Richard H. Haswell: A Conversation with an Empirical Romanticist

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INTRODUCTION AND DISCLAIMER: The interviews I have done for *The WAC Journal* over the past few years are an outgrowth of relationships I have developed through professional venues. The same is true of my relationship with Rich Haswell, recently retired as Haas Professor of English at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi. However, Rich and I quickly uncovered connections unlike those I have found with anyone else. How likely is it that two WAC types hailing from Texas and Minnesota would have been born not just in the same city, but in the same hospital, ten years apart? How likely would it be for my mother to have taken a college English course from Rich's father back in 1939? And if that were not enough, I learned through the course of this interview that we have a connection through entomology as well. Rich is an autodidact, and my father was a Ph.D., but the passion for Insecta rules either way, and I look forward to the day when Rich and I can chat about aphidophagous insects or Odonata or some other appetizing topic.

For now, I am thrilled to share with *The WAC Journal's* audience the products of an online dialogue plus a long conversation held in Denver at the 2008 WPA Convention. To those new to Rich Haswell, some biographical data. Rich earned his Ph.D. in English at the University of Missouri and thereafter took a literature position at Washington State University, becoming WPA there five years later. During his thirty years at WSU, he became known nationally for his attention to research on college writers as well as his strengths in administration, curriculum, and assessment. His was the guiding hand for the cross-campus junior portfolio at WSU, which has been in place since 1996 and has generated a body of research described in a collection Rich edited, *Beyond Outcomes: Assessment and Instruction Within a University Writing Program* (Ablex, 2001). In addition to dozens of articles and several other books, he is most often cited for *Gaining Ground in College Writing* (1991, SMU Press) and for his dedicated work as

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a bibliographer for the entire field of composition and rhetoric. He and Glenn Blalock have produced CompPile, a free, open-access, unaffiliated, searchable bibliography of scholarship, described on its Web page [comppile.org] as "an inventory of publications in post-secondary composition, rhetoric, technical writing, ESL, and discourse studies" from 1939 to the present.

WAC professionals gratefully draw upon Rich's scholarship and the fruits of his bibliographic projects. Now, about the man himself: Rich paints a self-portrait that is part iconoclast, part polymath, and all theorist-practitioner.

CAROL RUTZ: You grew up on a small Missouri farm, without electricity for the first eight or nine years of your life. Has that upbringing helped shape your professional career as teacher and scholar?

RICH HASWELL: The older I get, the more I think so—always keeping in mind the word "helped." (I'm not a determinist.) Three shapings come to mind. The first is a compulsion to explore. Or maybe it's a compulsive under-consideration of the risks. I had the run of a barn, forty acres of ponds, pastures, and post-oak woods, and about ten miles of river and bottom-land, all to stick my nose where it shouldn't be. On your own in that kind of terrain, it's natural to walk a hollow to see where it starts. I remember once jumping off the well house and landing with my knees locked to see what would happen. So perhaps it's not surprising that the English profession has always struck me as acreage wide open to my curiosity. I avoid reading books twice. I disliked teaching from old notes, and my best courses turned out to be the ones I taught for the first time.

The second shaping—I find it a little embarrassing to say this—is a kind of rural patience. Perhaps it's embarrassing because patience is not a trait of our trade. Teaching strategies fall out of favor before they can show their worth—think of sentence-combining and exercises in creativity. We imagine one research study is all it should take to answer the question or one course to instill the proficiency. Unless you have lived life on a farm, it's difficult to see how antipodean impatience is to it. The abandoned kittens are fed with an eye-dropper. You don't hurry a cow back to the barn to be milked. Meanwhile, university administrators want this program to be validated within the year. Can you imagine saying to a farmer, "You have a year to show us that your crop rotation works"? Until recently I didn't think of myself as having that kind of patience, and when students used the word on my teaching evaluations I was bemused more than pleased. But then my colleagues are amazed when they calculate the hours it must have taken to track down, construct, and upload more than 75,000 bibliographic entries in CompPile. And if there is any one recommendation that emerges from the

developmental analysis in *Gaining Ground*, it is for teachers to be patient with students and their growth in learning. I am attracted to trilogies, novels that spread out like whole countries. I may be the last person alive to have read all of Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*. So maybe some of that farm patience stuck.

I forget what the third shaping was. Maybe keeping an eye out for copperheads.

CR: When your name comes up in WAC circles, our colleagues immediately associate you with first-rate research on college writers—as well as your work as a formidable bibliographer. How did you find your way to doing research on writing pedagogy and college writers?

