focus on inclusive teaching, would be likely to support us, too. I've participated in workshops on inclusive teaching and have learned a lot, including about a type of grading that's based on the amount of labor students do.

As you can tell, this is a longer-term set of responses than you might have imagined. It might help members of our campus community feel more invested in this dialogue, though. The more we can invite the faculty and other campus leaders to participate, the more likely they are to reflect on their beliefs and practices and to try new approaches.

Keep in mind that we (faculty, staff, and administrators) want you to be successful, community-minded, independent thinkers and communicators. That means constantly challenging yourself to learn different ways to communicate to different audiences. That includes not just the vocabulary specific to your fields of study but also grammar structures that help you to communicate your knowledge to others. One question we can explore together is how we can include discussions of grammar in classes throughout the curriculum. My own approach is one of "additive" grammar instruction, teaching phrases and sentence structures that give students more tools in their linguistic toolbox.

Let me thank you again for your commitment to inclusion and for your specific, thoughtful requests. I could not let the petition

go without a concrete, detailed response, and so I hope that we can come up with a time to meet this week.

I very much look forward to a dialogue with you.

Sincerely,
Dr. Gail Shuck
Professor of Linguistics

## Suggestions for Implementing the Above Case Study Workshop

While developing case studies, it is important to adapt them to the lived realities of particular student populations. To do this, instructors are encouraged to customize the case details to their local settings, with care to avoid exclusion of some participants in the workshop, to enable greater student engagement. We also recommend the following practices:

- After the module has been distributed, students can first write memos individually to help develop their positions.
- Once everyone has some basic responses, they can discuss their respective ideas and develop a collective response.
- Then all the groups can engage in a collective discussion with the instructor, with each group presenting their strategic responses. The groups might act out or role play their strategy to make their approach more engaging. The instructor and other groups can then engage in constructive questioning to help each group expand its approach to the case.
- As each group presents, instructors could annotate or develop mind maps that emerge from students to help develop a bird's eye view of all the ideas.
- Active and inclusive listening should be encouraged during this entire process.
- Once all the groups have presented, the instructors should then distribute the guiding responses section of the case study (see above) and ask everyone to read and discuss them, to consider similarities and differences between those and their own approaches, and to think about ways they might want to revise their strategies after reading the sample responses (if at all).

- Once the exercise is complete, students can browse through some of the following articles as a homework exercise: UWT Teaching and Learning Center (2016), Ciccotta (2017), and McCarty (2017). These texts will take them through the controversial events that happened at the University of Washington, Tacoma in 2017, where a similar issue as represented in the case study had occurred.

## A Collective Reflection

As we developed our respective responses to this scenario, the three of us found ourselves turning to our knowledge gained from our positions as advocates for multilingual writers, from SLW scholarship, and from discussions we've had with others. The importance of seeing multiple responses and perspectives became very clear to us as we compared our responses. None of us have dealt with exactly this scenario, but all of us drew on our knowledge of linguistic change and variation, on the need for data-gathering to effect institutional change, and on our experiences developing relationships with other academics and campus partners, including students. We are also familiar with dominant ideologies of language that privilege certain users of English at the top of a hierarchy of language users and "good writers." We are knowledgeable about the variety of language practices that global English users engage in, as well as the need to reconsider how grading practices often reproduce social hierarchies tied to colonization and complex connections between language and power. Reading each other's responses and discussing them highlighted for us the continued professional growth that we engage in, whether we are current doctoral students or seasoned scholars and administrators.

We hope that this case study module, as well as new modules that readers will create for their own campuses, will be valuable for those in administrative roles or even for instructors hoping to collaborate with other faculty on issues of equity. Each of us has felt at some level that we stumbled our way through administrative challenges early on, and we sought the counsel of more experienced mentors, within or outside our respective campuses. Participating in this or similar case study modules as respondents, particularly in a group setting, would give others a low-risk opportunity to draw on each other's knowledge and strengths to develop as professionals. We hope to see an increase in such experiential resources that can help future WPAs feel better prepared for the world that awaits them. Finally, we hope it is clear that the collaborative nature of the case study module explicitly encourages participants to know—or remind themselves—that writing

program administration work is fundamentally a process of ongoing learning and collaboration.

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# Moving Away from ACT for Placement: A Three-Year Journey to Implementing Directed Self-Placement

Heather N. Hill

Abstract

*While writing scholars have long been arguing against the use of standardized tests for writing placement, many universities still use them. Other, more effective, placement methods, such as portfolio assessment, are often difficult and time consuming. Thus, many have moved to Directed Self Placement (DSP) as a more ethical and time-effective solution. This article is a detailed chronicle of three years of work, struggle, wrong steps, and ultimate success, in implementing DSP. This article explains the day-to-day work necessary to make large program changes. The goal of the article is for readers to find value in the details of the story and not only learn from our mistakes, but hopefully avoid them.*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the fall of 2020, our university went "test optional," meaning that students who applied to the university did not need to take the ACT or SAT. As we began returning to "normal" operations in the following years, one of the things that stuck was "test optional." Through the efforts of our Associate Vice Provost (AVP) for Diversity and Inclusion and several other parties, the push to do away with the ACT requirement became a reality. Writing scholars have long been arguing against the use of standardized tests for writing placement because (1) They are biased against minorities (Johnson and VanBrackle; Moos and Van Zanen); (2) They do not do a good job of placing students accurately (Isaacs and Molloy), and (3) The tests are inauthentic writing situations that can't accurately assess what students can do (Isaacs and Molloy; Nastal; Robertson). In addition, using standardized tests for placement is using them in ways they were never meant to be used. They were never meant to be placement tests for any discipline. Although it had been a long-standing goal in our department to discontinue the use of the ACT for placement, other priorities had taken precedence. Now, placement automatically became the highest priority because without ACT scores, we had to have another way of placing first-year writing students.

Because of my experience with Directed Self Placement (DSP) from my time as an instructor at a previous university, I quickly brought it forward as a potential option. DSP begins with the assumption that students know their own writing skills better than anyone and that they can choose their

own course accurately if given the appropriate amount of direction. Typically, DSP comes in the form of a questionnaire that asks students about their experiences with writing, such as their confidence in their writing ability and/or the feedback they have been given on writing, and then students are given a recommendation as to which course seems the best fit for them. However, students are given the option to choose a different course if they believe that recommendation is incorrect. As defined by Royer and Gilles, "DSP can be any placement method that both offers students information and advice about their placement options (that's the 'directed' part) and places the ultimate placement decision in the students' hands (that's the 'self-placement' part)" (2). Some schools have a writing task as part of the DSP, some use students' standardized test scores or their GPA as part of it, but the commonality among them all is that students are given the agency to choose their own writing course rather than being placed by someone else. What follows is the story of how, after three years of work, struggle, wrong steps, and ultimate success, we have finally implemented DSP at our university. I hope that readers can find value in our story and not only learn from our mistakes, but hopefully avoid them. I believe the story and the advice I give are relevant to most any large-scale programmatic change.

My university is a rural, Midwestern state school with a total enrollment of just over 10,000 students. We have a two-course composition sequence that most students take. This sequence consists of Composition I: Academic Literacies, which focuses on writing researched academic arguments, and Composition II: Writing as Engagement, which focuses on writing for non-academic communities, writing in multiple genres for different audiences, etc. In addition, we have an Introduction to College Writing course for students not quite ready for Composition I, and an Accelerated Composition course for those who are skilled and confident writers. The Accelerated Composition class combines the content of Composition I and II into one course. Students had placed into Introduction to College Writing if they had below an 18 ACT English sub-score, and they had placed into Accelerated Composition if they had above a 27 ACT English sub-score. If students placed into Introduction to College Writing, we had a writing challenge they could take to try to test out of the class. The writing challenge was simply an essay test that I graded. If they passed the writing challenge, they could enroll in Composition I.

As the Composition Coordinator (WPA), I am a tenure-track faculty member, with two course releases (out of a 4/4 normal teaching load) for administrative work. While I am given release time for my administrative work, I am not given any extra pay for summer work. In addition, my colleagues, one in my department and one in Computer Science, who helped

extensively, did not receive any compensation for their time. My colleague in my department worked on the project as part of his regular work as a member of our Expository Writing Committee (although he definitely went above and beyond what is typically asked of members of that committee). Our colleague in Computer Science just worked on it in his "free" time, and, while he did end up winning a service award from the university in part because of his work with us, I have, throughout this project, wished there was more we could have done to compensate him for his work.

At the beginning of fall 2020, we were still using the ACT to place students, even though many of the tests had been canceled. We began using the writing challenge for anyone who did not have an ACT score, but we recognized that as we continued to not require ACT scores, more and more students were going to come without one, and the writing challenge would eventually become unfeasible (since I was the only one who graded those tests). This push was what we needed to do what we already knew we should: stop using the ACT for placement.

For me, the most important criticism of standardized tests in general is that they are biased against minorities. Almost 30 years after Crowley asked whether we could "serve diverse student bodies well through placement?" (90), we are still attempting to answer this question. In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published the statement, "Students' Right to their Own Language," which argued that all forms of English should be valued equally. In addition, linguists have long claimed that Standard American English (SAE) is only one dialect among many, and that no dialect is more valuable than another (see, for example, Cameron; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian). However, standardized tests such as the ACT, continue to evaluate students' college-readiness based on their ability to conform to racist standards of language production. For example, Johnson and VanBrackle found that raters of standardized writing tests were biased against students who wrote in Black English, giving lower scores for students who had "errors" that were typical of Black English speakers than they did for errors that are more typical of white students. More recently, scholars have explained that standardized tests evaluate students' ability to produce habits of white language or HOWL (Inoue, "What's the Problem"). When we force students of color to use HOWL to be accepted into college, we are participating in what Inoue calls "White Language Supremacy" ("2019 CCCC Chair's Address").

The above criticisms of standardized testing led me to believe that DSP might be a better option. The next few months were spent reading research articles on DSP (such as those discussed above), talking with people at other universities who were using it, and gathering examples of DSP questions

used. I wanted to make sure that DSP was the right choice for us, and I wanted to have research to back up our decision if we needed to justify that choice to university administrators. The texts we read affirmed that DSP was an accurate way of placing students into composition classes (Aull; Blakesley; Crusan). One of the things we felt was most persuasive about DSP was the agency it gives to students to choose their own course. We felt like this would greatly improve the classroom morale in Introduction to College Writing because students wouldn't be forced to take it; they would choose to take it. We always had a good number of students take the writing challenge every year, and we had all experienced students in our classes who were not happy about having to take Introduction to College Writing. We felt like moving to DSP would eliminate this problem.

In creating the first draft of questions for our DSP survey, we relied on Toth and Aull's "Directed Self-Placement Questionnaire Design," which is a comprehensive survey and analysis of DSP questionnaires. We also received samples of DSP questionnaires from The University of Washington, Boise State University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara, and had Zoom meetings or email exchanges with the WPAs at those institutions to discuss their placement process and the process of implementing DSP. These institutions were chosen simply because I knew they had been successfully using DSP for many years. These discussions, along with the research consulted, greatly aided in getting the DSP to pass through the various university committees that needed to vote on it. I was able to discuss what the research said, how people used DSP at other institutions, and why I believed it would work here.

We then spent several months working to draft our own questions based on a compilation of questions from other universities and other questions we came up with ourselves. This process took nearly a full academic year. By the end of spring 2021, we had a first draft of our DSP questionnaire. After much discussion, two pilots, and several revisions (discussed in detail below), our final version was completed by early 2023. It begins with an introductory video in which I explain DSP to students (see full transcript below). The questionnaire has sixteen questions that ask them about their experiences with reading and writing, their confidence in writing for the college level, and the kinds of feedback they have received on writing in the past (see the appendix for full list of questions). When they finish the online questionnaire, a video pops up that explains, in detail, the course that is recommended. They are then given several prompts that ask whether they feel that recommendation is correct or if they would like to watch the videos that explain the other options. The final question says, "The course

I have chosen to take is . . .” and they chose from a drop-down menu. Students are free to choose whichever course they think is best for them.

To back up, though, over the summer of 2021, one of my rhetoric and composition colleagues worked with a faculty member in the Computer Science department to create the online survey implement. This process was much more difficult than I imagined. Creating the online platform took expertise that our lack of web building and coding experience would not have allowed us to do. His involvement has been crucial to our success. Thus, here is my first piece of advice: get someone in computer science or IT to help you early on. It is not feasible to do paper questionnaires, so you will need to create an online questionnaire that can gather the data and store it securely as well as upload it into systems such as Banner and Degree Audit for the registrar, advisers, and others to be able to access and use as necessary.

In the fall of 2021, we did a test of the DSP by having students in our composition courses take it. We then compared how the DSP placed them with how they were placed via ACT. The first test gave us some important information: there were several questions that did not correlate with either the final placement with the DSP or their placement via ACT. When I say they didn't “correlate,” I just mean that, for example, answering “highly agree” on one question did not necessarily mean that their final score was high or that they had a high ACT score. This lack of correlation caused us to rethink those questions because they seemed to be outliers. A student might say highly agree on that one question but then put highly disagree on everything else. We felt that those questions needed to be revised or deleted because we were trying to get consistent patterns. For example, we found that questions about a students' enjoyment of writing did not strongly correlate with their placement. On the other hand, the question about their experience writing in multiple genres had high correlation, as did a question about whether they like to challenge themselves to work on difficult writing tasks.

In addition, we saw too many students whose ACT score placed them into Introduction to College Writing place into Accelerated Composition via the DSP. We assumed we would see fewer students in Introduction to College Writing than we previously had, but we did not think that those students were ready for Accelerated Composition. At this point we did not have the videos that described the classes yet, so we were going simply by the scores. We took the rest of the fall to rethink many of the questions, revising, deleting, and adding others that we thought would help us get the results we needed. We also reset the cutoff scores to account for the results and added the videos at the end. We knew that most students should go to

Composition I and wanted only those who needed the most support and those that were the most accomplished to go to Introduction to College Writing or Accelerated Composition. We set the cutoff scores with this in mind.

In the spring of 2022, we did the test again with the new set of questions and cutoff scores. The correlations were much stronger throughout, and we felt confident moving forward with the instrument, knowing we could revise it again later if we needed to. At this time, we started bringing in other parties to let them know what we had been doing and how it would affect them. While earlier in the year we had discussed the potential use of DSP with the dean and head of academic advising, we needed to have more in-depth conversations. We met multiple times with the dean, the registrar, the director of our Student Success Center, the advisers, IT, etc. I would say this was a bit too late in the process for these meetings. It worked out fine because we had mentioned it to them already, but it probably would have been beneficial to get those people more involved earlier. Thus, here is my second piece of advice: do not wait that long to bring stakeholders into the conversation. These in-depth conversations happened in the spring of 2022, when we were hoping to get it up and running in time for the beginning of fall 2022. While this did make us have to push back our timeline, it had potential to cause worse problems. For example, if there was lack of support for the change, and we ultimately were not able to implement it, we would have wasted a lot of time.

After getting the thumbs up from all the people we met with, it was time to make the change official by going through the formal course and program change process. We were getting towards the second half of the semester, and if we wanted to have any chance of having this ready for fall of 2022, we needed to hurry up because the proposals had to be approved by many different committees and groups. First, I had some extended conversations with our department's executive committee and our full department. At first the major discussion point was whether it was effective to allow students to choose their own course. People in our department didn't seem to feel like students could accurately choose for themselves. After summarizing the research on DSP, talking through the full process and the pilot studies we had conducted, and trying to highlight the "directed" nature of the self-placement, we still had one person in the department vote "no" on the proposals. The proposals passed unanimously in all other university-wide committees. At each of these committee meetings, I was there to explain and advocate for the DSP. I was prepared to use all the research and the pilots we conducted to argue our case. Fortunately, that wasn't needed. However, here is another piece of advice: get as much research

behind you as possible and be ready to answer any questions that might be posed. Anticipate pushback from many different areas and be ready with research in hand.

At the same time as we were trying to get the proposals through, I was also informed that the actual survey platform that our computer science colleague had created was never meant to be the permanent solution. He had built it as a prototype on his personal GitHub account and was not keen on leaving it there long term. One reason for this was the security issues. We did not want student data to be hosted on a site that we did not feel was going to keep it secure. At this point we were given two options, neither of which were ideal. Our IT department could re-create the survey implement and have it hosted internally on our system, but the predicted timeline for this was six to eight months. Or, we could have it externally hosted by the company that currently hosts our new student orientation materials. This option was expensive and would give us less control. I wanted us to be able to have control of the implement and be able to make changes quickly and easily if we needed to. In the end, we decided to use the prototype that our computer science colleague created until our IT department could create an internally hosted version. This issue could easily have been avoided if we had gotten our IT folks involved earlier in the process.

Every summer, our university hosts several Student Orientation and Registration (SOAR) days. We try to get all incoming students to come to one of these days. We decided that the best choice was to have students take the DSP during SOAR. However, because the schedule for SOAR was already packed (and couldn't be changed for the year), for the sake of time, the person who runs SOAR decided to only have students take it whose ACT placed them into Introduction to College Writing or who did not have an ACT score on file. This decision was made without consulting me. Needless to say, I was not happy about this. At our university, incoming student schedules are created for them before they come to SOAR. All the students had been registered for a composition class based on their ACT scores, and anyone without an ACT score was put into Introduction to College Writing, pending their taking of the DSP. Having only the students who had already been registered for Introduction to College Writing take the DSP was potentially going to cause a scheduling nightmare. We knew that switching to DSP was likely to cause us to need fewer Introduction to College Writing classes and more Composition I courses, but with only the Introduction to College Writing students taking it, there would only be shift up, and no shift down.

And that is exactly what happened after the first two days of SOAR. The only person from our department who typically attends SOAR is an

advisor who meets with students who have declared Language, Literature, and Writing as their major. Thus, neither I nor anyone else who worked on the DSP had considered that we might need to attend. The people who run SOAR set up computers for students to take the DSP and had someone there to explain and monitor it, and we hoped that the process would be effective. We were wrong about that! After the first two days of SOAR, only two students who took the DSP were still in Introduction to College Writing and several had skipped up to Accelerated Composition. At this point, I made two decisions: first, we raised the cutoff scores for which course they were recommended to take, and, second, I decided to go to SOAR and explain and monitor the DSP myself.

What I found when I attended SOAR leads me to my next piece of advice: be onsite to see the project in action. Even if others do it right, you can learn a lot from being there yourself. To begin, I just observed what was happening so I could see if there was a problem with how the DSP was being explained. The first problem I noticed was that the person who was monitoring the DSP very clearly did not understand what it was. This leads to another piece of advice: make sure everyone involved really understands the program change you are making. In the case of DSP, it is a fairly big ideological shift and those in charge of explaining it to students really need to fully comprehend it.

When a student showed up to take the DSP, they were in a hurry to get to their advising appointment, and the person explained the DSP by simply saying, "This is your English placement questionnaire. Just answer the questions as honestly as possible." Then when students were done, they just took their score and left, with no discussion or explanation telling them that they could choose their own course, that the DSP was just a recommendation, etc. Not only that, but after students finish the DSP, there is a video they are supposed to watch that explains the recommended course in detail and then tells them that if that course doesn't sound right for them, they should talk to their advisor about changing to another course. While I was sitting there, a person walked by and told the student "You don't have to watch the video." I was quite shocked because the videos were extremely important to the process we had set up. I stopped the person and said "Actually, no! They do absolutely need to watch the video all the way through!"

At that point I took over the explaining of the DSP and began giving students about a two-minute advising session after they had taken it. My explanation went something like this:

> We allow students to choose their own writing course. We have three levels of writing courses that you can choose from depending on your writing skills and your confidence in your writing. We don't place

> you based on your ACT score or your grades or anything like that. We believe that you know your writing skills better than anyone. What you are about to do here is not a placement test. It's just a questionnaire that will help guide you in choosing the right course for you. It will ask you questions about your experience with writing, your confidence in your writing ability, the kinds of feedback you got from teachers, etc. At the end of the questionnaire, a video will play that describes the class that, based on your answers, *seems to be* the right one for you, but it's still completely up to you. So, answer the questions as honestly as possible, and then watch the video all the way to the end and really think about whether that sounds like the right class for you. When you're done, I'll come over and talk to you about whether you think that's the right course or if you'd like to know more about the other two options.

This speech eventually became the transcript for the welcome video that plays at the beginning of the DSP questionnaire that we now use.

After students finished, I would come over and ask them if that placement sounded about right, if there was anything in the description that made them nervous or have concerns about. Very often, I would suggest that they watch one of the other videos so they could compare. Students seemed to take the DSP seriously and really think about which class was right for them, often asking further questions about the classes. A question I found incredibly helpful when students were having trouble choosing between two classes was something like, "Do you want to take a course where you feel very confident that you can be successful, or are you someone who likes to challenge yourself to do something a bit harder even if you might struggle to get the grade you want?" This question was great to get them thinking about what kind of experience they wanted to have in their first semester of college. Often students chose the lower option when I asked this question. After that first day, over half of the students stayed in Introduction to College Writing, and none went to Accelerated Composition. These numbers were much closer to what we had expected, and these numbers held fairly steady throughout the rest of the SOAR sessions. We continued to have myself or one of the people who had worked on the DSP attend SOAR, and the process seemed to work well.

At this point, we had several lingering issues that we needed to address. First, the person in charge of new student orientation wanted the DSP to be sent to students before SOAR so they could take it at home, and we could have them already registered for their composition class. I was not convinced this was the best choice, but we are going to give it a try. I was not confident that students would read the explanation of the DSP

carefully or would fully understand their agency in choosing their course. To counter this possibility, I created a video that plays before they start. It basically says exactly what I told students at SOAR (the transcript above). They are required to watch this video all the way through before starting (the "start" button doesn't appear until the video is finished playing). I also wasn't sure if they would watch the video explaining their recommendation all the way through and really think through their choices. I believed that the two-minute advising session I gave students at the end of the DSP was incredibly valuable in helping them decide effectively. In response to this concern, the placement was designed so that students are not able to click out of the program without watching the video all the way through, and we have several questions at the end such as, "does this placement sound right for you?" We also added a chart for easy reference when they are making their choice. It shows each course, the kinds of reading and writing done in that course, and the skill level and dispositions of students who typically take that course. The DSP ends with a question that states "I have chosen to take . . ." with a drop-down menu for them to choose from. We are hopeful that this will work well.

A second concern we had at that time was what to do with international students and dual credit students. All international students are required to take the TOEFEL for admission to the university, but for placement, they had, up to this point, all been taking the writing challenge. We had to decide whether to continue using the writing challenge, to create a separate DSP questionnaire for multilingual international students, or to simply have international students use the same DSP questionnaire as our domestic students. The CCCC advocates DSP as a viable and appropriate placement method for second language writers (*CCCC Statement*). In addition, Crusan as well as Ferris, Evans, and Kurser argue that DSP is an effective placement method for multilingual writers. These arguments being considered, we decided to move forward with having international students take the same DSP as all the rest of the students.

In addition, dual-credit (DC) students had been allowed to take Composition I in their high schools if they had the required ACT score. Over the past year, all DC students had been taking the writing challenge instead. However, it is a state requirement that we use the same placement method for DC students that we use for our incoming first-year students. So, while I have a bit less confidence in the effectiveness of DSP for DC students, because of the state requirement, we have to use it for them as well. We had to set up a separate survey platform for the DC students, and I made a separate welcome video that is more specific to DC. Also, since they don't have multiple options, we don't use the videos at the end. We just use their score.

