

Conflicting Paradigms: Theoretical and Administrative Tensions in Writing Program Administration

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It is perhaps hackneyed to say that rhetoric and composition is still an "emerging field." Yet, its status as a growing discipline often does create substantial administrative problems for writing program administrators. One such problem is the tension created by an environment in which a department maintains a thriving graduate program in rhetoric and composition but its freshman writing program is not directed by the same faculty who teach in the graduate program. Theoretical conflicts can arise from such a situation: graduate teaching assistants may be learning the most current theory and research in composition from their graduate courses, while they are taught in their teaching practicums notions of writing and composition pedagogy that are antithetical to the concepts they learn in their classes. Similarly, some institutions employ rhetoric and composition specialists but assign administration of the writing program to non-compositionists. Undoubtedly, the conflicting paradigms that arise can have an adverse effect on any writing program's effectiveness. In this paper, I will explore the theoretical and administrative tensions arising from such conflicting paradigms, discuss the effects of these tensions on the writing program and those who teach in it, and explore ways to resolve such conflicts so as to make our programs as effective as possible.

It is understandable that we must deal with conflicting theoretical paradigms. As the field emerged—or is emerging, depending on your point of view—from the current-traditional paradigm to a model that valorizes the writing process, and as some theorists now are critiquing the "cognitivist" and "expressivist" assumptions of process theory and are calling for what James Berlin calls a "social-epistemic" rhetoric or what Marilyn Cooper calls an "ecological model," there is a great deal of theoretical, pedagogical, and administrative confusion. These theoretical shifts and competing paradigms have a significant impact not only on composition pedagogy but also on writing program administration. Conflicts can arise, for example, when graduate students taking graduate course work in composition theory are heavily influenced by one paradigm of composition instruction and then must teach in a writing program that is informed by a competing pedagogical ideology; when senior faculty who have not remained current with changes in composition theory are nonetheless asked

to evaluate teaching assistants who are incorporating new pedagogies into the curriculum; when teaching assistants who are not interested in composition theory and pedagogy devise pedagogies inconsistent with the writing program's goals and objectives; and when there is no institution-wide coordination of writing program policy. None of these things is necessarily negative *per se*; however, when such diverse paradigms arise and remain unexamined, the potential for programmatic incoherence often results.

As a kind of case study, I will consider one large state university that I am familiar with in order to explore how theoretical competition can lead to administrative problems and a lack of coherence within a composition program.¹ My intent in presenting this case is not to offer the results of data-driven research, but to provide a description of one institution to illustrate the kinds of paradigmatic conflicts that *can* arise. As Edward M. White writes in *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*, "It is not easy to discover what is going on, or why, in any college writing program. The research describing these programs is surprisingly constricted" (16). Yet the increasing body of detailed program descriptions and analyses (Hartzog, and Connolly and Vilardi, for example) serves as an important resource for all writing program administrators in helping us become aware of the issues pertinent to other programs so that we can adapt others' insights to the context of our own institutions and, in addition, avoid some of the problems that other programs have unfortunately experienced.²

Theoretical Competition and Administrative Problems

Summarizing a study by Thomas Wilcox, White comments that "large universities . . . preferred to hire specialists in literary fields, distinguished scholars in particular, and overused cheap labor—in the form of part-time and non-tenure-track appointments and graduate assistants—for writing instruction" (20). Such is the situation at the case university—an institution with over 30,000 students and a large and thriving graduate program in English. In universities such as the case institution, as well as in those White refers to, undergraduate writing programs are not seen as important to the overall mission of the institution and thus are not given the support necessary to provide adequate staffing by trained professionals.

At this university, adjuncts and graduate assistants receive a "recommended" syllabus for the two-semester sequence of required freshman composition. This syllabus was devised by the Director of Freshman English, independent of input from rhetoric and composition specialists on the faculty. (The director is largely uninvolved in the graduate program.)

According to the syllabus, the first week of class is devoted to discussion of the "writing process." Freshmen read the introductions in their texts that outline the "recursive nature of the writing process" and that explain what writers do when they prewrite, plan, draft, revise, edit, and proofread. However, the rest of the syllabus is solidly in the current-traditional paradigm. There is one 500-word essay due approximately every week, based on traditional rhetorical modes beginning with narration and description and culminating in argument. The syllabus does not provide for students to receive feedback in advance of grading, either from peers or from the instructor. Five of the eight to ten required papers are written in class. As a matter of fact, the recommended syllabus contains no instruction or practice in any of the activities that are commonly understood to be part of the writing process: invention techniques, such as brainstorming and heuristics; revision workshops and other collaborative pedagogies; and so on.

