William Thelin

Memos, Email, and Reports: Writing to and Being Written by Adjunct Faculty

MANY WPAS FIND THEMSELVES IN THE CONFLICTED POSITION OF wanting to ensure quality instruction in their Composition programs but in so doing becoming part of the exploitation of contingent faculty. WPAs do the hiring, the canceling of classes in the last week, the shuffling of schedules, and, of course, the firing. They have to figure out ways to meet administrative agendas for assessment, programmatic consistency, and, in some cases, standardization of materials and curriculum. Programs that rely on adjuncts to staff the majority of their writing classes face a situation where communication of policies and changes risks disrupting morale and teaching, as such alterations, often by necessity unilateral administrative decisions, remind the adjuncts of their status.

At the open-admissions university where I oversaw the English Composition program for eight years, we rely heavily on adjunct faculty. Of the 200 or so sections that we ran every semester during my time as WPA, only 5-8 were taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty. Another 20-25 were taught by full-time instructors, and TAs taught about 20 sections. We, therefore, relied on over 60 adjuncts to staff approximately 75% of our sections of English Composition. In such a situation, communicating programmatic needs ethically means keeping often disparate agendas in mind and trying to invoke a sense of team spirit or unity without manipulating the insecurities or desires of the adjuncts. Looking back, I fear, however, that the more I accommodated and sympathized with the adjuncts in my program, the more I enabled the exploitation of contingent labor to continue. The writing I did to communicate with the faculty, therefore, demonstrates my ambivalence in subtle ways.

To understand the labor situation in any given English department, categorizing adjuncts in terms of the reasons they are adjuncts constitutes an important first step. The faculty during the time I ran the program varied considerably in their interests and wants. In 1978, Howard Tuckman created a taxonomy often referred to in literature about adjunct exploitation. While Tuckman's taxonomy proved useful to an extent in describing the labor situation I confronted, he creates two broad categories and then five sub-categories that I think confuse the issue. I also believe the economic situation has changed in higher education, making some of Tuckman's observations antiquated. So while I borrow terminology from Tuckman in establishing categories of adjuncts, I move beyond his understandings.

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For my first category, I use Tuckman's term the "Flexibility Seekers" (305). These would be retired faculty who teach one or two sections of English Composition for various reasons, students supplementing a stipend elsewhere with a section or two, and those who only want part-time work because of obligations to family. In breaking from Tuckman, I also want to include in this category the people who are employed full-time outside of academia and teach a section or two at night, on weekends, or in the early mornings.

The Flexibility Seekers rarely complained about working conditions. In fact, I used to hear from two or three every semester who would tell me that they liked their jobs and wanted to distance themselves from the voices who sought changes in the working conditions. I should note here that the fact that these workers only want part-time employment does not excuse the less-than-adequate wages we pay nation-wide, but I think part of what I'll call the Flexibility Seekers' compliance is that they do not want all positions to be converted into full-time jobs because they want flexibility, not full-time positions. I don't think they conceived of a situation where part-time workers could be paid proportionately to full-time workers. In any case, whether they relied on this work to help with bills or other financial matters, their main motivation for taking the work revolved around the flexibility of the positions. About 20 of the 60+ adjuncts in my department at the time would have fit this category.

My second category modifies what Gappa and Leslie call the "Aspiring Academics," which describes adjuncts who have been unable to find a tenure-track position or a non-tenure-track instructorship. Most of the adjuncts in the department had master's degrees in literature and either never attempted or did not complete a Ph.D. They would have liked a career as a professor, but were bound to the area by spousal commitments or other factors, such as unfinished work on a dissertation. They might have been involved in writing groups or tried to publish or attend conferences, but their defining characteristic was that they would apply for most of the full-time academic positions in the area. Those without the doctorate were probably confined to the plight of "freeway flying." Another 20 or so of the adjunct faculty in my department could have been accurately described as Aspiring Academics. They generally did not spend much time in the department and did not involve themselves much in programmatic issues, probably because they were too busy.

This leaves us with about a third of the adjuncts. These faculty wanted full-time work for the most part, but economic considerations almost seemed secondary. Rather, they wanted full-time work in this English department only. They wanted to be acknowledged by this institution, not any others, as legitimate, worthy academics. Tuckman alludes to these workers when he talks about the "psychic rewards" of teaching (307).

Eileen Schell, of course, has attempted to debunk "psychic income" as a viable explanation for faculty, especially women, staying in exploitive academic situations ("Gypsy" 16).

