

# Chapter 5 | Yes, and: Reckoning with Positionality in the Academic Workplace

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A colleague who is also a dear friend describes herself as a “glass half-full” kind of person, and I am not. But I’m not a “glass half-empty” type either. I want to know: How much water is there? Who thinks it’s theirs? What are their plans for it? And where does that leave us, all of us connected via the water and the glass?

For over a decade, any finalist for a tenure-line job in our department may have seen us do the “Water Glass Routine.” It was pretty good schtick, and it delivered a good, if deliberately mixed message. A glass half-full is a welcome sight. But seeing it that way is an act of will, as is learning to “grow where you’re planted,” which is another colleague-friendism. My refusal to go halves on the water may have seemed less inviting, not an open hand but a closed fist. Yet critically situating the glass is another kind of campus survival strategy. It’s a matter of identifying available resources as a precursor to action. In this, I have learned a great deal from multiply-marginalized colleagues who have been telling and telling how they withstand, even flourish, in the face of microaggressions, macroaggressions, and the institutional conditions that grow them. Listening to their stories, I picture our campuses as hothouses that almost all have busted thermostats.

But glasses and plants are not my metaphors, even though both help us keep going while we stay put. Instead, I choose the many *entendres* of the compass to tell my cis white girl story, which is not my story alone. With one foot planted, I sketch some of the theatrics that have played out over my career arc—all events that recur in our profession even if they aren’t discussed much in professional publics. In grad school, I was not the only one who had to learn it’s okay to remove a bully from a dissertation committee. Early on, I became a card-carrying member of the tenure denial club, and more recently I witnessed the sudden but paradoxically slow death of the writing program I directed. It may be counterintuitive to cast these situations as commonplaces. My list may seem unlikely, especially to early career colleagues and nonacademic readers, and it may be missing what others would list first, second, and third.

I nod in response. My affirmative, “Yes, and” follows the logic of theatrical improvisation, including the example set by the legendary Compass Players, who founded the first improv theater in the U.S. Improv embraces the difficulty involved in seeing beyond our own positionalities by asking participants to continuously relate and recalibrate. The golden rule of improv is “yes, and.” It’s

acceptance and momentum. It's additive invention. In this spirit, I tell the story of the third "crucible moment" on my list, the end of the writing program I directed. I tell it as my story and something more: something and. I also give fair warning: I've read just enough Aristotle to be dangerous. I started with *The Poetics*, including eighteenth-century translations that stray wildly from the Greek in an effort to reflect going ideas about story, character, and good theater. *The Rhetoric*, which came later for me, always seemed haunted by actors, orators, and everyone else whose arts resist the discipline of certain kinds of epigraphically-ordered minds.

As a result, what follows is not tragedy or comedy or epic. Instead, I try to track some of the multiple lines of activity linking the present and that time my writing program got dead. To be sure, this chapter comes with a beginning or two, maybe even three; some middle; and at least a sense of an ending. It's hard to divide drama into anything but thirds, and it's equally tough not to see professional formation, like life and chronology, as progression. Nonetheless, for my next trick, I attempt a series of feedback loop-de-loops in order to showcase how much words and play can encompass, especially if we understand positionality as a compass: one foot planted, the other ready to move.

## One Thursday in August

It is a Thursday in mid-August, two working days before orientation for new First-Year Writing (FYW) teachers. Usually, there are ten to twelve MAs and PhDs in attendance, but this year the group is double in size and includes half grads, half new non-tenure-track (NTT) hires.

The institutional bollix that preceded this moment is well known to college-level writing program administrators (WPAs). The incoming first-year class was larger than anticipated, an unexpected percentage of those students needed to take FYW, and most could not or would not wait until spring. As a result, June and July included a cluster of full- and part-time adjunct hires, including former high school teachers and administrators, EFL instructors recently returned state-side, at least one MFA, and a couple of ABDs from other programs.

This kind of thing happens all the time elsewhere, but none of us could recall anything quite like it. So, for weeks I was immersed in issues technically beyond my scope as a tenure-track faculty member with an add-on administrative role: namely, budgeting, hiring, and fielding the ire of upper administrators convinced FYW was a cost center. Maybe that's why it took until early August for me to see a silver lining. What a boon for our students, I finally realized, and what a good thing for the writing program, the department, and the university. For at least a little while, we would be this remarkably robust teaching community. Truly, what better time to implement, program-wide, a previously piloted course that gave student writers 15 weeks of carefully scaffolded problem-driven, solution-seeking multimodal writing? How well-prepared would we be when, the following year, that same course slotted into the new "core" or gen ed curriculum?