All first-time teaching assistants are required to attend a methods practicum during the first semester that they teach. In this course, taught by the Freshman English Director, they read and discuss the readings assigned on the syllabus and are given "lessons" for each section. Teaching assistants are also required to read *An Introduction to the Teaching of Writing* by Stephen and Susan Judy, a book which, ironically, contradicts most of what is presented in the methods course as "the way to teach writing."

Teaching assistants are also required to enroll in another pedagogy course sometime before they graduate. The content of this course depends on which member of the faculty teaches it. Occasionally, this course is taught by literature professors who have no formal training in composition and who appear to favor current-traditional, back-to-basics approaches. It is sometimes taught by the Director of Freshman English, sometimes by a rhetoric and composition specialist who favors what James Berlin calls "expressivist approaches" and sometimes by another who leans towards "social epistemic," collaborative approaches. Both of these latter approaches undermine the department's recommended syllabus, with its emphasis on rhetorical modes and finished products. Unless teaching assistants enroll in additional rhetoric and composition classes (and there is little administrative or social reward for doing so), this is the end of their training as writing teachers, even though they may remain employed as such at the case institution for several years.

Clearly, in the case institution the quality and quantity of graduate assistant training in composition pedagogy and theory results in many conflicting paradigms of writing instruction in operation within the same department. Many graduate assistants are thoroughly confused by the time they finish their training and, consequently, fall back on the way they were taught writing as undergraduates. Some graduate assistants place enormous

emphasis on surface correctness, others almost none, preferring to deal with social issues raised in the readings; others treat the class as an introduction to literature. These approaches are not in themselves "wrong"; a variety of paradigms may even in some cases be advantageous, so long as the assumptions that underlie the paradigms are informed by current theory and practice. In the case study writing program, however, there is no departmental mechanism to monitor whether pedagogies designed by teaching assistants are so informed or how such approaches enhance or detract from the overall goals of the writing program. At least two other universities that I'm familiar with suffer similar problems, as do, no doubt, many others; and both the Hartzog and the Connolly and Vilardi studies illustrate the difficulties nationwide in monitoring, training, and evaluating TAs.³

Perhaps even more important than the mere existence of conflicting paradigms is that often these paradigms are not made explicit and acknowledged as the underpinnings of a program or as alternatives to it. In some situations there can be different paradigms and yet no conflict—so long as people acknowledge that they differ but agree that the program will operate according to certain principles. In addressing this point after reviewing an earlier version of this article, an editorial reader for *WPA* wrote,

If I may use my own institution as a case in point, there are six of us in composition. Among us we have cognitivists, social constructionists, an expressivist, and a developmentalist. Yet our program, which has social construction as its underlying paradigm, makes use of the strengths of all; one paradigm need not exclude others, as long as we agree that the goals of our classes are to introduce students to writing in an academic setting and to help them learn the processes and strategies of such writing. The problem is not just paradigm conflicts, but that the people involved in a writing program all need to talk to one another about philosophy as well as scheduling and staffing.

This writer is exactly right: a program's operating paradigm must be more than tacit, and everyone involved in the program must communicate with one another. Such is not the situation at the case institution.

A number of teaching assistants at the case-study institution specialize in rhetoric and composition and, thus, continue to take course work in composition theory, research methods, and rhetoric. It is often these instructors who feel most the disjunctions caused by the competing paradigms within the writing program there. In this institution of 30,000 students, the program is simply too large for the Director of Freshman English to evaluate all the instructors, and so senior faculty members are called upon to

evaluate all teaching assistants and adjuncts. These senior faculty do not teach writing classes and, typically, the demands of their own scholarship have preempted them from staying current with the rapidly growing body of theory and research in composition studies. And, as might be expected, some are openly hostile to rhetoric and composition in general.

In one incident a teaching assistant, also a rhetoric and composition specialist, was asked by just such a senior faculty member to provide a list of topics that she would be discussing over the next few weeks. The instructor promptly complied, providing a list of writing "activities," mainly collaborative group activities, that her class would be engaged in during the specified time. The evaluator returned her list, requesting that he be notified as to when she planned to lecture. Although she hadn't planned to lecture, she nonetheless devised a formal presentation rather than risk an unsatisfactory evaluation from an evaluating professor who did not consider collaborative activities to be "real teaching." Moreover, since she felt compelled to contrive a lecture for no other reason than to appease her evaluator, this teaching assistant had to accept in her personnel file an evaluation that gave a false picture of her classroom abilities and procedures. Of course, the problems of teaching evaluation are well documented in the scholarly literature on writing program administration, but what makes this already difficult problem even more complex is a situation in which conflicting ideas about what qualifies as effective writing instruction result in the writing program administrator having a false picture of what is actually happening in the writing classrooms under his or her supervision.