While Schell does give credence to the "emotional rewards" of teaching (68), she believes that the concept of psychic income has been used as a justification on the part of administration for not paying faculty more. In other words, she views the situation from the perspective of administrators, who feel psychic income can substitute for real income (40-41), rather than from the workers, who can be unconsciously motivated by psychic income to continue to seek adjunct work. My third category seeks to describe this latter effect of psychic income. As Katherine V. Wills explains, "psychic income is a powerful lure for workers seeking validation of their intellectual or service contribution" (201). So I will call the adjuncts in this category the "Validation Seekers." They wanted more than anything to have their work as teachers validated. Receiving a full-time position was only one obvious way of achieving this type of validation. Unbelievably, being asked to do extra, uncompensated work was another way they achieved a sense of validation. They wanted their input to lead to some valuable changes in the program or department. Being asked to serve on committees, or to give some sample papers for a workshop, or to train new faculty how to use the computers in the classroom were other ways they gained psychic income when financial income was not forthcoming.

I do not wish to be condescending at all in creating this category or describing these faculty members. The need for psychic income begins with the lack of financial prospects in the job. This group of workers had to turn elsewhere because the pay and working conditions were so bad, and the pursuit of validation took on a life of its own. Administration shamelessly exploited this need for validation, establishing part-time teaching awards and appreciation days and acknowledging how hard adjuncts worked, even claiming that adjuncts did the "real work" of the university. But they would do nothing to change the working conditions. The system of exploitation created the Validation Seekers.

Validation Seekers tend to have been in a department for a long time. The most striking example from my campus was a woman who worked 34 years as an adjunct before passing away four years ago and had been in the department longer than any of the tenured professors. The Validation Seekers, as I came to understand them, felt they had learned writing instruction by doing it and favored "practitioner knowledge," to use Stephen North's term (21), to any studies, historical portraits, or especially theory in Composition Studies. While I think overlap existed with the other groups, the Validation Seekers more carefully guarded their pedagogies and defended them, if not directly, then in the hallway discourse.

After I started seeing what I considered to be patterns among the different group of adjuncts, I found that it was to this latter group, those that I assumed to be Validation Seekers, that I tacitly directed most of my departmental communication when I was a WPA. Not that the Flexibility Seekers and Aspiring Academics were not intended to see my memos and other correspondences, but the audience I had to invoke was the Validation Seekers. The

other two groups seemed to only give my words a cursory glance or responded without comment to any requests for information contained within those memos. The Validation Seekers scrutinized communications. Based on what I heard from others in the department—full-and part-time faculty—those I am now referring to as the Validation Seekers wanted to be assured that any new procedures did not interfere with their autonomy. They were suspicious not so much of change but of the motives behind the change—why was it necessary? what had they been doing wrong?

I will admit here to struggling mightily in my memo writing and other correspondences. I replaced a popular WPA in the eyes of the adjuncts when I arrived at the university to take over the WPA duties. My dean wanted me to initiate program assessment and bring consistency to writing instruction in the department. Except for constraints in what texts the faculty could use, I found few guidelines for instructors to follow. I spent my first year listening, observing, and trying to uncover what type of instruction was occurring. To my disappointment, most every faculty member practiced tenets of current traditionalism. I had my hands full, then, in trying to encourage different pedagogical goals and implementing a portfolio system to do outcomes assessment. Some of my communication necessarily had to bring these issues up, and I struggled trying to hold back my critiques of the current pedagogy and maintain an even tone.

I was assailed early on—directly and indirectly—by these faculty who I see now as Validation Seekers, not for what I wrote or said, but more for what I did not write or say. Consider the flyer on the next page, written before I had the Validation Seekers in mind as a primary audience:

Beyond the Modes: Ideas for Assignments, Facilitative Group Work, and Critical Response

An English Composition Workshop
Wednesday, February 20 3:00-5:00 PM
_____ Hall 214

All Faculty and Graduate Students Are Invited to Attend the First in a Continuing Series of English Composition Workshops. The goal of this workshop is to offer exciting alternatives to the modal assignments often seen in textbooks (narrative, reflection, compare and contrast, etc.) and to discuss ways of implementing critical practices in order to help our students develop as writers. Participants can expect to hear suggestions about effective assignment construction and classroom processes to support the goals of those assignments while working in teams to devise and share assignments and exercises for classroom use. Bring pen and paper but nothing else except enthusiasm!

Please return this bottom portion to the box of _____

Although you can make a last minute decision to attend and still be welcomed, I just want to have a rough idea of how many participants to expect.

_____ I will be attending the February 20th Workshop
_____ I will be unable to attend

In the flyer, I was trying to be careful not to criticize the present teaching, so I aimed my critique at textbooks, associating them with current-traditional precepts rather than the faculty. I also tried to dress up the workshop as something creative and interactive. But the Validation Seekers seized on the word "alternatives." Why were alternatives needed? What was wrong with their teaching? The term "critical practices" also alarmed them. Weren't they already engaging in critical writing? Weren't they already helping students develop as writers? Most of the feedback I received about this flyer came from adjuncts who indicated that the unstated seemed to sting that group I am here calling the Validation Seekers.

