

How to Tell a Story of Stopping: The Complexities of Narrating a WPA's Experience

Wendy Bishop
Gay Lynn Crossley

The ending tripped us up, changed the story we'd set out to tell. Our plan was to spend a year learning the details of a WPA's life so that we could capture and understand the realities of that life.¹ From January 1992 to December 1992, Wendy would keep daily time logs and write regular journal narratives, Gay Lynn would categorize and tabulate Wendy's daily activities and respond in a weekly journal to the issues she saw raised in Wendy's narratives. We were to follow a simple plot revolving around the day-to-day, moment-to-moment experiences of a WPA in her second year directing a program at a large state institution. We followed the plan at first, documenting activities that filled the day,

... Tomorrow —talk to Elizabeth, teach, talk to Charles Nicholson [department chair] about talking to Elizabeth, teach, be interviewed by one of my class researchers, go to Gregory Ulmer's talk, drive home, lie on the floor moaning to relax my back or walk if possible, let the kids and cats bounce on me, eat, go to rhetoric group (which I'm greatly looking forward to as a simple pleasure). Friday, I'll be picking up pieces slowly—avoiding a huge stack of personal correspondence, trying to get the Writing and Therapy, WPA as Therapist essay finished (Wendy's Journal, February 18)²

reading into a daily schedule,

... You've made notes about talking with students, teaching assistants, office staff, other administrators within the department, colleagues in the department, administrators across the university, job candidates. It seems that a large part of the job involves establishing relationships with so many different types of people. Add to that a concern for the nature of many of those relationships (I'm referring to your concern about how you interact with the office staff, and how you work to remember to make a personal connection with GTAs) and you've accounted for a good chunk of the time and energy expended on this job, time and energy not easily documented in terms of hours and minutes. It seems then that the job easily becomes consuming. . . . (Gay Lynn's Journal, Week One)

searching moments for insight,

... I decided that the more I teach the less open I am to talking to others

about teaching in the sense of being interested composition director/
sympathetic listener. That is my classes consume me and I want to talk
about my teaching ideas and find it hard to shift to guide or decide for
others. . . . (Wendy's Journal, January 16)

That's how we started, as if following in the tradition of the realists. For over three months we kept our focus, felt a sense of control even as we knew we were watching the project take a shape of its own.

These early months were not without their tensions. It was a time of choosing a successor to take over the writing program after Wendy fulfilled her four-year commitment as WPA (including an initial year of training), a time of arguing for the candidate Wendy felt could be entrusted with the program she'd developed, and as a result, a time for Wendy to become even more aware of her identity as a WPA. Her emerging identity as a WPA was shaped largely by her commitments to the writing program, the teachers it employs, and the students it serves: in particular, her beliefs that there could be no valid graduate rhetoric program without a strong writing program and that a "strong" writing program is staffed by teachers educated to work toward the objectives of a coherent, theoretically-informed, student-centered curriculum. That her identity developed along these lines is not surprising. Wendy did not stumble into writing program administration. She had studied writing program administration as one of her qualifying exam areas. Her interest in administration was motivated by her sense that curriculum development was the site where writing research, theory, and practice could merge. Her intention to work in administration grew out of an early commitment to teacher education. Further, these commitments were a long time in developing. She had already been an administrator at other academic institutions—running a program for underprepared students and then a university writing center. Through these early experiences, Wendy had noticed a tension between her own concerns as an administrator and those of other university administrators. Other administrators were concerned with what she saw as managerial issues, while she was concerned with educational issues. In short, her identity as a WPA grew directly out of our profession's national discussions about the teaching of writing and writing program administration. For Wendy, then, her authority rested in her expertise to develop a respected writing program, not in her ability to maintain a quiet program.

In April of 1992, however, her loyalties to the writing program, teachers, and students were tested. After having worked for sixteen months to decrease her job responsibilities, the department chair explained a need to increase the size of the writing program:

The day which ended at 4:40 PM with Charles [Department Chair] telling me the Dean and Provost want us to hire five more GTAs—program up to 75 and prepare for 3100 freshman—I've never overseen more than 2400. And I just looked at him and said I knew there were reasons it was good for the program but absolutely no, that I could not take on the supervision of another single GTA—Anita [First-Year-Writing Program

Secretary] could not do the work, we might not have Danielle [Director of the Reading/Writing Center], we have no office spaces, I have no time to talk to the 70 GTAs I'm responsible for, no no no. Cole Daniels [Director of Undergraduate Studies] looked at me in amazement—he was in the office—and said the upper level classes could use them. (Wendy's Journal, April 2)