I was finalizing orientation packets and feeling hopeful when the department chair came into my office carrying two red Solo cups and a bottle of dead red wine from the second-floor refrigerator. She came right from a meeting that marked the end of a months' long, regularly scheduled department review, and she had news. The headlines began with the imminent shutdown of our MA along with changes to our PhD, and they ended with the elimination of FYW as a program. After all, the new core would have only one writing course, and there would be fewer graduate teachers to oversee.

In the moment, I was both gobsmacked and stunningly unsurprised. That summer, I had been reading *Composition in the Age of Austerity*, an edited collection that offers a masterclass in decoding neoliberal corporate-minded decision making in higher ed. It was Nancy Welch's chapter in particular that helped me ID almost immediately the differences between my situation and, say, the majority portrayed in scholarly literature. Neither the finest examples of stewardship nor the richest data-driven arguments are effective in the new economy, Nancy explained, as if writing right to me. That triennial report I filed, with its empirical evidence of student learning and persistence? That had no currency in the current scheme, nor did the fact that we had wrangled that rarest of curricular beasts: a first-year writing course that incorporated a complete undergraduate research arc.

None of that mattered at the time, and it doesn't matter now, not really. Years have passed, and FYW has been renamed, rebuilt, and recast. A straight-line version of this story might rehearse the curricular changes that have taken place, while a braided narrative might interweave commentary on the macroeconomics of austerity, the material consequences of local, petty politics, and all that the 2020 pandemics taught us about writing education. But this is a positionality story, or two or three, and it dramatizes what was a crucible moment for me. So, the questions to address, one foot planted, the other ready to move, include: What happened next? What did I do? And what did that make me?

## One Thursday in August, Redux

To begin again, I was hired as an advanced assistant professor to direct FYW after P&T even though neither my offer letter nor my contract said so explicitly. At the time, I had either no relevant experience or years of it. Although I had not previously served as a WPA, I was a participant-observer of one program's phoenix-like rise from the ashes, and with another I conducted grant-supported research that informed award-winning curricular revisions reported in refereed scholarship.

Nevertheless, the arrangement seemed clear enough, and I used it to chart my course on campus. If having a coffee, attending an event, or serving on a committee might help me lead FYW, then I was a yes; if not, then no. My earliest and most regular collaborators were the library and the campus social innovation initiative. The former made it possible to build undergraduate research and

multimodal remixes into the curriculum; the latter was an intellectual partner and a steady source of resources. In fact, just as the FYW program got the ax, social innovation was preparing to offer seed grants to first-year writers ready to turn their research into action.

But no. Instead, in August the night before new teacher orientation, I emailed my in-field colleagues: “Short Notice/Quick Rhet-Comp Get-Together,” and the next afternoon we raised plastic glasses of prosecco to our dead program walking. In the coming year, I told the group, the first priority would be FYW students. We owed them an experience untouched by whatever backstage chaos might ensue. Next came program faculty, who deserved respect and support in a situation where neither was institutionally forthcoming. My tied-for-third priorities, assessment and research, were quickly lost. In a moribund program, data and teaching materials decompensate fast. At best, they are props for postmortems that might usefully inform others’ ongoing praxes. Otherwise, like the video we submitted as finalists for an external innovation prize, program artifacts pile up as so many broken links, obsolete e-files, and mountains of hardcopy records that should be shredded, then recycled.

If this were a villanelle in the style of Elizabeth Bishop, a list of additional losses might follow, with off-rhymes calling out points of contrast. To be sure, there were instructors who resented how in the new course research and remix left no time for lit crit. There were also tenured and tenure-track colleagues who believed the austerity augurs and who feared (Write it!) they might have to teach “Jenn’s FYW.” Never mind that never came to pass. Never mind “my course” was co-authored by eight with input from another twenty-five.

In the end, this is not a rhyming poem written in tercets and concluding with a neat quatrain. It’s a story about how I responded when, as the clock ran down, a colleague stopped me in the hall and said: “So, this totally ruined your research agenda.” Was it a statement or a question? I still don’t know, and it doesn’t matter, not really. On one hand, as I took that first sip from the Solo cup, a good half of my plans were already wrecked. On the other hand, the other half were just as good, and they remained unaffected. Maybe if my “one art” were either of those most popular -isms, optim or pessim, I might have a better answer. But I still don’t see things that way. Instead, a student of Viola Spolin’s Theater Games, I accept the glass and the water offered, and then I improvise. I take a sip and do a spit take. I dip my pen to fill it, and then I write watery calligraphy across the wall. I rub the side of the glass as if to conjure a genie, and when that doesn’t work I fling out the remaining contents, yelling, “More, we need more!” and I offer the glass, curious to discover what comes next.