Similarly, the memo below about peer observations did not go over well:

TO: All Part-Time Faculty and Term Instructors
FROM: William Thelin, Director of Composition
SUBJECT: Peer Observations

DATE: February 21, 20__

I want us to set up a regular schedule of classroom observation for Composition faculty so that at least once every three or four years, instructors will be observed and have some feedback on their teaching. Currently, only term instructors, second-year TAs, and new faculty receive what I consider to be crucial information about teaching. I believe the program will prosper under a regular observation system, keeping us fresh and allowing us to share ideas about teaching.

These observations will be conducted by members of the Composition Program Committee. Their reports will consist of a description of what took place, an analysis of significant pedagogical areas of the session, and recommendations for the faculty member to consider. These observations will be sent for my review and put in your record. To get the process started, I have randomly selected certain faculty to be reviewed this semester. The instructor assigned to observe you will be in touch with you shortly.

To assist in this observation, please have available for the observer ahead of time a copy of your syllabus and an overview of the class plans for the day. Do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions.

As I alluded to in the memo, the program had had no system to give feedback on teaching. While I talk about "sharing ideas" and "keeping fresh," the unstated assumption the Validation Seekers perceived, I think, was that the faculty needed feedback, that the teaching might have grown stale. While the Composition Program Committee at the time was made up primarily of adjuncts elected by the adjunct faculty, whom I consulted about the process of observation, the Validation Seekers still saw the observations as surveillance and a top-down approach to programmatic unity. From my protected position as a tenured faculty, I personally like to be observed, as it keeps me on my toes. I learn about bad habits I have and can get a set of eyes to view any problem areas. I don't view observations as a threat. But without the protection of continuous employment, the Validation Seekers—and not illogically so—did.

Of course, some of the unstated in these communications was true. I did not like what I saw in the program and had to do something to intervene. And I suffered from male tendencies to be direct. It does not help that I am a man who, in essence, supervised a faculty consisting mostly of women. I did not intend these forms of communication to contain threats. I certainly did not want the language to be perceived as harsh. I did not see how the contents could impact the adjuncts' day-to-day teaching lives. But I obviously had to respond better to the needs of my audience.

I want to mention right here an important point. Rhetoric cannot cover up the beliefs of a writer if the writer wishes to remain ethical. Like all writers, I have times when a person on the other end just completely reads something into my words not close to my intention. Email, which tends to be dashed off in a hurry, increases the possibility of this happening, as does texting. We cannot entirely control language, as we all know from our poststructuralist theories. But I do know how to write. I am capable of conveying warmth and friendliness. But maybe more than other writers, I have to feel warm and friendly in order to do so. I lack insincerity. Warmth and friendliness tend to come with respect. In order to have conveyed a better tone, then, I would have had to respect the teaching of my faculty and the curricular decisions they made.

"I would have had to respect the teaching of my faculty and the curricular decisions they made."

Yet, in my role as a WPA, I had seen a serious problem with the teaching in my program. It has become fashionable in our field to ignore such problems in deference to concern for the economic plight of adjuncts. Schell, for example, states emphatically that the "generative question for higher education policymakers and administrators to ask is not, Why don't part-time faculty provide quality education to their students? Rather it is, Why do institutions hire then fail to provide part-time faculty with working conditions necessary for the provision of quality education?" ("What Is " 329). Schell lists the conditions necessary "for viable and sustainable teaching cultures," including fair compensation and coalition building, but feels "growth and development" for teachers will emerge from the implementation of those work conditions (331-32). She does not mention subject knowledge. She feels that focusing on the quality of part-time education enables a critique of the part-time faculty "as individuals or as a class of undifferentiated faculty…shift[ing] responsibilities from institutions to individuals who occupy the problematic positions" (326). Kelly Latchaw discusses the "culture of fear that shapes the teaching of the adjunct," suggesting that "conservative classroom practices" spring from the

adjuncts' lack of job security (Horner, et al. 82).[1] They do not want to risk losing their position and paycheck by going against the perceived norm. Another dominant strand of thought, similar to Schell's, admits that adjunct teaching might not be all it should be but views such results again as an outcome of the working conditions. Helen O'Grady invokes the need for "equitable salaries, reasonable teaching loads, benefits, office space, mailboxes, telephones, clerical support, access to copy machines, as well as time and reasonable support for research, scholarship, and professional development" to provide quality instruction (142). Implicit support for this position can be seen in many sources, but perhaps Janice Albert's article concerning the search for evidence of student learning states (or doesn't state) the belief best:

> If tests show that they [adjuncts] do a better job of getting students from Point A to Point B, then this would be another lever in the machinery of getting better pay and benefits. If tests were to show the reverse, then perhaps the adjunct problem would be solved by doing away with this category of employment and hiring people only into full-time positions. (A3)

In other words, the lack of full-time positions is the culprit for any poor teaching, not the subject knowledge of the faculty filling these positions, nor the way aspects of current-traditionalism embed their way into the psyche of adjuncts to the point that current-traditional precepts must be defended in order for the adjuncts to be validated.