Such moments seem far from unusual in a WPA's life. Since writing programs often house the only course required of all students, writing program administrators are constantly negotiating between their concerns for quality composition programs and fiscal realities, between their responsibility to argue for an exploited work force of instructors and GTAs and to meet student needs. The result of such moments is often to strengthen a WPA's alliance with GTAs and to remind her of the range of roles she assumes in her relationship with GTAs—boss, supervisor, advocate, and mentor. Not surprisingly, institutional and economic pressures won this battle. Since 1992, the writing program at this university has grown to serve 3200 students; there are now 86 GTAs.

In Wendy's mind, such growth—projected then, realized today—jeopardized the integrity of the program. The job of WPA became unacceptable, and the year of study ended with Wendy's early resignation as WPA in November 1992. This ending didn't surprise us. Warning signs appear throughout Wendy's journal entries:

I had an overwhelming sense that Eliot Cage [Director of Graduate Studies] sees me and the composition program as upstart . . . I had this terrible feeling that I might not want to be here in a few years with the composition backlash beginning . . . The new memo—FYW has to release four GTA units to literature this fall—was in my mailbox and rather hateful. First of all Charles Nicholson [Department Chair] does but Eliot does not admit that GTAs are hired first to staff the first-year writing program. (Wendy's Journal, July 7)

I thought of the department advertising rhetoric as a Ph.D. area with three faculty and Literature with 28 faculty and three more to be hired this year. I continue to realize both how threatening and how alien rhetoric is, particularly because faculty here do not (and never will) teach writing. . . . I spent the night thinking about whether I was willing to try to bring this issue up as a discussion topic at the upcoming department retreat or whether I'd just disappear from issues here entirely. I feel like I've half left. . . . and there's an angry part of me that wants to just come in with a resignation. (Wendy's Journal, September 10)

April's conflict over program size proved to be a preamble to future conflicts over the writing program, the teaching staff, and the valuing of rhetoric and composition in general. In November, after Wendy's decision not to release a first-year GTA from his training so that he could grade for a member of the literature faculty was overruled, she became convinced that the authority she had worked to establish for herself didn't reach far:

I closed the door and asked Brenda Ericson [the previous WPA] if I was hallucinating that she trained me to protect the autonomy of the FYW staff and the teacher-education program, and she said no I wasn't. Charles Nicholson should have told Cole Daniels that ignoring senior GTAs in order to hand pick a beginning teacher was impossible. . . . They don't respect pedagogy. They see FYW as working for them, not for FYWriters. . . . I'm going nuts—all year Charles Nicholson has not supported rhetoric—he's backtracking and he started this whole damn program. . . . I keep thinking, to hell with it, don't fight it, it's all [the next director's problem soon], but I can't exist like that. I'm at that "how many times can I quit" feeling. (Wendy's Journal, November 10)

Repeatedly that year, the message was that Wendy's expertise in composition and rhetoric and writing program administration carried little influence. Although she had the autonomy to develop a program curriculum and although this program had earned a strong Board Of Regents, external review, her concerns and values as a WPA did not fall within the department's priorities. The year, then, ended with a dramatic punch that changed the story we would tell:

It's odd to go to work and not "belong" in the main office. I sit on a chair and sort mail like other faculty members, say a word or two and leave without anyone needing to know where I am. . . . it's odd to see my old office inhabited by Rachel—I sure am a pack-rat comparatively, hers is empty and open. I gauge from her note that she's looking forward to it all—it's all upbeat and business forward. (Wendy's Journal, December 23)

Since December 1992, we've struggled to tell this ending, to narrate Wendy's story in ways that do not build to a shrill Movie-of-the-Week climax, that avoid the sensationalism of a daytime talk show.