At the end of the DSP, if they score forty or higher, they get a message that says, "Your score indicates that you might be prepared to take this course. However, please think carefully about whether you are really ready for this challenge before deciding." If they get below a forty, it just says, "Your score indicates that you are not quite ready for this class. Please take your regular high school English class instead." I have not seen any scholarship on using DSP for dual-credit composition, so this is new territory.

Lastly, we are already considering how we might assess the DSP in the short and long term. Aside from comparing completion rates and GPAs from before and after the DSP, we are also going to assess student perception. We are planning to do a simple assessment survey near the end of the term that asks the students to tell us whether they believe they made the right choice of course or whether they feel they should have been in a more challenging or less challenging class. This simple assessment will only give us student perceptions of whether the DSP worked effectively as a placement tool, but I think that's valuable information to have.

The lingering questions lead me to two last pieces of advice: (1) Understand that any large-scale program change is going to be complicated and time consuming and will take much longer than you hope to get into place; (2) Even after you have something in place, it will likely need constant monitoring, assessing, refining, and updating. In the end, even with the ups and downs and challenges of getting the DSP in place, I believe this will be a positive change for our students, and I hope that the story of our experience is informative and helpful to readers.

## Acknowledgment

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## Appendix: Final Version of Our DSP Questionnaire

*These questions are on a 4-point scale: strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1. Stating "strongly agree" on every question equals 64 points. Students get a recommendation of Introduction to College*

*Writing if their score is 39 or below, Composition I if their score is between 40 and 59, and Accelerated Composition if their score is 60 or higher.*

### *Relationship With Reading*

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your relationship with reading, and the role it plays in your life, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I read articles and books in my free time about topics that interest me.
- I read carefully and often take notes, especially when reading for school.
- I read most assigned reading for school without difficulty.
- I read a variety of texts in high school, including literature, non-fiction, essays, reports, news stories, fiction, poetry, etc.

### *Attitude toward Writing*

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your attitude toward writing, how you feel about it, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I enjoy learning and applying new ideas to my own writing.
- I feel confident organizing my paper around a focused idea.
- I feel confident revising, editing, and proofreading my own writing.
- I enjoy the challenge of working hard on writing difficult or complex papers.

### *Previous Writing Experience*

Please answer the following questions, reflecting on your previous experience in writing, whether in school, at work, or elsewhere.

- I have written at least two documents of 5 pages or more that received good grades and/or positive feedback.
- I have written at least three different types of writing, including essays, reports, news stories, fiction, poetry, that received good grades and/or positive feedback.
- I learned and improved based on the feedback and/or grades I received on writing assignments.
- Based on my previous experiences, including grades and/or feedback, I expect to do well in writing for college courses.

*Skills*

Please answer the following questions honestly, thinking about all the experiences and attitudes you've thought about throughout these questions, reflecting on your writing skills based on previous grades and/or feedback.

- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to adapt my writing style to different audiences and purposes.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to find, evaluate, and integrate sources in my writing.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to produce clear, readable sentences in an appropriate style.
- I have received good grades and/or positive feedback on my ability to craft an argument, a thesis effectively supported with evidence.

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*Essays*

# *2023 CWPA Conference Keynote*
# Students' Right to Their Own Language: The Gordian Knot of Social Justice for Writing Program Administrators

Dominic DelliCarpini

For WPAs, social justice lives in a liminal space between the personal and the professional. It involves us in both institutional and personal history, in administrative strategies, as well as self-examination. In this autoethnography, I'd like to explore key moments in my own, and the professions', attempts to do "social justice WPAing."

My thoughts are enriched by what I have learned from a true social justice activist—my wife, Rabiya Khan. What I have heard our community say about Rabiya is this: if there is a fight that requires a warrior, she is the one to turn to. She has done this work as an activist struggling against Islamophobia through the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an investigator and Commissioner for York City's Human Relations Commission, and an influential speaker on social justice issues in our community. I hope that one of the things that you will take away from my talk is that we cannot simply do social justice within academia. We must be bold like Rabiya and other activists who recognize language as a tool for either oppression or liberation.

## The Gordian Knot as Metaphor

First a few words about my use of the Gordian Knot as a metaphor for my discussion of the WPA's dilemma. As recounted by the Penn Museum,

> While at Gordian, [Alexander] the Macedonian king learned about a special wagon that was situated in the Temple of Zeus. The pole of the wagon was tied to the wagon body with an intricate knot of cornel bark, and a prophecy had foretold that whoever could unfasten the knot would go on to rule over Asia. Seized by a longing to test the prophecy, Alexander tried to unfasten the knot by unraveling it, but when he was unable to do so, he drew his sword and cut right

> through it. From this comes the proverbial expression "to cut the Gordian Knot," meaning to cut right to the heart of a matter without wasting time on external details. ("The Gordian Knot")

In other versions, Alexander does find a way to untie the knot. He removes the linchpin from the pole to which the cart was tied, exposing the two ends of the rope and making it possible to untie it. Those two versions might represent our choice as we look at the injustices around us: do we act swiftly and decisively, or shall we continue to look for linchpins that will allow us to unravel the puzzle?

Let's start with a prior question—one that is frequently, and pointedly, asked of us. What does social justice have to do with writing program administration? I might answer that question with Heather Andrea Williams' words from *Self-Taught*, words that Justice Sotomayor cited in her dissenting opinion on the recent affirmative action decision: because enslaved people "'fuse their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom,'" she frames literacy as an "instrument of resistance and liberation" which "provided the means to write a pass to freedom" (Sotomayor 3). Sotomayor reminds us that the desire to deny literacy is, in effect, a desire to deny freedom.

The message of Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) is similar. I invoke that resolution—and I do mean this as a type of invocation—because of its central ethical message, succinctly captured in these two sentences:

> The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. (Conference on College Composition and Communication 19)

So why is social justice our business? Because we are among the social groups with authority to exert this dominance (or not); we are among the social groups giving immoral (or moral) advice to humans. The things we do aren't just professional acts. They are social acts. So how we do those things matters a great deal. Viewed this way, perhaps one linchpin—to which our scholarship has continuously tied multiple scholarly knots—looks something like this: We administer programs for institutions that expect us to teach standardized writing skills. How can we do that without becoming a "social group [that] exert[s] its dominance over another"?

Most of us feel this knot in our gut. While many teachers confront it in their classrooms, WPAs feel the full force of challenges like those posed by the Committee on Language Policy:

> Shall we place our emphasis on what the vocal elements of the public think it wants, or on what the actual linguistic evidence indicates we should emphasize? . . . We must decide what elements of our discipline are really important to us, and whether we want to share with our students the richness of all varieties of language, encouraging linguistic virtuosity. (Conference on College Composition and Communication 21)

The Committee also quietly (if with some intended irony) offered a possible way out: "Shall we blame the business world by saying 'Well, we realize that human beings use language in a wide variety of ways, but employers demand a single variety'?" (Conference on College Composition and Communication 21). Indeed, that is one way to cut, or at least to avoid, the knot. Following that path, our job seems simpler: prepare students for "success" within a social structure that we know devalues other dialects. As WPAs, the pressures to take that path are real. They are inscribed within our job expectations—and perhaps may even keep the immediate interests of our students in mind.

But the stakes are higher now. Those who wish to restrict civil rights have a strategy, unleashed seemingly all at once, with shock and awe:

- Roe v. Wade. Gone.
- Affirmative action in college admissions. Gone.
- Protections against acts of discrimination by businesses. Going and likely to be gone.
- Book banning—gaining traction through Moms for Liberty.

Among those strategies is restricting speech and literacy—which includes valuing only dominant voices. And it is not just us who feels it. It is our students. It is the communities we serve. Democratic deliberation is itself under attack.

All of us have likely asked how we might pull on the rope of social justice without further tightening the rope around our programs' viability—without risking the life and careers of colleagues and students for whom we are responsible. In the history of our discipline, however, compromise has often derived from a lack of strategy. Linda Adler-Kassner's work has been a consistent reminder of that. In *The Activist WPA*, one of those reminders cites Karl Llwellyn: "Strategy without ideals is a menace; but ideals without strategy is a mess" (qtd. in Adler-Kassner 5). If our organizational infighting over the last few years has taught us anything, it is that we are indeed a bit of a mess.

I worry too that, under these pressures, we have come to accept—even rely upon—our identity as targets, acting as the frog in the old parable: put it boiling water and it jumps out; put it in cold water and bring it slowly to a boil, and the frog remains and dies. We have been at a slow boil for some time, something I can see as I think back over a career of watching such moments.

I was a student already in 1971 when SRTOL was being written by a CCCC working group. As I innocently learned standardized English in an eighth-grade English class at the nearly all-white St. Katherine of Sienna Elementary School (and there is no one quite like Catholic nuns to guard language purity), there was a group of progressive scholars at work on SRTOL. When it was adopted by CCCC's Executive Committee in 1972, I was an entering secondary student at Archbishop Carroll H.S. in suburban Philadelphia. By the time it was published in *College Composition and Communication* in fall 1974, I was a junior there.

I, of course, was blissfully unaware of any of this. But I was aware that something was in the wind that felt like change. We were reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the Beat and Harlem Renaissance poets, and treating the activist lyrics of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan as the new poetry. As I was experiencing atrocities through a child's eyes—the 1968 My Lai massacre in Viet Nam, the 1970 Kent State shootings, the 1972 Wounded Knee uprisings, as well as the oppression of civil rights activists and the assassinations of beloved civil rights leaders—my teachers had the freedom to teach from the world in which we were living. That is one of the important freedoms that is now being taken from educators—and from our students as they try to process all of this.

Yet even in that more progressive era, when reading was less constrained, the right to exercise ownership of writing was still off-limits, seen as the province of only "creative writers." For the rest of us, language had rules—rules that, according to those that taught us, were the pillars of the polite, civilized, and educated (i.e., MLA-compliant and white academic) society. In my privileged world, that was relatively comfortable; the language of my culture just needed some "finishing." But my recent work in the York, Pennsylvania community and with undergraduate researchers has made me mindful of how much larger and more painful a leap it is for others.

I am aware that my classmates and I experienced others' dialects largely as spectacle, as voyeurs getting a peak at exotic language and lived experiences outside of what we saw as the norm. Still, with all these limitations, I got a glimpse of a world where language's rules were not the measure of language's effectiveness. It left an impression. Those experiences are now under attack. School boards, and the Orwellian-named "Moms for Liberty," are

taking books away from young readers, and courts are taking people of color away from our college classrooms. Both will make our ability to do social justice work more difficult and less effective.

So why does this matter to me? As a privileged (but first-generation) college student, I advanced on the shoulders of a previous generation of DelliCarpini and Pellechia immigrants who never attended College—none of them—and for whom English was a second language. But it was what I learned from my ancestors—in their mix of English and their mother tongues—that drove my own language proficiency.

I became proficient at writing because my father was unable to write Edited American English. An Italian immigrant, he started his career in the sweatshops of New York's garment district. As he started to earn a living wage, he felt that all businesses—retailers, contractors, service providers—were out to cheat him. So, the deal he made with me was this: If he felt that he had been cheated (which was almost always), he would ask me to write a letter of complaint. If we received a refund or compensation, we split it. So, as a young student, I did not learn about the sophists. I was one. I was a hired language gun. That was my education in early Greek rhetoric. See figure 1.

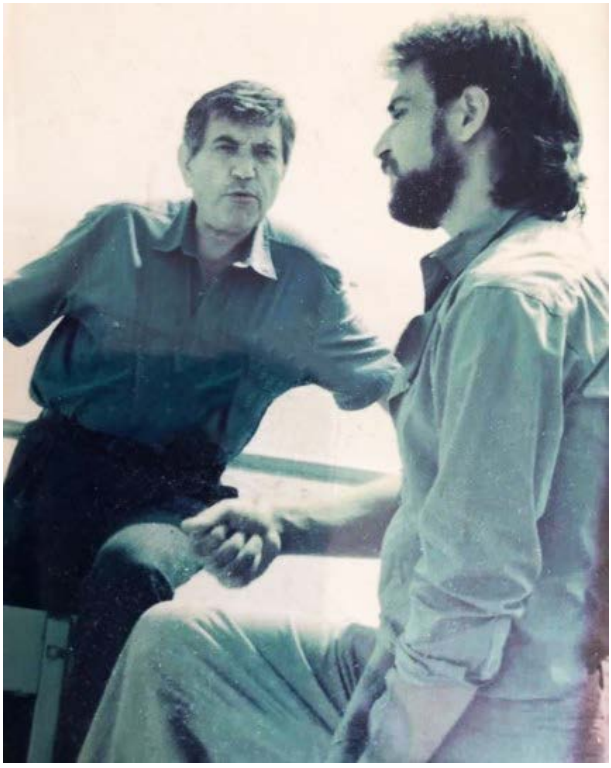

Figure 1. Domenick DelliCarpini, father of the author, counseling his son Dominic. Photo by Lisa DelliCarpini (reprinted with permission).

I also learned about rhetoric from watching my uncles play bocce, where they showed me that rhetoric was superior to geometry and physics. The winner wasn't determined by who actually got their bocce ball closest to the *pallino*. It was decided by who could convince the others that it was closer. They never measured; they argued until someone conceded. That was my education in Roman rhetoric. See figure 2.

Figure 2. Men arguing about whose bocce ball is closest to the pallino without benefit of a measuring device (reprinted by permission of INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo).

But their world was not what my parents wanted for me. They pushed me to pursue a college education so that (as my father always said), I wouldn't end up as a "ditch-digger." As a young adult, I didn't know why that was his term of choice. Only later did I realize why. My father had watched his father work as a "ditch digger" for the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Depression. My father later told me that when the Corps members didn't have enough work to do planting trees, they were made to simply dig ditches and then fill them back in—an early version, I suppose, of "welfare reform" to keep folks from getting lazy. That was my "three Cs," emblazoned on the shovel my dear, ditch-digging Grandpa used—and that I still use. And yes, I am in the possession of stolen government property, for which I'm sure Dad is smiling down on me. See figures 3, 4, and 5.

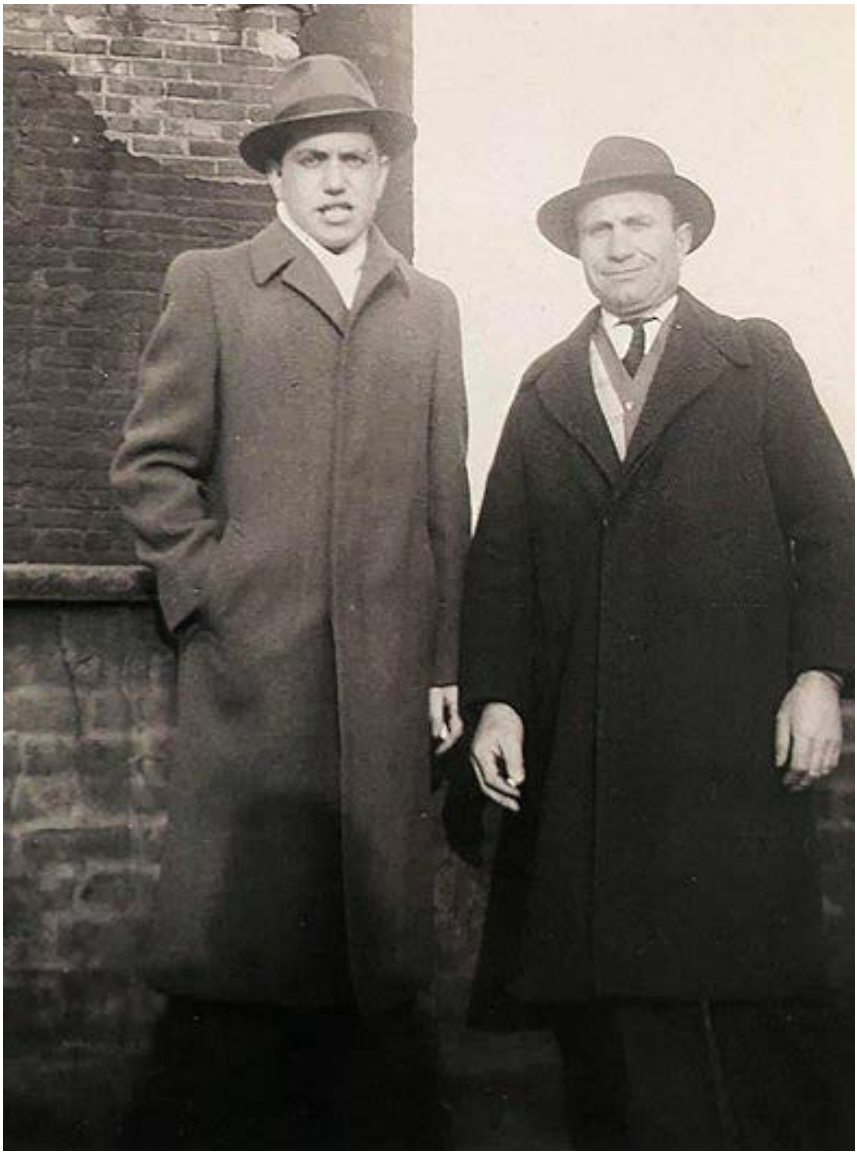

Figure 3. Domenick DelliCarpini and Giovanni DelliCarpini, the authors' father and grandfather, posing near their Bronx, NY home. Photo from DelliCarpini family albums.

Figure 4. Grandpa's Civilian Conservation Corps shovel, used in his "ditch-digging" days with the Civilian Conservation Corps. Photo by Dominic DelliCarpini.


Figure 5. Detail of Grandpa's Civilian Conservation Corp shovel showing the CCC inscription. Photo by Dominic DelliCarpini.

When I moved on to college, I needed to take on a new persona. I became even whiter. Handed the opportunity to move beyond my family's lack of access to higher education, I climbed to the pinnacle of white privilege: I studied literature at the University of Pennsylvania. I had moved as far as a person could from ditch digger; I studied the Liberal Arts. That is, until my family roots made me start to feel useless and guilty.

After graduating with my BA in English and having the usual English Major "what next" moment, I taught high school English in Philadelphia and its working-class suburbs. I began my teaching career with underprepared students in South Philly (called "4th track students"—those without hope of college). Two things happened as I taught those students: First, I realized that I could help them toward literacy by building on their natural language skills and lived experience—South Philly Italians, who felt very much like my people, can be very persuasive. Second, I lived in the community in which I taught—Philadelphia's "Little Italy." There, I recovered proficiency in my mother tongue—the language of urban, working-class Italians. Yo, Yous know what I mean?

Through all of this, I was unaware of SRTOL, the resolution; I was simply observing that when their own language was valued, students' self-esteem, confidence, and ability to communicate ideas improved dramatically.

The real watershed moment came at a recent Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies. As part of my work as Naylor Endowed Professor, and through the generous endowment offered by Mr. Irv Naylor, York College has for the last nine years sponsored an annual workshop that invites undergraduates from around the country to gather and work on their research in progress—a small, undergraduate version of Dartmouth's Seminar for Writing Research. The Naylor Workshop has given me insight into what matters to our students and what they ask of us. Their work is often not a disembodied intellectual interest, but an affective attachment directly related to their identity and lived experience. I saw these motives in their applications to attend, which I shared in my recent article in *Pedagogy*:

- Maria Clara Melo of Florida State University wrote, "I'm a first generation Brazilian–American Queer woman and trauma seems to stick to me like lovebugs to a windshield during a Florida June" (qtd in DelliCarpini 11).
- Kayla Watabu from the University of Hawaii wrote, "Rhetoric became a way to understand the condition of our existence. I saw how rhetoric can be used to both construct and deconstruct identities and realities. As a person of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) descent, I believe studying rhetoric and its impact on our identity to be a significant part of my kuleana (responsibilities, privileges, duties) …giving voice to those that do not have the same privileges as I do" (12).
- Alan McKenzie of Marymount Manhattan College offered this: "My interest in literacy education started almost 10 years ago when I had to repeat the 3rd grade. It was a dark period of my life filled with humiliation and alienation. Not only did I feel like I was incompetent and slow, I also felt misunderstood by my teachers. . . This is exactly why Hip-Hop pedagogy is needed in education. Like many children my age, Hip-Hop is the only place where I saw my struggles and circumstances authentically displayed. In the times we live in today, where so many minorities in this country feel marginalized and alienated by society, education and literacy can arm them with the knowledge to combat oppression" (12).
- And Nidhi Gandhi from Hofstra explained, "This [work] is important to me as a researcher because, as an immigrant with immigrant

> parents, I can see the communication problems my parents have when conversing with native English speakers" (12).

The principles embodied in students like these made the core principles of SRTOL more urgent, especially when Nidhi stood up in our final general session and said (without anger, but with commitment): "You all love to talk about student's right to their own language. When are you going to actually allow us that?" Nidhi's question leads us back to the knots we feel as WPAs. Why do we have so little freedom to follow what we know from our research? Why can't we build our programs (like other fields) on disciplinary knowledge without public outrage? At first, I thought it was just because we have strayed into social justice instead of staying within our "designated area," to borrow a term from Linda Brodkey's work.

But now I'm wondering something else. Perhaps we in fact do have some power, voice, and authority? Perhaps we should, with Justice Sotomayor and Justice Jackson, have faith in the power of offering dissenting opinions—and helping students offer dissenting opinions in their own voices. But our history tells different stories, stories of surrender.

## Brodkey v. the Conservative Media, or a Genealogy of the "White Guilt Trip" Narrative (circa 1990)

It did not take long for the backlash against the social uprisings of my childhood to visit. The policies of Ronald Reagan (1981–89), George H. W. Bush (1989–1993), and Bill Clinton (1993–2001), were responses to the civil and human rights revolts of the decades before. In our profession, those times brought things like the so-called troubles in Texas—which many of you have read about, but which I lived through at a formative moment.

As I entered my PhD program at Penn State in 1990, the backlash over Linda Brodkey's "Writing about Difference" curriculum was being debated in both public and academic venues. In May 1990, Kirby Moss interviewed University of Texas (UT) English Department Chair, Joseph Kruppa, for the *Austin American-Statesman*. Kruppa explained that the curriculum "will allow students a chance to examine landmark court decisions on civil rights and affirmative action" and that it was "designed to show the necessity of understanding social implications of differences of race, ethnic background, age, gender, sexual preference and religion" (qtd. in Moss B2).

At the same time, Kruppa justified the course within more conventional outcomes. He noted that those materials played a similar role to composition "readers," and that "Freshman composition will still basically be a course in argumentation—how to weigh evidence and build cohesive

arguments" He assured the reporter that "students will also continue to write compositions after receiving classroom instruction on how to plan and organize their topics" (B2).

But more troubling was the fact that Kruppa felt the need to extricate the course from the lived experience of UT students. He assured Moss that "the change is *not* a reaction to spring demonstrations at UT seeking ethnic diversity." "The change," said Kruppa, "was planned 'concurrent' to the protests." This, despite the fact that Kruppa also admitted on the record that "actually a lot of this was already happening on campus because students wanted to discuss ethnic and racial issues" (B2).

I cite this at length not to be critical of Dr. Kruppa. In fact, as administrators, we certainly can empathize. We frequently tie ourselves into knots as we try to explain what we do. I note it to raise a few other facts of our lives: 1) we feel compelled to apologize (in both the common and rhetorical sense) for examining social justice issues in our classroom; 2) we feel compelled to subordinate social justice work to protecting language purity as we administer what Sharon Crowley has called the "universal requirement" of FYW; and, 3) we often feel compelled to ardently deny that our curriculum is a response to students' lived experience.