If we are to embrace this line of thought, however, we have to question why universities across the nation offer doctorates in Composition. If the knowledge produced by a doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition—knowledge that is informed by research and theory—has so little relevance to actual classroom practice that the creation of a full-time position allows an adjunct with an M.A. in literature to perform as well as rhet/comp Ph.D.s in first-year Composition—to have the same base of knowledge to handle the linguistic and rhetorical problems we see in our diverse student populations—the doctorate in Composition has been specious all along, as some of our literature colleagues have always claimed. Perhaps its real role is akin to what Richard Miller suggests—to produce middle-management for universities so that writing programs can be run efficiently and the labor of others overseen (98-99). It is more productive in my estimation to acknowledge that the labor situation buttresses current-traditionalism and that the lack of subject knowledge on the part of a great majority of adjuncts makes them gravitate toward many of current-traditionalism's precepts. The knowledge that Compositionists possess does matter, especially for programs with open-admissions and at-risk students who are in need of the understandings developed in our field

1. It is not clear if Latchaw means to suggest current-traditionalism when speaking of conservative practices, but if we view tenets of current-traditionalism, such as the modes of discourse, as the status quo in Composition, I do not feel it is inaccurate to use the terms "conservative" and "current-traditionalism" as synonyms.

over the years. We do not need to blame the victim to see this situation for what it is. The chance to retool, as many knowledgeable Compositionists have done,[2] could occur with better employment conditions, but as a panacea for improved teaching, the call for full-time positions misses the complexities that surround the work done by adjuncts.

In communicating with the adjuncts in my program as the WPA, I could not cover up my concerns about the prevalence of current-traditionalism in our program with a tone that validated and praised the adjuncts. When our four non-tenure-track full-time lines were cut during my first year, I sympathized with the affected adjuncts who had come up to these positions through the ranks, and I argued for the positions' restoration, receiving instead two similar positions that required an ABD minimum. But I could not argue that the positions produced better teaching. I sensed that a competition had unfolded between my education and Validation Seekers' practitioner knowledge, so I even felt resistance to anything as innocuous as praising the adjuncts' dedication. The tone in my communications could not change under these circumstances. I needed to actually appreciate and value what the adjuncts were doing in the program first.

The adjuncts wanted more communication from me, however. The Validation Seekers seemed to want to show me that their pedagogies had merit. Some wanted a clearer sense of my intentions for the program. To facilitate this communication, I initiated small group meetings with them and started a listserv. This, by the way, is when I recognized the difference between the Flexibility Seekers, the Aspiring Academics, and the Validation Seekers. I could tell during the small group meetings that members who I am now classifying in the first two groups did not really have time or want to put the precious hours they did have into the program. The Aspiring Academics were balancing the needs of other programs they worked in, trying to negotiate hectic schedules and differing departmental requirements, all while applying for full-time positions or pondering changes in careers. Some admitted to me during small group meetings that they deleted email without reading it, as they assumed they already had all the information they needed. The small group meetings actually impinged upon their time, so some of our discussions appeared to me to be forced, as if they just wanted me to tell them what to do. The Flexibility Seekers, on the other hand, let me know that they agreed with certain new policies (as they often did offlist or offline), but I didn't hear any disagreements, making me wonder if they simply were keeping such things to themselves. We did talk about conflicting ideas regarding pedagogy, but the discussions didn't appear, at least from what I could tell, to cause them any great distress. The Validation Seekers, though, filled the hallways with gossip to the point that other full-time faculty

2. Please see the WPA-L archives circa May 2005 for a strand on the subject of retooling.

approached me and wondered what was going on. On the listserv, they demanded attention from me by challenging positions I had taken with repetitive questions. In preparation for their meetings with me, they tried to find out from other adjuncts the type of comments I had made during my sessions with them and then presented ideas that, based on my knowledge at that point about their individual pedagogies, were meant to appease me. The more aggressive ones simply defended their pedagogical ideas and dismissed mine, leading to some tension-filled meetings.

Seeing the non-productive confrontation that had developed, I changed my tone.

The following is a series of listserv posts between a long-time Validation Seeker and myself about the newly implemented portfolio system and then about the listserv itself. You can hear in some of my comments a certain defensiveness, but I generally maintain an even tone. Keep in mind that I had already answered all of this person's questions in previous memos, listserv discussions, and meetings, which, I believe, accounts for the lack of anyone else entering the dialogue. While you will see me apologize for not answering questions immediately, I, in fact, had posted to the listserv several explanations and clarifications at the beginning of the semester. I have edited these posts for clarity and brevity, as well as to keep identities concealed.