According to many of our early reviewers, we have not met the challenge. At best, the stories we have written read as naive:

Administrators simply must acquire a certain amount of distance from their jobs, perhaps even a kind of fatalism, a clear sense that you win some and lose some and have lots of ties, skill in distinguishing administrative failure from inevitabilities of the situation, an ability to not take things personally (even when they are "personal"), a thick skin and a long memory. For example, many battle-hardened WPAs might suggest that Wendy should have recognized up front that the plan to add 5 GTAs was a done deal, that she was being informed rather than consulted (probably in the same way the dean "informed" the chair) and that the proper response would be to help the chair figure out—and not in a passive/aggressive way—what resources (offices, supplies, mailboxes, etc.) would be necessary to accommodate the increase, to work with the chair to develop a proposal to get additional resources for the department There was no place in the journal entries cited where Wendy acknowledged that there might be some advantage to having 5 new teaching assistantships in the department: new resources, more support

for graduate students and thus improved recruiting power, more opportunities for students to teach and learn what they really need to know in order to get jobs, and so on. (Anonymous Review)

At worst, we have been perceived as buying into a discourse of victimization:

I am disturbed at how easily the authors permit themselves to present this story as another victim-narrative that you hear so often in accounts of composition, of WPAs, and even of women WPAs. . . . The whole story is framed in a way that I see as rather tiresome—WPAs are heroic but unrewarded professionals working to perfect programs in the face of great odds; they are victimized by Bad People who conspire to make WPAs lives miserable. . . . (Anonymous Review)

Certainly, there have been many times when we have felt both naive and tiresome since this project began. Beyond the moments in Wendy's journal when she's questioned her own naiveté, we have had many occasions since the project to wonder, individually and together, over our naiveté. We have been aware enough of state and university politics to know that there are seldom "Bad People," just people situated, like ourselves, in a university climate created by decreasing budgets even as student demand increases.

As we look back on our struggle to tell this story, though, we find it significant that despite our efforts we still created "naive" stories and "victim" narratives. Further, we find it telling that the reviewer saw the story we told as "*another* victimization narrative that *you hear so often* in accounts of composition, WPAs, and even women WPAs" (emphasis ours). Our professional journals and conferences are significantly populated with articles recounting the marginalization and feminization of composition studies and writing program administration (Bishop & Crossley; Bloom; Holbrook; and Shell). And when these stories are shared at national conferences, it is not at all uncommon to hear audience members, as they file out of the room, note how comforting it is to learn that others share their experiences. At this point, then, rather than shame ourselves out of our naive victim-narratives, we think it would be worthwhile to understand what is prompting the apparent need for such narratives.

Further, in retrospect, the timing of this project seems significant. In 1992, at a time when experts were still forecasting a healthy future for the academy (based on predictions of a large faculty turnover by the year 2000), Wendy's institution (like some other institutions across the country, in Ohio and California, for example) was beginning to feel the effects of substantial budget cuts. Since then, the economic pressures that defined the year of this study have affected almost all institutions. Currently, most institutions are somehow facing fiscal restraints, whether through the threat (or reality) of increased class size, a push for accountability, or a pressure to "re-engineer" curriculum in order to teach more students for less money. What, then, have we to learn from Wendy's experience this year since it seems to reflect the experiences of a steadily increasing number of WPAs?

We want to examine further both of these issues and their relationship: why have victim narratives become a characteristic way of telling our professional stories, what impact might the current economic climate have on WPAs, and how is the economic climate simply exacerbating the very conflicts that have led to our sense of victimization all along? So, for this discussion, we take off our realists hats and become postmodernists. We set out to tell the story of the story tellers.

It's a Matter of Training

By 1995, Gay Lynn was into her first year of writing program administration as a tenure-line faculty member. One day, a literature colleague of hers mused, "It must be hard for you. You are your work. The rest of us do our jobs, then go home. Our research on Dryden has little impact on who we are when we go to department meetings or when we even go home. We have distance. But you *are* what you write about and teach." This moment has caused us to pause and consider the truth of this statement and the implications to a WPA of "being" her work. Certainly, it seems to ring true every time WPAs are offended by the odd collegiality of sympathetic remarks at the beginning of a semester: "We couldn't get a better teaching assignment for you than comp?" Or by comments on messy desks and bedraggled expressions and the accompanying question, "When do you find time to work?" With every annual review WPAs are reminded that their time would be better spent outside the program, preferably doing research. The curricular and programmatic changes WPAs make are appreciated by handfuls of people who, in general, make daily department life easier. However, most WPAs' efforts to improve programs, or maintain strong coherent programs, are usually only begrudgingly acknowledged. And if WPAs are perceived to be threatening academic "standards" with newfangled changes, they get downright resentment. And, more often than not, WPAs remain offended.

Our training has positioned us to be offended at such remarks. A graduate education in composition studies (or any field, arguably) is as much about adopting a value system as learning our field's history, seminal research, scope, and boundaries. We talk knowledgeably about the ways our students are defined by their knowledge, value systems, and discourse habits. Much of our pedagogy reflects a belief that students' histories should not only be acknowledged but also valued in the writing classroom. Since our identities as compositionists and WPAs are similarly defined, perhaps we should explore how those identities can operate in the larger university context. While we don't assume, of course, that everyone's background matches ours, we do believe that our field has developed very basic principles around which most of us form our philosophies of teaching and of writing program administration.

