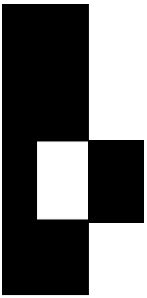

Listening to Everett Rogers: *Diffusion of Innovations* and WAC

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In "The Future of WAC" (1996), Barbara E. Walvoord suggests framing the history and future of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement according to social movement theory (58), explaining that WAC qualifies as a movement because of its "change agenda and its collective nature—faculty talking to one another, moving to effect reform" (58). Consequently, she proposes that her evaluation of WAC's progress at the 25 year mark and her re-envisioning of its future within this movement frame will uniquely reveal its "characteristics, strengths, and problems in ways that may help us think creatively about them" (61).

Certainly creativity may be the order of the day as the WAC movement, in spite of its successes, struggles to maintain its vitality and visibility against the perennially resistant landscape of academe. Such resistance, educational reform scholar Parker J. Palmer reminds us, (though few at the front lines of the WAC movement need reminding) will remain an essential feature of the academy as long as teaching "retains low status... tenure decisions favor those who publish, [and] scarce dollars. . .always go to research" (10). These conditions result in a "constitutional gridlock" which breeds the "mood of resignation. . .and despair" so familiar to those seeking reform (10).

Walvoord's review of WAC's progress from a social movement perspective turns the literature in an important direction. By providing the template of social movement theory against which to examine their successes and failures, WAC proponents are forced to take a more analytical approach to their subject, an approach that transcends the more anecdotal "what works and what doesn't" scholarship that has dominated writing-across-the-curriculum, especially in its early and middle years. Specifically, it provides an entrée into the extensive network of sub-fields *within* social movement theory, one of which concerns itself with the spread of new ideas or "innovations" within systems, a category of study known as "diffusion" or "innovation theory." In fact, according to Daniel Surry, who writes about the application of social movement and innova-

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tion theory to the field of Instructional Technology, "professionals in a number of disciplines from agriculture to marketing' commonly study diffusion theory in order to further change agendas" (1). Taking the lead from our colleagues in Instructional Technology, a close examination of the process of innovation diffusion can enhance the ability of WAC advocates to implement their own reform agendas.

The most widely recognized source for diffusion theory is Everett M. Rogers' seminal work, *Diffusion of Innovations*. Not surprisingly, Walvoord is the only WAC scholar whose work has recently referenced this volume, which synthesizes the last thirty years of diffusion research and distills it into a set of basic principles for the propagation of a new idea. Mentioning Rogers briefly first in "The Future of WAC" and later, in her longitudinal study of three writing-across-the-curriculum programs *In The Long Run*, Walvoord however, narrowly focuses her attention on one small portion of his expansive diffusion framework, describing how the "early innovation adopter" figures in her study. In fact, beyond this spectrum of "kinds of adopters," *Diffusion of Innovations* offers a solid, replicable framework for the process of moving an innovation through a social system over time. Diffusion theory is especially relevant to WAC efforts, moreover, because it examines "overt behavior change. . . the adoption or rejection of new ideas, rather than just changes in knowledge or attitudes (Rogers *Communication of Innovations* 12). *Diffusion of Innovations* can tell us a great deal, then, about how ideas are not just accepted but under what conditions they are most likely to be implemented.

While many would argue that WAC ceased to be an "innovative" idea in the late eighties (not coincidentally when most of the corporate and foundation funding had dried up), Rogers asserts that contrary to what its name implies, an innovation need not be a brand new idea but rather an "idea, practice or object that is *perceived* as new by an individual or other unit of adoption" (Rogers *Diffusion of Innovations* 11). Thus, perceived newness is often a more important element to recognize in the diffusion of a new idea than objective novelty. This factor is particularly salient to writing-across-the-curriculum as it proceeds towards its thirtieth anniversary and yet finds itself annually born and re-born at campuses across the country.

To be sure, "perceived newness" is also important when relating *Diffusion of Innovations* to the WAC movement, as the text was first published in 1962 and its latest incarnation in 1995, yet it remained undiscovered by WAC scholarship until Walvoord's 1996 article. Thus, I will argue that Rogers' close attention to the step-by-step process of spreading reform is not only perceptually new to the WAC movement but also holds valuable implications for the achievement of its reform goals.

To begin at the beginning, it is useful to examine, through the lens writing-across-the-curriculum, the ways in which Rogers pinpoints the general factors that attend the birth of any movement. Most movements are born of necessity, from a widespread recognition that a problem exists that is not easily rectified through established modes of operation (Rogers 132) or "when societies undergo structural strain, as during times of rapid social change" (Benford 1881) . Walvoord refers to the former condition when she dates the catalyst of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement to the now-famous Newsweek cover story of December 9, 1975, "Why Johnny Can't Write" ("The Future of WAC" 61). As composition historian David Russell details, this article sparked a shift in public perception that proved the unifying force between the separate strands of disciplinary writing theory drifting through higher education in the years that preceded it (276). It is important to note the influence of the latter condition as well, brought on by the strain of the open admissions movement of the late sixties and early seventies that ushered into academe tens of thousands of students nationwide who were under-prepared in such basic skills as writing. WAC is like many of the movements Rogers characterizes, then, in that it locates its origins in a dramatic shift in perception, in this case the perception of student writing ability in America. That WAC's early history fits the template of Rogers' diffusion theory bodes well for the rest of the patterns he describes. Even initial crises, however, may not be enough to ensure the rapid, universal and continued adoption of an innovation.

