

# Introduction

Patricia Freitag Ericsson  
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

The genesis of this book was a listserv discussion related to the burgeoning harassment news stories of 2017. Eleven days before *The Atlantic* asked, “When Will the ‘Harvey Effect’ Reach Academia?” (Fredrickson, 2017) a woman using the pseudonym, “Melissa Hitchenson,” and the subject line, “We have Weinstein problem,” confronted the issue on the WPA-L Listserv<sup>1</sup> (October 19, 2017):

I’m writing to you all because I want the field to face up to the fact that we are not exempt from having a problem with misogyny and sexual harassment in the field, often by powerful men in positions of authority in writing programs. I share my experience, under a pseudonym, with the hopes that this field that prides itself on its “niceness” can stare this issue in the face rather than ignore it. (WPA archives)

“Melissa” went on to detail her own experiences, writing, “I stayed quiet then, but I can’t stay quiet any longer.” She ended her post with the hallmark hashtag of the movement: #metoo. Posts to that discussion thread ranged from informative to confessional to wary. Included were #metoo stories, controversies about whether or not to name names, references to scholars whose work might be helpful, and more. The angst-filled conversation came from all areas of writing studies: classroom teaching, scholarship, mentorship, research, writing centers, graduate studies, and more.

Although the tone of the thread was generally supportive, precious little of the discussion concerned what we (as listserv participants or as individuals) could do that was proactive. The listserv conversation led to this post by Patricia Ericsson:

This is my proactive attempt at doing something. If it does even a small bit of good, then it will be somewhat gratifying. I have been searching for this kind of case study and have found a few. Most, however, are not in the academic world. Those outside have some application, but I’d like some that are more oriented to the kinds of situations we [in writing studies] face in academia. My hope is to archive a curated collection of these case

---

1. WPA-L is an international e-mail discussion list intended primarily for individuals who are involved in writing program administration at universities, colleges, or community colleges. WPA-L’s publicly searchable archives (<https://lists.asu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?Ao=wpa-l>) provide access to the entire conversation.

studies and make them available to all.

A possible process: 1) If you know of a collection like this, let us all know. Perhaps we don't need this if a collection already exists. 2) Volunteer to help put this together. Most case study collections have a somewhat uniform format. We'd work on that. You can contact me on the listserv or at my email if you'd rather do it back channel. 3) ??? your suggestions.

Within 20 minutes there was one positive reply; within a few days, a dozen people expressed interest in building writing studies resources regarding sexual harassment. Those responses and further conversations led to this book.

Chapter 1 details some of the previous scholarship on this topic, both inside and outside the academy, but readers will not be surprised that sexual harassment is not a new issue. With the women's movement in the 1970s, however, open discussions of gender relationships in the workplace became more widespread in the US. The term "sexual harassment" appears to have come into the lexicon in the mid-1970's. In a 2017 opinion piece, Lin Farley claims to have coined the term stating, "It wasn't until April 1975 that women had a word for talking about what their male bosses were doing to them. It was that month that I first used the phrase "sexual harassment" in public, during a hearing on women in the workplace by the New York City Human Rights Commission, at which I was testifying as an instructor at Cornell University" (Farley, 2017, para. 2). A 1975 *New York Times* account of research done by Farley and the Cornell Human Affairs Program found that 70% of the 155 female respondents had experienced sexual harassment (Nemy, para. 7). Reading the anecdotes that resulted from this study belie the 1970s Virginia Slims "You've Come a Long Way Baby" advertising campaign. Sadly, the same ad campaign would still be inaccurate today.

One of the questions the authors of this book initially asked was "Should there be a separate book about sexual harassment for writing studies?"<sup>2</sup> Despite there being considerable scholarly attention to sexual harassment in the academy, writing studies includes pedagogical approaches and unique relationships that make the discipline more open to concerns of sexual harassment. If not carefully considered, pedagogical approaches in writing studies can provide for social interactions that could lead to possibly questionable interactions. Whether in tutoring, one-on-one student conferencing, graduate student mentoring, or classrooms, writing studies' highly valued social, community approaches can open the door to harassment. Although he complicates the idea of community, Joseph Harris (2012) provided an insightful gloss of writing studies' approach to com-

---

2. This book takes a broad approach to writing studies, understanding it as including composition, rhetoric, writing centers, writing program administration, independent writing studies programs and those housed in English departments, and more.

munity, “We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say” (pp. 133-134). Inviting undergraduates, graduate students, and colleagues into a “community,” Harris posits, bids participants to become part of a community of power (p. 135). These communities of power are, however, communities of unequal power, rife with harassment possibilities. Whether these power communities are located in tutoring sessions, student conferences, small classes, or mentoring experiences, the power structure is not balanced, even though some of our most vaunted pedagogical ideals purport it to be.

Best practices in writing studies frequently include invitations to write and talk about challenging topics. Even when our writing assignments and research topics are seemingly not personal, threads of the personal often underlie them. In fact, many assignments and research projects start with personal connections. Challenging topics provide for lively conversations in undergraduate classrooms, graduate seminars, and even hallway conversations. Ideas, even disclosures, from these conversations can leak into day-to-day associations. Complex relationships can develop, and these relationships may include sensitive, personal topics. The writing that grows from writing studies scholarship and pedagogy is often central in one-on-one interactions at open tables in writing centers or over a desk in a private office. The personal is invited, but such invitations can create situations in which a sense of trust can be taken advantage of or betrayed. These betrayals are too often a surprise to those who have trusted the invitation to community, not aware that the community is one saturated in power relationships.

