

Editor's Introduction:

Impediments and Hope

I RESIGNED AS THE DIRECTOR OF COMPOSITION AT MY UNIVERSITY this past year after serving eight years in that capacity. In looking back, I recognize both the joys and responsibilities that came with trying to send a program in a certain direction and securing the investment needed to succeed. By the same token, I endured frustrations. Whether it was making little progress in the battle against adjunct exploitation, or seeing more than a few TAs regress to a modal or expressivist approach after leaving my practicum, or having the findings of composition research dismissed by some administrators because the research did not suit their agendas, the impediments to leading a program often seemed to block the rays of hope.

My experiences, which based on many posts to the WPA listserv appear not to be anomalous, reflect a disturbing trend in the humanities across the country. The corporatization of the contemporary university—often called the “business model”—has produced a disdain in many for the complexity inherent in the type of critical inquiry that drives programs such as women's studies, history, political science, and sociology. The politics that fuel movements like David Horowitz's “Students' Bill of Rights” erode the ethical judgments that come through critical thinking, especially in these movements' call for “neutrality” and “objectivity” in the presentation of subject matter and for the elimination of discussion of controversial matters that have no direct connection to the course in question. Attempts such as this to contain knowledge work toward simplifying it, in my estimation, making expertise among instructors less of a need (perhaps even undesirable) and reducing facts and theories to quantifiable answers needed for success on a test. Students become domesticated, not educated, in such a presentation of knowledge and too frequently, as a result, view the humanities courses still required for graduation at most universities as hoops through which to jump.

It should not be surprising, then, that composition programs face many obstacles in enacting progressive visions of writing instruction. Universities, colleges, and even departments can have plans to increase revenue or retention that do not take composition as a discipline seriously. It seemed during my time as program director that every initiative concocted by an administrator would need to include the composition program. Learning communities, distance learning, learning assistants, and dual enrollment come to mind, as well as a plan to create a separate program for students labeled “provisional.” On this latter count, I opposed what I interpreted as the segregation of these students from the mainstream

student body and further did not want non-compositionists to determine what or how we taught writing. While the course number would have still been the English department's, the plan involved a conception of dual supervision of this program with faculty and staff from another college. The only terms I ever heard were that I would be responsible for curriculum but that pedagogy and the hiring of faculty to teach it would be the province of the chair of associate studies, with my role reduced to that of consultant.

I remember a discussion I had over this matter with a former dean where he could not appreciate my claim that the pedagogy an instructor embraced directed the curriculum, not the other way around. After all, as I tried to explain to him, a top-down approach to teaching political topics in an argument/research course, for example, reproduces current-traditionalism and the possible silencing of students, not the critical school of thought that seeks to empower students. But the dean did not ask for any further explanation or research to support my claim. Instead, he insisted that I put together curriculum and that his joint committee from two colleges would decide the pedagogy separately. Ideas I wanted to pursue—Freirean-inspired problem-posing and a dialectal approach based in ebonics research that one of my colleagues had conducted—both required my control over who taught the sections, as the instructors would have needed much knowledge on the subject matter. Further, the teaching would have had to match the ideology of the two curricula. For example, an instructor teaching the ebonics-based curriculum would have had to understand the difference between correction and translation and possess the sensibility to learn from the students about nuances of their dialects and their connection to ethnic and class-based culture. Otherwise, students could have felt demeaned and even have experienced the imposition of a stereotype upon them. While colleagues in my department attempted to negotiate this pedagogical, curricular, and administrative separation, the hurdles were too great to overcome. We could not construct a consistent approach, set of goals, readings, or syllabi, and the majority of the instructors fell back to a modes of discourse model. The results of a study I conducted four years into the program's existence showed a deterioration in the retention rate of the provisional admits from their previous levels. This is but one situation that unfolded in my small corner of the country, but it tells a larger tale. Despite nearly a half-century since the unofficial establishment of composition as a discipline, the core of our field—the teaching of writing to first-year students—continues to carry with it the tag of “service course,” those remedial or near-remedial sections that administrators pay lip service to as “important,” but to which they desire simple solutions that do not require consultation with data or experts.