RH: Professors Roy Chapman and Donna Gerstenberger first showed me the way. Names with low recognition in the composition field. Chapman was my boss the three summers I worked in Missouri archaeology. I was in my late teens and the discipline he enforced entered through my fingertips permanently—measuring the depth of an artifact with a farmer's level to the eighth of an inch, writing up sweaty field notes for every six-inch layer in your square. Five years later, Gerstenberger was teaching a seminar in literary research methods at the University of Washington. We had to read all the background material for a recently published article. One student had unwisely chosen a piece on Shakespeare and I remember Gerstenberger sizing up the three-inch stack of bibliography cards he handed to her and then handing them back, saying that they couldn't be enough. Of course these two weren't the only professionals from whom I contracted the lure for rigorous research. This was the late 1950s to mid 1960s, when literary scholarship—that became my doctoral work—was still driven to get it right, get it exact, make it exhaustive. I'm just saying that before I entered composition studies, I apprenticed in hard science and hard historiography—and later, on my own, in entomological systematics, which is as hard as you can get.

CR: So by scholarly instinct you applied that apprenticeship to composition studies?

RH: Well, when I tumbled into the WPA position at Washington State University in 1972, I was taken aback at all the decisions I had to make without a smidgeon of hard facts to back them up. It was like ordering everyone to read Dostoevsky and not to read Tolstoy without having read either yourself. My office was requiring defenseless students to take remedial writing determined by a cut-off score on the Washington Pre-Collegiate Examination that no one had validated. I was recommending that my TAs get their students to do free writes and my only evidence was Ken Macrorie's enthusiasm for free writing in his textbooks. But, as you can guess, a WPA with 40-plus TAs and no assistant and no writing center has little time to do research. Then, in 1977, I decided to revise our advanced writing course, at least so it would be different

from our first-year writing course. I went around to teachers in other departments that required our advanced course for their majors and asked them what they thought it should cover. A biology professor looked oddly at me, like, what are you doing in my office? (This was in pre-WAC days.) He said he was willing to take on faith what the English department said should be taught. I thought to myself, "But the English department itself takes that on faith." That's when I started gathering the data for my first study of writing pedagogy, a comparison of freshmen, sophomore, and junior essays written to the same prompts. I figured that if there was a difference in the beginning and advanced curricula, it ought to be based on demonstrated differences in freshmen and junior writing.

CR: Did you feel like you were introducing an alien methodology into the field?

RH: Not then. Remember that in 1977 a scholar with an empirical yen wouldn't need to look outside composition studies. There were impressive names doing data-driven research and they certainly helped me find my way in it: Richard Beach, Lynn Bloom, Warren Combs, Sarah Freedman, Ann Gebhard, Kellogg Hunt, Walter Loban, James Ney, Ellen Nold, Frank O'Hare, Bill Smith, Patty Stock, Steve Witte, and many others. It's hard to imagine today, but back then empirical research had éclat. Even *College English* was publishing it. The alienation of data-based research came later, actually not many years later. Of course, the winds will shift back. Let's hope in as short a time.

CR: Your 1991 book, *Gaining Ground in College Writing: Tales of Development and Interpretation* (SMU Press), argues for a developmental approach to the teaching of writing. I would characterize the book as both revered and unappreciated, depending on the reader. As a member of the reverent camp, I have to ask you: Is there some kind of essential resistance to developmental theory in the WAC world? Who is likely to either dismiss or endorse the book's message?

RH: There's plenty about the book that is resistible. Gary Tate and Peter Elbow have told me that it's written in a belletristic style to which many comp people are unaccustomed and often antipathetic. And with good reasons. There are times I've been forced to re-read chapters and I find passages I can hardly figure out. To steal Browning's witticism, when I wrote them only God and I knew what they meant and now only God knows. I wrote the first draft on leave in Quito, Ecuador, which sits at an elevation of 9,200 feet. My high hopes that the composition community would embrace it were considerably lowered when every likely publisher in composition I could think of rejected the proposal or the MS. I received the MS back from one publisher in a split mailing container holding only the first and last pages. So when Tate at SMU Press showed an

interest, I rewrote the entire book in a contrary frame of mind: I would pursue the data that the book reports wherever that led, regardless of disciplinary druthers, and that happened to be right into theories of post-adolescent human development.

CR: But the resistance is to more than just the style of *Gaining Ground*.