Diffusion of Innovations identifies five essential characteristics that enhance the rate and effectiveness of diffusion. The first concerns the relative advantage of the innovation over the "idea it supercedes" (15), underscoring the imperative to demonstrate that any new idea is more effective than the one it is replacing. The second characteristic concerns gauging compatibility of the idea with the "existing values, past experiences and needs of adopters" (15). Walvoord in *In The Long Run* and Kipling and Murphy in *Symbiosis: Writing and An Academic Culture* (1992), illuminate this characteristic by acknowledging that teachers work in a context embedded in a past that influences their outlook, philosophy and attitude toward change.

The third characteristic relates to level of complexity or the ease with which an innovation can be understood. Directly dependent on the efforts of advocates to keep a new idea "simple," little WAC research has actually examined the relationship between the levels of complexity at which WAC pedagogy is presented and the rate at which it is accepted and implemented, a relationship that could have valuable implications for the movement. Finally, the fourth and fifth related characteristics are described as trialability, or the degree to which adopters can implement an

innovation, for example, a "new" writing-to-learn technique such as exit slips, on an experimental basis (16) and observability, or the extent to which "results of an innovation are visible to others" (16). Both are connected to what *Diffusion of Innovations* posits as the "heart of the diffusion process" (18), that is, its essentially social nature. While Rogers' assertion that humans are inherently social beings who from infancy to adulthood learn through the modeling and imitation that face-to-face contact provides is hardly groundbreaking, his grasp of the relevance of human relationships and social structures to the diffusion of new ideas can offer a system for understanding and analyzing the essential social nature of WAC that has often been reported in the research.

Rogers divides the channels for information exchange into two main categories, mass media and interpersonal. While the former remains more significant for innovations targeted to large populations, such as AIDS prevention, smoking cessation, and so forth, the latter can especially help explain the diffusion of WAC in smaller, more self-contained social organizations such as colleges and universities. Likewise, mass media channels are more useful in *creating knowledge* about an innovation while interpersonal channels are more useful in *changing attitudes* about a new idea and subsequently changing behavior. *Diffusion of Innovations* reminds us that "face to face exchange between two or more individuals is extremely effective in persuading individuals to accept new ideas" (18). Accordingly, it is useful to note that when making innovation decisions, most people are not influenced as much by statistics or consequences as they are by word of mouth from others who have adopted the innovation (Rogers 18). In fact, a cursory survey of WAC scholarship bears out this observation; many initial successes of the movement can be attributed to the grassroots involvement of faculty. Nonetheless, beyond this attribution, WAC research rarely seems to scrutinize this phenomenon. WAC leaders such as Elaine Maimon, Toby Fulwiler, and Art Young seemed to intuit what Walvoord examines most closely in *In The Long Run* and "The Future of WAC" that, due in large part to their high autonomy, "colleague esteem" and "socialization" were especially essential to the innovation decisions of college faculty ("Future" 64). This emphasis on "individual . . .change" (63) through casual discussion groups, conferences, and the inimitable "WAC workshop" helped the movement to flourish. Certainly, a less intuitive and more concrete awareness of the complexities operating within the interpersonal elements of diffusing an innovation such as WAC can only enhance its effectiveness and staying power.

The interpersonal channels of any diffusion process are intimately connected to the social system through which the new idea moves, a system Rogers identifies as a "set of interrelated units engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal" (23). Further, he suggests

that gauging the characteristics and values of such a system and the degree to which the system may be, as a whole, favorable or unfavorable to new ideas is another essential consideration in diffusion theory. Such considerations may explain the relative ease with which WAC was diffused in Great Britain. David Russell notes that in the British educational system, teaching students to write in all disciplines was a "long tradition," so reformers did not need to reinvent the wheel when introducing writing-across-the-curriculum, "only. . .modify the kinds of writing and its pedagogical uses" (279). Thus, it would seem that as Rogers predicts and Great Britain's success exemplifies, the seeds of innovation more rapidly take root in a system that provides fertile rather than fallow ground.

Perhaps the aspect of Rogers' theory WAC and other change advocates will find most apt to their purposes, however, is his discussion of the optimal role models for innovation diffusion within a system. For example, while it may appear common sense to recruit the most innovative members of a social system to model innovation adoption, many would be surprised to learn that research has found that such innovators are often perceived as extremists and eccentrics, which naturally detracts from their credibility among their peers and limits their effectiveness in the diffusion of new ideas. The most liberal faculty members at an institution, therefore, may not be the best first models of innovation.