But when we accept the premise that teaching argument is only an academic exercise—that it should not be tied to the identities and experiences of our students—we concede too far. After all, it's not as if after conceding a few points, the curriculum was blessed; instead, it was attacked more vehemently in public venues and put on hold by the Dean, much to the delight of columnists like William Murchison of the *Kilgore News Herald*. In August 1990, Murchison called the course "a lousy idea," and went on to assure readers that "we can relax at last" because "The dean of liberal arts, Dr. Standish Meacham . . . has shelved 'Difference—Racism and Sexism' for a year's study. Cremation would have been a more fitting solution" (Murchison 4).

We should have learned by now that when we concede our values, the reaction is not gracious. It is to continue to burn them until they are ash. Simply stated, this ain't working.

Particularly telling are the reasons why Murchison calls the course "a stinker"—all familiar parts of our Gordian Knot. After adding the obligatory "nobody denies, I hope, that educated people need to understand the various cultural strands that make up America," Murchison asks, "Do you center an English composition course on the viewpoint—telegraphed in the course title—that it's time to write about the great evils that society must combat and overcome? How does this make for objective thinking? Or for objective grading?" (Murchison 4).

He also ties us up in the "universal requirement" knot of our own making (this was "a syllabus to which 3,000 freshmen would have been subjected") and the language purity myth ("Were the students going to learn to write clear English—or to think Correct Thoughts?"). He even capitalizes "Correct Thoughts," emphasizing his belief that this course sounds "like Indoctrination 101" and that it imposes upon "White America," a "guilt trip" (Murchison 4). Future policies in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere had their test case.

But, if we listen closely, we might also hear some fear in the "we can relax at last." There was anxiety that 3,000 first-year students would be asked to read court documents about civil rights as related to race and sexism. There is worry that it might allow for discussion of students' concerns about ethnic diversity. Brodkey was onto something. Asking students to read and consider primary source documents that are affecting the world in which they will live is not indoctrination. It is a lesson in civics, active citizenship, and analytical reading—and even conservative thinkers agree that attention to American civics is much needed. We had exposed a removable linchpin that might have helped us unravel the knot; but instead of pulling it out, we surrendered. Six years later, in 1996, we waved the white flag again.

## School Board Culture Wars, WPA Outcomes, and/or Rhetoricians as Change Agents (circa 1996)

Six years after the Troubles in Texas came the Troubles in Oakland. The Oakland School Board, citing linguistic evidence that Ebonics featured "systematic, rule-governed and predictable patterns" of grammar—that is, that it constituted a legitimate language—resolved that

> As in the case of Asian-American, Latino-American, Native American, and all other pupils in this district who come from backgrounds or environments where a language other than English is dominant, African-American pupils shall not, because of their race, be subtly dehumanized, stigmatized, discriminated against, or denied.

This, like SRTOL, called out "an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another." The media backlash was swift, as seen in an editorial by Brent Staples of *The New York Times.* In that editorial, Staples

- refers to Ebonics as "broken, inner-city English," as "street talk" and as "urban slang";
- claims that Ebonics "patronizes inner-city children, holding them to abysmally low standards";

- objects to "declaring all students to be equal regardless of whether they have difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language"; and
- asserts that the resolution will undermine serious education as "time that should be spent on reading and algebra gets spent giving high fives and chattering away in street language" and will further isolate "children who are already cut off from mainstream values and ideas."

If we can look beyond the stereotypes about AAV and African-Americans, we find many of the usual tropes—most centrally that our primary goal should be educating students in "mainstream values and ideas" (i.e., the dominant culture's ideas and values). Much like the Brodkey case in higher education, this case brought literacy education at the secondary level under scrutiny.

But we don't seem to know how to defend what we know, at least not publicly, even when we are right. In response to public outcry, the resolution was amended. As noted by Baugh, "the amended text expresses the aim of . . . 'a program featuring African Language System principles to move students from the language patterns they bring to school to English proficiency'" (qtd. in Messier 6). The concept—that students' own language has value—was re-framed as a bridge to teaching "English proficiency"—i.e., standardized English. That still makes "the language patterns they bring to school" not just different, but wrong, inferior, of less value—and makes our job homogenization.

At the same time that the Ebonics debate was playing out, work on the WPA Outcomes Statement was beginning. There are, of course, multiple narratives of why and how the WPA Outcomes Statement, perhaps CWPA's most influential document, came to be. As chronicled in 2023 by Patricia Freitag Ericsson, on March 13, 1996, Gordon Grant (University of Charleston) asked WPA-L list members for "a pithy and effective list of objectives for their writing programs," since the members of the committee drafting outcomes for writing "either refuse or are unable to acknowledge that a body of scholarship guides our work, and they are relying on their own prejudices and memory of their own current-traditional classroom experiences" (1-2). In response, Roni Keane agreed, noting that it would be "useful for people like myself who are the only ones in their departments who are trained in the field" and would provide "some 'authority' to invoke when we find ourselves under siege" (Ericsson 3).

The WPA Outcomes Statement was written to give such isolated and beleaguered WPAs "some 'authority' to invoke when we find ourselves under siege." It accomplished that purpose for me as a new WPA and for

many others. Yet, when we layer SRTOL over it, the knot again tightens. The recent CWPA turmoil has raised questions not only about the content of the Outcomes Statement, but whether we can or should have one. The question of whether this Outcomes statement, or any revision of it, is still of value as "a curricular document that speaks to the common expectations, for students, of first-year composition programs in the United States" (Yancey 323) remains.

That question is beyond the scope of this talk; but if we believe the Outcome Statement's premise that FYC should help students learn "the relationships among language, knowledge, and power," (Yancey 324) we must create opportunities for students to inquire into that power dynamic, much like the undergraduate researchers at the Naylor Workshop.

## An Ex-WPA as an Agent of Social Change (2015–2023)

Before bringing us back to 2023, let's have one last glance at the past. 1996 also saw the publication of Ellen Cushman's landmark essay, "The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change." In this essay, Cushman called out the "colonizing ideology" of scholars who "maintain a distance from people" (11) as they do community-based research. In 1997, I became the WPA at York College, and focused my attention to the civic goals of FYW in that role.

But it is my current work as Dean of our Center for Community Engagement that made clear that we cannot afford to maintain a scholarly distance from our communities. As Cushman reminds us, language is always already embodied in people, in their sincere need to express their thoughts, emotions, aspirations—and (as I have seen in a deeply segregated and impoverished York City) their grief and their longing. We cannot separate language from the multiple tongues that speak it and the multiple hands that write it. Our students, and our communities, are crying out for both tangible and moral support. While admissions departments may be compelled to ignore race and the history of racial inequity, we need not do so. It is wrong to go out into the community as anthropologists, ready to study other cultures from a distance without returning anything to them. And we ought not blame the business world for only accepting a homogenous language while we uphold the structure that homogenizes it.

My work in the community has helped me to let go of my own false biases that one "community" is fundamentally better than the other because it is more prosperous—and that one language style is fundamentally better than another because it is the *lingua franca*. Yes, generally speaking, the places where people use standardized English are more prosperous, and

certainly enjoy more privilege. But better? And is communication stronger in my suburban home than in the impoverished city in which I work and in which people lend support to one another every day? Not in my experience. Yet somehow—and it likely comes from a place of kindness and a sense of justice—we came to believe that it was in our authority to recognize, or not, the viability of various community languages. My work in these challenged communities has helped me to see language variety as a form of community identity. Communities don't need us to affirm their right to their own language; they own and use it anyway, and quite effectively.

The use of standardized language is not a natural condition for entry to prosperity; it is (as universal design would suggest) a fabricated barrier that academia has constructed for entry. If entry to our culture requires the loss of identity, then what are we to say to students like the ones I cited, who are committed to social justice?

We may have missed from the start more effective ways to defend SRTOL. We might start by articulating our reasons for SRTOL differently—not as an act of graciousness, but as largely for the benefit of monolingual students who lack experience with larger cultural competencies and communication methods that are embedded in our communities. Those are the students who would benefit by learning about the very effective dialects and language styles used in various communities as part of what higher education is fond of calling "preparation for the real world." The real world is diverse, speaks many languages and dialects, and requires multiple language competencies. We can only prepare students for it by being less prescriptive and by valuing our students' experiences with varied language styles beyond our classrooms. Engagement with our communities—and I mean our own engagement, not just students—can help us to build a less constricted real world, if we add the tools of reflection, respect, and rhetoric (a new three R's).

What I've been wondering, and I what I invite you to wonder with me, is this: what would happen if we ignored those who control access to, and forms of, literacy education in our classrooms, asserted what power we do have, and slipped out the back door of the classroom (with our students) and into our communities.

That is where people already know their rights, where they already exercise their own languages, and where people don't tie themselves up in knots.

## An Afterword (2024)

This piece combines a somewhat self-indulgent review of my own life and career with a call to see the moral obligations that inform our work as

WPAs. Drafting this plenary address as I near the end of my career was a deeply emotional experience for me. I recalled my first experiences as a novice WPA, learning how to do this work at the WPA Workshop in Houghton, Michigan in 1997, where I was touched by the genuine care and counsel I received. I revisited my time as CWPA President, a responsibility I took on to repay old debts to this organization, but which is not without its own regrets for opportunities lost. And I recalled my four decades as a teacher of writing, during which time I was keenly aware of students' right to their own language because my family language was not that of the academy. Though as a WPA, I refused to allow a strict focus on Edited American English to exclude the language that our students brought with them to the classroom, I also feel remorse that, like many of us, I did not do enough.

As I look now at the struggles of CWPA to survive our recent reckoning with exclusionary practices that silenced the voices of women, of minoritized peoples, and of those whose first language is not (standardized) English, I wonder if the humane practices that originally knit me to this organization can still save us. In a deeply violent world, and in an academy increasingly starved for resources, the impulse to burn it all down is understandable. The coming years will determine whether the generosity of spirit that drove this organization can be extended to those whose voices we have silenced—not only students, faculty, and administrators, but communities whose citizens we will never see in our classrooms because of the deep inequities and iniquities of language policies. My central hope is that we can work together to make CWPA a voice for those communities, relinquishing power to those whose natural languages have much to teach us.

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# Exclusive of Ourselves: Private Multilingualisms in the Writing Center

Lizzie Hutton

Abstract

*Drawing on a mixed methods study (IRB 03832e), this article investigates how undergraduate and graduate consultants in an English-dominant writing center conceptualize the benefits and potential limitations afforded by their own and their colleagues' multilingualism, and it explores the specific ways they understand such knowledge to apply—or not—to their work with the diversity of writers they support. Ultimately, I argue that WPAs can better confront minoritizing language ideologies of the culture-at-large through more explicitly encouraging English-proficient consultants' explorations of their own complex, and often invisible, linguistic identities and resources. Indeed, and as my findings suggest, failing to encourage such explorations can leave such ideologies under scrutinized, as well as leaving students' own diverse linguistic resources unrecognized and untapped.*

For two decades, scholars have called for WPAs to actively combat monolingual and standard language ideologies, especially given the extent to which such ideologies maintain a status quo of "social inequality and inequity" (Weisser et al., 2020). Drawing on the work of Suresh Canagarajah (2006), who has long argued for "pluralizing academic writing" through pedagogies attending to students' varieties of "multilingual competence" (586), such calls frequently invoke the concept of translanguaging (e.g., Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011; Bou Ayash, 2019; Wang, 2019). As Allana Frost, Julia Kiernan, and Suzanne Blum Malley (2020) explain, a translingual approach seeks to help students understand "language as fluid and actional across social contexts" (p. 4): not as separable bundles of know-how but as a coherent, ever-evolving body of knowledge that can be leveraged for a variety of communicative tasks.

Yet calls for pluralization in scenes of writing instruction and support often exclude from their purview those students an institution has deemed English-proficient, regardless of many of these students' multilingual realities. This tendency is understandable; those considered lacking in proficiency are some of those most consistently harmed by the deficit narratives that standard and monolingual ideologies have naturalized. Nonetheless, to focus on second language learners alone runs counter to some of the

core principles attributed to a translanguaging construct: that linguistic proficiency is a far-from-stable construct; and that apparent proficiency in a dominant discourse does not justify the erasure of the linguistic heterogeneity often undergirding it (Matsuda, 2006; Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011).

Nor does such an elision in the scholarship constitute only a theoretical gap. This elision also denies administrators, as well as the students and instructors they support, more inclusive frameworks for exploring linguistic heterogeneity, in its many complex manifestations. As Bruce Horner (2020) notes, cultivating "translingual dispositions" is beneficial not only for students deemed to lack proficiency in an institution's dominant language(s); the critical awareness such dispositions foster is crucial for all students, however they linguistically identify, or, often more to the point, however they have already been identified by an institutional sponsor.

This study responds to such an elision by exploring the varied multilinguistic conceptions and identities reported by a set of university students who, while themselves linguistically diverse, also hold, by dint of their position as writing center consultants, institutionally sanctioned positions as relative "experts" in academia's dominant discourses. Given this positionality, this study's participants reveal the complex tensions that often mark such students' views of their own varied forms of multilingualism and the value of these varied linguistic resources. My findings raise important questions about how writing center administrators—and WPAs more generally—might more substantively explore and challenge pervasive standard language ideologies, and might better foster, within and for the units and institutions they serve, genuinely expansive conceptions of linguistic heterogeneity and its benefit for all learners.

## Conceptions of Multilingualism in the Writing Center

In the writing center literature, as in much of the writing studies literature, the term multilingual is often used interchangeably with second language learner—to describe students whom institutional standards have deemed not yet properly proficient in English (e.g., Rafoth, 2015; Weisser et al., 2020),[1] and whose challenges navigating U.S. higher education can be particularly steep. In many if not all college courses, after all, instructors will expect these students' writing to exhibit a level of English proficiency that often cannot be achieved without extra support. How exactly writing centers should provide this support has long been a central concern animating the scholarship (e.g., Thonus, 2014; Rafoth, 2015; Bruce & Rafoth, 2016; Condon & Olson, 2016; Cirillo, Del Russo, & Leahy, 2016).

Parallel to these pragmatic concerns is the growing conviction among writing center scholars that all writers, whatever their assigned level of so-called proficiency in English, would benefit from pedagogies that actively deconstruct standard language and monolingual ideologies (Blazer & Fallon, 2020; Elabdali, 2022). These calls for change join a growing chorus in the writing and literacy studies scholarship that promotes critical language awareness (CLA) as a core pillar of anti-racist, linguistically just reading-writing instruction and support across the K-16 spectrum (e.g., Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice*, 2020; Gere et al, 2021; Shapiro, 2022), an awareness that, Sarah Summers (2020) argues, writing centers can also help to cultivate.

Also relevant to such writing center pedagogies is the scholarship unpacking the institutionalized assumptions about multilingualism that underlay many of these minoritizing tendencies. Here, Paul Kei Matsuda (2006) offers particular insight. Matsuda's "Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity" calls out U.S. higher education's propensity to position English-only monolingualism not only as superior to linguistic heterogeneity, but as comprising all U.S. college writers' default status, unless otherwise and explicitly marked. His "Lure of Translingual Writing" (2014) expands this argument by observing that students' mixed language backgrounds are not always as visible, in writing or otherwise, as the scholarship often presumes. As Matsuda (2014) argues, multilingual writers will not always present as such—or, in some cases, choose to present as such—across the varied contexts in which they speak and write. Barbara George and Ana Marie Wetzl's (2020) study offers a case in point. Investigating mixed-language rustbelt college students' literacy practices, these researchers reveal the "self-silencing" (para. 7) that many students perform in their efforts to conform to the monolingual ideology they perceive to have thoroughly pervaded higher education.

While not the focus of this article's investigation, also worth noting are recent critiques of English-only monolingualism as a category descriptor that can uphold undeniably racialized language ideologies. As Vivian Presiado and Brittany Frieson (2021) observe, much of the translanguaging research K-12 U.S. classrooms risks contributing to the "erasure of Black language" by failing to recognize the complexity of the multilinguistic repertoires that Black language makes available to students whom researchers might otherwise classify as "English-only" (p. 390) (see also Do and Rowan). April Baker-Bell (2020, "Dismantling") relatedly argues for a pedagogy of linguistic justice that recognizes the rich stores of multilingual knowledge developed by students conversant in both Black English and what she calls "White Mainstream English" after Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman (2012). As these scholars show, a myth of linguistic

homogeneity and monolingual ideology contributes not only to the marginalization of L2 students, but to an instructional and scholarly failure to recognize the multilinguistic diversity of Englishes that many students already use.[2]

Altogether, such research suggests that designing more inclusive pedagogies requires that WPAs and students together develop newly expansive ways of defining and discussing multilingualism and linguistic heterogeneity. As Jonathan Hall (2018) notes, at stake is not only the field's increasing recognition that institutionally marked second language students require support. Also relevant is the insufficiency of the very categories traditionally used to sort students' language backgrounds, identities, and levels of proficiency (e.g., L1, L2, gen 1.5, "target" and "home" languages). Students' linguistic realities are far more fluid and complex, in ways both marked and unmarked, than these designations always indicate. Encouraging students' visibly mixed language performances as literate agents is crucial, to be sure. But equally important are students' explorations of the language identities and ideologies that undergird these practices and forms of self-presentation (Bou Ayash, 2019).

As contributors to the recent *Out in the Center* edited collection argue, investigations of identity can be fraught in sites of peer-centered writing support (Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère & Sicari, 2019). Especially significant to such investigations, these scholars argue, is research entailing "writing center administrators listening to and learning from their tutors and their private experiences in the writing center" (p. 9). Of course, no study centered on identity should promote involuntary disclosure, much less the imposition of essentializing identity categories. Yet, as this collection underscores, exploring the complexities of writers' and consultants' identities can help reveal where and how, even in the best-intentioned environments, dominant ideologies can maintain their power by a kind of default: an untested presumption of consensus and homogeneity.

In this same edited collection, Tammy S. Conard-Salvo (2018) observes that writing centers' purported commitments to pluralism are not always extended to the multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual realities of their own practitioners—realities that, due to the positions these practitioners hold, may be particularly subject to varied forms of "self-silencing." And the extent to which writing center practitioners recognize—or elide—these diverse identities matters. Writing center theorists have long posited that the most productive and ethical forms of peer writing support emerge from reflection and collaborative, reciprocal learning—a project wherein peer consultants engage with the complexities of literacy learning just as much as the writers they support. An ethos of empathy and inclusivity,

however, will ring somewhat hollow if consultants, and the administrators who lead them, hold themselves apart from the linguistically heterogenous identities and ecosystems they otherwise work to help students recognize and navigate. For when the reality and benefits of one's own diversities remain invisible, a standard language ideology will easily remain ascendent. Such an ideology can only be fully challenged through candid explorations of the linguistic diversity at the core of our own community members' work—an exploration that this study begins to undertake.

## Research Study

This study was designed to help writing center practitioners—peers and administrators alike—"listen and learn" (as Denny, Mundy, Naydan, Sévère & Sicari, 2019, put it) from one set of writing center consultants' "private experiences" and attendant conceptions of their own and their writing center colleagues' multilingualisms. It aimed to explore the nature of consultants' multilingualism and its visibility to other members of the writing center community, how consultants understood such multilingualism to shape their conceptions of language and writing, and how consultants understood such multilingualism to impact their support of student writers.

Given these questions, it was methodologically important to design a study that acknowledged the delicacy of exploring consultants' "private experiences" and conceptions, especially regarding the good reasons some might have for wanting to maintain such privacy. Linguistic identity often intersects, and/or is presumed to intersect, with varied other identity affiliations, including those related to race, nationality, or educational background, and which themselves are often subject to further assumptions, associations, and forms of marginalization. Because surveys can glean participants' perceptions on issues they might prefer to discuss anonymously (Salem, 2019)—particularly for research conducted by a scholar who is also the participants' employer and supervisor—this study (IRB 03832e) employed a voluntary, anonymous survey, using open- and close-ended questions, and brief, voluntary follow-up interviews. I then analyzed this data using grounded coding, identifying patterns in how consultants described and appeared to conceptualize their own and their fellow consultants' multilingualism; and their perceptions of multilingualism's particular affordances for their work as writing consultants.[3]

In an effort, moreover, to capture the complexity of these consultants' linguistic experiences and conceptions, my instruments used a deliberately capacious definition of multilingualism: the ability to use more than one

language on a semi-regular basis. When asking about participants' linguistic backgrounds, I avoided the terms L1, L2, native, and non-native. My protocols instead focused on where (at home, in school, through friends, or social situations) and at what age (before age 5, age 5–10, age 11–16, age 17–21, age 21 and beyond) participants learned either English or their other language(s), as well as, if applicable, the contexts in which they continue to use their other language(s). That said, I followed the general trend of the writing center literature in defining multilingualism as knowledge of English and at least one other non-English language; after all, this is the framework with which most U.S. educational institutions describe students' language competencies, and I suspected that some participants would feel unsure answering questions that were not aligned with this definition.

### *Site and Participants*

The writing center where this study took place—and that I direct—employs 30–40 undergraduate and graduate consultants each year and devotes significant energy to grounding consultants' practices in both contemporary writing center scholarship and the research-based principles about writing and learning foundational to the larger Center for Writing Excellence of which we are a part. In training courses and professional development seminars, consultants consider, among other issues, the varied ways that literacy is social, rhetorical, and requires the consistent negotiation of language differences. On the topic of language differences, consultants read scholarship by Frankie Condon and Bobbi Olson (2016), Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010), and Paul Matsuda and Michelle Cox (2011).

As to our larger context: the writing center serves a mid-sized, R2 university comprised of a main residential campus and three regional campuses. Anecdotally, students tend to describe this main campus as demographically homogenous; it is located in a small, somewhat expensive and mainly white midwestern town whose nearest (and more demographically diverse) cities are between twenty and fifty minutes away by car, and with a limited public transportation infrastructure. The student body is relatively affluent (2021-22 institutional data shows 13% reporting from low-income households), predominantly white (75%) and predominantly domestic (9% reporting as international). As to the linguistic backgrounds of the writers the center supports, 10% of writers making appointments in the 2021–2022 academic year identified as multilingual (though the number may well be higher: 15% declined to answer this question); 9% identified as international (with 20% declining to answer).[4]

I invited all writing center consultants to participate in this study, whatever their linguistic background. Of thirty-five invitations sent, twenty-three completed the anonymous survey, and four further participated in a follow-up interview. Of survey participants, sixteen were undergraduates and seven were graduate students. Of interview participants, two were undergraduates and two were graduate students. I refer to interview participants by pseudonyms: Harper, Ren, Nicole, and Peter. To maintain survey participants' anonymity, I did not ask about disciplinary backgrounds; I can, however, attest that our consultants in general hail from a wide range of majors. Details regarding participants' linguistic profiles will be provided below.

My own positionality should also be acknowledged. Since I am a monolingual,[5] white, cisgender woman, I do not bring to this research any lived experience of feeling subjected to the minoritizing presumptions sometimes attached to multilingualism, especially in academic contexts. No one, throughout my education and career, has questioned my proficiency either in English in general or in the dominant forms of English valued in the contexts where I have worked as a student and faculty member. That said, at both my current and previous institution, I have spent more than twenty years teaching and consulting with undergraduate and graduate writers from a range of linguistic backgrounds, where I observed both the stores of critical awareness these students brought to their academic work as well as the performances of monolingualism that they often also strove and/or seemed to feel compelled to enact. This project emerged from my growing suspicion that students' linguistic resources might be more complex and heterogenous than our traditional intuitional categories recognize, and that this might be especially true for students institutionally positioned as particularly accomplished in writing. If so, I reasoned, more focused effort might be needed in helping such students to recognize both the reality of this heterogeneity and its benefit for their work as writers and writing center practitioners.

