

Geneva's Story

Geneva sits at one end of the long conference table, facing full-time faculty members of the English department where she's worked part-time for the last twelve years. Sam, a full professor and long-time friend, asks her the first question.

"Geneva, I sometimes find that students don't always respond usefully to each other's work. How do you get students to respond to peer writing in helpful ways?"

"Well, Sam, I've never really gotten peer response to work well for me, either." She goes on to describe her problems, in response to Sam's confession of his own difficulties. She also knows from talking over the years to other faculty, both full- and part-time, that everyone has had problems with this technique.

She mentions some approaches she's tried and concludes that sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. "It depends upon the class," she says.

She feels herself shrugging just a bit, then stops. As a classroom teacher, she believes final solutions are the domain of those who write the textbooks and spout theory at conferences. Teaching, on the other hand, is a matter of trial and error, and good teachers are always on the lookout for new and better approaches.

She scans the room, registering the silence, searching first Sam's face, then the others in the room. She's known them for twelve years, but she can't tell what they're thinking, their faces smooth and bland as marble.

(Re)Presenting the Work of Writing Program Administrators

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"Is that correct?" she asks. She asks herself, Is that what they wanted to hear? She feels impatient with them but then with herself for not, somehow, knowing. After all, she's worked with these people for a dozen years. These are her colleagues. Some visited her classes when she first began teaching here. She's attended department parties and university functions. She's even consoled some through divorces, and been consoled by them for her own life's troubles. She's gone to lunch and dinner, and taken in movies with some. She's attended department meetings for years as a de facto leader of the part-time faculty. Her kids and their kids have gone to the same schools, played on the same sports teams. What could be so different now that she's interviewing for a full-time teaching job?

It had seemed like a good idea to apply. The position was for a lecturer, a two-year, nonrenewable contract to teach four classes a semester. With her children grown, she had decided she'd like the challenge. Two years ago, she had held a one-semester temporary lectureship, without benefits, and remembered how good it felt to have an office and a phone of her own. Going back to part-time teaching had felt like a demotion after she'd had a taste of full-time work and its privileges.

Geneva is honored that she's been chosen from a regional hiring pool. Yet she isn't sure what in her credentials impressed the department. She assumes they know how dedicated she is to students and the department. But she knows that the richness of her history with them didn't translate onto her resume.

Now they are asking her questions in the same room where she's sat for all those department meetings—only now she's at the head of the table. They want her opinion; they are treating her as if she were an expert. It's alternately flattering and unnerving: she's an authority, yet she still has to prove it. It's nice to have center stage, if one knows the lines, but she's not sure she does.

Neither do the full-time faculty, who have been divided from the outset on how broad a search to conduct and what credentials to require. Some of them, with strong support from part-time faculty, argued to limit the search to in-house candidates. Others thought that a regional search could not only provide a wider range of choices, but potentially bring fresh perspectives to the writing program, not to mention being more in keeping with conventional hiring practices.

Qualifications were another thorny issue. Until now, the lecturer rank had been used only for temporary and visiting appointments on a limited

basis, both within the department and the university at large. Some, including part-time faculty, argued that the PhD made those with Master's degrees less competitive. PhDs, they argued, would not be happy "just teaching" and would soon seek research appointments elsewhere. AAUP guidelines were invoked, citing the devaluation of the PhD and the erosion of tenure-track professorships when PhDs were hired into lower ranks. Others argued that limiting applicants' degrees might not only be illegal, but undesirable; candidates with research degrees could be, by virtue of their academic experience, just as, if not even more, effective as teachers. Some applicants might have long, successful histories as teachers as well as active research agendas, so why should they be excluded from consideration?

The university administration offered lectureships as a permanent solution to the "problem" of part-time faculty, whose ranks have increased dramatically as campus enrollments skyrocketed. The English department views such positions as a first step toward responding to the CCCC 1989 "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Post-Secondary Teaching of Writing," and thus improving the status of writing instruction on this campus.

