Politicizing the Portland Resolution

Jeanne Gunner

When we talk about the WPA position, we face certain inevitable rhetorical challenges: local conditions so deeply affect the position's definition, problems, and possibilities that it can seem almost self-defeating to try to arrive at consensus on what we see as the essential professional elements. The people who worked so hard and long on creating the Portland Resolution—Christine Hult and the members of the Portland Resolution Committe—can best attest to these challenges. Complicating their creation of the document is the sensitive issue of its intended audience. The Portland Resolution must represent the WPA position to a variety of institutional units, from the English Department, to deans of colleges of arts and sciences, to other administrative entities, reflecting the disparate local situations of the WPA figure and functions; and it must do so in a politic, rhetorically astute way, given the unequal power relations of the authors and audience. The document the group ultimately published stands as a lucid, comprehensive set of guidelines on the WPA's areas of responsibility and the professional conditions needed to enact them.

This is not to say that the document does not serve other purposes; most critically, it supplies us with a foundation for our own professional definition. This defining power of the document, especially when we consider the constraints of the document's rhetorical situation, is a troubling site which needs some further exploration. Since the Portland Resolution had to be drafted in a way that de-emphasizes the political, it is all the more important that we consider among ourselves what could not be said to others—that we revisit and reread, and perhaps revise, the document for the kinds of political concerns that its current version perforce leaves submerged. Otherwise, we risk accepting a kind of necessarily truncated, necessarily co-opted public self-definition as the one we use to guide our own professional mission, in the WPA organization and in our own individual programs. Whether the new document on the intellectual work of the WPA will serve as a corrective (though it, too, is constrained by its intended audience) is now an open question; it could indeed supplant the Portland Resolution. But the latter document continues to inform our notions of the WPA position, and its foundational nature has set—and limited—the terms of the discussion thus far. We can serve our own interests by critiquing it and considering whether and how to refigure the WPA as the Portland Resolution presents it—and so us.

The following discussion of this claim needs to be situated within a proviso, that being appreciation of the document and its intentions and recognition of its successes, along with its authors' generous work. I consider the Portland Resolution a useful and significant document—useful because it is there for us, existing to be used in the pragmatic ways the document itself suggests;

and significant because it has been a key text for opening theoretical discussions of the WPA position. The authors and their motives advanced the status of the WPA position and helped new and continuing WPAs represent themselves and their work to "others" in professional terms. And because the document does present in nascent form a theory of the WPA position—a somewhat neglected yet very valuable aspect of the resolution, in my opinion—continuing critique of it can extend the theoretical discussion, bringing to the center of our professional conversations an evolving sense of our self-definition. But to the discussions we have already had on the Portland Resolution we need to add three terms: ideology, theory, and dissensus. These open the way to consideration of issues that are now suppressed.

As a definition for the first two terms, ideology and theory, I would like to use a formulation offered by Ira Shor in a recent exchange on the Conference on Basic Writing listserv. Shor's formulation of the opposition of ideology and theory derives from the Marxist critical thought of Gramsci and Althusser, and it is represented in composition studies most notably in the work of James Berlin:

> Ideologies are the frameworks that teach us how to understand and relate to the world .... [W]e theorize our experiences through the ideological lenses we absorb from various sources. Ideologies tell us how to interpret reality .... Theorizing and everyday speech ... and action show the ideologies underlying our sense of knowing and doing.

If we examine the Portland Resolution as a kind of theorizing of the WPA position, we begin to see the ideology that drives it and so us as WPAs—an ideology that, as we examine its embodiment in the document, comes to seem a highly conservative one.

Which brings in the third term—dissensus. In this instance as in others, continued conversation depends on a voice of dissent from the prevailing opinion; in other words, dissent from the current climate of acceptance of the Portland Resolution may help us reread/rewrite/reinterpret the document in order to advance and extend its usefulness. Such a critique might best be understood within the context of a broader critique of the concept of consensus. In a recent *College English* article entitled "Writing Teachers Writing and the Politics of Dissent," Frank D. Walters argues that consensus necessarily carries with it a process of coercion and suppression of dissent. It silences some concerns in order to achieve conformity, inevitably reducing issues in their complexity and altering them to address the concerns of the intended audience. In so doing, however, the value of consensus begins to emerge: it creates a communal voice of pragmatic agreement even as it produces a space for voices of dissent. True dissent, as part of a binary process, is more than simple opposition. Opposition creates a kind of alternative reality not necessarily grounded in creative tension with the consensus, and so the consensus view remains unchallenged and unchanged; and the opposing system simply introduces a new coercive and suppressive process. Unlike such simple opposition, dissent allows for the introduction of difference into a discussion. Placing the Portland Resolution

within this process, we see that it is a document of consensus and so must coerce other voices, but in so doing it also creates the space for dissent and a consequent expression of difference, a continuing corollary discussion of the statement. I take as a goal here, then, the articulation of a different view of the WPA position.