## Finding One: The Presence and Invisibility of Consultant Multilingualism

One aim of this research was to better understand consultants' understanding of their own and others' linguistic diversity, by gleaning both the scope of these consultants' own multilingualism and their awareness of their colleagues' multilingualism. As to scope, only three survey participants identified as international students, but almost half (43%, or ten out of 23) identified as multilingual. Put in the context of the writing center more broadly,

these numbers revealed that, of all consultants, including those who did not take the survey, 29% at the very least (or 10 out of 35) would self-identify as multilingual.

As already noted, my survey used a capacious definition of multilingual—as an identifier not limited only to so-called international or second language learners. Still, the number of consultants who self-identified as multilingual surprised me. Based on my experience with these students—having taught them in a small training course, where they frequently reflected on their literacy experiences and practices, and continuing to interact with them as supervisor and mentor—I would have estimated a far smaller number. Yet, as one of the survey participants noted, linguistic diversity can be hard to discern: "You cannot tell if someone is multilingual based on looking at them or hearing them speak."

My ignorance of consultant multilingualism was matched by participating consultants' perceptions of their fellow consultants' multilingualism. When asked how many of their fellow consultants they *knew* to be multilingual, most (19 of 23) reported between 1–3; the remaining 4 reported between 4–6 (see figure 1). Yet, these survey results also showed a significant disparity between what consultants felt they could confidently verify of their colleagues' multilingualism and what they suspected: when asked how many of their fellow consultants they would *guess* were multilingual, the numbers rose, with most (17) guessing between 4–6 and 7–9 (again, see figure 1).

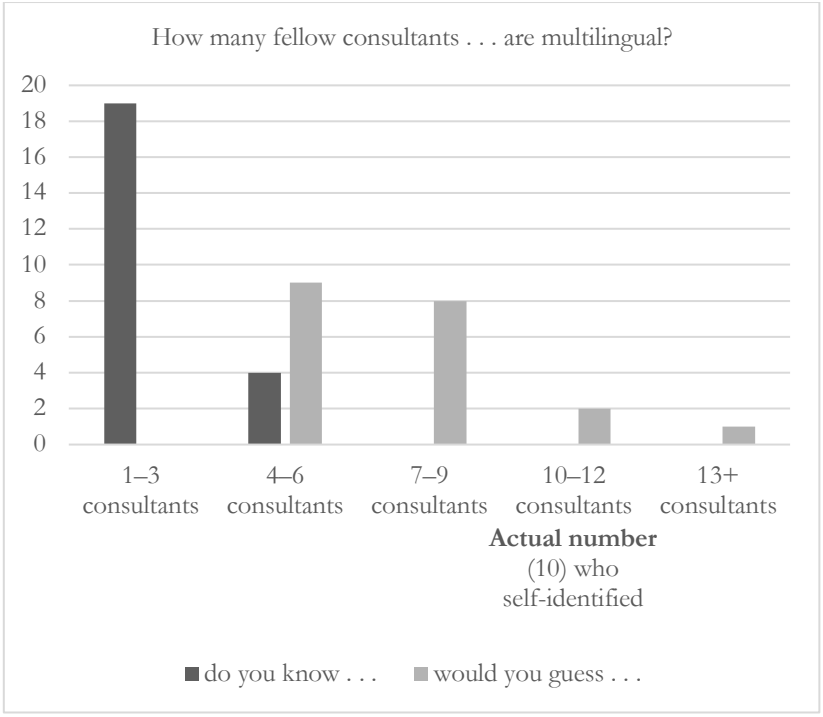


Figure 1. Consultants' (n = 23) Knowledge of and Speculation about Fellow Consultants' Multilingualism.

Comparing these results to the number of participants who identified as multilingual pushes these findings into sharper relief. Even though most consultants suspected their writing center peers were more multilingual than they knew for sure, almost all underestimated the number who would indeed identify this way. While 43% of study participants (which was at least 29% of all consultants), identified as multilingual, most participants (74%) guessed this number to be closer to 12% (6 of 35) or 20% (9 of 35).

At the least, this shows the extent to which these students' multilingualism remains, if not entirely invisible, then shrouded in uncertainty, even for peers with whom these consultants had worked closely for one to three years. More generally, too, these results confirm why Matsuda's (2006) "myth of linguistic homogeneity" remains so durable on college campuses (p. 638). After all, and except in the case of students, others can confidently identify as non-native (often because of the non-dominant accent with which they speak and write in English), college students frequently remain ignorant of any multilingual knowledge their peers hold. Even if

participants suspected that the truth might be more complicated, the illusion of homogeneity remained for them unchallenged by any hard knowledge to the contrary.

## Finding Two: The Complex Nature of Consultant Multilingualism

Survey responses also showed the complex nature of these consultants' multilingualism and how resistant such multilingualism can be to traditional categories, whether L1 and L2 or native or non-native. Of the consultants who identified as multilingual, eight of ten reported that they learned English at home before the age of five, and seven of these same ten also learned at least one other language at home before the age of five. Only two of ten, therefore, might be traditionally categorized as "second language learners," learning English outside of the home and at an older age; likewise, only three of these ten learned their other language(s) outside the home and at an older age. The majority, then, did not begin their language learning with one language holding clear prominence, as a construct of nativism implies; for many, their so-called "home languages," from the beginning, were plural. Moreover, the majority (6 of 10) of these multilingual consultants reported knowing and using on a semi-regular basis two or more languages other than English, including Vietnamese, Bulgarian, Arabic, French, Japanese, German, Persian, Turkish, and ASL, further complicating the notion that multilingualism most often involves one "home" language and another single "target" language.

Follow-up interviews confirmed these complexities. One undergraduate, Harper, a U.S. citizen, was raised from a young age in various domestic and international contexts because of her English-speaking parents' work, whereby she acquired a pragmatic familiarity with many European languages, as well as a more focused background in French. The other undergraduate, Peter, had been raised in a dual-language household by parents who had been raised in non-English speaking countries, yet, while he might be understood to possess two "home" languages, he differed from many students typically categorized as "generation 1.5" by identifying English, and not his parents' native Bulgarian, as their main shared home language.

Nor did the two graduate interviewees' linguistic profiles fit tidily into L1 or L2 categories. Nicole was raised fully bilingual in Central Africa, learning and using two languages—French and English—both at home with her parents and later at school. The other graduate student, Ren, like Peter, had been raised in the United States speaking two languages at

home—English and Vietnamese—but unlike Peter, Ren spoke of herself as confidently fluent in both.

Moreover, and despite these four students' range of multilingual backgrounds, only Nicole would be considered "international" by our institution's definitions, even if her specific relationship to English was hardly "L2" or "non-native." Further, the sheer variety of Nicole's multilingualism would, I suspect, have surprised many of her writing center colleagues: in her interview, she revealed she was fully fluent not only in English and French, but also in German and Arabic, which she studied intensively in high school and college. Nicole's experience thus challenges the many L2 stereotypes so frequently applied to non-U.S. university students, just as the linguistic backgrounds of Harper, Ren, and Peter expose how linguistically heterogenous some apparently homogenous U.S. university students will show themselves to be, at least when asked.

These findings substantiate the scholarship showing the actual prevalence of multilingualism on university campuses, as well the complexities of identity and experience that blur the categories typically used to describe college students' multilingualism (see also Hall, 2018). But these findings also reveal the subsumed nature of much of this multilingualism, and the extent to which English-proficient students—even in the context of a writing center devoted to inclusivity—tend to keep such multilingualism to themselves.

## Finding Three: Multilingualism and Critical Awareness of Linguistic Diversity

Despite the invisibility of many consultants' multilingualism, almost all multilingual participants spoke passionately about how firsthand experiences with multilingualism afforded them considerable insight into how language functions. In survey responses, a number discussed how their multilingualism impacted their thinking about the power of language norms and engendered a relativistic understanding of language standards. One wrote that, because of their multilingualism, "I recognize that English isn't the only language in existence, and there are also multiple Englishes at that." Another explained multilingualism as enabling a kind of critical consciousness about the politics of English language use: "being multilingual has allowed me to appreciate different types of writing as effective instead of aspiring for some prescriptivist notion of American English exceptionalism." A third argued that "I feel more open to different rhetorical or style strategies" since multilingualism "reminds me that effectiveness can be . . . culturally informed." A fourth consultant further framed their

multilingualism as enabling processual and communicative "transgressions": "My second language allowed me to understand the exciting and transgressive variety in the writing process while also helping me understand how my language conventions shaped my viewpoints of writing."

These insights into the language ideologies baked into higher education—and a frequently avowed resistance to "prescriptivist American exceptionalism"—also helped many of these consultants appreciate the complexities of language learning and the relative nature of proficiency itself. In her interview, Ren mused about how her multilingualism helped her recognize—and encouraged her to help other students to recognize—that one never really masters a language: as she explained, "language learning is a continuum . . . It's an ongoing process . . . not even native English speakers will know everything there is to know about the English language." As Ren thus explains, "I think extending the same grace to people who speak more than one language is important." Nicole echoed this idea when, in her interview, she spoke of her own multilingualism as inspiring an ethos of "tolerance" of the varied linguistic profiles, backgrounds, and kinds of knowledge that writers may bring to the writing center.

Similarly, when asked about how consultant multilingualism might shape writers' experiences in the writing center, many participants saw consultant multilingualism as having the potential to foster an "inclusive" atmosphere. More publicly acknowledging consultants' multilingualism, one argued, would show that the writing center community is "respectful of language differences" and can offer "all students" language support that not bound to a single construct of "standard English." Another explained that knowing about consultant multilingualism could help students recognize that "just like there's no one 'right' way to be an academic, there's no one 'right' way to be a writer." Recognizing writing center consultants' own linguistic heterogeneity, a third posited, would help writers "feel" the writing center as a "supportive diverse environment."

For these consultants, then, inclusivity and diversity were not mere theoretical commitments. This ethos emerged from these students' acknowledgement that the heterogeneity that already defined their own linguistic resources had also expanded their understanding of how language norms work. A number of them argued, moreover, that making such identities and insights known to a larger population of writers would demonstrate the values that so many writing centers, in principle, seek to espouse: showing writers the many faces of diversity, and thus helping to actively combat the minoritizing presumption that, again, there is only "one 'right' way to be a writer." The question that remained, however, was whether consultants recognized and leveraged such heterogeneity in their everyday writing center

interactions if so many of these consultants' linguistically diverse resources and backgrounds still remained, among their peers, largely invisible.

## Finding Four: The Perceived Limitations of Linguistic Heterogeneity

Overall, many participants showed genuine critical awareness of how language ideologies affect all writers, whatever their backgrounds. At the same time, however, many also reported uncertainty about the broader relevance of this identity marker and the knowledge it enables. Especially when asked whether and why they might divulge their multilingual status with others in classrooms, with faculty, or with students at the writing center, a good deal of ambivalence emerged. Of course, students who write and/or speak with a non-dominant accent lack the privilege to choose whether to disclose their multilingualism. But for those who could keep such identity private, reflections about disclosure revealed that many felt their multilingual knowledge to have only limited application to writing center work.

First, as one participant explained, not all writing consultants would "feel comfortable sharing" their multilingualism. For some, the decision to keep this facet of their identity private emerged from a kind of stereotype threat: the worry that identifying as multilingual could invite other unwanted associations. Another participant explained that, as a writing center consultant, admitting to multilingualism could undermine their authority: it "might take away my credibility in the eyes of writers." This confirms Matsuda's (2006) observations, whereby—at least in the U.S. context of writing instruction—linguistic expertise is most often associated with monolingualism and multilingualism with linguistic inadequacy. As some of these consultants thus knew, their own critical awareness of language ideologies could not negate the real power that these ideologies yet maintain.

Even more notable are the number of consultants who appeared to have internalized these ideologies, at least concerning their own multilingualism, thus applying an unwitting double standard to themselves and to the writers they supported. For despite their expressed commitments to an "open" and "tolerant" view of others' linguistic diversity, many participants still understood their own command of other languages through the lens of deficiency. One survey respondent—who yet explained that they used their multilingual knowledge for a local job—evinced significant tension between, on the one hand, a pragmatic view of the multilingualism they often used, and, on the other, a more affective reluctance to lay claim to such skills. Asked about whether they identify as multilingual in their

current school setting, they wrote "I do not speak/sign the languages often enough/fluently enough for me to believe that I can identify in that way. Though I am very capable of understanding and holding conversations, I have a lot of doubts as to my execution of the language." Harper echoed this consultant's self-deprecation, explaining that she didn't feel "confident enough to put [multilingualism] on the resume . . . I have this weird smattering of, like, Spanish, French, Romanian . . . and I suck at all of them." Peter expressed a similar inadequacy, explaining, unprompted, and more than once, that, while he spoke his second language often with family, still, he couldn't "read above a fourth-grade level." For these consultants, then, private multilingual identities did not always "count" as a form of knowledge legitimate enough to claim in more public forums.

The consultants I interviewed also espoused a subtractive rather than an additive view of how multilingualism impacted their linguistic resources. Both Nicole and Harper frequently, and regretfully, spoke of the many mistakes they saw peppering their uses of multiple languages, largely because of what Nicole called the "linguistic influence" of another language system. Peter meditated on the ways he saw his multilingualism to have negatively affected his ready command of English: when asked how his multilingualism had shaped his writing practice, his first response was to describe it as "setting him back." Asked to elaborate, Peter revised this statement, but maintained its negative connotation, explaining that "maybe setting back isn't the right way to say it, but [multilingualism] can be confusing. You have an idea you want to express in a certain way, and then you have to spend a couple seconds to translate it the best you can." Ren similarly offered that, because of her multilingualism, "I forget words a lot . . . I have three languages running through my head . . . so sometimes when I'm thinking of a list of examples, I'm stuck at two because . . . I forget words." Significantly, no participants framed this multidimensional complexity in the positive terms it might connote: that multilingualism had expanded their linguistic repertoires, even if this expansion also sometimes slowed down the speed at which they could determine the right word for a given task. These consultants might have understood multilingualism as making them more productively mindful of the meaning-making processes that remain, for many monolinguals, more mindlessly automatic. Instead, all consistently framed their linguistic heterogeneity as presenting a challenge, not a gain, to their linguistic competency.

Most strikingly, such deficit narratives also shaped the narrow way many participants understood multilingualism to apply to their work as writing consultants, with almost all framing their linguistic knowledge as valuable only when supporting second language learners: those the

university deemed not yet fully proficient in English. For these consultants, then, multilingualism was not understood to expand their consulting repertoire in any holistic way; such knowledge instead offered an "extra" resource useful only for the special circumstances of the L2 learner. Nicole made this plain when she explained that, as a consultant, her multilingualism "is like an instrument to use when necessary. I don't come in with . . . let's say the 'bilingual mind' with every paper that I see." As such, while many spoke devotedly about fostering inclusive views of linguistic heterogeneity, not one mentioned the specific relevance of these lessons for the many English-proficient students the writing center supports (which, again, make up about 90% of the writers we work with). Instead, and despite the complexities of their own linguistic heterogeneity, these consultants' commitment to inclusion and diversity was more narrowly understood as applying only to those whose diversity was visibly marked, and by traditional L2 criteria.

Moreover, these consultants' descriptions of supporting L2 learners often employed a lexicon of error, frustration, and self-deprecation. Of course, such a lexicon may reflect the concerns L2 learners are apt to bring to their writing center consultations. As Harper noted, many of the L2 students she worked with "tend to be very insecure about their English." Nonetheless, Harper's consideration of how her multilingualism shapes her consulting practice remained centered on her ability to empathize with the sheer difficulty of second language learning in higher education, as when she remembers "a very, very nervous [L2] student . . . who kept stopping to apologize. And I told her that I had failed my last French test, because, I was like, *learning languages is so hard*." These consultants' overall conceptions of multilingualism thus exemplify the same contradiction that Bou Ayash (2016) describes as a "condition of (im)possibility" wherein students are caught between "the apparent promise of an emergent translingual take on the dynamism of language" and "the enduring force of dominant monolingualism" and its "premium on the fluent mastery and presentation of standardized conventions" (p. 559).

Altogether, these interviews reveal how powerfully institutional cultures can enforce monolingual ideologies. Peter described his multilingualism isolating him from communities he perceived as uninterested in the kind of linguistic diversity he quietly understood as so central to his identity. Referencing a few friends on campus who were also multilingual, though not in the same languages, he told me it was "fun" and gratifying to "hear each other talk"; even so, Peter also admitted that, in both coursework and the writing center, "I can't think of a good context or to what ends [my multilingualism] would come up, where discussing it would be worth it." As he went on to say, "In that way [my multilingualism] is pretty private, and

probably not for the better." Another survey participant similarly observed that, "At my previous institution, it was a very diverse environment where we spoke frequently about our other language identities, but I've noticed here . . . writers don't discuss this."

In her interview, Ren elaborated on the tension many consultants expressed between their own critical awareness of language ideologies and the sense that there was little they could do to combat them. As she explained, academia too often upholds an ethos of "perfectionism," or "this expectation to be perfect in using English, especially in certain . . . levels and positions." So even while Ren understood the nature of linguistic diversity—arguing, as she put it, that "there are many Englishes; there's not just one type of English"—she still did not understand this insight as actionable or acknowledged in her current academic settings. Instead, she saw the academic context is one in which "if there's a discrepancy" in someone's language use, "then their ethos as an English user . . . is brought into question, and they're not seen as . . . knowledgeable, or as quote unquote intelligent or well-spoken or as articulate." So as much as a student like Ren might personally embrace a relativistic construct of multilingualism, she still found it difficult, at a more systemic level, to understand such a construct as broadly applicable, much less acceptable.

Indeed, and as attuned as Ren was to the nuances of what might be considered a translanguaging approach—recognizing the benefits of her own multilingualism and continued language learning, particularly in shaping her critical language awareness—still she remained tellingly at a loss to describe how these lessons might impact her work as a consultant supporting writers who in the main were entirely English proficient. "I don't really know," she said when asked about how her multilingualism had benefitted her consulting work. "I don't feel like I've had a specific encounter or consultation . . . that made me like aware of any benefits . . . to me being multilingual." As another survey participant put it, even more succinctly: "I'm not sure how to . . . incorporate my multilingualism into my work as a consultant."

## Conclusion

As a writing center administrator, I understand these study results as both heartening and sobering. Overall, these findings suggest that participants—who made up the majority of a cohort of consultants I trained and supervised over two years—understood quite well how monolingual and standard language ideologies not only minoritize writers but also forward a fundamentally inaccurate conception of how languages work. Nonetheless,

few understood these insights as relevant to their general consulting practices. Instead, many tended to frame multilingual identities, experiences, and knowledge as only relevant to their work with students not yet proficient in the university's linguistic standards—standards, it is worth underscoring, that these consultants otherwise critiqued. Few framed their own multilingual resources with the same inclusive terms they used to discuss linguistic diversity more abstractly. Few, moreover, knew much, if anything, about the sheer scope of their colleagues' multilingualism, much less the complexity of this multilingualism and its resistance to traditional taxonomies.

Indeed, these findings reveal a vicious circle in which a default presumption of linguistic homogeneity—as perpetuated by the largely invisible nature of these consultants' multilingualism—only reinforces consultants' hesitation to share and explore other ways of applying the insights afforded by their linguistic diversity. The private nature of such heterogeneity may thus be the prime culprit in their tendency to understand consultant multilingualism as an identity feature only relevant for their work with L2 leaners.

As George and Wetzl (2020) have argued, WPAs, like the students they teach, can better combat language ideologies by "addressing erasure," not just by making space for writers who are explicitly minoritized for being institutionally marked as multilingual, but also by making visible the other forms of multilingualism and linguistic heterogeneity that may not be as clearly marked, and which can complicate and challenge both a monolingual ideology and the deficit narratives that often accompany institutional understandings of language difference.

So, while it is certainly important, as Ben Rafoth (2015) suggests, to recruit writing center consultants "who are themselves multilingual, or learning another language, or who have significant experience with non-English-speaking cultures" (p. 123), this study suggests that merely assembling linguistically diverse consultants is not enough—their existence alone cannot counteract the misconceptions fundamental to standard language and monolingual ideologies. Nor is it enough to explore only in the abstract the harm of such ideologies, and the benefits of more critical awareness, or just as these ideologies selectively apply to a tidily delineated portion of the writers' consultants' support. As these findings show, language ideologies are strong enough to encourage even the most critically sophisticated students to keep their linguistic diversity largely to themselves, and to maintain the illusion that multilingual experiences, insights, and identities have only limited relevance for writing center work.

To fully combat these ideologies, students need more expansive frameworks for thinking through their own and others' linguistic heterogeneity, for exploring the many forms linguistic diversity can take, and for openly circulating the insights such diversity enables. Indeed, it is my hope that this study can encourage more administrators and students to reconsider what exactly "counts" as linguistic diversity, how complex the linguistic diversity all around them may really be, and how more inclusive frameworks can benefit all writers, not only those who have been explicitly, institutionally siloed. Such reconsideration, ultimately, is the promise made by the concept of translanguaging, which, as Horner, Lu, Royster & Trimbur (2011) argue, "recogniz[es] the linguistic heterogeneity of all users of language both within the United States and globally" (p. 305)—recognitions that should include, as Kevin Roozen (2020) further observes, even "the language and literacy of people who are presumed to be monolingual" (p. 135).

More specifically, training and professional development should, somewhat like this study itself, scaffold consultants into reflecting on the nuances of their linguistic knowledge, backgrounds and experiences; and administrators should share back with consultants—albeit in anonymous and aggregated form—some of the content of these reflections.[6] Consultants should be led to discuss, moreover, how they arrived at these forms of self-identification—even if they understand themselves as representative of a default monolingualism—and what effects they understand these identities having, both in and out of writing center settings. Doing so, administrators can help consultants re-evaluate some of the presumptions they might subconsciously bring to both the terms "multilingual" and "monolingual," whether involving educational background, nationality, race, class, language varieties, or "correctness." Finally, consultants should be asked to share the varied forms of critical insight that linguistic diversity enables, whether about technical, personal, or political aspects of language use. Doing this might not only alleviate the multilingual loneliness felt by consultants like Peter; it might also help Harper and Nicole reconsider their own deficit narratives, and prod Ren to recognize that her hard-won multilinguistic wisdom is well worth sharing with others, whatever their linguistic backgrounds. As a result of such sharing, consultants might feel more empowered to navigate more critically and purposefully the educational sector's many naturalized presumptions around linguistic diversity, whether concerning "error," "accented" English, the many standards by which proficiency is determined, or the illusory universalism often attributed to dominant language norms.

After all, one way writing center consultants define their expertise is through this kind of research-informed sensitivity to the many forms of difference that animate writing—differences among languages, discourses, genres, contexts, conventions, positions of privilege, or reader expectations. It is the reality of these differences that monolingual and standard language ideologies work so hard to efface. But administrators and students can help to counter such effacements through exploring linguistic diversity in all its complexity: as a construct that includes but is not reducible to second language learners and that expands the linguistic resources of consultants just as much as the writers they support.