This "improvement," however, poses serious complications for the department. The lectureships may raise the writing program's status yet threaten the department's overall status as a discipline rather than a mere "service." The university's call for functional literacy competes with the discipline's liberal humanist tradition of learning for learning's sake. While enrollments in writing courses and on campus are rising, the number of English majors is lagging. Writing instruction and administration consumes more and more of the department's time and resources, to the detriment of literary studies.

Geneva, however, primarily anticipates the privileges that a lectureship would offer her. What she hadn't anticipated was the difference of the terms on which she would have to compete. It's no longer enough to do what she does as a teacher. Now she has to talk about her teaching in authoritative and reflective ways. She's got to have answers and be able to defend them. She has to know why she does what she does, constructing herself as "professional" in ways for which neither her current status nor the institution has socialized her. But perhaps this call for professionalism is just a preliminary hoop which, once jumped, will allow her to return to being who she really is: a teacher.

The Costs of Professionalization: Issues for the WPA

While Geneva may have reason to believe that professionalization may be a fleeting concern for her, most WPAs face an ongoing struggle with the contradictions of "improving" their programs. The costs of professionalization have serious consequences for WPAs and their programs, as Geneva's story illustrates. For example, hiring Geneva may bring some temporary relief to the WPA who is struggling to hire from an ever-shrinking pool of often minimally qualified part-time instructors. It will appease her fellow part-timers, who may see her hiring as cause for hope that some day they, too, may reap the rewards of loyalty, devotion, and dedication to the institution. It certainly comes as a boon to Geneva, one of many exploited workers, not coincidentally a woman. And yet this apparent "progress" poses serious complications for the long term professionalization of the writing program. It fosters the development of a two- or three-tier hierarchy of hiring, in which writing faculty make up more and more of the lower rungs. In Geneva's story, the WPA is in the "upper" rung as a tenure-track hire, yet it's clear that her professional expertise as a composition specialist is seen as distinct from the "practical" aspects of administering the program. The WPA's commitments are, in this respect, set into conflict. The costs of professionalization are the maintenance of a professional hierarchy that remains largely intact despite a few surface changes. Such professionalization also creates tensions within faculty ranks over the appropriate qualifications, credentials, and professional development for a full-time faculty position. Yet there is no overarching resolution to the contradictions at work; instead, the WPA's work is necessarily improvisational and conditional insofar as the WPA must act upon knowledge that is always partial and take positions that may seem on the surface contradictory to long-term programmatic goals and professional commitments. The next story offers further illustration of these contradictions.

Steve's Story

Steve stands at the front of the classroom where he teaches basic writing two evenings a week. His three-piece, navy blue suit and striped tie elicit some good-natured ribbing from his students, since they're used to his jeans and pull-over shirts. But tonight, the Director of Writing, who himself often wears a tie, is observing Steve's teaching as part of the English department's evaluation of first-semester part-time instructors.

It's not like Steve's never worn a suit and tie before. The dean of a

local boys' high school, he's in a suit every day; he just changes for his nine p.m. class to relax himself and his university students for writing. As a high school administrator, he has to dress formally, but as a university professor, he may dress more casually, reflecting the greater freedom enjoyed by college teachers.

He reaches for chalk and feels his sleeve tighten around his shoulder as he writes next week's assignments on the board, then decides to remove the jacket. Administrators wear jackets, he thinks. But teachers roll up their sleeves.

He begins with some dramatic reading, a technique he used during his twenty years teaching high school history. He couples the reading with journal writing, which he has recently learned in a course taught by the director on teaching composition, another requirement for new part-time instructors.

Steve assumes that the director notices his use of journals. While students write, Steve uses the extra time to fine-tune tonight's class plan. He can feel the director watching him and making notes on a yellow legal pad.

Last spring, when Steve noticed the ad for writing instructors in the local newspaper, he thought university teaching might provide some intellectual stimulation. He didn't anticipate that seven weeks into the term, the responsibilities of teaching, not to mention the extra hours studying for the teacher-preparation course required of first-semester part-time instructors, would isolate him so completely within the department. The only two instructors he ever saw outside of class were usually busy with their own students or in a rush to go home.

