A WAC Teacher and Advocate: An Interview with Rita Malenczyk, Eastern Connecticut State University

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RITA MALENCZYK AND I MET—and bonded—at the workshop for new writing program administrators (WPAs) at the 1998 National Council of Writing Program Administrators Conference in Tucson, Arizona. In July. The heat was devastating, especially for a wimpy northerner like me. Rita did better than I, which is a testament to her overall toughness. At that time, she was an assistant professor at Eastern Connecticut State University; now, in 2011, Rita has been a full professor for some years, with a host of professional accomplishments to her credit.

Back in 1998, both Rita and I were part of early conversations that eventually led to the Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, a document that has seen wide distribution and adaptation since its adoption by the WPA organization in 2000. Rita was one of the co-editors of a collection based on the debates leading to the outcomes statement as well some notable applications to higher education beyond first-year composition. I am willing to bet that more than a few WAC faculty have come to know the statement through faculty development over the last decade.

Rita's vita (that's rather fun to say three times in a row) reveals that she has taught courses in writing, rhetorical theory, and more, including several courses that speak to connections between rhetoric and literature. She has directed the University writing program since 1994 and is the founding director (as of 2008) of the ECSU writing center as well as serving a term as associate chair of the English department. She has chaired several important committees at her institution, served on many more, reviewed for several national publications, and has recently been elected president-elect of the WPA.

Before coming to ECSU, she earned her B.A. at St. Louis University, her M.A. at Washington University (St. Louis), and her doctorate at New York University—all in English. Her conference presentations are always well attended, and her articles, book

chapters, and co-edited collection hold worthy places in the composition-rhetoric-writing center-WAC-assessment realms. That last sentence speaks just a bit to the range Rita brings to the profession.

What follows resulted from an extended conversation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication's annual convention in Atlanta in April 2011, plus some e-mail correspondence over several months.

CAROL RUTZ: Your doctorate from NYU is in literature. How did you end up as a WPA?

RITA MALENCZYK: I taught in the Expository Writing Program at NYU, which produced a large number of WPAs who are currently active. There was no composition/rhetoric major at that time, only English education, which was not possible to pursue in the arts and sciences school.

At that time NYU's Expository Writing Program was under attack. TAs essentially ran it while the director fought for the program's existence. Therefore, under some duress, several of us learned WPA moves. My colleagues developed a whole curriculum for the program, and their initiative was respected. When I finished, I deliberately sought a writing program position.

CR: Your work stretches the definition of WPA, given your teaching, writing center, and other responsibilities. Yet you fit WAC in somehow. How do you define WAC in your professional context?

RM: I'm at Eastern Connecticut, a state university with 5,000 undergrads and a department-based WID program that is defined for me, although I've made some big changes in the last two years. After students take first-year comp, where the emphasis is on writing in different genres—the term WAC is not used—every major requires courses that feature writing in the discipline (WID).

CR: Would you call this sequence a Trojan horse approach?

RM: Absolutely. We see a lot of programs in, for example, psychology and sociology, with a lot of writing in advanced classes. That kind of expectation allows me to validate the writing-to-learn approach in faculty workshops. In upper division courses, faculty build on those skills in large classes as well as the smaller WID courses. You could describe the program as vertically strong, and I'm pretty happy with that.

CR: It's great that you're happy. I'm wondering, though, what the most difficult challenge might be that you face as a WAC director.

RM: It's odd: faculty know so much more than they think they do about teaching writing. They write as scholars themselves, they review. Some may not be strong writers, but most are. I am amused when some faculty define writing as an "essay," overlooking the many kinds of writing they are already doing that they could teach within the major.

CR: So when you present them with evidence that they are not only competent writers but promising teachers of writing, how do they respond?

RM: It takes them a while to believe it—and claim that identity. Our biologists claim it, but our earth scientists do the work but do not claim the teaching expertise. But if even one person in a program sees him or herself as a writing teacher, the whole program benefits through a useful kind of contamination.

CR: I agree that faculty teach each other, whether deliberately or accidentally. What's most rewarding for you as you work with faculty?

RM: I love it when, in a workshop, you see a resistant person say something truly insightful about grammar. Or their responsibility for students' writing. I enjoy working with disciplinary faculty on writing, acknowledging disciplinary conventions, and finding ways to help students understand the disciplines.