## Notes

1. This term is preferred—especially in place of "ESL" (English as a Second Language)—because it avoids implying deficits or hierarchies of knowledge (see Giaimo & Gooding, 2023).

2. Relatedly, Canagarajah (2011) questions whether "being monolingual" even constitutes "an ontological reality," since "so-called 'monolinguals' shuttle between codes, registers and discourses" (4).

3. To preserve participants' anonymity and comfort, I did not ask about other aspects of identity, including race. While I acknowledge that linguistic identity frequently intersects with other identity affiliations, such considerations were beyond this study's purview.

4. Note: our university also sponsors an English Language Learner Writing Center, designed expressly to support students' English language acquisition. While students may use whichever center they choose, the existence of the ELLWC considerably lowers the number of L2 learners our center supports. That said, because ELLWC consultants neither train nor work under my supervision, and approach consulting with pedagogical goals different from ours, I did not include ELLWC consultants in this study.

5. Monolingual by the definition used for the study: I grew up in an English-only household and never learned a language other than English well enough to use it outside the context of the classroom.

6. Since beginning this study, I have disseminated a truncated form of my survey to incoming consultants and shared the (anonymous) results with them in class, providing the basis for a discussion of the reality, effects, and benefits of our own multilingualisms.

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# Where Have You Been? Where Are You Going?: Reconsidering Literacy Narratives in the Context of Neuroscience Research

Irene Clark

*Abstract*

*This article argues that literacy narratives should be viewed as an important genre in composition courses, and in other courses as well, because they can help students consider and reconsider who they were, who they are, and who they want to become, both as individuals and as members of a culture or community. Engaging with neuroscience scholarship, critical race theory, and counter story, it maintains that recalling "stories" of literacy acquisition can provide students with transformative insight into educational inequities, entrenched power structures, and challenges that may have impacted their previous involvements with literacy. Because writing a literacy narrative involves reflection about previous "scripts" associated with literacy and education, it is a genre that can be enlightening for all students, those from privileged as well as from disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to critique the cultural, political, and social forces that have impacted their educational experiences and to replace damage-centered scripts and traumas with affirming insights and plans. The article utilizes current research in neuroplasticity to provide support for this perspective, in that it demonstrates that different identities are manifested in the brain. Examples of students' work are included.*[1]

> *In order to enter this particular literary community, I had to first give up a huge part of myself. Now, as I grow and come to fruition as a writer, I feel encouraged to find a way to rediscover and utilize those passionate parts of myself that I previously worked so hard to suppress.*
>
> —Enrique Solis, "Delving into a New World," (p. 301)

> *I realized how different my family was from the average American family . . . but two months later, my mom signed my sister and me up for a free after-school computer course and got us each a library card, ensuring that her children never had to go through that again.*
>
> —Charlie

> *Reflecting on this experience, I have come to realize that Black identities are subtly informed and solidified through schooling and education.*
>
> —Joseph

> *The autobiography narrative paper prepared me to choose the path of being a financial planner. While I was writing the paper, I realized that I was passionate toward this career so that someday I could be a financial advisor and assist clients to reach their financial goals.*
>
> —Raphael

The above statements, written by students who were enrolled in a course I taught several times titled "Literacy, Rhetoric and Culture," testify to the insights students can obtain when they write literacy narratives. They also provide support for the theme I will develop in this article––that literacy narratives should be considered an important genre in composition courses, and in other courses as well, because they can help students consider and reconsider who they were, who they are, and who they want to become, both as individuals and as members of a culture or community. Because many writing programs are currently grappling with issues concerned with linguistic and social justice in their curricula, it is an especially important time for the discipline of writing studies to recognize that the reflective awareness of past experiences that is generated in writing a literacy narrative can help students critique the cultural, political, and social forces that have impacted their educational experiences, realize that "literacy can both liberate and oppress" (Vieira et al., 2019, p. 37), and consider "how they might alter such a pattern" (Williams, 2003, p. 343). Engaging with neuroscience scholarship, critical race theory, and counterstory, this article will discuss the transformative power of literacy narratives and argue that they can enable student writers, those from privileged as well as from disadvantaged backgrounds, to replace damage-centered scripts and traumas with affirming insights and plans.

## Development of My Perspective on Literacy Narratives

As the Director of Composition at a large, public, Hispanic serving university, I teach a variety of undergraduate and graduate rhetoric/composition courses, prepare graduate students to teach first-year writing classes, observe writing instructors, and serve on several committees concerned with the teaching of writing. When I first assumed this position, my approach to

writing pedagogy was characterized by a strong emphasis on thesis-driven argument that, I still maintain, is important for students to learn. As Gerald Graff (2003) asserted in *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*, most academic writing involves some form of what he refers to as "arguespeak" (p. 22). Many students remain clueless, Graff maintained, because they are unaware that "all academics, despite their many differences, play a version of the same game of persuasive argument" (p. 22). Graff cited a list of common persuasive practices inventoried by compositionists such as Mike Rose (1989), who wrote in *Lives on the Boundary,* that it was important for students to be given practice in "framing an argument, analyzing someone else's argument . . . applying a theory to disparate phenomena, and so on" (p. 188). These were goals that I strongly endorsed when I assumed my position as composition director. I did not disdain narratives of any kind, and some instructors continued to assign them—but I viewed them as "extra" assignments.

I still emphasize argument in my writing classes. Nevertheless, over the past several years, I have come to appreciate the importance of assigning literacy narratives—in first-year writing classes, in upper division classes, and in graduate classes––because I have found that this assignment enables students "to explore and reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning to better understand how these encounters have formed them into the literate beings they are today" (Alexander, 2015, p. 43). They have the potential to foster students with a sense of agency, providing them with the confidence to undertake other genres of writing, even those with which they are unfamiliar.

The impetus for this change in my perspective occurred when I was involved in developing an undergraduate minor in Writing and Rhetoric that included a new core course titled "Literacy, Rhetoric, and Culture." The new minor was launched in 2008, and when l taught the new course, I assigned a literacy narrative and discovered that many students found the assignment both enjoyable and meaningful. Since that time, I have continued to assign literacy narratives in most of my classes, and I have always found them valuable for all students, but particularly for those who are new to post-secondary education. Writing in this genre allows students to reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning, thereby enabling them to construct potentially new "selves" as they grappled with the multiple demands of the academy.

## Literacy Narrative Scholarship: An Overview

Literacy narratives, although not new to writing studies scholarship, are not as frequently assigned as are personal narratives on a variety of subjects. In the early days of the process movement, personal writing was regarded as an important approach for helping novice writers find their "voice," and become "writers," a perspective that is often associated with the work of Peter Elbow, Mike Rose and Donald Murray, among others. The focus was not on literacy or language acquisition, although those topics were frequently addressed. Rather, the idea was that students would be most engaged with subject matter concerned with their own lives, would discover a personal "voice," and could write about something that they understood better than their teacher. The goal was for students to write authentically and develop confidence. In "Being a writer vs. Being an Academic," Elbow (1995) argued that having students write from a personal perspective enabled students to present a world view approached from their own perspective.

As the history of rhetorical discourse has established, however, encouraging students to write about personal experiences was not always considered valuable. As Robert Connors' (1987) discussed in "Personal Writing Assignments," classical rhetoric was a public discipline that emphasized outwardly directed, objective, impersonal speech, the goal being to examine and argue questions that "could be shared by all members of the polity" (p. 167). Reviewing the perspectives of several classical rhetoricians, Connors explained that classical rhetoric was not concerned with individual experiences and personal expression, a view that persisted until the latter part of the 18th century, when personal opinion, particularly in the context of making judgments on literary works, began to gain importance. Connors maintained that this shift contributed to the relatively rapid movement toward Romantic thought in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, leading eventually to the increased acceptance of personal feelings and the need to write out of actual experience, which characterized the early days of the process movement. Nevertheless, as teachers and scholars in the field of Writing Studies know, even during those days and certainly at the present time, other genres of writing such as exposition, library research, thesis driven argument, and literary analysis have continued to be viewed as important in first-year writing courses—in some departments considered more valuable than personal writing of any kind. Moreover, determining which writing genres should be privileged in a first-year writing course is additionally complicated by the increased importance of multimodality and visual rhetoric.

## The Transformative Potential of Narrative: Insights from Neuroscientific Research

The question of whether first year writing classes should include literacy narratives continues to generate debate. However, an additional perspective on this topic is provided by recent scholarship in neuroscience, in particular, work in neuroplasticity that indicates the brain can change frequently and experiences and changes in one's sense of self can be detected in the brain through advanced imaging techniques (Clark, 2016; Cozolino, 2013; Greenfield, 2016; Seung, 2012). As neuroscientist Susan Greenfield (2016) explained, experiences can be viewed in terms of narrative or stories, similar to how we understand fiction, and when we play different roles within these stories, "differing cerebral blood flow" that is associated with "different personality states" (p. 34) can be detected. Similarly, as Brian Crawford (2024) has pointed out in his recently published book, *Emotional Value in the Composition Classroom: Self, Agency, and Neuroplasticity*, "modern neuroscience has expanded our understanding of the neural and bodily correlates which comprise the foundations of self" (p. 15), which are in a continuous state of becoming. Crawford notes that whereas "in Composition, we often speak of rhetorical selves . . . in modern neuroscience, the plasticity of self—a protagonist constructed to best anticipate threats and satisfy desires in changing environments—is essentially identical" (p. 9).

This perpetual state of becoming and the potential fluidity of identity was discussed in Clark's (2015) "Genre, Identity, and the Brain, Insights from Neuropsychology," which argued that "identity is not an essentialized or static construct" (p. 1), that it "can be understood in terms of performativity" (p. 1), and that it can be affected by one's experiences and insights. Because writing a literacy narrative often permits students to view themselves as the heroes of their own stories, the process of developing material can help them realize how much agency they already have had in their lives, realize that identity can be altered by what one does or performs, recognize possibilities for choice, and give them confidence to move ahead.

This alteration in identity as a result of performance and/or experience can now, in many instances, be detected in the brain in a mutually generative relationship—that is, everything that we do and think affects the brain, which correspondingly affects what we do and think. As argued by Satel and Lilienfeld (2013),

> everything the brain enables us to do—feel, think, perceive, and act—is linked, or correlated, with changes in oxygen consumption and regional blood flow in the brain. When a person responds to a task, such as looking at photos or solving a math problem, specific

> regions of the brain are typically engaged and receive more oxygen-laden, or oxygenized, blood. The increased blood flow and the boost in oxygen associated with it are proxies for increased activation of neurons. (p. 5)

A similar perspective on how experience and identity are manifested in the brain is discussed in the work of Sebastian Seung (2012), author of *Connectome: How the Brain's Wiring Makes Us Who We Are*. Seung, a professor at Princeton's Neuroscience Institute who uses techniques from machine learning and social computing to extract brain structure from light and electron microscopic images, maintained that identity is linked to what he referred to as a "Connectome," which he defined as "the totality of connections between the neurons in a nervous system" (p. xiv). Seung argued that "minds differ because connectomes differ" (p. xiv) and that a person's "connectome changes throughout life," (p. xv) influenced by experience. This perspective is in accord with the work of neuroscientist Susan Greenfield (2016), who discussed patients with a history of exposure to traumatic stress whose brains show smaller volumes of blood in the brain area related to memory (the hippocampus). Other examples cited by Greenfield are patients with multiple personality disorder, whose brain waves register differently according to the particular state they are in. Greenfield pointed out that a neural approach has been used to show what is happening in the brain during the experience of different identities.

These insights from current neuroscience research suggest that the transformative self-insights referenced in the epigraphs written by Enrique, Charlie, Joseph, and Raphael are likely to have parallel brain correlates. Enrique's narrative (Solis, 2016) concludes with his realization that in order to enter a new literary community, he first had to give up a huge part of himself—essentially, to write a new script for his performance in his classes. Joseph concludes his narrative with the realization that his view of himself as "black," rather than "creole," had been shaped by the limited perspectives of fellow high school students, enabling him to consider how he wished to view himself. Charlie's literacy narrative recounted his developing awareness that his family had faced challenges that were different from those of "the average American family" but also indicated his pride in having overcome those challenges and his recognition that his family had new choices. Raphael's letter, written after he had completed my class, demonstrated that the process of writing a literacy narrative had made him aware of a predilection for finance that he hadn't fully understood and enabled him to view himself as a potential financial advisor.

*Processing Stories in the Brain*

Current neuroscience research also indicates that stories are processed differently in the brain than other types of information and can contribute to the development of empathy. A study conducted at the University of Pennsylvania indicated that "personal stories are more consistently processed in the regions of the brain that help us understand what other people think and feel than other non-narrative types of messages" (Falk, 2021, p. A24). This perspective is supported by a neuroimaging study conducted by Grail, Tamborini, Weber, and Schmälzle (2021) to determine whether personal narratives engage the brains of audience members more than non-narrative messages and to investigate the brain regions that facilitate this effect (p. 332). The study indicated that "personal narratives elicited strong audience engagement as evidenced by robust correlations across participants frontal and parietal lobes compared to a non-personal control text" (p. 332). It provides further support for assigning literacy narratives in that it suggests that "listening to someone else's story can give us a new way of seeing the world, motivate us to care, teach values, and change minds," thereby enhancing understanding (Grall, Tamborini, Weber & Schmälzle, 2021, p. 332). As Falk (2021) notes in her conclusion,

> stories are one tool to help people stimulate and understand social experiences they've never personally gone through. Also, when people retell stories to others, listeners' brains reconstruct the same patterns that successful communicators originally had in mind. (p. A 24)

Mar (2011), in "The Neural Bases of Social Cognition and Story Comprehension," explained this phenomenon in terms of what happens in the brain, noting that fiction enhances imaginative thinking, because fictional words and stories activate neural processes that reflect real-world events that are similar to the story. Marco Iacoboni (2016) referred to this action in terms of "mirror neurons," which he asserted are relevant to our tendency to be empathetic:

> When I see you smiling, my mirror neurons for smiling fire up, and I get your state of mind right away. I feel it as you feel it. We need that mirroring in order to create a full empathic response to other people. (para. 5)

What is indicated here is that personal narrative strongly engages listeners' brains, suggesting that when people recall their own stories, similar engagement is likely to occur.

## Recent Scholarly Interest in Literacy Narratives

Many teachers continue to assign literacy narratives in their classes. But people who are not enrolled in classes are writing them as well. As Delgado (1989) observed in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," "everyone has been writing stories these days. And I don't just mean writing *about* stories or narrative theory, important as those are. I mean actual stories, as in 'once-upon-a-time type stories'" (p. 2411). Writing from the perspective of a legal scholar, Delgado characterized the writers of stories as "members of what could be loosely described as outgroups, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—has been suppressed, devalued and abnormalized" (p. 2411).

More recently, Smith and Watson (2010) noted that "memoir and autobiographical writing have been gaining greater acceptance in the academy, not only those written by students, but by teachers and scholars as well" (p. 22). Moreover, they point out that the value of these narratives is not only because they have an impact on readers, but also, and perhaps more significantly, they often have a transformative effect on those who write them. What is often the case, they argue, is that memory researchers from fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and philosophy have shown that

> remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 22)

In the context of this article, the understanding that there is a connection between recalling and reinterpreting an event is important because it affirms the generative role of recalling the past and the potentially transformative impact that writing literacy narratives can have, not only on those who read or hear them, but also on the writers themselves. Such insights can provide awareness and understandings that can lead to an enhanced sense of agency. The scholarship of Mary Soliday (1994, 2002) points to the value of the literacy narrative in enabling students to "translate" private experiences into public discourse (*Politics of Remediation*, p. 150), situating the literacy narrative as a site of tension between the personal and the public. A similar perspective is offered by Christopher Minnix (2015), who views the literacy narrative as contributing to a public writing pedagogy that is positioned between a student's voice and academic discourse, as a genre that enables students to recognize the public significance of their personal experience. Minnix views the literacy narrative as a site "of continued

rhetorical invention and public engagement" (p. 24), helping students recognize the public significance of their personal experiences and opinions.

## Critical Race Theory and Counterstory

The transformative potential of writing a literacy narrative is particularly relevant these days because it is in accord with the concept of counterstory, a significant component of critical race theory, which has been gaining increased attention. As defined by Delgado (1989), in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," counterstory has the function of exposing the falseness of prevailing concepts of power and inequality that are based on the idea that inequality can be corrected by enforcing currently existing policies. This is a grossly oversimplified story which ignores the tendency of the dominant group to justify the world as it is—a world with whites on top and others at the bottom. The effect of counterstories is implicit in Patricia Williams' "On Being the Object of Property" (1988), in which she discusses how her mindset changed when her mother told her that law school was "in her blood" and that no one should make her "feel inferior because someone else's father was a judge" (p. 6). "Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing" (p.6), Williams argues, an insight that enabled her to gain agency—to view herself as being able to "counter" the status quo. More recently, Delgado, Stefancic, Chilton, and Harris (2017) discussed the power of story as a means of helping people from different races and cultures to understand one another. "Well told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers to bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others," they point out (p. 8-9), because "engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others and invite the reader into a new and unfamiliar world" (p. 49). Moreover, they maintain, "powerfully written stories may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity" (p. 51).

Other examples of narratives that counter false cultural/societal beliefs include Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the first Voice You Hear is Not Your Own" (1996), Villanueva's "On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism"(2007), Villanueva and Moeggenber's "A Tale of Two Generations (2018), and Aja Y. Martinez's *Counterstory: the Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (2020), which includes chapters about Richard Delgado, Derrick Bell, and Patricia Williams, whom she refers to as "*counterstory exemplars*" (p. 2). In the introduction to that book, Martinez recounts how valuable it was for her to read Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved: The*

*Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987) and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1989) when she was a graduate student because these works gave her the language and the confidence to reject "research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (p. 3). Martinez emphasizes the importance of using a range of methods such as family history, biography, autoethnography which "empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (p. 3).

A significant element within the critical race theory movement has been to validate the role of narrative inquiry, which uses individual experience as a primary data source. Both critical race theory and narrative inquiry utilize narrative as valid evidence. However, whereas critical race theory focuses on listeners and readers with the goal of motivating action, narrative inquiry conceptualizes the primary audience of narrative as the inquirers themselves. Stories that circulate within a cultural community, especially an oppressed community, are an important source of self-education and self-transformation, and thus have the capacity to transform experience. When accessed through writing a literacy narrative, these stories can enable students to reevaluate past experiences. Reflecting on their own experiences with literacy, they often become aware that the power dynamic associated with race and gender are not based on biological or genetic factors; rather, they are societal constructs that can serve as roadblocks to literacy acquisition and academic success. The first three epigraphs to this article, those written by Enrique, Charlie, and Joseph, demonstrate that they had experienced challenges that they had managed to overcome, and that writing about them in their literacy narratives had made them more consciously aware of what had transpired. As Maximillian Wetter points out, "the use of narrative does not refer to some fantastic, fictional story, but rather the way that humans construct truth through the process of storytelling" (Wetter, 2022, p. 152).

## Translingual Experiences

Other published literacy narratives include accounts of literacy acquisition by non-native speakers who recount their struggles to learn English or adapt their writing to culturally based expectations for structure or style. A notable recent example is Suresh Canagarajah's *Transnational Literacy Autobiographies as Translingual Writing* (2020), which traces his own literacy journey and discusses how the literacy autobiography enabled him to become aware of "rhetorical challenges and options from [his] school days and graduate education to [his] early years as a faculty member" and that

it made him "more respectful of [his] vernacular resources, more rooted in [his] traditions, more resistant of rhetorical impositions, and more open to negotiating with dominant norms critically and creatively" (p. 17). This experience, he maintained, caused him to value the cultural traditions on which he was raised and to understand that he had choice and personal agency about how he presented his work. This awareness, he argues, can be useful for native, non-native English, and multilingual students, providing them with similar agency and self-confidence.

Comparable perspectives appear in Morris Young's *Minor Re/Visons: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship* (2004) and Noriega, Belcher and Black's *Autobiography Without Apology: The Personal Essay in Chicanx and Latinx Studies* (2020). Young's (2004) memoir consists of stories that, he emphasizes, are "not simply stories about learning to read and write; they are attempts to define who we are and who we want to become, both as individuals and as a community" (p. 26). *Autobiography Without Apology* links the personal with the public, explaining that telling personal yet public stories enables writers to utilize a range of writerly options.

Recently, Khadka, Davis-McElligatt, and Dorwick (2019) published *Narratives of Marginalized Identities in Higher Education Inside and Outside the Academy,* a collection of first-person accounts about what it was, and likely still is, like to be an outsider at the university. Arguing that the university claims to support diversity while actually sustaining racism, their book includes accounts by graduate students, tenure-track professors and administrators from locations around the world.

## Benefits for Students

There are many benefits that writing a literacy narrative can provide for students, the most significant being that they foster self-awareness, lead to an increased sense of confidence, and generate cultural/political critique associated with established, often power-driven systems of literacy acquisition. Some of these narratives foreground success and transformation. Others may challenge culturally established ideas about literacy, raise questions about the politics of language acquisition (Eldred & Mortensen, 1992), and complicate the definition of literacy (Fleischer, 2000). In many instances, the reflection involved in writing in this genre enables students to realize that they have the potential to construct multiple, potentially new "selves" as they negotiate the complex demands of the academy. As Mary Soliday (1994) argued, "literacy narratives can expand students' sense of personal agency when they discover not only that their own stories are narratable,

but also that through their stories they can engage in a broader critical dialogue with each other and with well-known texts such as Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*" ("Translating," p. 512). This self-awareness often results in students' reconnection with a former mental script, one which may be associated with negative school experiences that are unconsciously stifling motivation and influencing responses to education. Some of these scripts may have arisen from societal biases and inequalities, but students may not have examined the extent to which these scripts continue to influence their reaction to school. However, when students write literacy narratives, they can revisit and reevaluate scripts from the past, enabling them to write new scripts, looking backward and forward simultaneously. This reevaluation of past experiences and the writing of new scripts was particularly important in the narratives written by Enrique, Charlie, and Joseph, whose reflection on past challenges enabled them to construct new directions for the future.

Other transformations can occur as well. Frequently, when first-year writing students write literacy narratives, they often portray themselves as the heroes of their stories, having overcome obstacles to achieve success. In other instances, students gain insight into problems they now recognize as being due to their own past literacy practices. In "Heroes, Rebels, and Victims: Student Identities in Literacy Narratives," Bronwyn Williams (2003) pointed out that a student's identity often shifts from being the lone hero, having overcome adversity to succeed, to someone who sees the value of being more connected to others.

Each time I have assigned literacy narratives, many students have told me that they hadn't recalled the challenges they had faced and overcome until they began thinking about what they would write in their literacy narratives. Sometimes, they said, reflecting on the past was difficult, even painful. However, what often occurred is that the reflection that is necessary for writing in this genre enabled them to realize that they had indeed triumphed, or perhaps now have the potential to triumph, allowing them to claim "more powerful identities from which to speak, read, or write" (Norton, 2013, p. 3). Because literacy narratives often have an emotional impact on both writers and readers, they can contribute to students' understanding of how cultural, economic, and political forces have impacted their past experiences with literacy. As noted by Amanda Sladek (2021) in "Say What You Want to Say: Teaching Literacy Autoethnography to Resist Linguistic Prejudice," literacy narratives enable students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds to become aware of asymmetrical power relations and racial inequities of which they may have been previously unaware, motivating them to question the value of what was emphasized in their

previous school experiences. In important ways, the insight that develops from writing in this genre gives students permission to problematize and question what they once believed was absolute about writing, learning, and their place in an educational or cultural scene.