Because the Portland Resolution was intended to present an argument for improved WPA working conditions to those in positions of institutional power, disciplinary and institutional politics enmeshed its authors (and all of us for whom they wrote) in a process foregrounding the material conditions and practical tasks that are likely to apply at least generally to most WPAs. This context also required a concomitant silencing of the political issues that led to the need for a Portland Resolution, since these typically are practices engaged in, consciously or naively, by the document's target audience. Because the document's conditions of production gave it a Janus-like nature, with its impetus the opposite of its language, the document's ability to articulate and promote a clear political agenda for the field was impaired. Carefully crafted for consumption by those outside the field, the document has nonetheless become a set of guidelines for how those of us inside see the position, too. The political consequences of its ostensibly apolitical stance thus diminish how effectively it can foster progress in some commonly held goals: increasing disciplinary parity with more dominant fields (i.e., literature), for example, or preserving the democratic ideal of access for our students.

From the time of its publication, the statement has seemed to me theoretically problematic. As its preamble states, there is a history to its genre. First came the Wyoming Resolution; next the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards; then, the Portland Resolution. I've argued elsewhere (see Gunner) that the CCCC Statement coerces, suppresses, and has supplanted the Wyoming Resolution, silencing discussion of its radical call for material change, a call which, had it been heeded, could have led to radical social change—to democratic, equitable working conditions and a redistribution of professional and social power. Ironically, the Portland Resolution has a similar effect on the professional values asserted by the CCCC Statement, which, like the Wyoming Resolution, grounds itself in a rhetoric of democracy and concern for the teaching of writing, even as it seeks traditional professional status for a select group of composition-rhetoric scholars (those who conform to the traditional rank/tenure model). The CCCC Statement makes an explicit connection between its avowed mission and the working conditions faced by many of our colleagues (erroneously connecting status and ability, in my opinion). The Portland Resolution, however, moves away from the Wyoming Resolution's call for radical change in working conditions and a system of institutional responsibility, *and* from the connection made between status and educational quality in the CCCC Statement. No part of the

document treats the WPA's role in relation to the exploited situation of adjunct faculty, for example. It neither offers issues for the intended audience to consider nor does it build into the WPA model it sets up a professional expectation to work on such pressing concerns of the field as improved working conditions for our colleagues.

What we see in the three documents is a process of increasing normalization, the product of a coercive consensus. The ideology of professional equity represented by the Wyoming Resolution's three tenets of fair salaries, improved working conditions, and establishment of a grievance and censure procedure—an ideology that could lead to enormous upheaval in the academic culture—becomes an ideology of shared privilege in the CCCC Statement. The CCCC document seeks prestige and power equal to that of literature faculty for composition faculty who observe the traditional academic cultural values of tenure through research and publication (an emasculation of the Wyoming Resolution, as James Sledd has argued). The Portland Resolution, however, as its preamble invoking the CCCC Statement gives way to the message of its body, takes the further step of deferring *all* overtly political concerns. Instead of substantively addressing the political issues raised in the Wyoming Resolution and CCCC Statement, the main portion of the Portland Resolution refers readers to the earlier statements, thus excluding their concerns from the defining activities of the WPA and shifting responsibility for the struggle for equity to other professional bodies.

Through this language of redirection, the Portland Resolution creates a kind of political vacuum for itself, an apolitical space that has the effect of silencing the concerns represented in the two other documents at the very point of convergence between our field and the institutional structures in which it is embedded—the English Department, for example. Its problem is its language; it adapts for conservative purposes the same language imposed on students. As Richard Ohmann writes in "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language;" such injunctions "push [the writer] always toward the language that most readily reproduces the immediate experience and away from the language that might be used to understand it, transform it, and relate it to everything else" (250). The language of the Portland Resolution is the language of the status quo, replacing complex historical, social, and political issues with the exigencies of daily administration. The document's narrow focus might seem merely logical. The Wyoming Resolution and CCCC Statement, after all, do not address a specific appointment within the field. But this difference becomes meaningful when we consider that the WPA position is the nexus for all of the concerns raised by the other two documents—the working conditions of writing teachers, the status of the profession in institutions of higher learning, and the educational rights of students—for the WPA is the liaison position. To use David Bartholomae's term, the WPA is the "writing icon" in the English Department (Cambridge and McClelland, 157), the representative voice of the field and its workers and students.