From: William Thelin
Sent: Thu 1/30/20__ 11:36 AM
To: ENG-PTFAC@LISTS._____.EDU
Cc:
Subject: Answers to More Questions

Good Morning:

I'm sorry I have not had a chance to answer some of the questions that have been addressed to me. I have been busy putting together the small groups and dealing with other matters, not ignoring or avoiding your concerns. Let me put together today some responses to similar questions about the portfolios. Individuals, going through various channels, have wondered about exam week and the substance of the reflective letter.

Someone was concerned that I was demanding that you be available throughout exam week. This is not the case. I said that for someone teaching three classes, 4-6 hours in your office during exam week should be fine. It seems to me that the easiest thing to do is to meet your students in your classroom during your scheduled exam time and hand back the

portfolios with brief parting oral remarks. Your classrooms will be available. But you can also spend the exam period times in your office and have students come to you OR put aside a block of hours (I believe I suggested something like 9-1 on a particular day) where students from all of your classes can come and retrieve the portfolios. Just make sure that you accommodate those individuals who have an exam schedule conflict.

The question about the reflective letter asked if it could be "a parting goodbye argument about student growth." There are many acceptable ways to work the reflective letter into your course. At our pre-semester meeting, Jeff K [an adjunct] and Linda A [a professor of Composition], among others, suggested ways to make the letter an ongoing part of the classroom. But the content must be consistent for the outcomes assessment to have any validity. Therefore, I don't think a focus on student growth will be enough. In the reflective letter, students should talk about the quality of their revisions in the portfolio and their revision strategies. In doing this, they should be able to articulate essential concepts, such as audience awareness, critical thinking, language use (specific versus general, concrete versus abstract, connotations versus denotations, etc.), relevant detail, arrangement, and other major considerations, and then be able to refer to specific places in their writing where they have worked on these issues. Their growth as a writer might be a factor in such a letter, but it should not be the point of the letter.

Remember that this semester is the one where we will be practicing and adjusting to this system. I noticed in some syllabi that there is no reference to a reflective letter or a portfolio. While I told you that you did not have to redo your syllabus to incorporate this system into this semester, you will be depriving yourself of the opportunity to learn how this system can work in your courses if you do not put some elements of this type of assessment into it. Therefore, if you are not collecting a portfolio, per se, make sure you have some assignment that has the students reflect on their writing in the manner outlined above and that you return this writing to them during exam week. The writing can be an in-class assignment for this semester, if you so choose, but do something that will prepare you for the second phase of the assessment that we will start in fall. Please see me individually if you are struggling in any way to incorporate the portfolio and/or letter into your present syllabus.

I'll get to another question tomorrow.

Thanks

From: W.,Esther [an adjunct]
Sent: Thursday, January 30, 20__ 8:54 PM
To: ENG-PTFAC@LISTS._____.EDU
Subject: Re: Answers to More Questions

What is it that we are assessing with this tool—what is the outcome we desire? The students' ability to articulate certain concepts? Is that the point? Dr. Thelin, you said that the point is not the students' growth as writers.) The exact thing(s) we are supposed to be measuring or assessing--not exactly clear yet to me yet from the meeting, listserv letters, or open discussion here.

By the way, has it come to your attention, Dr. Thelin, that the listserv misses Part-time faculty who are not on it by accident and by design as well as Part-time faculty who do not or cannot use their e-mail. This means that some are missing your messages if you don't send them paper copies. And, of course, from the letter you forwarded from [the department chair], we see that the entire Full-time Faculty is left out of this Composition Faculty Discussion. Shouldn't they be included?

Esther W.

From: William Thelin
Sent: Fri 1/31/20__ 10:10 AM
To: ENG-PTFAC@LISTS._____.EDU
Cc:
Subject: Re: Answers to More Questions

I think the issue Esther brings up is why we must make an effort during Week 15 to do some mock portfolio sessions. I'm not sure if she is talking about the reflective letter or the portfolio in general when she speaks about a "tool," but I will try to answer as best I can.

The desired outcome of the portfolio is two-fold, meant to respond to differing forces on campus and nationally. First, do the students know what they are talking about when they discuss writing? Second, can they demonstrate an application of this knowledge through their revisions? Through the letter, the revisions, and the in-class essay, we should get a sense of both of these areas. I have also said that versatility should be a component in assessment, as we want to make sure students are not staying in a safe zone, so to speak, and have abilities that can be applied to varying writing situations.

I said that growth should not be the point of the reflective letter, not that student growth is irrelevant. Learning involves growing, after all. But we are NOT assessing the amount of

improvement in the student, so I think a letter focusing on how much a student has grown or developed over the semester might blur the issues we are concerned with.

I will not duplicate these posts in paper form. Some faculty opted out of the listserv. I am working to get accurate email addresses for others. Most of us who want to discuss matters relevant to the program, then, have access and have had the choice to participate. Perhaps since you are concerned about the one or two faculty members without email, Esther, you can print out my messages to them and forward any responses to me. Otherwise, my door is still open to all faculty, regardless of email access, who have questions about the program. All formal announcements will continue to be made through paper.