Actually, all narratives, in some ways, can be viewed as acts of imagination, involving imagined identities and communities, many of them delving into the past and looking toward the future, and the literacy narrative privileges this type of backward/forward perspective. Reflecting back on one's former self in a past educational and/or cultural setting can thus be empowering, fostering the disposition to continue to move forward. Moreover, when students analyze their own stories and read or listen to those of others, they also become aware that linguistic and cultural transitions often come at an emotional cost; sometimes challenging beliefs and ideas that have shaped their lives. As one of my graduate students noted in her literacy narrative, her academic success resulted in her feeling removed from her family, a dynamic that is similar to Richard Rodriguez's (1982) recollections in *Hunger of Memory*. Because she no longer accepted the tenets of her religious and political upbringing, her mother told her that she wished she had never gone to the university. In many ways, this situation is similar to the experience of Eliza Doolittle in Shaw's *Pygmalian* (as cited in Eldred and Mortensen, 1992), who bemoans to Henry Higgins that she no longer knows who she is: "I have forgotten my own language," she tells him, but "can speak nothing but yours" (p. 515). There are, of course, personal costs to all transitions, especially when they occur when a student is young and is in the process of developing a sense of self. But there are also benefits. Writing a literacy narrative enabled the student discussed above to reflect on how her academic success had alienated her from her family, but it also led her to consider how she might address that alienation.

## Stuent Examples

Many of the literacy narratives written by students in my classes demonstrate the various benefits of assigning this genre, and in this section, I will briefly discuss the four that I used as epigraphs to this essay.

### *Enrique*

Enrique's literacy narrative, which I published in the second edition of my book *College Arguments: Understanding the Genres* (Clark, 2016), provides a lively example of the self-awareness and cultural insights that writing a literacy narrative can generate. Enrique began his essay by describing what a poor student and general miscreant he had been in high school:

> In High School, I failed 8 classes, took summer school every year, and barely graduated with a 2.1 GPA. And those are just my academic shortcomings. Don't forget the curfew tickets, truancy tickets, arrests, gang activity, and the two occasions I succeeded in evading police helicopters. The miscreant, the delinquent, statistic, society's worst nightmare—Me. (Solis, 2016, p. 298)

Writing a literacy narrative enabled Enrique to realize the extent to which he had found his high school "cumbersome and lifeless" and that his bad behavior was due, at least in part, to his inability to view the educational system as having value (Solis, 2016, p.299). He wrote that he had already learned that "getting an 'A' had less to do with actually learning than passively completing busywork" (Solis, 2016, p.299).

Eventually, Enrique managed to complete high school and enrolled in a community college, where the majority of students were minorities—Black and Hispanic. Yet, as he recalled in his narrative, he discovered that in his English class, everyone was white. "Even the professor noticed," he recounts, who observed that "There are no black students in here, are there?" (Solis, 2016, p. 299). Enrique raised his hand, answering "no," and then, referring to movie posters on the wall, added "and there is only one on the walls" (Solis, 2016, p. 299). In addition, because he had done little reading in high school, Enrique recalled that he began to view himself as an outsider in this class and wondered if he would be able to survive in a field in which he had previously failed.

In his narrative, Enrique wrote that his trial and ultimate development as a writer came when he was assigned to write a paper on *Huckleberry Finn*, choosing between two scholars with differing perspectives on whether or not *Huckleberry Finn* should be banned in certain schools. One scholar praised the book for its groundbreaking depiction of a black slave, Jim, as a character round with humanity. He emphasized *Huckleberry Finn's* relevance for young students today. The other scholar took an opposite approach. He stated that the depiction of Jim is still fraught with stereotypical elements that can be damaging to young black readers. In his narrative, Enrique wrote that he was aware that the instructor was strongly in favor of the first critic's position. In fact, the instructor stated that "anyone who wants to ban *Huck Finn* is clearly illiterate and incompetent" (Solis, 2016, p. 300).

Nevertheless, Enrique, who had always been inclined to rebel against authority, decided to counter that position, arguing that Huckleberry Finn was more relevant to white audiences who struggle with racism at the expense of discomfort or uneasiness felt by black readers. However, to his dismay, the teacher gave Enrique a zero on the essay and required him to

rewrite it, a process which, in his narrative, he characterized as "fueled by turbulent emotions and anger." (Solis, 2016, p. 301). On the day that his rewrite was returned, Enrique received an "A" and high praise from the instructor. Yet, although he felt "incredibly proud of himself, he was also deeply perturbed for being praised for embracing ideas that he didn't agree with. However, he concluded his narrative with the realization that in order "to enter this particular literary community," he first had to give up a huge part of his identity (Solis, 2016, p. 301). Nevertheless, he also added that as he grows and comes to "fruition as a writer," he feels encouraged to rediscover and utilize those passionate parts of himself (Solis, 2016, p. 301).

Writing his literacy narrative had helped Enrique realize that he had undergone a profound change in identity, which, in the context of what is currently understood about neuroplasticity, is likely to be manifested in new neuronal and synaptic movement in his brain. As a result, he had recalled and then reimagined a scene in which he had overcome a literacy-based challenge, gained insight into an egregious educational incident, and then reflected on the extent to which he was a "sellout or a success story" (Solis, 2016). Enrique is now a middle school teacher, and he comes to my class frequently to discuss how writing his literacy narrative had generated insights he had not remembered previously and contributed to the agency he developed for moving forward. "I worked on that narrative for days," he tells my students, and it helped him discover how he had become a writer.

### *Charlie*

Enrique's narrative resulted in both personal growth and a growing awareness of the limits of educational authority. Charlie, a student from El Salvador, recounted a story in which he realized the extent it was possible to overcome a societal challenge, thanks to the determination of his mother. His narrative focused on a story that occurred when he was in the fourth grade and was required to type a paper—a problem for him because he had never owned a computer and didn't know how to type. In his narrative, Charlie recalled that he and his mother went to the library to use a computer available to the public, where it took them thirty minutes to figure out how to turn it on—nor did they realize that they had to save the text he had painstakingly written. Charlie lost the limited amount of text he had produced, and when his mother asked questions of a librarian who spoke Spanish, she was treated rudely. Nevertheless, undaunted, his mother, "with tears rolling down her cheeks," drove straight to the home of an aunt who owned an old typewriter, which Charlie used to type his story, working all night, while "my mom encouraged me by bringing me fruit and sitting on the

side, reading a book to keep me company." That experience helped Charlie realize how different his "family was from the average American family," but "two months later," he wrote, "my mom signed my sister and me up for a free after-school computer course and got us each a library card, ensuring that her children never had to go through that again." Like Enrique, Charlie felt a tremendous sense of pride and confidence that he could continue to move ahead. Charlie shared his narrative with other students in the class; many had had similar experiences, but, like Charlie, had managed to overcome them.

### *Joseph*

Joseph's narrative traces his realization that although both his mother and father consider themselves Louisiana Creole, which he defines as "both a cultural and ancestral designation denoting a mixed racial and ethnic background," he discovered when he entered high school that in White America, one is considered either black or white and that cultural designations, such as being Creole, are viewed as unimportant. Reflecting on his high school educational experiences, Joseph realized that "Black Americans have been separated from their heritage. Our history in this nation literally begins with slavery in the history books, a history architected and told, by and large, by White historians," and that Black identity has been "imposed by the societal White hierarchy to denote that we exist outside of Whiteness, Americans of a 2nd tier." Ultimately, by reflecting on his background in his literacy narrative, Joseph understood that "Black identities are subtly informed and solidified through schooling and education," but he also understood that he didn't have to accept that he had only one "identity." He could be both Black and Creole.

### *Raphael*

The fourth narrative, written by Raphael, came in a letter to me a semester after he had completed my class and exemplifies how the recollections involved in writing a literacy narrative can facilitate meaningful self-discovery. Apparently, Raphael had chosen to major in business, but he hadn't thought deeply about his choice or what he planned to do after he graduated. The process of writing a literacy narrative enabled him to recall that he had always enjoyed math and was, in fact, quite pleased about his choice of career because it would allow him to focus on finance. He discovered a sense of himself as someone who was genuinely interested in finance, aspiring to the "identity" of a financial planner. Writing his literacy narrative

enabled Raphael to experience a clarity of purpose and a sense of satisfaction that he hadn't felt before.

## Conclusion

Of course, not all literacy narratives are as thoughtfully written as the examples cited in the four epigraphs to this article, nor do they all generate the same degree of critical insight into entrenched power inequities or educational and societal limits. However, what I want to emphasize in this article is the importance for writing program administrators and teachers to consider the literacy narrative as an essential assignment. It is a genre that enables students to explore and reflect on their past experiences with language, schooling, education, and/or learning, thereby aligning with the *CWPA Statement on Racial Injustice and Systemic Racism* (CWPA Executive Board and Officers, 2020). Writing a literacy narrative allows students to recall who they were, who they are, and who they might be, and they all generate new insight into various cultural and educational settings. Most importantly, they can help students realize that their destiny, at least to some extent, is in their own hands.

## Note

1. IRB Protocol Number FY23-184.

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# Scarier Than It Seems: Multimodal Composition in GTA Training

Ryan P. Shepherd, Rachael A. Ryerson, and Courtney A. Mauck

Abstract

*When teachers first learn to teach multimodal composition, they often expect to experience certain challenges with the class, such as problems with their multimodal composing experience or their lack of theoretical knowledge. However, instructors new to multimodal composing may overlook more mundane problems such as issues with learning management systems or students' hesitancy to try something new. In this study, we followed eight new graduate teaching assistants as they started teaching and taking classes at Ohio University, a large Midwestern R1 institution, focusing specifically on three representative case studies. We present the challenges these new multimodal teachers expected before teaching, what they experienced while teaching, and what stood out to them upon reflection. Through these interviews, we found that the GTAs were concerned about their own multimodal experiences and knowledge early on, but during on-the-ground teaching, these issues rarely came up. Instead, student struggles with multimodality and more common day-to-day teaching issues were larger concerns. Their teaching fears shifted as they taught their first multimodal projects with students, and other more common and well-documented teaching problems took center stage during and after the semester. Based on what we learned from the interviews, we offer some suggestions to help mitigate these struggles in new multimodal teachers by setting up courses and mentoring to make multimodal teaching less of an internal and practical challenge.*

When we asked Jean[1] whether she thought that she was prepared to teach multimodal composition, her answer was unambiguous: "Um, no, I don't. I'm going to be honest and say, no, I don't." Jean had taught creative writing, literacy, and composition in multiple contexts before she joined the PhD in Creative Writing at Ohio University, a large Midwestern R1 university. Her position immediately before entering the program was as an adjunct composition teacher at a local community college. She was an experienced writing teacher.

She was even an experienced multimodal composer, although she was not calling it "multimodal composition" at the time of our initial interview. Jean had a background in text-based art and used "many different means" to convey messages to her audience. She had long been incorporating

other modes of media into her creative writing as well. In the past, she had even incorporated videos to accompany written texts into her composition classes. While she did not call this "multimodal composing" either, these texts conveyed meaning through multiple modes. Jean was certainly an experienced multimodal composer and even had experience teaching multimodal composition.

So why did Jean feel so unprepared to teach multimodal composing? She was worried she did not have the theoretical backing—that is, the knowledge of what research says about multimodal teaching and practice—to justify her teaching choices. This was a fear echoed by many of the other graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Jean's cohort. Still others were afraid that they did not have enough practical experience composing multimodal projects themselves, and a few were scared how the students might react to multimodal assignments. Many of the GTAs expressed fears about teaching multimodal projects early in the semester, and different fears came up throughout the semester and after they finished teaching. Fear—at least partially—guided their level of confidence in teaching multimodal projects.

In the last two decades, the field of composition studies has come to embrace multimodal composition as a regular part of first-year writing courses (e.g., Alexander and Rhodes; Bowen and Whithaus; Palmeri; Selfe, "Movement"; Shipka, *Toward*; and many others), to the point where multimodality is mentioned offhandedly in books like *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle) and in position statements by major organizations in writing studies (Council of Writing Program Administrators). Despite this ubiquity, not much research in the field has explored guiding new composition teachers through the process of teaching multimodal assignments. While a wealth of scholarship offers insights into training new GTAs, very few of these manuscripts mention multimodal composition at all.

In order to begin to fill this gap, the authors of this article followed new GTAs as they learned to teach multimodal projects. Through these interviews, we were able to see the real on-the-ground struggles with multimodal composition that new GTAs experienced—something not yet done in other explorations of multimodal composing or of GTA training. The GTAs in this study were interviewed before teaching, during their first semester teaching multimodal composition, and after the semester was over. The hope was to offer insights into what challenges impeded teaching multimodal projects and how WPAs can adjust training for new GTAs to mitigate these challenges. Through these interviews, we found that GTAs' attitudes about multimodal teaching changed through the course of the

semester. Before they began teaching, GTAs often experienced more fear and uncertainty about teaching multimodal composition than other areas of teaching even if they had experience with multimodal composing themselves. These fears changed as they taught and completed their first multimodal projects with students, and other more common and well-documented teaching problems took center stage during and after the semester. While anxiety about teaching is well documented, this specific anxiety hasn't been covered in previous literature—and as far as we know, the drop off of the fear offers a unique contribution to GTA training literature. In this article, we document the interview process and challenges students experienced, and we offer recommendations for how to build confidence early in new GTA training so that multimodal composition will feel less scary for first-time teachers. Helping GTAs get over that anxiety about not being good enough may help them teach multimodal composition better.

## Multimodal Composition and Teacher Training

Over the last decade, multimodal composing has become more prevalent in writing classrooms, with scholars arguing for its importance (Ball; Kress; New London Group; Shipka, *Toward*), exploring how to implement multimodal pedagogies (Anderson et al.; Bowen and Whithaus; Rankins-Robertson, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher; Selfe, *Multimodal*; Shipka, "Task-Based;" Sorapure; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc), investigating what students learn from multimodal composition (Delagrange; DePalma and Alexander; Alexander; Jacobs; Nelson et al.), and explaining how and why faculty can become more proficient in multimodal composing (Journet; Rankins-Robertson, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher; Wood and Madden). While support for teaching multimodal composition abounds, most of the research focuses on established writing teachers who might want to make a "theoretical shift" toward multimodal literacy (Takayoshi and Selfe 3). GTAs, who might be new to teaching entirely and still in the process of building their own theoretical foundations, are left out. WPAs must account for this gap when deciding to create a curriculum focused (even partially) on multimodal composing in order to ensure that graduate students are adequately trained to teach multimodal projects.

Unfortunately, little has been written about how training in both traditional composition pedagogy and multimodal composition could take place concurrently in GTA seminars or about the particular challenges GTAs might face in training to teach multimodal projects. There is a large body of scholarship that focuses on graduate pedagogy in the form of the teaching practicum—the orientation, training sequence, or graduate course

often provided for incoming GTAs in both master's and doctoral programs. The research tends to focus primarily on theorizing the practicum and curricular development (Dively; Dobrin; Khost, Lohe, and Sweetman), teacher training and preparation (Estrem and Reid; Fedukovich and Hall; Stancliff and Goggin; Bourelle), or the identities and attitudes of GTAs themselves (Grouling; Ebest; Dryer). Multimodal composition is largely absent in this body of research. While there are many claims of a multimodal turn or calls for "multimodal curricular transformation" (Palmeri 149), multimodal composition is still frequently treated as ancillary and is often not fully integrated into TA training. This sentiment is echoed by Beth Brunk-Chavez, who notes that in many cases it is only the "lucky few students who enroll in the new-media expert's class" (281) who will receive adequate training and experience for incorporating multimodal composition into their own classrooms.

Indeed, in a 2005 survey conducted by Anderson et al., the data shows that many programs lacked thorough training in multimodal composition at the time, which left graduate students to "teach themselves how to implement multimodal pedagogy" (74). Similarly, Claire Lutkewitte, in her study of GTAs' integration of multimodality into FYW classrooms, records several GTAs' complaints about the lack of training they received in teaching multimodal composition. Even in a more recent study, Rory Lee acknowledges an imbalance of labor in many departments or programs, where "a select few individuals shoulder most of the responsibility regarding the implementation of multimodality" (266). This imbalance can certainly result in less focus on GTA training in multimodal composition, despite calls for such changes to GTA curriculum and teacher training over the past decade (Graupner, Nickoson-Massey, and Blair, for example). As such, the challenges of preparing graduate students to teach multimodal composition while also learning about composition pedagogy more broadly remain undertheorized both from the perspective of instructors and WPAs and the perspective of the new GTAs themselves.

In contrast, some of the broader challenges that GTAs face as both teachers and students have been addressed by many scholars, with Dryer noting that GTAs may find their confidence or writing competence "undermined" in their role as a student while simultaneously being positioned as "writing experts" in their own classrooms (425). More specifically, GTAs may struggle with the pedagogical application of the theoretical knowledge they are learning in the practicum or through other coursework (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; Bourelle) or may even resist the practicum altogether (Ebest; Dryer).

These challenges undoubtedly remain when adding multimodal composition into the mix and may be intensified or branch into new challenges. As mentioned previously, the unique benefits and challenges of multimodal composition have been discussed widely. For example, in the introduction to *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe address some of the common concerns instructors might have when considering multimodal composition, such as the fear that multimodality may take away from "writing concerns" or that instructors must be technology experts in order to teach it (7). Many of these challenges and concerns still exist for instructors over a decade later, with Logan Bearden noting that many instructors resist multimodal composition because they "feel they lack expertise with the digital" or may wish to uphold the "privileged position of print" (140-1). It is for this reason it seems particularly important to address GTAs experiences of these challenges and their approaches to incorporating multimodal composition.

To better understand their approaches, Xiao Tan and Paul Kei Matsuda examine first-year writing instructors' beliefs about incorporating multimodality into their writing classrooms. In particular, Tan and Matsuda seek to address whether teachers' beliefs about incorporating multimodality align with their actual teaching practices. Ultimately, their study finds that teachers' beliefs and practices tended to align, though their approaches were influenced by various internal and external factors, such as their perception of the students (8). Tan and Matsuda's study is an important contribution in that they specifically explore how GTAs choose to incorporate multimodal composition in a first-year writing classroom based on their beliefs about multimodal pedagogy. However, the study is also limited by its data collection, which is isolated to a singular moment in time, an issue that Tan and Matsuda also note, given that teachers' beliefs are "dynamic and susceptible to changes" (10). This article aims to extend the work of Tan and Matsuda by focusing more specifically on the internal and external factors that impacted GTAs when teaching a multimodal-focused first-year writing course at our university. We also recognize the need for further research that accounts for "contextual variables," as Tan and Matsuda suggest (10). This project seeks to extend Tan and Matsuda's work, in that we conducted a longitudinal study to better understand the fears, challenges, and successes that GTAs experience when asked to teach a first-year writing course focused on multimodal composing.

## Data Collection and Analysis

This study began in the summer of 2020 as new GTAs engaged in the GTA seminar and began to teach first-year writing at Ohio University (OU), a public R1 university in the Midwestern US that enrolls around 20,000 undergraduates. The authors of this piece, Ryan, Rachael, and Courtney, all worked at OU at the time data were collected. Rachael was the WPA in the English department at OU at the time of the study, and Courtney was the assistant WPA. Ryan was a tenure-track faculty member who taught rhetoric and composition graduate courses and was a member of the Composition Committee advising the WPA.

There are typically around fifteen new GTAs in the graduate program per year. These include both MA and PhD students who are enrolled in one of three different tracks: creative writing, literature, or rhetoric and composition. To prepare to teach the one-semester first-year writing course offered at OU, GTAs take a graduate seminar course in composition pedagogy. That course, College Writing, combines theory with praxis. GTAs learn about the history and theory of teaching college writing while they concurrently teach a first-year writing curriculum designed by the WPA and assistant director. The College Writing seminar is also taught by the WPA. Because the first-year writing curriculum the GTAs in this study taught was centered around multimodal composing, they were provided with a great deal of support, both through an online summer/fall orientation prior to the start of classes and in the seminar course.

In addition, it is worth noting that the GTAs in this study also taught their first-year writing course online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because they were teaching a multimodal curriculum, because they were teaching it online, and because the GTAs varied so greatly in their teaching experience, with some of them teaching for the very first time, they were asked to participate in an online teacher orientation that began in July and met through August. The orientation, which consisted of eight Zoom meetings with assigned "homework" in between meetings, allowed GTAs to become familiar with the curriculum by reading through course materials and composing some of the materials they would be asking students to compose. For the year of this study, the online orientation replaced the two-week in-person orientation that typically occurs two weeks before classes began. Thus, the GTAs had more time to learn the curriculum they would be teaching, to ask questions about it, and to gain confidence in enacting that curriculum in an online setting. Finally, Rachael and Courtney crafted the first-year writing curriculum that was provided to GTAs, and GTAs had the entirety of this curriculum, including a full semester schedule,

copies of assigned readings, essay assignment sheets, and lesson plans. It is within this context that we collected data on these GTAs' experiences of teaching a multimodal first-year writing curriculum.

With IRB approval,[2] three sources of data were collected. The first was an initial interview that took place immediately before or soon after starting the GTA seminar. Questions in this interview focused on definitions of multimodal composing, experiences with multimodal composing, and potential challenges of teaching multimodal composing. The purpose was to gauge GTA experience with both theoretical and practical aspects of teaching multimodal composing as well as help the researchers select three candidates for case studies. Case studies took place concurrently with teaching and were designed to get a sense of challenges with the curriculum as they arose. A final round of interviews was conducted with all participants after the semester had finished during which interviewees were asked similar questions to the initial interview.

### *Interviews*

A total of thirteen GTAs were enrolled in the GTA seminar, and of these, eleven agreed to take part in the initial interviews. Of that eleven, eight took part in the final interviews. In order to keep the data consistent, only those eight are focused on in the data presented here. Basic demographic data on these participants can be found in table 1. Readers may notice that seven of the eight interviewees were on the PhD track and five of them were in the rhetoric and composition concentration. This may be slightly misleading, as only one of the eight had a background in rhetoric and composition before entering this university. Most had a background in either creative writing or literature.

Four of the eight interviewees had taught at least one composition course in their MA program, and three had taught composition for more than two years. Most of the interviewees had taught "incidental" multimodal projects before, meaning they had not set out to teach a multimodal project but had included multimodal elements in traditional projects. For example, teachers may have taught students how to use PowerPoint for presentations or encouraged students to analyze advertising images as part of a rhetorical analysis. Only one of the eight had intentionally taught a multimodal assignment previously. Four of the eight were "novice" multimodal composers, meaning they had created relatively low-effort multimodal texts, such as posting pictures on Instagram or minimally edited videos on TikTok. One participant was "proficient," meaning they had created more complex multimodal texts, and the final three were "expert," meaning they

Table 1
Interviewees Teaching and Multimodal Experience

| Pseudonym | Program | Teaching Comp Exp | Multimodal Teaching Exp | Multimodal Composing Exp | Case Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anna Marie | MA<br>Literary History | None | None | Proficient | No |
| Kurt | PhD<br>Rhet & Comp | At least 1 course | At least 1 multi-class project | Expert | Yes |
| Jean | PhD<br>Creative Writing | At least 1 course | Incidental | Expert | Yes |
| Kitty | PhD<br>Rhet & Comp | More than 2 years | Incidental | Novice | No |
| Laura | PhD<br>Creative Writing | More than 2 years | Incidental | Novice | No |
| Ororo | PhD<br>Rhet & Comp | More than 2 years | Incidental | Novice | Yes |
| Raven | PhD<br>Rhet & Comp | At least 1 course | Incidental | Novice | No |
| Remy | PhD<br>Rhet & Comp | At least 1 course | Incidental | Expert | No |

created multimodal texts that required extensive knowledge and heavy editing. For example, Kurt had recorded and edited musical albums and created videos in both professional and personal contexts, and Jean had created multimedia online fiction.