So who are the best models of innovation? Rogers calls them the "opinion leaders," key players in the interpersonal aspect of the diffusion process which also includes the change agent, or individual sent by a change agency to influence followers, and the various stages (early, middle, late) of adopters themselves. Rogers' characterizations of these leaders can help identify the best faculty allies in the pursuit of change. While opinion leaders have more credibility than their more innovative counterparts, they remain more receptive to change than their conservative peers. They are usually recognized in social systems for their "technical competence, social accessibility, and conformity to the system's norms" (27). In addition, compared to their followers, opinion leaders are generally "more exposed to external communication" and "more cosmopolite" (27). Walvoord classifies these leaders as horizontally-networked "early adopters" in *In The Long Run*, those faculty who over the years of her study "[came] to WAC partly because they like new ideas and are not averse to taking risks. . .that come to them through their broad social networks" (6) and additionally uses Rogers "change agent" label to describe the WAC advocate. *In The Long Run*, however, focuses much more closely (and in retrospect) on how faculty come to frame the meaning of their WAC experiences over time rather than how various categories of faculty adopters interact in the innovation process for optimal results. At a time when

WAC programs struggle against multiple obstacles, room exists for both kinds of conversations.

While exploring the opinion leader category, Rogers goes on to caution that in spite of their power to model change in a system, there are certain circumstances where opinion leaders can lose influence. For example, they can be perceived as "worn-out" if change advocates over-use them by asking them to sign on at the start of every new writing-in-the-disciplines initiative simply because of their demonstrated sympathy to the cause. Moreover, if opinion leaders are perceived as too close to change agents, other members of a social system may reject their influence. Walvoord begins to underscore the truth in this warning when she notes that WAC opinion leaders may easily "change from a 'we' to a 'they' in faculty eyes. . .becoming not helpers but enforcers" ("The Future of WAC" 66). *In The Long Run* further explores and attempts to de-emphasize the "we" versus "they" mentality that has emerged over the history of the WAC movement. *Diffusion of Innovations*, however, inspects the delicate balance between opinion leaders and interpersonal channels and provides a structure for the careful, consistent monitoring that such delicacy involves.

Perhaps the best and arguably most successful implementation of Rogers' principles may be found in the rise of the National Writing Project, which developed in the early seventies to improve writing instruction and promote WAC in primary and secondary schools. Revolutionizing the concept of "teacher development" the National Writing Project did not focus on what Russell calls top-down "teacher-proof" materials but instead provided an environment for gifted teachers (opinion leaders) to share their "insights and methods for using writing in the classroom" (280). Nonetheless, relative to its success, this national organization has received comparatively little scholarly attention, attention that might be augmented if the structure and philosophy underpinning it were more closely examined according to paradigms such as social movement and diffusion theory.

As the WAC movement enters into its third decade, it has become apparent that while an early, intuitive grassroots model was responsible for significant positive change in the teaching of writing-across-the-disciplines at many institutions, just as many schools labor to build viable WAC programs or are in the process of re-building programs that have withered or failed completely. Many theorists, like Palmer, view these failures as endemic to higher education, proof of a kind of institutional incompatibility between reform and the climate at American colleges and universities. Further, Russell notes that WAC programs meet organizational resistance because they demand the dismantling of departmental boundaries when there is "no specific constituence for interdepartmental

programs within the structure of the American university, much less for interdepartmental programs that *incorporate writing*" (298) [emphasis mine]. It is clear that as questions about the staying power of WAC arise once again in formal and informal discussion forums, the kind of re-envisioning of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement Walvoord advocates demands a paradigm shift away from the narrative, anecdotal emphasis in the scholarship and towards a more balanced approach, integrating a structural basis for change that *Diffusion of Innovations* and other key social movement texts can provide. Three years after the publication of "The Future of WAC" and *In The Long Run*, the lack of references to social movement and innovation theory in the field reveals that few WAC advocates consciously utilize or even seem aware of the existence of this rich resource. Diffusion research has the potential to not only inform the daily work of WAC advocates, but also to locate the narrative of writing-across-the-curriculum movement in the larger theoretical context of educational reform. At a very basic level, moreover, Rogers' work has the potential to inform the WAC field simply by acknowledging how challenging it is to introduce innovations into any system, an acknowledgement present in the first lines of the book, which state in no uncertain terms that "[g]etting a new idea adopted, even when it has obvious advantages, is often very difficult. Many innovations require a lengthy period, often many years, from the time they become available to the time they are widely adopted" (1). Thus, in addition to validating the resistance so frequently encountered by WAC advocates as an often "necessary evil,"[1] diffusion theory, especially the sheer volume Rogers synthesizes in *Diffusion of Innovations*, also reminds us that change is a highly complex process that might benefit from a more systematic framework. Consequently, if WAC is to survive the present academic climate well into the next century, its last best advocates would do well to take the lead from our colleagues in other disciplines for whom "diffusion theory" is a common term and Everett Rogers a familiar voice and prick up their ears.

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Notes

[1] For a discussion of "resistance" as natural and productive, see also Jody Swilky's article "Reconsidering Faculty Resistance to Writing Reform in *WPA* 16:1-2, and Deborah Swanson-Owen's "Identifying Natural Sources of Resistance: A Case Study of Implementing Writing-Across-the-Curriculum" in *Research in the Teaching of English*, 20:1.