[The department chair] will be joining this listserv. The tenured and tenure-track faculty have their own listserv. None of them has expressed any desire to be included on this one. If I hear from any such faculty, I will consult with you to make sure it is okay for them to be added. Otherwise, I'm not sure these issues concern them, as programmatic changes are announced through regular channels.

Let me know if there is still confusion on any of these items.

From: W., Esther
Sent: Thursday, January 31, 20__ 8:05 PM
To: ENG-PTFAC@LISTS._____.EDU
Subject: Re: Answers to More Questions

There are a few things to cover here.

Apologies, Dr. Thelin, if I was unclear on this point:. I did not mean that all faculty should be included on a PART time faculty listserv; after all, this one is for PART time faculty.

The issue is that COMPOSITION issues are of concern to COMPOSITION faculty, which the English department faculty are, by definition of the by-laws, unless that was also changed last May?[3] If it wasn't, then all faculty are in and of the Composition program. Perhaps—as you claim—they do not wish to DISCUSS Composition issues, and certainly this listserv is not a hotbed of DISCUSSION.

But it is nearly impossible to believe that the people I know on our faculty are not interested

3. This is a reference to a change made to the by-laws to appoint from a group of volunteers rather than to elect part-time representatives to the Composition Committee. The number of votes for the election had dwindled to the point that the last group of elected representatives had earned their position with only two votes, so the process had flaws.

in the writing program; still, it is good to know that you keep them informed of the program through regular channels so that they are keeping up with the rest of us.

When all is said and done, if an assessment program is to be effective and valid, the assessment must be done program wide. That means that the entire faculty, Full—as well as Part—time must participate. Why is this so hard to understand?

As to the issue of my keeping others on the faculty informed of departmental issues, I shall do my best, and I do try. But it is not my job to reach out with official news and programs. And it is not in my budget.

As to the "tool" I name, I speak of the reflective letter, which Dr.Thelin discusses in detail, but which has no described point. It is that letter that I ask about specifically, "What is the point?" because Dr. Thelin noted that growth is not the point, but he does not say what is the point of the letter. He mentions that students are describing the revising process in the language of the course, so I wondered if that were the point. I am hoping that there is something more, for this vague "outcome" is not something I can see as a valuable, valid thing to assess, and I don't think it is one that will fly with national assessment programs. I think they will be looking more at products, such as essays.

I am not sure yet what to ask about the portfolio itself. I know it is a collection of revised essays with earlier drafts, a record of the composing and revising and reflecting processes. I am into that. But I think that assessment of achievement is where we should be going.

It will be harder—but it will be more acceptable to those who are assessing us! That is why places such as [a local university] demand a yes/no pass/fail vote by impartial anonymous faculty for students finishing the course. Certainly we could come up with something—something based on the actual research of writing assessment, such as the fact that the most reliable assessment of writing is done by two experienced classroom teachers reading a writing sample. Did you all know that? So why not have a timed writing sample and train raters? And read holistically? And let the sample count for 20% of the grade? Experienced third raters could resolve differences. That writing sample would at least affect the final grade. We did that in the pilot freshman writing program. If you can catch Emeritus Professor Ted D., ask him about it.

Yours in process--

Esther

One of the Flexibility Seekers complimented me on this exchange for what she perceived as my great restraint and patience considering that we had covered these issues in a faculty meeting and in prior communications. However, a Validation Seeker, not the one who dialogued with me here, accused me of screaming in this communication. I definitely can see places in retrospect where my directness did not do me any favors.

Of interest to me in this dialogue are the underlying issues. Esther wants her ideas to be read by the full-time faculty. Notice in her January 31st post the emphasizing of "Part" and "Composition." Clearly, she is making a statement about the way the department designates her status with the capitalized "part," but she appears also to be implying the importance of Composition by capitalizing it, perhaps in response to its secondary status within the department. Further, she suggests that full-time professors are members of the Composition faculty. I am not sure what section of the by-laws she was referring to, but the full-time professors, even the Compositionists teaching in our graduate program, took great strides at the time to distance themselves from the Composition program. She also wants the full-time faculty to participate in the portfolio assessment, claiming issues of validity as her reason. Notice that I mentioned nothing about full-time participation in my posts, so she pulled that from elsewhere to make it seem like I had not understood something. It would seem she must know that validity would not be compromised if we had data from 155 out of 160 sections. She feels rather, I think, the lack of privilege in her status and wants it leveled off. Finally, in her last paragraph, she makes a vague reference to research in the field of assessment and a desire to do uncompensated work. She wants her perspective validated and is willing, if I am reading this correctly, to do extra work in the form of a double-blind read in order to get it. Look at her question, "Did you all know that?" Perhaps she echoes, here, the language use of myself and the other Compositionists when we defend our pedagogies.[4] Further, her use of the term "process" in her closing seems to me to be an attempt to align her position with what she perceives to be the current trend in the teaching of Composition, which is interesting given her call for a timed writing.