Case studies followed three students chosen to reflect a variety of experience levels in terms of multimodal composing experience, theoretical learning about multimodal composing, and experience teaching multimodal composing. The three case studies selected were Kurt, Jean, and Ororo. Kurt was selected because of his extensive multimodal creation experience and high multimodal teaching experience but relatively low experience with multimodal or rhetoric and composition theory. He had extremely high scores in disposition toward multimodal creation, value of multimodal composing, and confidence in teaching multimodal composing. Jean also had extensive multimodal creation experience as well as relatively low theoretical experience. However, Jean had low multimodal teaching experience and was the lowest participant in terms of confidence at the beginning of the semester. Ororo fell somewhere in between. She had quite a bit of teaching experience, but little of it involved multimodal teaching. She also had little experience with multimodal creation. But on the other hand, she was one of the few students who had multiple rhetoric and composition courses at the graduate level before entering the program.

Case-study interviews took place roughly every two weeks over the course of the semester, with each interviewee participating in five to six case-study interview sessions in total. The questions for these interviews were simple, focusing on what multimodal activities they had taught and how the GTA felt the activities went, but case-study interviews were conducted somewhat loosely. Many interviews expanded to include general challenges with teaching and challenges with multimodal teaching specifically.

All initial, final, and case-study interviews were conducted by Ryan. He was selected to conduct the interviews because he was not directly involved in the GTA seminar teaching. Rachael led that seminar, and Courtney assisted with seminar instruction. In order to encourage students to answer more honestly, the research team felt that someone not involved directly in the teaching of the seminar should conduct the interviews. While Ryan taught graduate courses in rhetoric and composition at OU at the time of this study, he had not yet had any of the GTAs selected for case studies, and only one of the other GTAs, in his courses when he conducted the interviews.

It is worth noting that all interviews, the GTA training seminar, and all of the students' first teaching experiences at the university of this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and were entirely conducted online.

Initial interviews took place in July 2020, the GTA seminar took place from July through December 2020, case studies and teaching took place in Fall 2020, and final interviews took place in January 2021. Obviously, this made teaching, training, and most university work especially hard on everyone involved. As former WPA editors Lori Ostergaard, Jim Nugent, and Jacob Babb put it, "we may do no more in a day than to keep our heads above water and to help our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and students to stay afloat themselves" (9). This was certainly true for the GTAs in this study, many of whom struggled with pandemic-related issues as much or more than teaching issues. In fact, one student initially selected as a case study for this project was overwhelmed and decided to leave graduate school entirely. It is with this backdrop that the data below was collected.

### *Interview Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed using transcription software then checked and corrected by the research team. Codes were derived inductively by the research team. As we were looking for challenges and concerns in teaching multimodal composing, we first went through the interviews simply marking the concerns. Each interview was analyzed by at least two members of the research team in order to ensure that all concerns about teaching were marked. The research team then grouped similar codes together to create a set of fourteen concerns or challenges into which all of the individual codes were grouped. The codes are presented below, and the frequency of each code is presented in table 2.

- **Lack of teaching knowledge**: The teacher feels they do not know enough about general pedagogical theories.
- **Lack of multimodal knowledge**: The teacher feels they do not know enough about the theories or practice behind multimodal composing.
- **Lack of knowledge about multimodal tools**: The teacher feels they do know enough about which tools to use to compose multimodally or how to use those tools.
- **General feelings of unpreparedness**: The teacher feels they are unprepared but does not know in what specific areas.
- **Lack of confidence in teaching**: The teacher feels they are unprepared to teach composition generally.
- **Effort to teach multimodal composition:** The teacher feels that there may not be enough time to fully teach multimodal composition, or it will require too much effort.
- **Student resistance or fear**: The teacher feels that students may resist the pedagogy.

- **Student reluctance to try new things**: The teacher feels that students will not try new modes they are not familiar with.
- **Student lack of effort**: The teacher feels students will not put forth much effort into projects because they don't take projects seriously or think they believe projects are overly easy.
- **Student inability to apply multimodal theories**: The teacher feels students will not understand multimodal theories or will not create effective multimodal projects.
- **Accessibility**: The teacher feels students will not be able to access required tools.
- **Technical problems:** The teacher feels that students may struggle with issues related to the creation of multimodal texts, such as how to save or submit drafts.
- **Online teaching**: The teacher feels tools used for general online teaching may impede learning.
- **General Teaching**: The teacher feels there is some other problem with teaching.

Table 2
Frequency of Codes

| Code | Initial Interviews | Case-Study Interviews | Final Interviews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lack of teaching knowledge | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lack of multimodal knowledge | 6 | 3 | 5 |
| Lack of knowledge about multimodal tools | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| General feelings of unpreparedness | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Lack of confidence in teaching | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Effort to teach multimodal composition | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Student resistance or fear | 1 | 3 | 5 |
| Student reluctance to try new things | 0 | 8 | 6 |
| Student lack of effort | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Student inability to apply multimodal theories | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Accessibility | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Technical problems | 0 | 6 | 3 |
| Online teaching | 0 | 7 | 4 |
| General teaching | 0 | 14 | 2 |

The research team noticed a pattern in the data when grouping similar codes together. The first six codes could be grouped roughly into concerns about GTAs' own internal struggles as a teacher, the next four concerns could be grouped into concerns about external struggles with students, and the final four concerns could be grouped into concerns about external struggles with teaching. Internal struggles were those in which the locus of the concern came from inside the interviewee's own thoughts or feelings of preparedness. In other words, the internal struggles were not responding to an external stimulus directly. For example, internal struggles included grappling with a lack of knowledge about multimodality. External struggles were those in which the locus of the fear started outside of the interviewee initially. For example, the interviewee may have been concerned about student reactions to assignments or about tools not working correctly. While the lines between internal and external struggles were sometimes blurry, context often told us whether the fear started with the interviewee's own sense of themselves or with how they were interacting with the world beyond themselves. Codes occasionally came together, such as when a student was resistant to an assignment (external struggle with student), and this caused the interviewee to worry they didn't know enough (internal struggle). These codes are grouped into internal struggles, external struggles with students, and external struggles with teaching in table 3.

Table 3
Groupings of Codes

| Code Group | Initial Interviews | Case-Study Interviews | Final Interviews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Internal struggles | 10 | 9 | 8 |
| External struggles with students | 2 | 14 | 15 |
| External struggles with teaching | 0 | 27 | 12 |

## Discussion of Interview Results

Three points reiterated elsewhere are worth noting from the data that we collected. The first is that GTAs' internal struggles—their concerns stemming from knowledge and feelings of preparedness—began before teaching, continued through teaching, and persisted after the teaching was over. These internal struggles are also reported in similar studies (Grouling; Dryer) where GTAs indicated difficulties developing their teacher-student identity. The second is that GTAs' struggles with student-related teaching problems were not really on their radar before the semester began

but became a major problem once teaching had started. This struggle is similarly reflected in Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid's study where "for the majority of [GTA] respondents, a 'teaching challenge' was a 'student challenge'" (468). And the final point of note is that GTAs seemed to be completely unaware of other struggles with teaching issues besides those focused on students before the semester began, but this was the largest problem while in the middle of teaching. GTAs in Carolyn A. Wisniewski's study identified similar problems "related to inexperience organizing learning environments" (45). Each of these will be covered in the remainder of this section.

However, in addition to these findings, we also found that interviewees' internal struggles with multimodal teaching in particular were at the front of their minds before teaching—and even to a certain extent after teaching as well—but these struggles largely disappeared when they were in the middle of the semester. Instead, struggles with multimodal teaching largely shifted to focus on interactions with students and other external factors. In retrospect, this finding may not be surprising, but it does have significant impacts on how WPAs may approach helping GTAs to teach multimodal assignments for the first time.

### *Internal Struggles*

Internal struggles over knowledge and feelings of unpreparedness were by far the most mentioned anticipated challenge among the GTAs in their initial interviews. They expected that their lack of multimodal knowledge would be an impediment to their ability to teach effectively. This is similar to the GTAs studied in Tan and Matsuda, who also had internal worries about teaching multimodal composition. However, their worries seemed to focus more on the justification of multimodal composition than on their own experience level. In contrast, many of the GTAs in our study expressed concerns that they simply did not have enough experience with multimodal composition themselves to teach it. Both Anna Marie and Remy expressed this as their primary concern going into teaching multimodal composition. Remy said he was "not very comfortable in teaching" multimodal composition yet because he did not see himself "as good enough to teach" it. He felt that he still needed "to learn how to apply it" to the students in his classes. This is particularly notable because Remy had already taken a doctoral-level multimodal composition class with Ryan before beginning as a TA.

Many others were comfortable with multimodal composing but were concerned that they did not have enough theoretical understanding of

composing multimodally to teach it effectively. For example, Raven stated that the word multimodal was scary to her and that she believed she could teach it but that "it would be easier with instruction." Kurt worried that he did not fully understand "the pedagogy behind" multimodal teaching or "what the research [was] saying about it" despite being an experienced multimodal composer and the only interviewee to have intentionally taught a multimodal assignment. Laura's and Jean's concerns were very similar to Kurt's: They worried that their lack of theoretical backing—that is, knowledge about what other scholars had written on the topic—in multimodality would hurt their ability to teach. Aubrey Schiavone also found that instructors new to teaching multimodally might find this teaching "especially daunting" because they "simultaneously encounter multimodality in theories or scholarship" as they try to "integrate multimodal composition into their instructional practices" (358-9). Early on in the interview process, many of the interviewees felt that they needed to read more theory on multimodality in order to be able to teach it effectively.

These internal concerns remained remarkably stable in the case-study and final interviews. Internal concerns were mentioned ten times in the initial interviews, nine times in the case studies, and eight times in the final interviews. However, the specific internal struggles changed after the initial interviews. During the case studies, lack of multimodal knowledge was still mentioned a few times, but a more general lack of confidence in teaching was mentioned as often. This came up most often in Jean's interviews, where she expressed concerns about her "capabilities as a teacher" and expressed that she felt "kind of in the dark" about how to teach—despite her extensive teaching experience. In other words, teaching generally became more of a concern than teaching multimodal assignments for the GTAs in the case studies once they were in the classroom. The question of theoretical backing fell away as interviewees became more concerned with the practical day-to-day aspects of teaching.

Lack of multimodal knowledge returned as the primary concern in the final interviews, accounting for five out of the eight internal struggles that interviewees expressed. Kitty said that she "didn't always have the best advice for how to approach multimodal projects that students wanted to do," and Kurt worried that he couldn't take what he had learned about multimodal composition and "make it palatable for different learning styles." Anna Marie, Jean, and Laura expressed concerns about lacking in theoretical multimodal knowledge, in visual rhetoric, or even simply in having the vocabulary to discuss multimodality. Other scholars have also found that GTAs often struggle to make this connection between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel;

Bourelle), and these after-the-fact interviews seem to bear that out—applying what other scholars have said to multimodal theory as well.

The primary take-away seems to be that the GTAs in this study remained stable in their concerns that they may lack multimodal knowledge—either theoretical or practical—before, during, and after teaching a course focused on multimodal composing. However, during teaching, this concern was as common as more regular day-to-day teaching concerns. We believe that helping to allay these fears requires two interventions. One is the more obvious one: allowing students time to expand their theoretical and practical multimodal composing knowledge before teaching may help with these fears. This follows up Tan and Matsuda's call to "help teachers gain a critical understanding of what multimodal literacy is and does" (10) and to give teachers "more opportunities to do hands-on multimodal practices" (11). In addition, it may be helpful to simply let GTAs express these fears with their peers and see that they are common. We think that GTAs may have been concerned about their lack of multimodal knowledge partially because they believed that peers knew more about or had more experience in certain areas. In other words, students may be feeling a bit of imposter syndrome. By seeing that other students are concerned and that each GTA has different assets and gaps in their multimodal knowledge, it may help students feel more confident in teaching. They were already seeing their deficits, but they were not yet seeing their assets as multimodal teachers.

Of course, this finding falls in line with previous research on teaching GTAs more generally (Bourelle; Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; and Reid). Our study extends this research to demonstrate that not only does teaching multimodal assignments also tap into this imposter syndrome but also that it seems to be even more of a fear for GTAs than general teaching concerns. Before teaching, these GTAs were more concerned about multimodal knowledge and experience than they were about teaching experience more broadly. We recommend that GTAs grapple with the imposter syndrome endemic to being a new teacher as well as that related to multimodal teaching specifically.

These concerns about a lack of multimodal knowledge come into starker focus when we explore the external concerns—those concerns that began with a perceived problem outside of their knowledge or feelings—that the GTAs experienced throughout the semester.

### *External Struggles with Students*

Struggles with students related to multimodal composing were not on GTAs' radars very much during the initial interviews. Remy expressed concerns that students may resist multimodal composition, and Laura worried that students would not exert much effort and just create "a glorified PowerPoint." Aside from those two points, no other interviewee mentioned concerns about students' reactions to multimodal composing—or problems with students at all—before teaching.

It is perhaps not surprising that these concerns were much more common during the case-study interviews. This mirrors Wisniewski's study in which she found that nearly half of the problems reported by GTAs were with students, such as a "lack of engagement" and "students' writing quality" (43), something that we can apply here to multimodal composing as well. Interviewees described struggles with resistance or fear, with lack of effort, and with an inability to apply what had been learned about multimodal composing. But by far the most common struggle with students was a reluctance to try new things. This ranged from students requesting to do traditional projects instead of multimodal composing to trying to do the same kind of multimodal project for each assignment. This echoes the students in Michael-John DePalma and Kara Poe Alexander's study who were "accustomed to thinking about language in specific, narrow ways" and struggled with multimodal projects because they "challenged their assumptions, understandings, and approaches to composing texts" (189). Students in Jean's class tried to avoid multimodal projects all together, instead opting to do traditional essays when multimodal projects were encouraged and later even required. Ororo's students "freaked out a little bit" when she told them about multimodal projects. She said her biggest challenge was that students were afraid of "failure" on multimodal assignments. Later in the semester, most students tried to just do PowerPoints for their multimodal projects, and she had to encourage them to try different approaches. In fact, she took this as a learning experience and said she would be giving them a "limited number of options" for multimodal projects next time around so that the students would feel less stressed about all the possible ways to approach multimodal assignments. But she also said PowerPoint would not be on that list—she wanted them to try different formats. It seems likely that this resistance might be experienced by any teacher using a multimodal curriculum for the first time, but at the same time, more experienced teachers may be able to allay student fears more easily.

After the interviewees had finished the semester, student reluctance to try new things was still GTAs' biggest student challenge. But student

reluctance or fear and student inability to apply multimodal theories came up much more often in the final interviews than they did in the case studies. Overall, struggles with students stayed relatively stable from the case studies to the final interviews. Student struggles came up fourteen times in the case studies and fifteen in the final interviews. Whereas internal struggles stayed relatively stable, student struggles were mostly absent in the beginning, went up during the case studies, and stayed up for the final interviews.

We believe this is simply because most of the GTAs had not considered student struggles with multimodal composing yet in the initial interview, but during the semester these struggles took up a lot of their energy. A good approach to this problem is dealing with sample student struggles before the semester starts, both to make the GTAs aware of them and to help them prepare for how to handle them once they do. The instructors for the GTA training class can bring in examples of their own struggles with students and ask the GTAs to work in groups to solve the issues. Then, the class can discuss them together and decide which approaches would be most appropriate.

These external struggles with student reluctance or fear demonstrate one very important point about the GTAs' apprenticeship into teaching multimodal assignments: GTAs were concerned about their own knowledge and experience early on, but during and after teaching, students' reactions caused the greater struggles. Knowing this and addressing it directly with GTAs offers two very important interventions. The first is that we can allay GTA fears earlier by pointing to the fact that their own knowledge may be less important than their students' reactions, but this also allows WPAs an opportunity to talk about those student reactions in advance. We can bring up points such as asking the GTAs what concerns they might have as a student doing one of these assignments and helping them to develop strategies to allay their students' fears and concerns.

### *External Struggles with Teaching*

While struggles with students were somewhat on the minds of the interviewees during the initial interviews, not a single interviewee mentioned any anticipated struggles with day-to-day teaching problems such as accessibility, technical problems with software, problems with teaching online, or general teaching problems (such as grading, getting students to do homework, or other issues that any teacher would experience). But somewhat surprisingly, this became the largest category by far in the case studies. Every case study interviewee mentioned these struggles in nearly every interview,

and more than half of the struggles mentioned were with general teaching. To echo Elizabeth Saur and Jason Palmeri, "[n]o teacher, no matter how experienced, has it all figured out" (148).

In his very first case-study interview, Kurt mentioned four different problems with general teaching.[3] These included problems leading discussions, problems explaining to students how to approach homework assignments, problems producing good examples for students, and problems explaining major assignments to students. Kurt, Jean, and Ororo all expressed problems with stress and trying to keep up with work such as grading and class preparation, despite all three having taught before and all three having taught composition at least once. The problems they expressed were problems that any teacher—especially a new teacher such as many of the GTAs—would experience teaching. Likewise, because these classes were taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with software and online teaching (such as problems with video conferencing) were to be expected. What was perhaps not expected, however, was that these issues came up so much more often than issues directly related to teaching multimodal composition. During the case studies, general teaching struggles came up in twenty-seven separate interviews as opposed to the fourteen times that problems with students related to multimodal composing came up and nine times that internal struggles with multimodal teaching came up. That means these general problems accounted for more than the combined total of all issues related to multimodal teaching during the case studies.

But these external teaching struggles dropped off precipitously in the final interviews, where they came up only twelve times—less than half the times they came up in case studies. We think there is a relatively simple explanation for this: these kinds of day-to-day struggles were on the GTAs' minds a lot while the classes were happening, but they made much less of an impact on what they considered a "struggle" in retrospect. In other words, it seems likely that the GTAs largely solved these teaching struggles by the end of the semester—or at least had made progress with being more comfortable with the problem. Grading, students doing the reading, and students understanding the homework seemed much less important to them in retrospect. So, for example, general teaching struggles were mentioned fourteen times in the case-study interviews but only twice in the final interviews. The problems were just less of a problem to the GTAs by then.

How to address these external teaching struggles is a question that has been addressed elsewhere in the research (Reid; Saur and Palmeri; Wisniewski). These issues are the same issues that almost any teacher would

encounter—regardless of whether they were teaching multimodal assignments or more traditional ones.

This finding has important implications for WPAs interested in using a multimodal curriculum for GTA training. These very normal day-to-day struggles aren't really on students' minds before teaching—they're much more concerned about the multimodal aspect at that time—but when teaching, the more quotidian (non-multimodal) elements cause more problems. This seems to suggest that WPAs interested in teaching a multimodal curriculum—but who may fear it's going to be a lot of extra hassle for GTAs—need not be too concerned about the new element. The same concerns that all of us are most used to GTAs experiencing are the ones that are more likely to be a problem in the classroom. In day-to-day teaching practices, multimodality does not appear to cause much more additional struggle.

### *Summary Discussion*

Internal issues related to knowledge and feelings about teaching were most present for GTAs early in the interview process and dropped off little by little as the interviews progressed. Issues with students and multimodal composing were mentioned rarely early on but rose in the case studies and stayed up in the final interviews. Issues with general teaching problems were completely absent early on, spiked in the case studies but then dropped in the final interviews. Based on what we are seeing here, it seems like the GTAs had a good sense of how much of a problem their own knowledge and experience would be, but less of a sense of how much problems with students or other day-to-day teaching struggles would be. One of our primary contributions is that we found that our interviewees thought early on that their own knowledge and experience with multimodal teaching would be a much bigger problem than it actually was: this could be imposter syndrome rearing its head. At least the students in our study seemed to be far more capable teachers of multimodal composition than they feared they would be. Based on these findings, we have three recommendations for future GTA training.

The first is simply support. Early on, the GTAs seemed overwhelmingly concerned with their own ability to teach multimodal composing classes. Taking an inventory of what they know and what they need to learn may help to allay some of those fears. In addition, as many scholars have argued, providing GTAs with training in teaching multimodal composition in FYW can provide these teachers with both the praxis and confidence they need to be successful in the classroom (Graupner, Nickoson-Massey, and

Blair; Lutkewitte; Rankins-Roberston, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher). Building on these previous studies, we believe that reassuring students that they have or will acquire what they need to succeed at teaching multimodal composition may help as well. This provides WPAs with a map for the kind of training in multimodal composition that will be most helpful for our GTAs.

It may even be helpful to point out to GTAs that, as our interviews seem to show, their own knowledge and experiences with multimodal teaching matter less during the semester than they appear to believe. In fact, in some ways, learning about multimodal composing alongside their students may be an asset, not a deficit. Struggling together may be a good way to model good learning behavior for the GTAs' students: "I don't know how to do that, but let's find out together." All of the GTAs in this study ended the semester as competent teachers of multimodal composition—regardless of their experiences with multimodal composing or multimodal theory before the semester started. It appears that one thing that may be getting in the way of these teachers is their own self-doubt, and we can help them to calm some of those fears.

Our second recommendation is to engage in reflective activities in which GTAs think about how they might handle classroom problems before they encounter them. For example, the GTAs experienced many problems related to multimodal composing with students during the semester. And these problems stuck with them through to the final interviews. Introducing similar problems to the GTAs early on and asking them to think through how they would address them could certainly help them feel more confident when these issues arose during the semester. As we already know, this kind of before-the-fact reflection helps with the problems with general teaching concerns as well (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; Reid), and we could extend these suggestions to multimodal teaching as well. For example, Meridith Reed suggests "reflective experimentation" to help GTAs build their pedagogy (120). This kind of reflection could help GTAs consider aspects of both traditional and multimodal pedagogy. Putting on GTAs' radars that some students might resist doing multimodal assignments in favor of more traditional writing or that they may want to create similar things for multiple projects can be helpful. It is important to add these strategies to address multimodal composing problems to any reflections WPAs may already be doing as part of GTA training. These problems were not serious ones, but they were concerning to new teachers when they encountered them for the first time.

And our final recommendation is to let students be imperfect. As E. Shelley Reid says, teachers need to remind themselves that feelings of

incompetence are "a normal learning stage and one that will diminish over time" (132). This advice applies to all GTA training, of course, but it is especially true when introducing GTAs to multimodal composing assignments. Across all three of our groupings of GTA concerns, we found that the GTAs often felt stressed about how well they were handling their problems. From not knowing which multimodal tool to use to students making "glorified PowerPoints" to having the video conferencing software fail, many of the interviewees expressed regular concern that they were not doing their best. The additional element of multimodality particularly scared some GTAs. A reminder that all teachers experience problems may help allay some of this fear. And a reminder that all teachers learn from issues encountered while teaching and endeavor to do better in the next class may help as well. The three authors of this piece can all say without question that we have never had a perfect class, but in each class that we teach, we learn to be a little better. Perhaps that is a lesson that these GTAs need to learn early in order to stress less about teaching multimodal composition—and to stress less about teaching in general.