The recurring themes in our field's canonical texts produced since 1963 suggest a core of basic principles that define our field. In fact, these principles

seem so basic that listing them would be an exercise in stating the obvious. The principles, though, inform the teaching of writing and therefore have implications for how we would administer any writing program. If we place an emphasis on the writing process, for example, we must train our writing program faculty in the theory and practice of writing process-oriented pedagogies. The training of writing faculty requires a credentialed WPA who has the ability and support to develop a training program, hire new staff, create courses and in-service opportunities. Further, this WPA has to be connected at the national level so that she can effectively advocate for these principles to be implemented at the local level. For instance, she has to know about national standards for WPA positions and for adjunct and part-time teaching staff which will—undoubtedly—provide the bulk of the instruction in her program. She has to know about position statements on class size and students' rights to their own language. She has to follow discussions on assessment and standards. She must be a professional working in a professional environment, or she is not a WPA (see "Statement on Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing" and Wyche-Smith and Rose).

Of course, the more professional we are, the more we cost. Professional WPAs would not be untenured assistant professors. Professional WPAs would have some say in their budgets and in the hiring and firing of staff as well as in the contractual nature of that work. Professional WPAs would be advocates for their programs, assuring that training is available and up to national standards. Professionals make decisions about textbook choice, about classroom size, about staff professionalization, working conditions and workplaces. A professional WPA would have the same advocacy function vis-a-vis the writing program as the department chair has vis-a-vis the department.

When Wendy responded to the central administration's directive to increase the writing program, she is the kind of WPA our field has trained her to be:

I was most taken today by the comp. program position I took again today. Eliot Cage [Director of Graduate Studies] and Charles in my office as they tried to deal with me and the [issue of hiring the] extra GTAs. Both of them, I felt, had talked away my objections with each other and really couldn't believe they were hearing me raising them again. Charles started by saying that maybe (not certainly) we'd have a fifth instructor who could help out (unspecific help) and admitted he wasn't even sure we'd get that help. Then I mentioned offices. He admitted there were absolutely no offices available. I said they couldn't be hired with no offices and these were faculty teaching more students than I teach. Then Charles Nicholson said but the [GTAs] haven't had to teach 25 [students—enrollment averages were around 22 students per class at this time]—i.e. they've had it pretty good. I said, I don't buy the logic of that at all. We all know GTAs have poor conditions and often teach third sections at Tallahassee Community College [to make enough money to live on]. I

pointed out that we hadn't improved the position for Rachel Hall [the new assistant professor of rhetoric who would take over the FYW program] in the area of secretarial support, etc. That we'd be handing her an enlarged program. I said he could blame it [this resistance] on me [when talking to the Dean] and that I heard the Dean and the Provost say [at a recent meeting with English faculty] that faculty should start saying no, and I was starting. I said I had a different view having come here more recently and I saw no benefit to stretching an already beleaguered program to the point that it would be no good anymore. . . . You can hear the anger in this recital. I'm naive enough to be bothered that I have to make these arguments. I pointed out that I didn't like doing so but there was no other spokesperson for all these people. (Wendy's Journal, April 13)

Her concerns are to protect the writing program faculty and the integrity of the writing program. In her mind, hiring additional teachers to teach more sections for more students was not a simple proposition. Her expertise told her that "more" is not better in terms of educating teachers and establishing a coherent curriculum. The projected growth could threaten the quality of writing instruction unless growth also occurred in the program's ability to mentor and train teachers (areas in which Wendy already felt taxed). The avenue she takes to argue against growth situates her firmly as an advocate for GTAs. She tries to share her estimation of actual conditions, citing space and staff support problems. She tries to point out that she is taking these positions logically—evoking the Dean's comments and her own assigned responsibility to the GTAs. But her arguments are not "logical," of course, when she and the other administrators are working from different premises altogether. For Wendy the WPA is the expert who should have the last word on program decisions, the expert responsible for protecting a program from being "no good anymore." For the department, the WPA should manage the program to support the department.