RH: Of course. To the approach itself, as you say. Resistance to developmental theory thrives in the comp world, less so in the WAC world. But I wouldn't call the resistance "essential." It's more unthinking or automatic, a kind of knee jerk. What is essential is human development itself. Who can deny that fact of life? Look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and you are looking at development. The resistance, I think, is to that essentiality of development, like it threatens to trump any card that writing teachers might want to play. If they want to teach cultural critique to first-year students, they don't want to hear about findings from college-span development research to the effect that many if not most first-year students have a lot of trouble even conceiving of the multiple frames that kind of critique has to assume. The other problem is that, in part because of this resistance, most college writing teachers have notions about college-age development that are about thirty years out of date. They seem to think theories of development stopped with Piaget (a structuralist who had little to say about post-adolescent development) or William Perry (who largely confined himself to cognitive changes). What they are missing is the rich trove of subsequent theory and findings—life-span, constructivist, affective, material, social, cultural—that could support and enhance their teaching rather than negate it. Often WAC faculty are more amenable to developmental theory because they know more about it, sometimes even teach it. Still, I can't imagine a physics department or engineering school altering their writing curriculum because of some notion about college-age development.

CR: So it's the old clash between disciplinary knowledge and teaching practices.

RH: Precisely. With teachers, especially with college teachers, human development is no different than other human givens, more respected in the scholarly journals than in the classroom. It's easy to defend cultural or gender differences theoretically and even factually, but how many teachers allow them to affect, say, the material they cover or the criteria on which they grade?

CR: In the last decade or so, psychologists such as John Bransford (University of Washington) have reframed adult learning as a journey from novice to expert. How do such insights help us understand college writers?

RH: It helps us understand them but it raises new problems in teaching them. Take the long-standing finding—fully observed with chess players—that experts work more by meaningful patterns than set, linear, procedures. Chess masters recognize board

positions and remember better and worse combinations that emerged from them in past games. Ah, with this endgame I'd better get my rook on the sixth not the seventh rank. They do less brute calculation of where pieces will be three or four moves ahead than do novice players. But how do you teach novices to recognize meaningful patterns? Experts everywhere improvise around novel situations and are willing to transfer to them experience from old situations. If builders don't have any Portland cement around they may sift the gravel out of concrete mix to make a slurry. But how do you teach transferability? Experienced technical writers are flexible. They know that multi-drafting is right in one situation, first-time-final is right in another. But how do you teach flexibility?

CR: Are you saying that expertise can't be taught?

RH: It's more a question of when an expert strategy should be taught. Bransford shows that students who are good at rote learning can get befuddled if they are asked to apply it to any other context than the one in which they learned it. That sounds like teachers should stop teaching rote learning. But maybe rote learning is a necessary first step to flexible learning. OK, but when should the first step be over? Haven't entering college students learned long ago to stick their thesis statement at the end of the first paragraph? Yet when they get out of a writing course and into a disciplinary course, they don't seem to know where to put it. Here is where the WAC or WID teacher may benefit more from novice-expert findings.

CR: How so?

RH: Take context switching. It's not so much that the student who walks into a junior writing-in-biology course is suddenly required to write like an expert, but that the context for the writing suddenly changes from a generalized "English comp" to a particular discipline. Context switching forces expertise as much as expertise manages switches in context. It's the upper-division WAC or WID teacher who can best see where students are applying pattern recognition, skill transfer, and flexibility and where they aren't. In short, novice-master understanding severely questions the timing of the generalized first-year writing course. Haven't entering college students been noviced enough already by their school writing? The understanding also renews the venerable insight of developmental studies, that what makes development is sequence, not age. Once in Quito rush-hour traffic my Ford Bronco gearbox locked up. A twelve-year-old boy, sent by his father from the closest garage, fixed it with a piece of wire he looked for and found in the gutter. That's expertise.

CR: Approaching research from a different angle, let's talk about the informal requests we see almost daily on listservs. Panicky WPAs request information (ideally, in

the form of current national statistics) pertaining to class size; equipment for classrooms or writing centers; the value of lecture/recitation teaching methods; the effectiveness of placement/assessment mechanisms (including machine scoring); and so on. You and your CompPile compadre, Glenn Blalock, often graciously direct desperate inquirers to substantial bodies of research. One might wonder why such research seems to be unfamiliar to those who need it most. What's going on?

RH: Something both disturbing and understandable. What kind of graduate curriculum didn't teach these WPAs how to find this kind of disciplinary information on their own? Don't they know the bibliographies? Can't they extract the relevant texts and then slog through them and gather the data they need? Are there whole rhet-comp degree programs that never dirty their hands with factual information critical for the defense of writing programs? Yet we both know that WPAs are daily harried by the deep-rooted impatience of higher education that I have referred to. The dean of the business school telephones you on Wednesday that he is meeting on Friday with representatives from the Student Business Organization who think their upper-division writing requirement is a waste of time because it has nothing to do with the jobs they will get. Could you come? You remember that there are studies of the considerable amount of time workers spend writing on the job, but you yourself don't have the time to find them. So you post to the WPA-L, hoping for someone who can give you figures to show the students and the dean.