This problem of depoliticized language colors the sphere of self-representation. In its focus on the concrete matters of the WPA position, the Portland Resolution reduces the WPA from a representative figure to an efficiency expert. Deflecting attention from a social agenda, its purpose statement redefines concern for working and learning conditions as an ethical professional issue into concern for the managerial interests of the larger institutional unit: "[These guidelines] are intended to improve working conditions for more effective administration of writing programs." The tragedy of our field, to borrow the postulate of literary critic Francis Fergusson that all great tragedies ensue from a single utterance (witness Oedipus's promise "to find the killer"), lies in this utterance of the Portland Resolution: "to improve working conditions for more effective administration of writing programs." What follows is the narrowing of the position from representative of the larger profession and its assertion of democratic ideals to a constrained theory of the WPA as a managerial agent acting in the interests of the cultural group that marginalizes the work and workers of writing programs. This construction of the WPA subsumes and subverts the political. It separates administration from the social, a managerial model that highlights tasks and functions and ignores the material reality of writing instructors and students—two entities whose existence the Resolution does not acknowledge in any but an administrative way. Thus the Resolution reifies instructors and students, making them into decontextualized objects of administration.

Theorized as a manager, the WPA becomes the faculty equivalent of the devalued essay, to extend the argument of Don McQuade in "Composition and Literary Studies." McQuade argues that as the essay was reduced in status from literature to secondary statement on literature, the English Department gained increasing authority over composition instruction, and the essay became the product of this instruction. If the WPA is represented as the one who effects administration of this product, then the WPA is tied to a single activity, is fixed as the manager of it, with the result that the field itself becomes as constrained in its essence as the Portland Resolution's narrow focus makes it appear. Defining ourselves by a service function, we disempower ourselves professionally: if we define our mission as the effective administration of writing programs, if we are managing agents rather than intellectual peers, then our ability to work for such goals as professional status for writing teachers and democratic access for students is eclipsed. "Effective administration" does not include a voice or a position from which to speak and act on interests other than those of the hegemonic group. The Portland Resolution constrains the voice of the WPA to matters that reinforce a conservative notion of the WPA as manager—as someone who takes care of routine practices of evaluation, training, budget, staff supervision, assessment, and so on, making these practices routine, devalued in importance, and closed to more than administrative change. The serious social and political issues of the Wyoming Resolution and CCCC Statement are erased; the connection between writing and democracy goes underground; and concern for such matters as the exploitation of writing teachers falls off the WPA agenda.

A WPA so theorized is useful and appealing to the English Department and to hegemonic society as a whole, as Susan Miller so clearly argues in *Textual Carnivals*. Miller shows how the WPA is used to "restabilize" relations between high and low, between the elite of society and those who attempt to rise, using higher education as their vehicle of social mobility:

> The *social usefulness* of a composition program . . . depends in large measure on a director's ability to leave the uses of writing undefined or tied only to generic processes, forms, and formats that are not openly implicated in social or political conflicts. A composition program's effectiveness will be judged largely by the level of correctness and propriety its students achieve in relation to the body of their writing. Its success will depend heavily on the level of comfort its teachers achieve in relation to their stigmatized status. It will not be judged according to the later successes of its students in writing anything in particular or by criteria outside the institution's social goals of initiation and indoctrination. (167)

Effective administration, then, the Portland Resolution's stated purpose for seeking improvement in the WPA's working conditions, means reproducing the traditional hierarchy. The Resolution's resistance to naming—its failure to ground itself in the social and historical concerns of exploitation and access—makes it a document more useful to the self-preserving purposes of the dominant structures than as a step toward material improvement in the lives of writing teachers and their students. Contrary to most of our values and desires, the WPA becomes the site and means of oppression in the field. Accepting it uncritically as "our" statement, we reproduce hegemonic social structures, class divisions, and systems of exclusion and privilege.

The ideology that persists if we do not question the Portland Resolution's implied theory of the WPA is an ideology of vocationalism. "Vocational" connotes a specific function and task, a limited area of expertise and application of an isolated skill to attain practical results. The vocational represents a flight from the political—a flight that Bullock and Trimbur, in their Preface to *The Politics of Writing Instruction*, claim is a common reaction in our field to the word "politics," for the word suggests conflict and evokes mistrust. Their claim seems justified when we consider that, for the most part, overtly political matters in the field are typically redirected into curriculum, where they can be safely contained—where teacher and student are unthreatening, powerless figures controlled by the dominant social system. In discussions of the political nature of the WPA position that have been published within the field, the rhetorical context is often the refuge of satire or the personal anecdote, even in articles by such senior members of the field as Lynn Bloom and Ed White ("I Want a Writing Director" and "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA").