One of the interesting findings of Polin and White's study of writing programs in California universities is "that students write better on campuses where there is a single WPA for the writing programs as a whole, as opposed to those campuses where separate administrators coordinate the remedial, the freshman, and the upper-division writing courses" (as quoted in White 12). At the case university, the upper-division writing courses are administered by one professor, the writing center by an adjunct, and the two-semester freshman sequence by another professor; the remedial courses are coordinated by a professor from a local community college, and another composition tutoring center (a federally-funded program for economically disadvantaged students) is directed by a specialist in education. The implication from Polin and White's study is that an institution's overall writing program will be more coherent and thus more effective if it is directed by a single writing program administrator. Since this is not the situation at the case institution or at many of the institutions described in the Connolly and Vilardi study, the lack of a single WPA in charge of all writing programs may also be another source of conflicting paradigms that adversely affect the quality of writing instruction.

Some Suggestions

These problems are less the fault of the writing program administrator than of the department's administration. And, of course, budgetary, legislative, and administrative constraints in any institution will limit the writing program administrator's power to run a program as effectively as he or she might wish. However, there are ways that writing program administrators and English department chairs can provide leadership in resolving some of the administrative tensions that this discussion poses.

First, teaching-assistant training can be improved in several important ways. The CCCC "Task Force on the Preparation of Teachers of Writing" states that teachers of writing at all academic levels "need, first of all, experience in writing, and also some theoretical knowledge to guide classroom practice" (446).⁴ It has long been argued that teachers of writing should themselves *be* writers. And as Sally Barr Reagan argues in a recent article in *WPA*, "Teaching TAs to Teach: Show, Don't Tell,"

Reading about teaching strategies, being told what should be incorporated, or discussing different approaches to teaching does not have the same impact as showing their effects on students. If we expect our TAs to move beyond the bounds of the traditional composition classroom, their training should parallel the new pedagogical approaches. (50)

At the case study institution, the valuable connections between the practical experience teaching assistants gain in the classroom and in graduate course work, required or not, is not exploited. Certainly, administrators and graduate faculty in such institutions should work together to develop ways to exploit these two departmental assets. It seems that both the graduate program and the writing program could benefit from such collaboration.

One way that these connections could be exploited is by changing the way graduate courses are structured. Charles Moran has argued that direct training in writing and editing should be the core of training programs for writing teachers. Talk about theory and research should grow from the writing and editing experiences that the teaching assistants themselves are engaged in. Many graduate courses, even in rhetoric and composition, are based on the presentational model, in that the professor lectures and requires one or two research papers due at the end of term but offers no avenue for peer response to emerging papers.⁵ It strikes me as inconsistent to teach TAs to teach writing as a process on the one hand while on the other to force them as students to magically produce finished products. Such courses offer no access to group or professor feedback during the writing process and make no overt connections between the processes of inquiry and writing.⁶ And often there is little comment from the graduate professor about the paper as a piece of writing. Teaching assistants and others training

to be writing teachers rarely get to experience how process pedagogy works—and sometimes fails. They rarely experience the benefits and drawbacks of peer feedback, the struggles and joys of working through the revision process, or the satisfaction in seeing that the end product is significantly better because of the revision process. Without that experience, they are less likely to find ways for their students to share those same struggles and joys.

In other words, teaching assistants need courses designed to deal with writing problems they face as students and professionals. Several universities, including the one I am presently associated with, have instituted required courses in writing and publishing scholarship in English.⁷ Such courses not only help young professionals learn the conventions of publishing in English, but they help them become better writers; and, most importantly to writing program administrators, they more firmly establish connections between our own attempts to compose professional prose and our students' attempts to master academic discourse.

Second, writing program administrators should whenever possible influence the required core curriculum for writing instructors that teach in their programs. Even teaching assistants specializing in literature need courses in composition theory. Perhaps all graduate TAs should be required to take at least one course in composition theory beyond the typical practicum. This additional training in theory will help them design informed pedagogies. Donald Stewart takes this position one step further, arguing that instruction in composition theory should become an integral part of English education on the *undergraduate* level, before students ever enter a graduate program (194-95).⁸

Third, universities like the case institution that have large writing programs and graduate programs in rhetoric and composition have an untapped resource. Graduate programs and large writing programs provide a pool of researchers and subjects to study. Graduate programs that take advantage of these resources could become valuable sources of new scholarship in composition studies.⁹