CR: Still, it's hard to imagine these kinds of requests for data in other disciplines.

RH: I suppose so. What I find hard to understand is the reluctance of rhet-comp scholarship to provide the kind of information WPAs need, in the form of synopses or reviews of research. The data are there. CompPile locates around a hundred pieces describing the amount of writing required in the workplace, and about three-fourths of them contain empirical data, the sort that impress deans and students. As you say, a substantial body of research, but no one has reviewed it. If every two years NCTE published a book called *Current Facts WPAs Can Use*, it would be a biennial best seller. Of course few of those facts would come from NCTE-sponsored publications, but that is another story.

An aside on the collecting of facts. I'm not a data-only kind of scholar, as my publications show. But I've never done any hard analysis of discourse that didn't raise rather than lower my esteem for the authors. I find this especially with academic texts. I found that basic writers are logically more shrewd in impromptu essays than I thought, that 10-minute junior freewrites are organized in more sophisticated ways than I had perceived, that teacher stories about teaching are narratively more complex than I would

have predicted. So when the English comp field headed away from close textual analysis in the 1980s and 1990s they abandoned one way that student writing—and teacher writing—can be seen as better than it looks.

CR: So in your opinion, where are writing teachers and WAC/WID heading?

RH: Off and on I think about the teaching of college writing and its historical trajectory during my career. More and more I ponder the centering of the field around first-year composition—an historical accident. In the 1960s we saw an emergence of articles in *College English, College Composition and Communication*, and elsewhere that conveyed a sense of unused power, that as the single course required of almost every student, first-year composition had cachet. But there is a danger in making that curriculum the power source for the field. The profession needs to define itself in terms of a much more extensive and important power, maybe written communication or discourse praxis or human rhetoric. That's where the real energies lie, with lines not only connecting lower and upper division courses and all university departments but reaching out into the world beyond university walls.

CR: And WAC/WID could play a role in this de-centering of the field?

RH: It already has. WAC/WID is the one change that has most energized comp practice and comp studies in the last 20–30 years. Where it will head is a mystery. Only dark passages, as Keats's simile has it. I'd like to see it move in a couple of directions. One is to continue to lead from one of its strengths, which is proleptic learning. I mean proleptic in the sense that the student is doing work that she or he knows will help later on. General first-year comp has a problem with proleptic learning because most students have little idea where they are going. No one is convinced when the teacher says I will teach you strategies that will help in whatever course down the road. "Whatever" has about zero persuasion, as the colloquial dismissive use of the word shows. By contrast, the engineering WID course teaches students who plan to be engineers to write like engineers. So there is a major motivation boost in WAC/WID courses that comes with proleptic learning, as long ago developmentalists would have predicted. But WAC/WID courses still must wrestle with a problem inherent in proleptic learning, that they are still deferring the real work. The course-bound student still cannot fully grasp what a particular form will do rhetorically in a real-world context. In contrast, on the job even a novice engineer understands a supervisor's reason for asking for a particular kind of writing. It is not just a textbook exercise. So one WAC/WID direction will be to make proleptic pedagogy work better, maybe by further expanding the kind of service learning, internships, mentorships, and other active-learning sites

that give students a taste of what it is to write on the job for real audiences, not just to rehearse forms for a teacher.

CR: And the other direction?

RH: Knowledge building. I mean the ordinary task of an academic discipline in expanding knowledge in its bailiwick. Somewhere one of the clients of Sherlock Holmes, amazed at some fact Holmes had inferred from his appearance, asks, "How do you know?" Holmes's reply somehow has stuck in my head. "It is my business to know things. That is my trade." Well, in a deep sense academic scholars are detectives whose business it is to know things, solve puzzles, throw light on Keats's dark passages. It is the business of WAC specialists to know things about WAC that other people don't know. That is their trade. Understandably, the recent adventurous three decades of WAC have found specialists occupied mainly with creating courses, building curriculum, and administering programs. I think it's time now for specialists to devote prime time to learning more of what's not known about WAC, from skill transfer to job success to rhetorical praxis. Romance first, facts second—Whitehead's venerable developmental sequence fits professions as well as persons.

CR: In addition to your phenomenal scholarship in composition/rhetoric/WAC, you are a lifelong Wordsworthian. Tell us how you combine those passions.