Last week, after spending the entire weekend writing a sequence of persuasive essay assignments for his required class, Steve found himself in the unexpected and uncomfortable role of student writer. The director had told the class to exchange and write to another student's sequence for the next meeting. In addition, they had to theorize about their partner's sequence and write a response to it. Steve was humiliated by this role reversal, as he had been as a student struggling for teacher certification. At that time, he knew he was still supposed to be learning. But now, as a professional, Steve expects to teach and exchange ideas with other teachers, not assume the role of his students. Teachers teach; students learn—as dean, Steve knows how important clear roles are for maintaining the order and discipline students need to develop.

After students finish writing, Steve discusses methods of researching topics. Class discussion winds down sooner than he expects, so he lets the

students out fifteen minutes early. The director approaches Steve afterwards, complimenting his performance, and asks him to stay a few minutes to go over class. But tomorrow is parents' day at Steve's high school, and he'll be up past midnight finalizing his plans, so he says he'll stop by soon to talk. He never does.

The director is not terribly surprised by Steve's silence, given his resistant attitude in the required course. Created a few years earlier with teachers like Steve in mind, the course addresses those whose experience in teaching writing is minimal or who have experience but lack sufficient knowledge of current composition theory and practice. However, unknown to Steve, the history of this course includes departmental struggles which affect his position.

Steve does not know to what extent the course helps the English department justify hiring instructors who have little experience not only in teaching writing, but with academic culture in general. It broadens an otherwise shrinking applicant pool for part-time instructors, and as a result, allows the department to meet university enrollments. Yet it brings in many individuals who are outsiders to academic culture and, because of the nature of part-time teaching, remain that way.

Like the required teaching course, freshman writing classes are designed to bring students into academic culture. Ironically, these courses are taught by academic outsiders themselves, the part-time faculty. In response to being outsiders, instructors enact powerful resistances to their education as writing "professionals," in which theory, integrated with practice, is supposed to help them enter academic culture as "insiders." Yet theory seems more a luxury than a necessity, given instructors' workloads, pay, office space, etc. As one instructor put it, theory isn't relevant to "those of us in the trenches." The course actually isolates instructors even more because they experience it as just another obstacle, something to keep them busy and separate from each other and from full-time colleagues.

Steve knows firsthand the conflict this course presents for his status as a professional. On one hand, he was hired for his professional accomplishments and experience as a teacher. Yet he is, upon entering the university, treated as an apprentice requiring special training and supervision. He is grateful for the support this class offers him, a newcomer, yet ambivalent about this status as a supervised apprentice rather than a full-fledged professional.

Further Complications: Ethical Dilemmas

Geneva and Steve's stories speak powerfully to us about the complications that shape the development of composition's professionalization, some occurring on a daily basis, others as one-time crises, still others as the challenges of a semester, a year, or even a career. Such complications are fraught with contradictions, including ethical dilemmas for the WPAs. Tensions inevitably develop in the struggle to follow professional ideals, survive the chaos of program administration, and develop a broad-based coalition for changing long-standing institutional injustices. Yet it is these very tensions that reveal the possibilities for action. If WPAs can relinquish fixed images of their role, and work more improvisationally and conditionally, such tensions can become constructive limits for shaping decisions.

Teacher education is one professional ideal that WPAs typically embrace. However, this ideal may put WPAs into competing and conflicting situations between the interests of their programs' survival, the needs of instructors and students, and WPAs' own professional survival. For instance, if WPAs regard education as a site of liberatory praxis, with students as not only learners but also co-workers in an unjust system, then the consequences may jeopardize the stability of not only the WPAs' institution but, ironically, of the writing program itself. For example, Steve's resolution to the tensions presented by liberatory education was to leave the institution. This may be a necessary step in his liberation, yet it creates a problem for the WPA concerned with slowing the revolving door of part-time staffing. Requiring a course in teacher training may be the most ethical way to ensure adequate teacher preparation. Yet how ethical is it to actively invite discontinuity of instruction within the program? One resolution might be to avoid bringing such tensions into the teacher preparation classroom. But what are the consequences for these teachers' students, whose inclusion in and exclusion from the academy may go unchallenged? What are the consequences for the personal and professional growth of instructors, the program, and the WPA?

