

Knowing who you are is good for one generation only.

—*Flannery O'Connor*<sup>2</sup>

How do we see ourselves as writing program administrators? And how do we represent that perception to others? It has become increasingly important that we conceptualize and communicate a complex self-definition, as Jeanne Gunner insists, one which represents the WPA in more than managerial terms as a doer of tasks, but as a real academician, someone with disciplinary expertise.<sup>3</sup> In our efforts to convey this emerging sense of professional identity, we need to articulate the traits that we most want others to associate with our collective character. In other words, if we see ourselves as something beyond efficient managers, we need to highlight those features of our identity that we want others to understand and value. I hope to promote a professional ethos that pays close attention to moral judgment, one that highlights our association with a rhetorical ability to make judgments based on a sound ethical system.

To that end, we need to find the most ethical model to use in representing the kind of agency that we seek as administrators and rhetoricians. In this case, an ideal ethical system is one that allows for informed choices for all participants, one that provides for individual agency at the same time that it enables others to choose freely their own courses of action. Such a system results in a liberated environment with the most potential for fostering both individual and common good. My goal in this essay is to destabilize the current construction of writing program

# *Rhetorical Agency: Seeing the Ethics of It All*<sup>1</sup>

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Carmen Werder

administration by both questioning the theoretical constructs inherent in the traditional language we use to represent ourselves and suggesting a more ethically sound conceptual frame. By proposing new language for our self-representations, I intend to suggest an expanded way for understanding the remarkable opportunity we have to operate with a more ethical professional ethos, one in keeping with our disciplinary role as rhetoricians.

If we look to the WPA literature, we see extensive efforts to define ourselves. How then do we typically describe our professional ethos in forums such as journal articles and conference presentations and what do those representations suggest about our moral principles? Presently, a familiar self-portrait emerges from the way we talk about ourselves, and that portrayal tends to rely almost exclusively on power talk. For the past decade, the literature provides a chronicle of this master narrative by continually reverting to power language. Going back to Olson and Moxley's 1989 discussion of the limits of the freshman composition director's role, the terms commonly used in characterizing this position are "authority, control, and power" (qtd. in Gunner, "Decentering" 9). Of these lexical items, the most pervasive one is "power." Gunner employs it in "Politicizing the Portland Resolution" by characterizing the challenge we face "given the unequal power relations of the authors and audience" (23). Assumed here is the belief that "power" accounts for all our exchanges, an assumption made explicit in Harrington, Fox, and Hogue's statement: "Writing program administration is, in many ways, an exercise in power" (62). This declaration reveals a collective assumption that the notion of power provides the fundamental conceptual framework for explaining our institutional situation and lies at the center of our self-representations.

While Gunner and others tend to use power talk in a matter-of-fact way to describe our position, still others employ similar language with a tinge of advocacy, apparently in an effort to remind us how essential the power construct is to our efficacy. Edward M. White uses the term in this way when he observes that WPAs are often reluctant to wield power and challenges us either to "use it or lose it" ("Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA"). With even greater urgency, Louise Wetherbee Phelps has urged us to "become warriors, unafraid of our own power" (332). Such calls reflect a confidence in power as the quintessential defining term in the WPA ethos.

Still other voices in the literature have modified and re-invented the language by introducing qualifiers, but the talk still veers back to power terms. One such revision is Rebecca Moore Howard's discussion of "Power

Revisited," which tempers White's militaristic language by identifying two potential sources of power: "institutionally sanctioned power" and "institutionally-changing power" (*passim*). Howard's terms soften the edge in White's earlier call to wield power by suggesting a scheme in which either we use our institutional placement to further our programmatic agenda or we effect changes that provide some kind of institutional leverage. While her contrasting terms provide two options, the language continues to intimate that we succeed primarily by overpowering others. Offering yet more egalitarian language, Christine Hult focuses on giving power to others in "Politics Redux," and echoes Trimbur and Cambridge's resounding call for "empowering actions" (qtd. in Hult 51). On closer analysis, however, the term "empowering" in this context suggests a re-allocation of power from one person (who has extra) to another person (who has little). In this model, agency emerges not from some kind of situated expertise, but rather from individuals who have enough power to give some away. Similarly, when Hildy Miller advocates a "postmasculinist direction" that provides for "exercising power from a position of equality" (58), here again efficacy is portrayed more or less as an entity that can be gained only if certain individuals are willing to give up some of their power cache in order to facilitate power equality. Such talk implies that we conceive of our professional identity mostly in terms of individual charisma, rather than in terms of situated, collective expertise.