Such impediments have soured me over the past couple years. I have experienced a decline in my scholarship, as I have wondered, “Is the time I put in worth it? Is anyone lis-

tening?" Such questioning has frustrated many a co-author I have attempted to work with during this time (yes, Kara and Abbey, I'm talking mostly about you; sorry for the delays). Returning to full-time teaching responsibilities this past semester, I found that my teaching bored me, and I compromised many of my pedagogical beliefs in my first-year sections because I could not conceive they would make a difference. I looked at the program that I once led and saw what I had considered to be innovations swept away as if they had never existed. The collaborative projects I encouraged were now discouraged. My emphasis on learning rhetorical concepts was being replaced by the 21st Century's version of the modes of discourse—genres. My beliefs in locating writing within systems of discursive and bureaucratic power and challenging the status quo died with barely a whispered eulogy. I sought to remove myself from the field, to find another occupation where I might achieve personal satisfaction and then fight for the political beliefs I hold in an arena other than higher education. I floated in limbo, hoping an opportunity would arise.

Yet, as John and I prepared this issue (John having to prod and push me, it seemed), I discovered something. I read through these articles, and indeed, I saw versions of the various impediments that so challenged me as an administrator, such as the negative conceptions of writers, difficult locations for writing instruction, and budget issues. However, the articles here collectively comprise a narrative of an unwillingness to surrender to the dominant paradigm that undergirds the teaching of writing in higher education. The authors struggle, sometimes fail, yet they retain a glimmer of hope that pushes them to not give up. How could I shrug my shoulders in defeat when the writing instructors within these pages were carrying on the battle?

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So in this issue, readers will certainly recognize some of the problematic situations these authors describe and the limitations institutions and varying ideologies impose on the authors' pedagogies. But readers will also encounter the vision of these authors and their determination to see it through.

Mike Rose's "Re-mediating Remediation," our first article (excerpted from his book, *Why School?*), addresses the "fairly standard media story about remedial students." Not only does Rose discuss a progressive pedagogy for basic writing classes, but he asserts the necessity in a democratic society for remedial courses in general. He suggests that universities cannot continue to detach themselves from the social problems in their communities by turning away from students who come to campus "underprepared." While he regrets, to an extent, the term "remediation," Rose's use of it gives the word new life and vigor.

Joseph Burzynski reflects on his experiences teaching inmates in his article, "Conflating Language and Offense: Composing in an Incarcerated Space." Burzynski examines the relationship among literacy, location, and pedagogy in light of federal and states' laws that turned educational opportunities toward degrees for offenders into job training. He advocates for the use of ESL and basic writing scholarship to "inform a progressive linguistic pedagogy that increasingly questions the place of English and its dominant varieties at the core of the incarcerated classroom." Ultimately, Burzynski analyzes the assumption that the learning of the language of the non-incarcerated will lead inmates toward better lives and suggests that writing pedagogy in prisons must—much more than with students in traditional places of learning—help negotiate hopeful futures from the fragments of failed pasts.

While the discontinuation of any successful program on a campus due to budget cuts could cause discouragement, Mark Sutton's review of the defunct studio model at the University of South Carolina instead sends a message of hope to other universities and colleges that currently use it. In "Messages to and from Third Space: Communication between the Writing Studio and Classroom Teachers," Sutton analyzes "dialogue sheets" to investigate how they mediate space between a classroom teacher and the studio leader in ways that allow for strong student development. In focusing on one student who had considerable trouble with writing, Sutton demonstrates that even students who fail or, like this one, withdraw can take away valuable lessons that can possibly only occur in the supportive studio environment.

Our final article is a collaboration between Jennifer Beech and Julia Anderson titled "Teaching the Obama Generation: Helping Students Enter and Remain in the Public Sphere." Beech and Anderson feel compositionists can build on the mobilization efforts of the Obama campaign to assist students in engaging in a wide range of literate activities that will meet the call in our discipline for public writing. Understanding some of the problems with previous models for public writing, Beech and Anderson urge compositionists to help students "recognize, locate, and strategize ways to enter a variety of public spheres . . . from more safe to more risky and from radical to more traditional iterations." Both recognize that instructors cannot hope for sweeping changes as a result of student public writing and projects. Yet, their examples demonstrate an unyielding faith in pedagogy's ability to invigorate students collectively and allow their voices to be heard.

We will always face disappointments in our endeavors to improve student writing and the conditions in which we teach. This issue of *Open Words* has reminded me that even in restrictive circumstances, our willingness to dig beneath the surface to explore complexity demonstrates our strength as a discipline—even when not recognized by those around us.

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