I provide copies of Gottschalk and Hjortshoj[1] to faculty in workshops, which has proven to be an effective resource. It's just great to get people together to talk about teaching and be a community. I learn a lot about what people do in class as well as their ideas about where writing fits in their pedagogy. Even though we have good verticality, as I observed a minute ago, I feel pressure as a WPA to make sure that writing really is going on in all of the places it makes sense.

CR: I have often said to my dean that WAC is like fluoride in the water: once it's established, writing pedagogy gains ground even if a segment of the faculty doesn't actively participate.

RM: True, and it also means you have to offer a continuous WAC message, because you can't afford to lower the energy among faculty. Fortunately, more of our new hires are coming to us with WAC and WID experience before they are hired—some even have

writing center experience. Regardless, we need to reward participation in WAC/WID, making it a visible part of our general education program.

It's a funny problem to have, but as WAC is subsumed, promoting it becomes more difficult. How do you sustain a program that is fully integrated?

CR: In that connection, you have just been chosen president-elect of the Council of Writing Program Administrators—congratulations. Do you have goals for your presidency? Where does WAC fit into the work of the CWPA organization?

RM: First I'll be vice-president for two years, and my goal for that is to support whatever Duane Roen (who will be president while I'm VP) wants to accomplish and help him in whatever ways I can. I also want to sustain a lot of the great work Linda Adler-Kassner has done; during her presidency we've seen a lot of great work from the WPA Network for Media Action, for instance, and we've seen that network become established as a WPA committee and take on a life of its own. Then we also have, now, WPA-GO, the graduate organization, which I think is a great thing because I was a grad student WPA myself.

For my part, I want to revive WPA's diversity initiative. When I was on the Executive Board a few years ago, there was a lot of talk and seeming commitment to diversifying the organization, but I don't think anyone ever knew how to fully approach that, and so it hasn't really happened. Plus, it's kind of a weird thing: what does "diversity" mean in this context anyway? When we used that word in WPA we talked both about more representation on the Exec Board from both WPAs from community colleges and WPAs of color, and those are different kinds of diverse. The former, for example, is about institutional diversity, and the latter about getting more representation from historically underrepresented groups. What I want to explore is how to diversify the organization institutionally (the former) and therefore (possibly) bring about the latter. For example, I've been going through the membership list and the number of members from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) is very, very low compared with, say, the number of members from Research1 schools. (And I think maybe we have one member out of nearly 600 from a tribal college, though I'd have to double-check that figure.)

There are ways of diversifying an organization—for example, the National Writing Project did it, when they realized that the leadership of the NWP was mostly men and the teachers of writing were mostly women—and I want to explore those possibilities (i.e., see what other organizations have done) and see what resources and time WPA is willing to commit.

As far as WAC goes, I don't know that it's in the ascendancy right now as an up-front concern of WPA, though certainly WPA has a lot of members who are college and university WAC directors. I think that right now one of the most important concerns of the organization may be with how to legitimately prepare high school students for writing in college—for example, there's the "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" which WPA co-authored with NCTE and the NWP. I can see WAC in high schools becoming an important part of discussions about said preparation as time goes on (though right now the discussion does tend to be focusing on such FYC-related matters as dual enrollment and AP).

CR: I noticed on your vita a book chapter under review titled, "WAC's Disappearing Act." What can you tell us about that?

RM: Well, Carol, that means that both you and I aren't really here. No, but seriously. You and most readers of this journal will remember Barbara Walvoord and Sue McLeod, both around 1996 when WAC was 25-30 years old, talking (Walvoord, for instance, in her *College English* article "The Future of WAC") about how WAC was in danger of being knocked off the academic playing field by other initiatives that were more trendy (what Kathi Yancey referred to memorably at one WPA conference as "shiny objects").

We all know how that works—for example, right now colleges are all about general education reform, while a couple of years ago they were about first-year programs. And WAC got started in the first place because deans everywhere freaked out over the appearance of "Why Johnny Can't Write"—there's a memorable chapter by Elaine Maimon about this, in McLeod and Margot Soven's book, *Composing a Community,* which I highly recommend. Anyway, both McLeod and Walvoord worried about what would happen to WAC once other things caught people's attention, McLeod more than Walvoord at the time, I think.