We might turn to James Slevin's essay, "The Politics of the Profession," to see serious treatment of political issues: Slevin discusses access, democracy, and the nature of knowledge; he expresses concern for the personal effects writing

instruction has on students; and he ties these issues to the WPA's work. He writes, "Our aim . . . should not be simply to re-situate ourselves within institutions but, in so doing, to reconceive and reconstruct those institutions . . . . [T]he politics of teaching writing must be a politics of change and reform, not adaptation and accommodation" (155). Slevin's points are critical, in all senses of the word. But his analysis of the politics of the WPA position is presented from the individuated and so narrowed perspective of a fictitious new WPA. Its power is constrained by its formal context—an essay in a collection intended for graduate students (*Introduction to Composition Studies*), rather than a statement made to and for ourselves and the larger profession of English studies. The connection of our political goals and our professional performance seems destined to be endlessly deferred.

Unless, that is, we use the Portland Resolution to create the necessary space for dissent. Left uncritiqued, the Resolution encourages silencing of the WPA's voice and her or his capacity for social activism. It hinders enacting the role one assumes the WPA could play in advancing individual and class-based critical consciousness. True, it does leave us room individually to work locally on the political concerns we individually identify, and such activism is to be admired. But when we as an organization endorse, publish, and distribute an apolitical model of WPA work, we undermine and devalue such activism, even if inadvertently and unintentionally. We encourage reproduction of the WPA as a service provider, a mechanism by which the dominant structures of the English Department, the institution, and society erase the problems we know to exist locally and nationally.

If "a democracy demands citizens who can read critically and write clearly and cogently," as the first line of the CCCC Statement claims, then the WPA's position is fundamentally and necessarily a political one; the job is not to administer, effectively or otherwise, the courses whose object is the production of the conformist citizen. The Resolution's purpose statement needs to re-envision that line and its implications, to read instead "[These guidelines] are intended to improve WPA working conditions for more effectively opening up students' access to critical reading and writing skills, the tools of democracy; for reducing and ultimately eliminating exploitation of writing teachers by English Departments and institutions of higher education; and for ending disciplinary bias against our field." The WPA then has a theory of the position that validates and demands his or her efforts to change material conditions and practices in a way consistent with professional and social equity, a theory that reflects an ideology of social activism, belief in the democratic power of literacy, and a defense of those who teach and enable it. Construed as the site of social change, the WPA position, as dissensus from the Portland Resolution enables us to reconceive it, becomes politicized, which is to say it finds a way to begin connecting the real practices of the profession and the ideals of the field it more than administers: to begin acting on and in the interests of students, instructors, and democratic society.

Works Cited

Bullock, Richard and John Trimbur. *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1991.

Cambridge, Barbara L., and Ben W. McClelland. "From Icon to Partner: Repositioning the Writing Program Administrator." *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Eds. Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1995.

"CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." *CCC* 40 (October 1989): 329-336.

Fergusson, Francis. *The Idea of a Theatre*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949.

Gunner, Jeanne. "The Fate of the Wyoming Resolution: A History of Professional Seduction." *Writing Ourselves Into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*. Eds. Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.

Hult, Christine et al. "The Portland Resolution." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 16 (Fall/Winter 1992): 88-94.

McQuade, Donald. "Composition and Literary Studies." *Redrawing the Boundaries*. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn. New York: MLA, 1992. 482-519.

Miller, Susan. *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Ohmann, Richard. "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language." *The Politics of Letters*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1987. 241-251.

Robertson, Linda, Sharon Crowley, and Frank Lentricchia. "The Wyoming Conference Resolution Opposing Unfair Salaries and Working Conditions for Post-Secondary Teachers of Writing." *College English* 49 (1987): 272-80.

Shor, Ira. "Theory/Ideology." Conference on Basic Writing Listserv. CBW-L@tc.umn.edu (30 May 1996).

Sledd, James. "Why the Wyoming Resolution Had to Be Emasculated: A History and a Quixotism." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 11 (Fall 1991): 269-81.

Slevin, James. "The Politics of the Profession." *Introduction to Composition Studies*. Eds. Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. 135-159.

Walters, Frank D. "Writing Teachers Writing and the Politics of Dissent." *College English* 57 (1995): 822-39.