Although Chapter 4 provides more on the issue of power relationships, it is vital to know that virtually all the published articles and books on sexual harassment point to power (sometimes coded as “status”) as a core consideration. In the 1990 book, *Ivory Power: Sexual Harassment on Campus*, Vita C. Rabinowitz stated the power that professors have might be “indirect” and thus “more subtly exercised,” but then went on to claim that “In fact, professors wield a great deal of power over students who depend on them for grades, letters of recommendation, academic and career counseling, and research and clinical opportunities” (p. 104). Higher education is saturated with power relationships that can impact individuals at all levels whether undergraduates, graduate students, staff, or faculty. Because of our pedagogy, small class sizes, and frequent one-on-one encounters, writing studies is super-saturated with power relationships.

Foremost in the minds of those who have contributed to this book is the commitment to making it a learning resource. It is not an in-depth study of the social, psychological, or even the rhetorical roots of sexual harassment. It is not a trove of legal knowledge on the topic. It is not a step-by-step guide to an undoing of all the societal and personal wrongs that will lead to a world unscathed by sexual harassment (although if we could write such a book, we would!). Instead of being daunted and demoralized by what it is not, those of us who contributed to this book have played to our strengths. This book is a resource that provides

the groundwork for understanding sexual harassment as well as encouraging the often-difficult conversations that are steps to awareness, action, and prevention of it. Perhaps most importantly, this text mandates a heightened consciousness of sexual harassment as a cultural issue and underscores the profound commitment to cultural change that is necessary to eradicate sexual harassment. This book is about driving the conversation toward increased awareness of sexual harassment as a cultural issue while providing a meaningful resource from which to learn how substantive action might be taken.

As the book was taking shape, the authors thoughtfully considered the venues in which it might be useful. Our approach encompassed composition, rhetoric, writing centers, and writing program administration, but we envisioned the book being used beyond the discipline in campus committees that focus on curriculum, general education, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. It can be a resource for new-faculty development or training faculty for leadership positions. For those leading programs (writing program administrators, directors of composition, writing center directors, writing across the curriculum program directors, and more) it can be a dynamic resource easily adaptable for workshops and classes. For those preparing peer tutors, the book can provide guidance in the interpersonal dynamics at work in student sessions. It can be a foundational text in any pedagogy class—at either the graduate or undergraduate level. As a resource and handbook, it can be used to support graduate students moving into leadership positions. In disciplines outside of writing studies, the book can be used as a kind of template for best-practice approaches in preventing sexual harassment. Those disciplines could write their own, discipline-specific scenarios, but use other parts of the book as appropriate. We see the book being used to start conversations, construct training, and improve policy—all of these in the contexts of local situations and constraints.

In organizing this book, the authors were mindful of the need for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of sexual harassment. A reader could jump directly into Chapter 4 and start opining on the scenarios. This short-cut is tempting, and some will, no doubt, take it. But a productive dialogue about those scenarios requires historical context, definitional clarity, and knowledge of policies that govern institutional responses.

Chapter 1: “Digging In” provides a brief background on sexual harassment, moving from its history in the general public, to the academic world, and then narrowing to writing studies. All of this background is important, but perhaps none of it more important than elucidating the need for this book in writing studies. Despite this field’s concern about a variety of social issues, a similar concern about sexual harassment has been sorely missing. In Chapter 2: “Defining It” the reader will find eleven terms approached through definitions in the popular press, legal research, and, perhaps most importantly, higher education. Admittedly defining terms is not the cure-all for addressing sexual harassment, but definitions are a necessary foundation for tackling the issue. Chapter 3: “Baking

It In” provides several approaches to enacting the cultural change needed to fight against sexual harassment. These approaches were chosen because significant research has gone into evaluating their effectiveness. In addition, they are suitable for academic institutions and the particular challenges of writing studies. Chapter 4: “Talking About It” provides an in-depth opportunity to apply the ideas from the first three chapters. All scenarios are fictional, but they will sound familiar to far too many readers. Simple, uncomplicated analyses of the scenarios are not provided because that would close off the opportunity for thinking, discussion, and multifaceted considerations of them. Readers are encouraged to use the definitional grounding provided by Chapter 2, the proactive approaches detailed in Chapter 3, the Discussion Questions that follow each scenario, as well as variety of critical lenses to analyze the scenarios. Closing the book, Chapter 5: “Learning More About It” is an extensive bibliography for those who want to pursue further study.

Considerable thought was given to including an additional chapter that would tie things up neatly, provide a recipe for success, or offer a step-by-step guide to eliminating sexual harassment. But that kind of chapter would belie the complexity of the cultural change needed to combat sexual harassment. It would also ignore the reality that such change is local, focused on relationships, and requires leadership that is adaptable and flexible (Maimon, 2018, p. 5). Realizing that a neat concluding chapter might uncomplicate what we know is a complicated, thorny, and intractable issue, that chapter was not written. In reality, it might have been an impossible chapter to write.