What I'm arguing in this book chapter is that what they predicted may, in fact, be coming true (and I stress the *may*) but if so, it's not a bad thing but a sign of WAC's success. For example, Marty Townsend has talked on the WPA-L listserv about how Missouri—where the Campus Writing Program is very strong and well-established—is moving toward a model that combines WAC with general education; this model essentially eliminates the writing-intensive tags for courses but rather infuses writing throughout an entire curriculum. So in the one sense, WAC is disappearing from that program, because you're not seeing the "W"; on another, this programmatic revision suggests that the WAC movement may have succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Writing in all courses?

COME ON! As I said earlier, it raises the question of keeping a WAC program going when it is fully integrated into the university curriculum.

Anyway, there's other stuff in this chapter, but I don't know how much I'm free to talk about that because it's pre-publication. But I will say that I think a lot of the most interesting work in WAC is that which questions existing definitions of things. Chris Thaiss' and Terry Myers Zawacki's book, *Engaged Writers, Dynamic Disciplines,* for instance, talks about their work asking faculty to examine when they violate disciplinary conventions, what those conventions are in the first place, how much we should be teaching them to our students.

CR: We're having this conversation at the largest national conference for composition and rhetoric scholars. What have you heard about WAC that's new?

RM: I heard some interesting stuff about research on the early days of WAC via grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Education Association. I've also appreciated the continuing interest in knowledge transfer and how that applies to writing, particularly WAC.

CR: Your teaching, administrative roles service, and scholarship range widely: from courses on rhetoric and critical thinking to roles in writing centers and writing programs to service on the athletics advisory council and the local chapter of AAUP to articles on institutional change and learning outcomes. How do these many interests and experiences blend in your professional life?

RM: Well, the athletic advisory council thing is sort of interesting. I have three kids (16, 13, and 12) who are all hockey and lacrosse players, and I got interested in student athletes for that reason. Eastern belongs to NCAA Division 3, and our athletes tend overall to have higher GPAs, plus involvement in athletics at ECSU correlates positively with retention. When an opening for a faculty member appeared on that council, I volunteered for it because I thought it would be interesting to see an aspect of university life that faculty don't usually see unless they're in the Physical Education dept. And I think WPAs, especially WAC directors, should get involved in non-writing-related matters where possible. I mean, we ask faculty to do our stuff, after all.

CR: On that note, I will change the subject. You and I have commiserated over the past few years about the demise of our favorite television series, *The X-Files.* Alas. For those

unfamiliar with the program, please describe the premise (if you can) and tell us about your favorite episode from this nine-year series—and why it is your favorite.

RM: The show was about two FBI agents—Fox Mulder and Dana Scully—who were assigned to investigate incidents of paranormal activity, a/k/a the X-Files. Mulder was an Oxford-trained expert in the paranormal and Scully a medical doctor originally assigned to keep an eye on him, though eventually they become friends and (before the end of the series) lovers.

I have two favorites, actually. One was a hilarious parody of *Cops* that appeared late in the show's run; both shows were on Fox, and the *Cops* parody had the cameramen following Mulder and Scully around investigating a mutating monster. It was very dry and parodied the conventions of both shows in a very funny way.

My other favorite episode, though, was one called "All Souls." I actually found (and I know I'm in the minority here) Scully to be a more interesting, more subtle character than Mulder for any number of reasons; she grows and changes throughout the series, and in addition to being an MD she was also a practicing and devout Catholic, yet the connections between her faith in God and Mulder's in the paranormal were never explored, really, except I think in this episode.

Scully consults a priest to ask if there's anything in Church teaching that might shed light on the supernatural features of a disturbing case. The priest says, well, sure, there's an apocryphal story, but he also warns her that this story isn't an official part of church teaching and therefore not "real."

How the episode resolves and plays out is interesting, but the most interesting things to me are the themes it pokes at. First, how reality is determined by what institutions (or discourse communities?) acknowledge—e.g., what Scully's priest tells her about the apocrypha is a reminder that reality, at least in Catholicism, is mediated by the Church.

In addition, I think Chris Carter (the director/writer/creator of the X-Files) is poking at some feminist issues here. Anyway, I periodically teach a seminar in Rhetoric and Popular Fictions in which we look at popular genres through the lens of various rhetorical theories, and I like to show this episode in the feminist-theory module.

CR: As a fellow X-phile, I have to admit that it's refreshing to participate in that discourse community once again. It's a good reminder that "truth" is contextual. We in the WAC business learn early on to respect the intellectual ground of our colleagues' discourse communities as we help them teach students to participate in and navigate those communities. Thank you!

ENDNOTE

1 Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines.* Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.