The needs of the Validation Seekers hampered communication, so even when one adjunct perceived my tone to be polite and professional, another found me arrogant and demanding. And as a writer, I was very conflicted. Again, I recognized I was communicating with a group of people who, with a few exceptions, had not read the literature in Composition. In this listserv post, the person asserted knowledge based supposedly on research but wanted to revert to what I considered to be a regressive form of assessment—20% of a student's grade based on a pass/fail timed essay with no input from the instructor of the student.

4. It is also interesting to note that Janice Albert in *Forum*, the publication for adjuncts in *College Composition and Communication,* calls for the exact same type of assessment that Esther does in the article previously cited.

I wanted to validate the people doing the work and join their side in the fight against exploitive working conditions. But I could not validate the type of teaching that undermines progressive teaching methods.

Like most people, I do not enjoy confrontation, so creating a more positive atmosphere in the program became a priority. The endless negativity in the Validation Seekers' complaints undermined programmatic goals and confused many new part-time employees regarding requirements and guidelines. An idea from a supportive adjunct instructor to start a reading group on Composition struck me as a possibility toward professional development as well as programmatic healing. She and I agreed on three books and invited the entire adjunct faculty to meet in my house for wine and cheese and robust discussion of pedagogy and theory. Ira Shor inadvertently contributed a twist to this group. We chose his book, *Empowering Education*, as the first selection, and upon hearing this in a private email exchange between him and me, Ira volunteered to do a conference call with the group. Ira answered questions and initiated dialogue for over an hour, and the group so enjoyed it that I found a way to get every other author we have read in our six summers in the group to do a conference call as well. The conversations with the authors not only helped drive discussion, but it gave the adjuncts a sense of being a part of the profession. This type of professional sharing allowed me to see the dozen or so adjuncts who popped in and out of the group in a more respectful light, as I saw them thinking through important issues and wondering ways to incorporate ideas into their pedagogy. While most prominent Validation Seekers never attended, I gleaned their ethos from these meetings anyway.

A final example below of my communication shows yet another shift in tone.

TO: Composition Faculty
FROM: William Thelin
Director of Composition
DATE: November 22, 20__
SUBJECT: Norming Groups

I am very pleased with the progress we have made in implementing the portfolio assessment. I appreciate the effort and skill you are bringing to this project. Please continue to give me your input as we approach the end of the semester.

It is time again to form norming groups for Week 15. I have put a schedule of available times on my office door. As per the wishes of the majority of you, we will limit groups to three persons. Sign your name or the names of a pre-formed group for the date and time

you wish to norm. If you need to vary the time slightly to fit everyone's schedule in your group, just let me know. Also, if you would like to be in a group that norms only with English I or English II, please indicate this with something like "EN I only" next to the designated slot. I will do my best to accommodate you.

As always, feel free to come to me with any problems. I will again make myself available during all times listed to answer questions that come up, review a particularly troublesome portfolio, or help in any other way. Do not forget to submit a finished norming chart at the end of your team's meeting.

Please sign up for a date and time by Wednesday, December 1.

I must confess some serious discomfort with this memo. In a certain light, I can read the first few lines as pandering to the Validation Seekers. Yet, it also marks a change in my view of the situation and my shifting relationship with the adjuncts, a shift that is more complicated than might be seen at first glance. In springboarding from the summer reading meetings, I realized the need in Freirean terms to understand the local situation as much as possible. Freire talks about working with liberation movements in Africa after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* "Not even here," he says, "where going beyond commonsense knowledge was a matter of life and death, would it be legitimate to belittle that knowledge or look down on it. It must be respected. A transcendence of commonsense knowledge…must be achieved only by the way of that very knowledge" (146). In working with the adjunct faculty, I had to find a way to respect the practitioner knowledge they brought to the classroom, even as I wanted to transform it. The adjuncts' knowledge did not materialize out of their collective desire to follow current traditionalism. My sense of competition drew largely out of my own head. The Validation Seekers did not, I think, have any great desire to challenge more contemporary views of Composition. Rather, they were trying to serve students, a large percentage of whom were first-generation or at-risk, within a program that offered little professional development opportunities and few forms of validation. Instead of looking at their teaching as "a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing," as Maxine Hairston termed it years ago in "The Winds of Change" (80), I tried to look at their pedagogies with fresh eyes. What I saw were practices designed to help with problems the instructors perceived in student writing, such as organization and sentence structure. I saw assignments trying to encourage reflection and open up possibilities for students. I saw attempts at showing students the value of good writing. It was actually plain amazing how good the teaching of writing was, even as it lacked in

crucial areas. And in recognizing these strong points, I was able to say, "I see your concerns. Have you ever tried this?" As opposed to, "That goal is not worthy. You need to be doing this." Not that I was ever this blunt, but perception deemed my communications as such.