## Conclusions

Jean was an experienced multimodal composer, an experienced writing teacher, and an occasional teacher of multimodal assignments before starting her PhD program. So why did she struggle with teaching multimodal composition for the first time? Our conjecture is that most of this struggle related to internal perceptions of herself: She felt she did not know enough about the subject matter even though from an objective perspective, it appeared to us that she was something of an expert. As Saur and Palmeri explain "your life as a teacher is likely to be awash in complex, messy emotions" and not without "deep moments of doubt" (147). Still, we believe a few simple interventions could have helped Jean to see her assets as a teacher and build on the areas that still needed work. A good starting point would, of course, just be support. Letting Jean take an inventory of what she already knew about multimodal composing may have helped her to feel more confident in her abilities as a multimodal composition teacher. It may also have helped to make the areas she needed to still work on more concrete—less of a nebulous gap and more of a specific area for improvement.

Getting Jean to work through the problems she may face with students in class in advance could also have helped. She was often flustered when a problem with a student came up, but helping her work through hypothetical problems with students and multimodal composing may have made those situations seem less baffling. She could have drawn on her experiences

teaching writing in other contexts to overcome those challenges and felt less like "a stranger in strange lands" (McCarthy 234).

But we think the final intervention would have been most critically important for Jean: she should have been allowed to feel as though it was okay to be imperfect when teaching multimodal composition for the first time. Not just Jean, but many interviewees struggled when things went wrong. Knowing that things going wrong is a normal part of teaching can help GTAs not only get more comfortable with challenges, but also reflect on their failures and learn from them. As Reid says, "our potential for growth often depends on our willingness to take risks and fail" (138). We should make space for those risks and failures. No matter how much we learn about a subject and no matter how many times we've taught it, we still will butt up against challenges that are new to us.

These suggestions will likely not be novel or surprising to experienced WPAs. In fact, they may appear to be often-repeated maxims for GTA training. That's true. But as WPAs, when we introduce new elements such as multimodal composition to our GTA training, we must remember to apply these maxims to the new situations as well. It is important to remember that the novelty of the curriculum largely does not change the GTAs' experiences of teaching a new curriculum for the first time. Our suggestions here for multimodal teaching would likely apply to any large curricular change.

Going forward, we hope to continue this conversation about how best to not only teach multimodally but also how best to learn to teach multimodally. We expect as we get better methods to incorporate multimodal teaching for both new and experienced teachers that we will find that our assets as teachers often more than make up for our deficits. Being inexperienced with multimodal theory may be offset by outside-of-school multimodal practice. Having never taught a multimodal assignment may be offset by having taught many traditional composition projects. We should remind ourselves of the wealth of knowledge we draw on as we teach—and learn to not focus on the gaps we may have in our experience or knowledge. That will allow us to help ourselves as teachers to be more confident, but it may also help us to instill more confidence in GTAs like Jean.

## Notes

1. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

2. Ohio University IRB Protocol Number 20-E-202

3. For the purposes of our study, we coded this as a single incident. Multiple occurrences of the same code in a single interview only counted as one occurrence.

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# Practical Perspectives for *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum: Diversity and Inclusion, Collaborative Partnerships, and Faculty Development*: A Review

Lauren Fusilier

Perryman-Clark, Staci M. *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum: Diversity and Inclusion, Collaborative Partnerships, and Faculty Development*. Utah State UP, 2023. 156 pages.

Universities must prioritize diversity and inclusion in recruiting and retaining diverse students and faculty, especially as the demographic shift looms. Scholars in rhetoric and composition are uniquely situated to contribute to these efforts, particularly those with writing program administration and writing across the curriculum (WAC) experience because expertise in language, writing, and communication are needed across disciplines and administrative units to perform this work. Methods for doing so are at the center of Staci Perryman-Clark's *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum: Diversity and Inclusion, Collaborative Partnerships, and Faculty Development*, published in 2023. *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum* is grounded in Perryman-Clark's experiences as a WPA, director of the Office of Faculty Development, and upper-level academic administrator at Western Michigan University (WMU). This work has informed her assertion that "stronger collaborations between WAC initiatives and centers for faculty development and teaching and learning are vital steps toward moving diversity and inclusion efforts forward as they pertain to teaching and learning at institutions of higher education" (9). Perryman-Clark presents WAC scholarship and literature surrounding faculty development work as theoretical frameworks "offering potential opportunities to respond to calls for stronger diversity and inclusion initiatives in campus environments" (15). *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum* charts a course for rhetoric and composition scholars to forge coalitions among writing scholars, faculty development experts, and university administration—roles that are frequently siloed. Only through collaborative efforts can WAC and faculty development programming fully unlock the expertise of professionals

to forward and institutionalize diversity and inclusion within university missions.

Perryman-Clark's book includes six chapters that discuss different initiatives, partnerships, and professional development opportunities working together to support and maintain both WAC and diversity and inclusion efforts. In the book's introduction, Perryman-Clark shares her professional journey from WPA to director of a faculty development office to academic administrator. In her role as faculty developer, she reports strong commitments to WAC and diversity and inclusion work and emphasizes that "diversity work is WAC work and WAC work is institutional work" (6). The combination of her experiences led her to mark the exigence for a project that explicitly connects diversity, WAC, and teaching and learning centers, which she notes this project begins to address. In the context of declining enrollments and shrinking budgets in higher education institutions, Perryman-Clark argues that WAC programs can serve as a bridge for promoting diversity and inclusion, and faculty development centers can provide opportunities for writing teachers to improve their teaching practices related to these areas. She emphasizes the need for collaborative partnerships and innovative approaches to survive and thrive in this environment.

In the first chapter, Perryman-Clark makes the case for the importance of formal collaboration between faculty development centers and WAC programs. This chapter serves as a literature review of both faculty development and WAC scholarship, investigating the ways diversity and inclusion work are taken up in each area to find that "faculty development data and research includes desires for more diversity programming, while limited attention has been paid to diversity more generally within WAC programming" (25). Because each area of expertise may serve the other, she identifies "purposeful and explicit partnerships and collaborations" as a key to addressing the desires expressed in faculty development scholarship and the gaps left in WAC. Faculty development offers an avenue to alignment with institutional missions and close ties with senior administration to build long-term, sustained programming; WAC specialists provide "sophisticated understanding of rhetorical knowledge and versatility" that can serve to inform diversity initiatives (25). Chapter 1 firmly establishes the need for and an answer to questions of how to strengthen diversity and inclusion efforts on university campuses.

Chapters 2 and 3 unpack the practical application of faculty development and WAC partnerships at WMU, and this is where Perryman-Clark's work really comes to life. Chapter 2 focuses on the revision of WMU's general education program, which she became involved in to protect first-year writing requirements and prevent "outsourcing the labor of writing

instruction to those who possess no training or expertise" (26). As part of the process across all four phases of reform—from self-study to curricular design, logistical planning to assessing outcomes—Perryman-Clark found that the process of revision provided opportunities "to prioritize writing instruction and diversity and inclusion across campus through more formal structures and partnerships," which ultimately yielded additional professional development in the form of training and workshops. Similarly, chapter 3 covers WAC and diversity and inclusion professional development opportunities offered by WMU in the form of programs such as the Seminar on Teaching Inclusivity, a panel on experiences with microaggressions, and the Response to Charlottesville workshop. These programs addressed everything from linguistic bias to accessibility to implicit bias in tenure and promotion. Collectively, these chapters highlight the potential benefits of resource sharing and external funding, the role of WAC in breaking down disciplinary silos, and the significance of diversity and inclusion pedagogy in both institutional progress and professional development. The specificity of the information shared—rubrics from general education assessment, pedagogical strategies developed from workshops, and sample programming schedules, among others—illustrates implementation and gives practical takeaways for readers looking to learn more about the processes, subject matter, and benefits of such initiatives.

In the final two chapters, Perryman-Clark shifts to concerns of broader institutional realization of WAC and diversity and inclusion programming. Chapter 4 further emphasizes the importance of collaborative partnerships and innovative approaches for the survival and growth of WAC programs in the face of declining enrollments and shrinking budgets in higher education institutions. She explains two major budgetary structures, the responsible-centered model (RCM) and the incremental budget model, and provides tactics for maneuvering within these models to find and maintain funding. Finally, chapter 5 reiterates the need for collaborative approaches to achieve broader institutional support and resources for sustainability. Perryman-Clark recommends three steps to achieving this goal: first, the pursuit of collaboration through "connection before partnerships and partnerships before merging or centralizing" (119); second, the identification of initiative-based funding to get collaborations off the ground; and third, approaching budgetary constraints with awareness and preparation for working within them. The ultimate goal is to leverage WAC specialists' expertise in writing and cross-cultural communication with faculty development centers' stable, centralized locations within institutions to provide opportunities for collaboration and deeper exploration of complex topics such as race and diversity. Coalition building between these services will

assist administrators in seeing the value of WAC programming, faculty development in writing, and diversity and inclusion work as part of the university's mission.

One of the greatest strengths of *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum* is Perryman-Clark's emphasis on practical application. She writes to an audience—of rhetoric and composition scholars broadly, but WPAs, those interested in WAC, and perhaps to those outside of these specialties simply looking to contribute to diversity and inclusion efforts at universities—ready to get to work, and she does not disappoint in delivering strategies for pitching in on campus-wide initiatives. Her work makes explicit that "collaborations between faculty development and WAC to foster diversity and inclusion initiatives offer WAC specialists the opportunity to elevate the case for writing instructional support and resources on college campuses" (124). This book fills some of the gaps identified in WAC scholarship as it concerns diversity and inclusion; however, the unpacking of scholarship in each chapter's literature review sometimes reveals a theoretical grounding that appears a bit less developed than the examples and suggestions for practical application that appear alongside it. Perryman-Clark eloquently fills said gaps, but this book may serve those pursuing WAC scholarship better as a gloss than a deep-dive into that area's history with diversity and inclusion. *The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum*'s contributions to future engagement certainly are its strongest suit because of its explicit and actionable paths forward.

*The New Work of Writing Across the Curriculum* also offers readers a fresh perspective, both on how professional identity may develop for those within our field and how those of us within this field might employ skills beyond the confines of our discipline. Perryman-Clark makes a strong case for the WPA to faculty developer to academic administrator pipeline, pointing out the ways these roles inform one another. The work of pursuing diversity and inclusion, however, is bigger than any of these roles and cannot be completed in silos. For beginning scholars exploring the wealth of interests and areas of specialty that rhetoric and composition offer as they forge their scholarly and professional identities, this book reveals trajectories that are perhaps unexpected. For those with field experience, it may provide surprising approaches to familiar pursuits. The book provides strategies for making the case for faculty development and WAC resources to administrators, and would serve as an informative tool for anyone involved or interested in those positions. No matter what, as higher education continues to evolve along an ever-restrictive, cost-cutting funding model amidst continually diversifying enrollments, everyone on campus must lend a hand

in pursuing diversity and inclusion efforts to achieve the goal of access for all to excellence.

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# Review of *Radiant Figures: Visual Rhetorics in Everyday Administrative Contexts*

Skyler Meeks

Gramer, Rachel, Logan Bearden, and Derek Mueller, editors. *Radiant Figures: Visual Rhetorics in Everyday Administrative Contexts*. Computers & Composition Digital Press/Utah State UP, 2021.

In the evolving landscape of writing program administration, the art of storytelling holds a place of central importance. WPAs are often cast in the role of narrators, tasked with weaving compelling narratives about their programs to various stakeholders within the university landscape. These stories, however, extend beyond mere recounting of events or achievements; they embody a strategic communication that can either engage or disengage, inform swiftly or muddle in complexity. *Radiant Figures: Visual Rhetorics in Everyday Administrative Contexts*, edited by Rachel Gramer, Logan Bearden, and Derek Mueller, dives into this narrative core of WPA work, proposing a transformative shift in how these stories are told.

The text posits that the traditional avenues of storytelling in administrative contexts, which "tend toward a kind of tabular grammar that enables us to tell certain stories," do not always capture the immediacy or engage the audience as effectively as needed. In a realm where engagement and clear communication are paramount, the authors argue for the integration of visual rhetoric, specifically through the lens of visual administration, or "VizAdmin," that represents "a philosophical orientation to the work . . . that understands, accounts for, and embraces the rhetorical potential in the creation and circulation of everyday visuals." This approach, as the text suggests, isn't just about incorporating visuals into administrative work but is about embracing a new philosophy in WPA work, one that aligns with the conceptual shift that "GenAdmin" brought to the field (Charlton et al., 2011).

*Radiant Figures* emerges as a pioneering text in this domain, highlighting the untapped potential of visual artifacts in telling the stories of writing programs. It does not merely advocate for the use of visuals but delves into the 'how' and 'why'—exploring the intricate ways in which visual rhetoric can enhance, clarify, and revolutionize the narrative capabilities of WPAs. By integrating visual elements into the narrative fabric of administrative communication, the text argues, WPAs can create more engaging, succinct, and impactful stories about their programs.

In essence, *Radiant Figures* is a clarion call to WPAs to rethink and reframe their storytelling approaches. It offers a novel perspective in the field of writing program administration, encouraging a shift towards a more visually oriented narrative style by illuminating "an underrepresented area of intellectual inquiry in WPA scholarship." This approach, as Gramer, Bearden, and Mueller illustrate, is not just an aesthetic choice but a strategic tool in making administrative communication more vibrant, effective, and resonant with its intended audiences.

## Overview of Content

*Radiant Figures* is segmented into various chapters, each focusing on a unique aspect of visual rhetoric within administrative contexts. Throughout the text, various essays and case studies illustrate the power of visual artifacts in writing program administration. The authors delve into how visual representations, such as infographics, visual syllabi, and other graphic elements can simplify complex information, foster engagement, and provide a clearer understanding of administrative narratives. These visual tools are not just aesthetic enhancements but are strategically employed to improve the clarity and impact of communication within and outside the university setting.

One of the text's key contributions is its discussion on the practical application of visual rhetoric in WPA work, where "60% of the WPA scholarship examined has no graphical figures present at all." It provides real-world examples and theoretical underpinnings of how visuals can be effectively integrated into administrative tasks, such as program reporting, curriculum development, and faculty communication. By doing so, *Radiant Figures* bridges the gap between theory and practice, offering WPAs a toolkit for incorporating visual rhetoric into their daily administrative responsibilities.

The initial chapters lay the foundation, emphasizing the importance of visual elements in administrative documents. The authors argue that these visuals are not mere embellishments, but vital tools that reflect and communicate the values and objectives of writing programs. This sets the stage for the text's central argument: the indispensability of visual rhetoric in administrative communication.

The text's opening chapter, "Thinking through Data Visualization" by Julia Voss and Heather Noel Turner, positions visual elements as fundamental in WPA work, harnessing the revealing power of figures to establish knowledge within writing programs. The chapter argues for a preemptive posture toward data visualization, not just to illustrate programmatic data, but also to render the complex relationality and dynamism of this data.

This, the authors argue, is a mode of communication with stakeholders but it also functions as a strategic practice, as WPAs negotiate and advocate in their administrative roles; this is the productive friction of quantitative data in conversation with disciplinary knowledge in writing studies.

Subsequent chapters delve into practical applications, examining how visual aids like graphs and diagrams enhance curriculum design and improve the clarity of program guides and assignment sheets. These sections underscore the functionality of visual rhetoric as a means to convey complex information effectively and engagingly.

One such chapter is Kate Pantelides, Jacie Castle, and Katherine Thach Musick's "WPA Responsive Genre Change," where the authors apply visual representation to student writing events to demonstrate how such events "map" student participation, while also exposing the shortcomings of traditional visual modes, like printed maps, to that task. They propose "holographic thinking" as a way to conceptualize multi-dimensional representations in writing program work. They chronicle their transformation of a Celebration of Student Writing map to a more interactive and inclusive form, culminating in an embodied tabletop diorama format that makes the visualization of event participation active and as personal as participation in the events it represents.

Chapters 5 ("Diagram as Boundary Object" by David Swiencicki Martins) and 6 ("Designing to See, Mean, and Act" by Laurence José) mark a move to investigate the practical implementation of visual rhetoric within WPA contexts. Martins considers the strategic use of visual diagrams as "boundary objects," which allows for unmediated communication and understanding between constituents and stakeholders in the administrative process. José, meanwhile, explores the critical role of visual design in program administration, particularly in making academic programs tangible and comprehensible. Together, these chapters champion a shift from traditional methodologies to more multidimensional and visually dynamic strategies, enhancing both administrative and pedagogical practices in writing program administration.

The concluding chapters project into the future of visual rhetoric in writing program administration, highlighting emerging trends and advocating for ongoing research in this evolving field. Those interested in these innovations will find chapters like "Networks of Discourse" by Jacob W. Craig and Chris Warnick and "Graphic Re-Imaginings" by Logan Bearden of particular interest, as they demonstrate sophisticated approaches to addressing the complexities of WPA work. Craig and Warnick use network mapping to unveil the rich interplay of institutional histories and program missions, while Bearden offers a profound look into curricular

revision through transformative visual representations. These chapters both showcase advanced applications of visual rhetoric, but they also encourage a broader set of possibilities for WPAs to captivate stakeholders through rich visual narratives, often stepping well outside the lines of the traditional administrative memo.

In summary, *Radiant Figures* makes a compelling case for the integration of visual rhetoric in writing program administration. It argues that the adoption of a VizAdmin approach can revolutionize the way WPAs communicate and tell the stories of their programs. Through a combination of theoretical insights and practical applications, the text provides a comprehensive guide for WPAs looking to enhance their storytelling capabilities and overall administrative effectiveness.

## Analysis and Significance

The text notably pivots from the conventional reliance on textual and numerical data, advocating instead for visual rhetoric as a dynamic tool to articulate complex administrative data and program narratives. This shift not only bridges a recognized gap in the literature but also enriches the discourse by integrating theory with practical, real-world applications.

Through its chapters, the book presents a nuanced exploration of how visual elements—when strategically employed—can significantly enhance the clarity, engagement, and comprehension of administrative documents and processes. This practical orientation, firmly rooted in the multimodality of current rhetoric and composition research, underscores the text's relevance and timeliness, especially given the evolving complexity and interdisciplinary nature of writing programs.

While not introducing radically new theoretical frameworks, *Radiant Figures* distinguishes itself by delving into the specifics of visual rhetoric's application in administrative settings. It extends the conversation surrounding program assessment and narrative construction, demonstrating how visual tools can effectively communicate multifaceted program aspects. The text's contribution lies in its detailed portrayal of how these visual strategies can not only diversify but also refine program assessment and communication strategies, thereby fitting well within—and expanding—the current framework of rhetoric and composition research. In essence, *Radiant Figures* is both a reflection of and a response to the increasing demand for innovative and effective narrative techniques in the realm of writing program administration.

## Relevance ad Recommendations

*Radiant Figures* fills a crucial gap by focusing on the creation, circulation, and reception of visual–rhetorical artifacts within WPA work, highlighting the intellectual practices surrounding their distribution and uptake. The text's focus on visual artifact creation, circulation, and reception addresses the modern WPA's data-driven demands, presenting key metrics like enrollment and performance visually. Its practical orientation, demonstrated through examples like alluvial diagrams, infographics, and program banners, provides readers with actionable insights. This unique approach not only distinguishes the text but also invites practitioners to adapt these strategies in their contexts, making it an invaluable addition to WPA scholarship and practice. While immensely beneficial to seasoned WPAs, newcomers may need a foundational understanding of WPA assessment to fully leverage the book's offerings.

Embracing its role as a dynamic, evolving text, *Radiant Figures* introduces itself as "work in progress" through its innovative, open access webtext format. This digital approach offers a unique, interconnected journey that proposes seven "paths," each designed to guide WPAs through various themes, ranging from "Mapping in/as Administration" to "Program Visibility." This structure is particularly beneficial for those new to the field of VizAdmin, providing a less intimidating entry point into a comprehensive exploration of the subject. The paths are interconnected, indicating the multidisciplinary nature of the work and the rich tapestry of ideas woven throughout the chapters.

While the text's format and its multidisciplinary approach enhance readers' comprehension of visual rhetoric's role in program administration, *Radiant Figures* is not devoid of challenges. Some readers might find the digital format less familiar, and the thematic interconnectivity, though enriching, might lead to occasional content overlap. Nonetheless, the text stands as a seminal resource, especially for WPAs and scholars eager to navigate the complex landscape of program administration through the lens of visual rhetoric. Its approach to content organization, coupled with a rich blend of perspectives and practical insights exemplifies the potency of visual narratives in the contemporary, data-driven academic world.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Radiant Figures* emerges not just as a textual resource but as a beacon guiding WPAs through the nuanced terrain of program storytelling. Gramer, Bearden, and Mueller's work does more than illuminate the

path; it redefines it, inviting WPAs to embrace visual rhetoric as a primary narrative tool in their administrative arsenal.

This text's significance lies in its ability to transform the narrative techniques within WPA work, shifting from the traditional text-heavy approach to a more dynamic, visually-oriented methodology. By doing so, it equips WPAs with the tools to tell more effective, engaging, and memorable stories about their programs. These stories, woven with visual elements, become more than just accounts of administrative tasks or achievements; they evolve into compelling narratives that resonate with a diverse range of stakeholders, from students to faculty, and from university administrators to external evaluators.

*Radiant Figures* establishes itself as a critical text, predominantly engaging seasoned WPAs and scholars dedicated to writing program administration as a field of study. It insightfully navigates the complex terrain of visual rhetorics within administrative contexts, proving indispensable for those already versed in the nuances of WPA work. While it serves as a foundational guide, its presumption of prior assessment knowledge in WPA might present an initial challenge to the uninitiated, thereby delineating its audience between the experienced and the aspirants keen on deepening their WPA expertise.

The integration of visual rhetoric as proposed in *Radiant Figures* is not merely a cosmetic enhancement; it is a strategic move towards clearer, more impactful communication. In an academic world increasingly driven by data and metrics, the ability to present complex information in an accessible, visually appealing manner is invaluable. This text, therefore, is not just a guide but a catalyst for change, encouraging WPAs to rethink how they present their programs' stories, outcomes, and visions.

For WPAs looking to refine their storytelling abilities and elevate their program's narrative, *Radiant Figures* is an essential read. It offers a fresh perspective on the power of visuals in administrative communication, providing practical insights and tools that can be immediately applied. In essence, it's a handbook for the modern WPA, one that acknowledges and leverages the rich possibilities of visual rhetorics in an ever-evolving educational landscape. By endorsing this innovative approach, *Radiant Figures* doesn't just offer a new way to tell the stories of writing programs; it encourages WPAs to create stories that are as radiant and impactful as the programs themselves.

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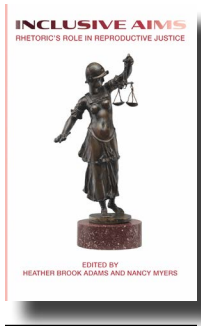


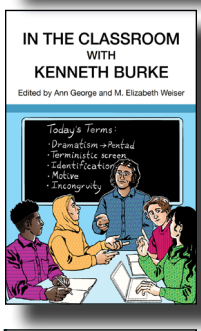


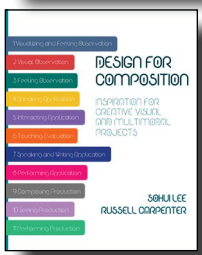


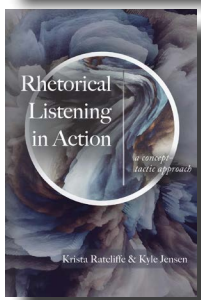


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