Fourth, writing program administrators should be specialists in rhetoric and composition, familiar with various approaches to the teaching of writing and the strengths and weaknesses of each and, therefore, able to help teaching assistants develop and evaluate the pedagogies that they devise in response to the specific needs of their classroom. Gary Olson and Joseph Moxley write in a recent article in *College Composition and Communication*, "Ostensibly, writing program administrators are their departments' specialists in rhetoric and composition—in many cases, their *only* specialists in this field" (56). Clearly, this is an unjustified assumption; at least at the case institution, the rhetoric composition faculty—the "specialists"—are

largely involved with the graduate program, not the writing program. Assigning direction of a writing program to non-specialists is sure to create and reinforce the kinds of tensions I've been discussing.

Fifth, writing program administrators in such large institutions can develop administrative structures that will provide colleagues with current information that will help them make informed decisions about the writing programs in their institutions. Such administrative structures, perhaps small groups of teaching assistants and senior faculty, could also provide the writing program administrator with ways to monitor instructor problems and successes. For example, Michael Holzman devised small administrative groups in response to problems similar to the ones I have explored here. Small groups of teaching assistants met with a senior faculty member in order to discuss pedagogy and classroom problems. I would further argue that each group should be chaired by a composition specialist who in turn provides feedback to the writing program administrator. Of course, the structure of these groups would vary greatly from institution to institution. But their function would be to keep information flowing from the writing program administrator to the instructors and back again. Another, perhaps somewhat cumbersome, solution to this problem was proposed by a writing program administrator who heard an earlier version of this paper presented at the 1989 WPA conference: he schedules the same meeting at three different times whenever he needs to communicate with all of the instructors and adjuncts in his program. "Needless to say," he went on, "I can't do that very often."

Writing program administrators also need to ensure that those faculty who are asked to evaluate writing instruction are familiar with the goals of the writing program as a whole as well as the theory and pedagogy that informs those goals. One obvious way to do this is to provide in-service workshops to inform evaluators about process pedagogies such as collaborative learning.¹⁰

I do not claim that the problems of the case institution are typical. I only wish to raise questions and explore possible solutions. Nor am I advocating that writing program administrators enforce conformity to particular approaches to the teaching of writing. However, any writing program is only as good as those who teach in it, and a program will be coherent and pedagogically sound only to the extent that all participants are knowledgeable and informed. Only then will conflicting paradigms within the program work to create lively and productive debate rather than confusing and unproductive tension.

Notes

¹Most of the tensions I will be exploring are not as evident in smaller programs. In small departments where the entire faculty teaches writing, conflicts can be handled in regular faculty meetings where everyone can discuss shared pedagogical objectives and methodologies. Michael Holzman calls such an arrangement a "sort of a participatory democracy." But in many large universities, with numerous teaching assistants and hundreds of freshman English sections, such participation is not practical or typical.

²Similar to the Hartzog and Connolly and Vilardi works is a text recently published by Fulwiler and Young that presents numerous descriptions of writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

³It is unclear from Connolly and Vilardi exactly what kind of TA training is being provided at the institutions described. Many listed seminars, practicums and apprenticeships; none listed any *required* course work beyond these. Pittsburgh claims to "intimately relate" graduate study in composition and the study of literature and literary theory, leaving vague exactly how that is accomplished without watering down composition studies (137). Furthermore, it seems that given the demand for rhetoric and composition specialists, relatively few are being graduated. White predicts that "despite the signs of new programs, special Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition will be in short supply for many years. In 1985-86, a total of only twenty institutions granted 228 such degrees; 102 of them were from three universities: Southern California, Indiana of Pennsylvania, and Pittsburgh (Chapman and Tate, 1987, p. 128)" (11).

⁴A new CCCC committee on the preparation of college teachers of writing, chaired by Richard Larson, is charged with developing guidelines and recommendations for training writing teachers at all levels.

⁵See Hillocks for a discussion of the general ineffectiveness of the presentational model (113-31, 192-204).

⁶According to Reither, "Academic writing, reading, and inquiry are inseparably linked; and all three are learned not by doing any one alone, but by doing them all at the same time. To 'teach writing' is thus necessarily to ground writing in reading and inquiry" (625).

⁷For a discussion of the importance of this kind of program, see Olson.

⁸One book that some WPAs use to help convince administrators that strong writing programs are in the best interest of the institution is Boyer's *College: The Undergraduate Experience*, which argues that writing is the heart of any curriculum and can help solve problems of attrition.

⁹See Reagan for an example of how graduate students' research can benefit teacher training.

¹⁰See Polin and White for a discussion of "retraining" literature faculty to teach writing.

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