Composition's emerging disciplinary visions often heighten the tensions WPAs may experience in relation to administrative work. Disciplinary and administrative visions are sometimes at odds; for WPAs, what may be good for the discipline (research and theory) may be bad for the program's administration (where "local" research is, often as not, unpublishable). Another dilemma for WPAs who claim disciplinary

authority in their administrative role is that full-time colleagues across the university may construct this authority in conventional ways and thus marginalize the administrative work as nondisciplinary. Program research, for instance, is not considered "real" research but rather "service." As a result, WPAs' disciplinary authority may not extend, in the eyes of departmental colleagues, to hiring decisions of full-time nontenure-track writing faculty such as Geneva. In Geneva's case, the more a WPA might claim disciplinary expertise in evaluating Geneva's application, the less relevant it may seem for a position that seems to call for a "nonexpert." Furthermore, while a strong disciplinary vision may be essential to tenure-track WPAs' careers in composition studies, it may distance them from their colleagues' vision of administrative authority, in which disciplinary authority is merely a specialty whose reach within administrative practice is necessarily limited.

Another complication arises in the ambiguous authority WPAs are granted as professionals. WPAs may find themselves struggling between competing modes of authority at any given moment in their work. These include persuading others about one's ideology, nurturing and protecting "dependents," and isolating oneself from unsupportive or even hostile views of composition to protect one's professional commitments. These modes are not ones that are fixed or necessarily even dominant in any WPA's construction of authority. Rather they describe habits of mind that WPAs move between and enact simultaneously (to varying degrees, at various times) rather than simply imitate. They must improvise among various modes of authority as a given situation requires. Within this framework, power is not "fixed" nor is marginalization "essential" to WPAs' identity, since WPAs are simultaneously marginalized and central, powerless and powerful. What shapes the WPAs' work is in what way they are powerful and powerless within a situation, and how they resolve these contradictions to make and act upon decisions.

For example, the WPA is confronted with an ethical dilemma over whether and how to exercise his authority when Steve dismisses his class early to prepare for parents' night at his school. How should the WPA approach such an inappropriate behavior? Does Steve's disregard for the class's scheduled hours signify resistance to the WPA's authority (including his presence in class that night)? Does it reflect a harried instructor trying his best to balance competing responsibilities? How harmful is it to students to dismiss class fifteen minutes early? Is Steve ignorant of basic expectations of

college writing classrooms where improvisation is often the rule and class time generally at a premium? Might his own education as a history major have presented images of the college teacher as a proficient lecturer who, as a sign of efficiency, ends class when the lecture is completed?

The WPA in this situation has the responsibility and authority to inform Steve about classroom practices and departmental expectations. The WPA can also correct Steve's "error" even as he sympathizes with Steve's workload. He can question Steve about why he thought his action was appropriate. The limits to this WPA's authority, however, will condition his response to Steve. For instance, this WPA has to consider his program's serious problem of recruiting and retaining part-time writing faculty. The WPA has no power to refuse to staff sections when qualified candidates are scarce. The teaching course was designed to help enlarge the hiring pool, but Steve's behavior may suggest that even those who receive training may not, finally, be qualified. It's a delicate balance for the WPA about how and whether to approach Steve: to warn him, to appease him, to win him? Maybe all of the above? Maybe none.

Social and Political Complications

The complications in Geneva's story dramatize how contradictions in the American social justice equation come into conflict as part of the cost of professionalizing writing programs. On one hand, affirmative action stresses that individual differences (gender, race, ethnicity, class, etc.) ultimately shouldn't influence employers, and on the other, in the process of weighing individual candidates' merits, requires employers to take such differences into account in terms of representation. Hiring decisions aimed to improve a writing program's permanence and influence within the university will inevitably place WPAs within this contradiction.

To ignore Geneva's gender and class means to ignore the history of her exploitation. She has taught for twelve or more years as part-time faculty, a position which not only does not encourage professional development, but in some ways actively discourages it. Of course, the extent to which "professional development" will be valued in the position she's applied for is unclear, since it is primarily a "teaching" position with no research expectations, only vague statements about "professional development." Nonetheless, Geneva's pink-collar academic class and her gender may make it impossible for her merits to be understood within conventional professional expectations, since Geneva so clearly constructs

her professional identity as separate from, even at times, in opposition to, those of some of her full-time colleagues, including the WPA (as she does regarding the role of theory and research in relation to practice).