## Full Circle

A compass is both a navigation tool and a drawing instrument. One involves magnets and truth telling. The other hinges on two arms plus a steady hand and

is usually plural, like shoes. In a pair of compasses, one is more needle or trash picker with a sharp point; the other grasps a pencil or its equivalent and is used to draw circles or trace arcs.

When I look down, it does and does not surprise me to see one foot planted almost exactly where it was that Thursday in mid-August, when I started firing emails and texts to the people, colleagues and friends, I trust most in a pinch. A year or two later, Carmen Kynard would offer “job,” “work,” and “hustle” as categories that might have helped me regroup. Instead, part coder, part archaeologist, I saw my situation as nodes of possibility in layers of timespace. On the surface, most immediately: my employer and the campus where I did my job(s). Just beneath: the intradiscipline that sponsors my work as an educator, including teaching, research, leadership, and service. Another fathom or five: the many archives, repertoires, and deep sources that ground me and keep me energized.

Letting go of FYW as a measuring stick, I reevaluated campus opportunities. It turns out, they were surprisingly easy to discern. I didn’t—and still don’t—see myself as furniture or the star of an off-brand cop show (e.g., *Milwaukee Vice Chair*, 3*nglish*). I also didn’t—and still don’t—have a dog in most fights. I’m more a cat person than a political animal. From some standpoints, that means I selfishly packed up my toys and went home instead of getting down off my hobby or high horse, take your pick, to play ball. My favorite among the mixed metaphors lobbed at me: I am not a team player. Never mind it’s not all sportsball. Some play chess or run track, while others make the NFL, the National Forensic League, via debate and speech team.

Look close, and the surface is not where my foot is planted although from a bird’s eye view it can seem that way. In my capacity as “chief capacitor,” a nonce-title given to me by a disciplinary colleague I esteem, I embrace the endlessly innovative work of working with others to make space, connections, and resources. This is what I pursue through symposia that spawn publications and launch satellites. It is also what draws me to scholarly editing, which is similarly formative and formidable intellectual labor whether the subject is undergraduate research, longitudinal research, or community listening. Presently, I headline in the writing center, where “co-director” doesn’t begin to capture the way I am positioned, one foot deep in intradisciplinary articulations of writing education, the other pivoting to help writers, peer tutors, and others arc toward countless possibilities.

If this is the kind of story that comes with a moral or a lesson, it’s probably best set to music: maybe a harpsichord and tin whistles or bagpipes, maybe Chicago drill. Whatever the case, the chorus is something about taking the high road or going high when they go low. It was the First Lady who reminded us the former is not about “losing the urgency or the passion or the rage, especially when you are justified in it.” This pathway is lit by problem-driven, solution-seeking energy. The result is momentum, a “yes, and” directed true north and shaped by a pair of compasses: one foot planted, the other poised, always ready to draw the next curve.

## Acknowledgments

I could not have written this piece without Writing Buddies and the RSA CWPAs, Jeff, Kathryn, and Kuhio, or Zeno's analogies for rhetoric and logic; *The Compass* by Janet Coleman; Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*; Frank Kermode's *Studies in the Theory of Fiction*; *Composition in the Age of Austerity* edited by Nancy Welch and Tony Scott; so much WPA scholarship, including "The WPA as Worker" by Doug Hesse and Chris Anson's "The Intelligent Design of Writing Programs"; "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop; Viola Spolin's *Theater Games*; Carmen Kynard's "Black Feminist Community Meditation on the Work, the Job, and the Hustle"; Shakespeare's *Tempest*; "Capacitating Community Writing," which I wrote with Seán McCarthy and 27 other writing innovation symposers; everyone involved in *The Naylor Report on Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies*, which I edited with Dominic DelliCarpini and Jane Greer; all who contributed to *Telling Stories: Perspectives on Longitudinal Writing Research*, which I edited with Amy Kimme Hea; everyone with a hand in *Community Listening*, which I edited with Lauren Rosenberg and Romeo García; "The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond"; Michelle Obama in conversation with Stephen Colbert; my feminist network, aka colleagues and friends I trust most in a pinch; and my past and present campus rhet-comp colleagues, especially Rebecca Nowacek.