In "Somewhere Between Disparity and Despair: Writing Program Administration, Image Problems, and *The MLA Job Information List*," Joseph Janangelo claims that WPA job descriptions either reveal "misunderstanding about our field itself" or indicate "an institutional skepticism about the continuing role of writing programs at century's end" (65 & 64). We wonder if the "skepticism" he mentions is more to the point. In fact, we'd like to add to his range of possibilities: perhaps the advertisements that define a WPA's duties reveal no misunderstanding at all and serve to remind us that as WPAs we are to work in service to the university's value system—a large-scale system that, by its nature, is antithetical to our training.

In fact, we do know that the basic value system we've developed as a field remains to be widely accepted. Understandings of our field are built on defining *against* mainstream academic values more than anything else. Isn't it our "difference" that we think of when we hear the good-humored remarks at recent College Composition and Communication Conferences describing how our

initiation into composition studies is often spoken of with something akin to religious zeal? Isn't it this "difference" that makes it possible for us still to hear from students that we've "opened a whole new world" to them? Isn't it this "difference" that invites the new GTA to collapse into our office chairs with relief and gratitude for "finally" finding like-minded people? But defining ourselves against is one thing; daily reminders of our "difference" that serve to alienate us from the very contexts in which we must operate is another. On these occasions, we are tempted to think that "they don't get it," to feel dismissed as being "beyond the pale," to see ourselves as misunderstood.

Conclusion

Perhaps we have a tendency to borrow the discourse of victimization because we've talked about our experiences as largely based on the misunderstanding, or lack of understanding, in English departments and central administration about our evolving field, our interests, our priorities, and the changes in writing instruction and program administration as a result of the last thirty years of evolution. And maybe it's this very way of talking about our experience that reflects our naiveté. We sound naive because on this point we are: it is not "they" who misunderstand. English departments and central administration may very well understand what we are about. They just don't like it, or more likely, do not operate in a political and economic system that can affirm our values.

It's clear to us that the "mis-fit" we experienced continues to play out for graduates. When we participate in interviews to hire new colleagues, we often hear that new graduates in rhetoric and composition have been told not to consider WPA positions by faculty mentors who know that the university is not "misunderstanding" their new hires. In these same interview discussions, we hear our own colleagues still failing to affirm our values, for, in the era of cost-effectiveness a "strong" writing program may come with a price-tag that will not even be considered. These repeated experiences tells us that we might take time to examine our own misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that plays out every time we are confronted with the implications of our identities within the larger culture of the university. Perhaps, we need to understand why there's a part of us that remains surprised at how different we are.

While we would love to take the heroic high-road and encourage incoming WPAs to study, learn, prepare, to find value in this area of the academy that we value (that was one of our original endings) we think that a heroic encouragement does no more good than the victimization narrative. Our story, for now, then, ends here. With a tale of stopping. With more data to review and understand (for one year in the life of a WPA is full and complex). With a continued commitment to writing programs. With a more pragmatic view of what happened and will happen. It is in a study of such complexities that we can find our futures.

Notes

1. The larger story will be found in a book-length manuscript, working title, *The WPA and the Culture of English*, while another rehearsal can be found in "Doing the Hokey Pokey."

2. We have edited these journal entries—removing unrelated private entries; rewording in places, slightly to clarify and contextualize the discussion; expanding abbreviations, and so on. We have attempted to save the tone and meaning of all entries. We created and inserted pseudonyms for members of this English department community. We have retained our own names, names of family members, and names of well-known individuals in the field of composition who are referred to professionally rather than personally.

Works Cited

- Bishop, Wendy and Gay Lynn Crossley. "Doing the Hokey Pokey: Why Writing Program Administrators' Job Conditions Don't Seem to Be Improving." *Composition Studies/Freshman English News* 21.2 (Fall 1993): 46-59.
- Bloom, Lynn Z. "I Want a Writing Director." *College Composition and Communication* 43.2 (1992): 176-79.
- Holbrook, Sue Ellen. "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition." *Rhetoric Review* 9.2 (1991): 201-29.
- Janangelo, Joseph. "Somewhere Between Disparity and Despair: Writing Program Administrators, Image Problems, and *The MLA Job Information List*." *Writing Program Administration* (1992): 60-66.
- Schell, Eileen E. "The Feminization of Composition: Questioning the Metaphors that Bind Women Teachers." *Composition Studies/Freshman English News* 20.1 (1992): 55-61.
- "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 40.3 (1989): 329-36.
- Wyche-Smith, Susan and Shirley K. Rose. "One Hundred Ways to Make the Wyoming Resolution a Reality: A Guide to Personal and Political Action." *College Composition and Communication* 41.3 (1990): 318-24.