If one ignores Geneva's gender and class, it is not difficult to conclude that Geneva has little or no merit as a candidate. For example, she admits failure with a practice (peer groups) that is, by professional standards, virtually indispensable in writing instruction. What's more, she reveals this "failure" before a group who she knows is evaluating her "merits." Although most faculty have no doubt had similar experiences with "failure," the fact that Geneva has presented such a failure in lieu of a tangible professional merit positions her as "less than" professional in this context.

Yet if we opt to consider Geneva's gender and class differences as significant within this context, we can understand how she sees her own "merits." Her "failure" in the previous context takes on new meaning, as in her admission of "failure" with peer groups. She has constructed the full-time faculty as "peers" rather than "evaluators" and thus appeals to their shared sense of the everyday challenges of teaching. Her talk is teacher-to-teacher, "teacher lore" as Steve North has put it. Furthermore, as Deborah Tannen has noted in her research on gendered styles of conversation, Geneva may see herself as engaging in "troubles talk." She may not see herself as admitting "failure" as much as acting meritoriously, demonstrating her honesty as a teacher who bucks trends and fads in favor of cautious trial and error.

How this faculty values Geneva's merits—her de facto leadership among part-timers, her knowledge of local bureaucracy, her sympathy and devotion towards a body of students who, for the most part, have few images of professional merit themselves—is reflected in their invitation to interview Geneva. Her merits as a local authority and dedicated teacher have helped her arrive at this opportunity. She is different than the other candidates in this respect. Yet if those differences finally land her the job, they also reinscribe her professional identity in the same, limited ways as they were before—the teacher as consumer and transmitter of (someone else's) knowledge. Her apparent lack of innovation, her inability to engage in the professional conversation of her field, her lack of preparation to lead other, part-time faculty into something other than the publishers' rehashings of the same old stew ensure that the position will be little more than a glorified part-time position. Furthermore, Geneva's hiring suggests to other part-time instructors that if they put in their time, they, too, may reap the rewards of

loyalty and devotion, without ever having to develop themselves beyond the local limits.

Geneva's case dramatizes the struggle over the meaning of "equality" within a democracy. Does equal mean "no differences" or does it mean "differences between" equally valued groups—in this case the masculinized "professionals" and the feminized "teachers"? In either case, these definitions of "difference" occur not simply within a context that is supposedly blind to social differences but within a meritocracy based upon differences in "qualifications" and "talents." Of course, the governance structures that shape faculty hirings may be more or less "democratic" in terms of equal (or equally valued) access and participation for faculty, students, and staff, depending upon which level of governance at what institution. For instance, within the department, Geneva may be treated as more of a peer, with an office to herself, a phone, voting privileges, etc. But within the university, she may receive little or no travel funds and no recognition or support for professional development. She may constantly risk her nontenured position over conflicts with student "customers" or administrators. In short, her "equal" status is not the same across various levels of governance.

Thus, if Geneva is hired, does it represent a step forward in democracy, towards the professional standards laid out in the CCCC's "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing"? After all, a part-time position has been "increased" to full-time. The students benefit in tangible ways from an instructor who has more of a presence and a stake in their success and the university's livelihood. Gender equity is served: a woman is promoted. Geneva may be motivated to learn new ways to teach, to become more "professional" by attending conferences, reading and talking to other composition specialists.

On the other hand, Geneva is hired precisely because she is who she is now; who she might become is difficult to predict. Tenure-track faculty are often hired on the basis of promise, but that promise is codified and documented by transcripts, publications, and candidate interviews, for instance. In contrast, Geneva's "promise" for professional development is difficult to document, since her achievements do not conform to the conventional standards of evaluation. Furthermore, it is unclear what "promise" means in such a position, untested as it is to this faculty and university. Consequently, her "difference" as "only" a teacher is reinscribed into this discursive vacuum. Hiring her may keep the peace with the part-

time faculty, who may read Geneva's Horatio Alger story as a sign of social justice. Yet her "difference" is not, finally, "equally valued" by her professorial-rank colleagues but "less than" the "professional" faculty. In turn, composition's "professional" status remains more or less the same: anyone with "common sense" and the right basic "skills" can learn how to teach it, and once they learn, they've got it. The composition teacher's knowledge is seen as "foundational." And in the meantime, administrators can maintain the attitude that new tenure-track lines aren't necessary, that such lecturers are a "good compromise" to meet the university's needs—not just in the short run, but for the long haul.