This was a two-way street. While by the time I stepped down, four Validation Seekers absolutely hated me and what I represented, the majority appeared to respect what I had brought to the program. I received an 80% approval rating from the adjuncts in my last administrative assessment in 2008. Many of their comments talked about the English Composition sequence as finally having a direction. Initial resistance to the portfolio assessment had transformed into, "Look what I have found out from that reflective letter" along with great suggestions of how to make the assignment better. So when I look at this example of one of my later memos, I know I was sincere when I talk about their "effort and skill." I was validating in the absence of economic rewards.

Yet, while this might have been a victory for me and to some extent for better teaching practices in the program, it marked a defeat for the battle against exploitive working conditions. My validation of the adjuncts fulfilled the need for psychic income. It made what should be intolerable working conditions tolerable. It lessened the chance that the adjuncts would work toward change, at least the group I have labeled the Validation Seekers; if they find fulfillment through programmatic affirmation, they will not seek the economic justice the position deserves. The creation of full-time positions must come from adjunct agitation. Many will find it hard to agitate against exploitation when they enjoy their jobs.

I purposely proposed *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers* for our summer reading group one year, knowing the collection's focus on the exploitation of adjunct labor would stir up the group. We engaged in a thought-provoking conference call with co-editor Tony Scott, and the discussion spilled over onto the part-time listserv the next day. Based on Steve Parks's ideas of designing writing assignments for our students around economic issues and the university itself, I suggested that a group of adjuncts could develop solidarity with the students by making the theme of work at least a part of their syllabus. While I worried about adjuncts preaching to their students under these conditions, I thought well-designed assignments could still teach writing and let students come to their own conclusion while exposing the economic situation within the university and opening some student eyes. To lead the way, I took some key terms from the adjuncts' posts to the listserv, such as "exploitation" and "accommodation," and

"worried about adjuncts preaching to their students under these conditions"

turned them into assignments that would allow for the students to explore many different paths and perspectives. The adjuncts appeared to greet these assignments with enthusiasm, and several said they would test them out or develop ones of their own. In anticipation of the results, I even submitted a proposal to a national conference to report the findings.

I had forgotten about psychic income. In order for the adjuncts to develop a unit on work in the university, they would have had to expose themselves as contingent labor. To have presented themselves as exploited labor to their students would have shattered illusions, for the students, of course, but also, I think, for the instructors. Not one adjunct to my knowledge used any of these assignments or derivatives of them to make students aware of the exploitation of part-time labor. Further, one of the Validation Seekers even reported my efforts to an administrator directly above me (although he did not see the assignments as inappropriate, he kindly recommended that I tone down my "political leanings" as the WPA). The adjuncts apparently preferred to secure their identity as respected professionals. Walter Jacobsohn condemns this practice he calls "adjunct passing," believing it degrades its practitioners and others in the community. He feels it is "only right" that students be made aware of how their institution of higher learning, through the exploitation of adjunct labor, does not support their learning. Adjunct passing, he asserts "make[s] the working conditions of adjunct faculty almost impossible to change" (171). Katherine Wills also suggests that adjuncts who want "to avoid being outed" can slow down the organizing process for collective bargaining (205).[5]

Steve Street comments in "Don't Be Kind to Adjuncts" that acts of kindness are actually less than kind if not accompanied by discourse designed to put adjunct issues "front and center" (A36). Given the strength of this psychic income, then, perhaps I would have helped the adjuncts more if I had taken Street's title literally and assumed (or continued?) an enemy role, the Boss Compositionist who privileges theory and research over practitioner knowledge. Validating the work of adjuncts, after all, reduces tension when for conditions to be changed, unrest is needed. The terms of the adjuncts' employment were the problem, and in many ways, I ended up enabling that problem to continue by measures not dissimilar to the upper administrators that I bemoaned earlier. Ultimately, then, the system of adjunct exploitation has created roles or identities for workers (WPAs included) that—brilliantly, I'm sure, from an administrative perspective—suppress the type of dissent necessary for wholesale change. Without collective action targeting the system and building allies, individual adjuncts will simply rely on the benevolence of administrators to create full-time positions and then compete against their colleagues for the few positions that pop up here and there. WPAs, sympathetic or not, will continue to dole out validation for a job well done, appeasing

5. I should point out here that my state's laws forbid the unionization of part-time workers.

some adjuncts but harming far too many, especially the Aspiring Academics, who want, need, and deserve full-time positions with a professional salary and benefits.[6]

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6. This article was based on a presentation given at the WPA Summer Conference. The author would like to thank the members of the audience for giving helpful suggestions and would especially like to acknowledge Lisa Lebduska, who gave wonderful feedback during the transformation of the paper into an article.

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