RH: Ah, Wordsworth. No doubt an odd addiction for someone who seems to have acquired an unsavory reputation for empirical research. Let's not forget, though, that the first critical reaction to Wordsworth's poetry claimed that it was too factual. Next thing he will be describing in meter, warned the critics, is the evisceration of chickens. Actually, I think I first felt an affinity with Wordsworth's biography. He grew up on the margins of England engaging in activities familiar from my boyhood, calling out the owls, traipsing the fells at night, that sort of rustic larking about. Eventually I was drawn to the emotional power and subtlety of the language in his work, and then to its narrative complexity, on which I wrote my dissertation.

Later, as I got into composition and human development, Wordsworth kept coming back to mind. Or maybe he helped lead me there unawares. Historically, Wordsworth was a great precursor—no one before him described the human development of individuals so fully and perceptively. Literary scholars have written about his eerie ability to predict other twentieth-century trends in thought. Take social construction, for instance. Wordsworth was a deep thinker about human perception, and his position that "we half perceive and half create" maps perfectly onto current constructivist theory. Not if you listen to the typical compositionist, however. There is a great divide between literature folk and comp folk about historical Romanticism. The rhet/comp

side often turns Wordsworth and other Romantic poets into straw men in an argument defending the discipline's turn toward the social. Following Jim Berlin, compositionists identify "Romanticism" with expessivism, an antisocial rejection of culture, and the myth of the isolated author. Literary historians would find this position insane. If you reconvened the Romantic poets—British, German, French—and told them that they had worked in isolation from society and only from their own knowledge, they would laugh you out of the room. This difference in the interpretation of Romanticism is just one of the unfortunate fall-outs of the split between literary and composition faculty in English departments, which I lament.

CR: Speaking of that split, you and Janis Haswell are working on a book that attempts to reunify composition and literature, right? What would you like *The WAC Journal's* readers to know about that?

RH: Actually, it's done, and it doesn't really attempt to reunify composition and literature. Rather it just assumes that the two are part and parcel of the same endeavor, the study and teaching of written discourse, and it carries on as if the two were one. So probably it will alienate everybody. We call the book *Authoring: An Essay for the English Profession on Potentiality and Singularity*. We chose "authoring" as the axial term because it turns at the center of all the disciplinary sides—composition, literature, linguistics, creative writing. The WID assignment to write a technical report and the colonial literature assignment to read Phillis Wheatley revolve around the same human act: a writer writing, the act of authoring. The book is revisionary in that for several decades now from both the lit and the comp perspective the focus has been on input to the act and output from the act and not on the act itself. The profession has dwelt on social and cultural context (input) and on textual deconstruction, interpretation, and evaluation (output). This book just asks what might happen to our scholarship and our teaching when we redirect our eyes to the phenomenology, the felt sense, of authoring.

CR: And what did you find?

RH: We start with a survey of successful working authors and their testimony about what it feels like to write, physically, mentally, and emotionally, in fiction and non-fiction. Then we compare their set of traits with the assumptions and expectations that English faculty tend to have of student authoring. There is hardly any overlap. So we select two of the working-author traits—potentiality and singularity—and use them to critique the way literature and writing is taught in college. Hence the subtitle. The book asks the WAC enterprise, for instance, if it creates assignments for writing and response to writing that specifically aim to increase the chances that the student author will want to continue writing in the future (potentiality), or that assume that the

student is a unique person who will author a unique piece of discourse (singularity)—and if not, why is the WAC enterprise assuming a phenomenology of student authoring that lacks elements of the phenomenology reported by successful working authors.

CR: You're retired. Would you do it again?

RH: Why not? A job that gave me three months vacation each year. Departments that were friendly enough to release me to live for three and a half years in Spanish-speaking cultures that I relish. Work free of Research I institution obsessions so that I was able to teach both literature and composition to the end, and to teach courses that I did not have the research publications to qualify for—courses such as contemporary poetry, young-adult literature, and language in culture and society. Scholarly preoccupations with topics so big and boggy they will never cease calling for answers: authoring, narratology, evaluation, human development. What would I change? My good colleague Keith Rhodes once said publicly that I do the dirty work of the field. But from my point of view it's all been clean fun.

CR: Plans?

RH: Jan and I are working on a book about hospitality and the English profession. It was intended as a third part of *Authoring* but that book ran out of space. I'm also collecting my work, largely unpublished, on evaluation and assessment of discourse, for a book maybe to be called *Interpreting Student Writing*. There's always work on Comp-Pile, also big and boggy and without end. What else? Perfecting potato gnocchi, salt rising bread, and those cursed last sixteen bars of Beethoven's piano sonata in D major, Op. 28. . . .