Conclusion: Writing Programs as Improvisation

The problems these stories illustrate inscribe the site where the work of all WPAs begins, specifically in the improvisatory and conditional nature of their decision-making and action. Improvisation is a matter of drawing upon as many pre-existing forms as possible in order to create, within a particular moment in time, a new form that reflects as well as responds to conditions that do not easily fit within conventional categories. But in order for the improvisation to work, one must first have access to many different, even competing forms of thought from which to draw upon. For instance, Jeanne Gunner's discussion of de-centering the role of WPA in a writing program illustrates the importance of WPAs reforming their own roles in light of the many different contexts they work within, not simply as the tenured head of a program (which Gunner, in fact, argues against entirely), but also as a colleague, collaborator, and political advocate. With an abundance of forms available to the WPA to draw upon, improvisation becomes richer and more meaningful within particular contexts. In fact, because of the contextual nature of writing programs, such improvisation is ultimately necessary to respond to, on one hand, pre-existing forms of order that reinforce dominant and unjust hierarchies and, on the other, chaos that is generated by the many contradictions that shape a writing program.

In the end, Geneva's story illustrates the WPA's need for improvisation when faced with pre-existing forms of hiring rationales. If the WPA regards the choice as either between promoting a teacher whose labor has been exploited for years and hiring someone with a higher degree, more professional savvy, and/or broader experiences within the profession, then that WPA is likely to decide in favor of the one role she most identifies with herself. Gunner would argue that the WPA-centric model would necessarily

shape such decisions, to the detriment of the program's faculty. Thus, the WPA in this case might be better off improvising a more generous rationale for hiring Geneva as addressing particular conditions of the current program, based on a perception of multiple and competing roles the WPA plays within and outside of the program. Consequently, the WPA might also advocate for the higher administration's support in simultaneously hiring at the tenure-track level. Furthermore, the chaos surrounding requirements for Geneva's professional development needs to be resolved; again, improvisation is necessary since no such position has previously existed on this campus.

In the case of Steve, the required teacher preparation course may actually contribute to the instability of the writing program, as it prompts Steve to "liberate" himself by quitting. Adjusting the course toward a more "practical" and less theoretical model may help retain the teachers, but at what expense to the students? Here is an instance where a WPA's improvisation among modes of authority may generate a useful fluidity between liberatory ideals, program needs, and the WPA's own professional survival. The WPA may, on the one hand, improvise among various roles available in the required course, including facilitator, peer, mentor, even learner, emphasizing such improvisation as a model for the part-time teachers. On the other hand, he may also give the teachers ample opportunities to reflect upon the many roles they inhabit (such as their experiences as "students" and those of their own students). But if teachers like Steve cannot, for whatever reason, improvise within more fluid modes of authority in the classroom and department, the WPA's commitment to such a training course may need to be more conditional. He might, for instance, suggest to his department that he will teach the training course on the condition that he is also given some authority to restrict the number of sections that the writing program offers each semester based on the number of adequately prepared teachers available to fill them.

In the end, such stories are rich sites for WPAs to reimagine the seemingly endless contradictions that shape their work, including the difficult dilemmas that the professionalization of writing programs presents. Knowing the costs, both real and potential, of such professionalization can change the way WPAs construct their authority and the choices available to them. Instead of binary oppositions, a more improvisatory and conditional view of the contradictions presented can help WPAs imagine beyond more conventional resolutions that maintain the marginalization of writing programs and all those within.

Notes

1. For a further discussion of "difference," see Teresa Ebert, "Ludic Feminism, the Body, Performance, and Labor: Bringing Materialism Back into Feminist Cultural Studies." *Cultural Critique* 23 (Winter): 5-50.

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