Despite these revisionary attempts at reinventing the language of power, the "P" word continues to echo through our discourse and intimates a self-definition cast in terms of adversarial relations and one that tends to highlight individual sway over others, rather than to emphasize the ability of a WPA to act in concert with others.<sup>4</sup> While these portrayals using the language of power are commendable in that they seek to free us from a repressed professional position, they do reveal a limited conceptual scheme. Always, the god term is power and always the voices echo the same refrain: Our political viability and professional effectiveness rely on our willingness to cast ourselves in power roles. But what is at stake with such a portrayal?

In an effort to explain my theoretical concern with the rhetoric of power, I offer a set of definitions borrowed from David Bell, a political linguist, who provides a useful taxonomy—a perspective for conceptualizing these political issues in a complex way and for understanding their ethical implications. His lexicon distinguishes among

three kinds of political modes—power, authority and influence—with each term referring to accompanying linguistic frames, to distinct ways of talking, of communicating with others to affect their behavior. While Bell's taxonomy is based on a linguistic perspective that enables an analysis of communication modes, his definitions also provide a way of examining how we represent our professional selves and the conceptual models that such talk reveals.

First in Bell's inventory is power, which refers to the potential to impose one's will on another person, based on the ownership of some external property or resource. Linguistically, it takes the form of a threat, bribe, or promise—sounding something like this: "If you do X, I will do/give you Y." Whether positive or negative in form, power talk necessarily implies control over some resource that can be used as a sanction or reinforcement (Bell 17-24). Power talk reveals a conditional relationship: "If you do X (and usually only X), I will do Y." The underlying motive here is to control another person's actions; to wield power is to persuade someone based on what we own. If we use power as the central term in our self-portrayal (as a review of the literature suggests), we imply a fundamental interest in controlling others with what we own—in doing something to them—rather than in enabling them to choose for themselves.

Next in Bell's scheme is authority, which refers to the capacity to direct another person's actions, based on the possession of a title or position. Authority talk assumes an hierarchical relationship and often takes the form of an imperative: "Do X because I said so (and I'm your boss)." Once again, the motive behind such talk is to control; to exert authority is to persuade someone based on the title we hold. To use authority as another privileged term in characterizing the WPA position is to imply an interest in controlling others with our organizational rank—once again in doing something to others—rather than in providing them with choices.

While relying on different sources (power based on owning something, authority based on having some position), the concepts of power and authority—thus defined—highlight controlling others and enforcing obedience, either by virtue of what resource is owned or what title is held. To speak exclusively about power is to reveal a fundamental obsession with external control. To speak only about authority is to demonstrate a dangerous sense of entitlement, a belief that institutional placement is enough to expect compliance. Because both power and authority rely on control, they have enormous potential for abuse. And it is this reliance on

coercion that I believe marks the language of power and authority as ethically suspect. If we rely on such language in a self-portrayal, we cultivate an ethos of dominance, implying the need for a controller and a controlled. And if we attain power and authority, as defined, we risk developing a dangerously arrogant stance, for if we regard ourselves as having control over others, we will feel no compulsion to negotiate with them. Conceiving of our position in such terms provides for a model that can potentially blind us to the expertise of others and runs counter to the collaborative model that invites us, not to compete with others for resources and positions, but to work in non-hierarchical, de-centered partnerships.

In contrast to power and authority is Bell's third political mode: influence, which refers to the ability to persuade another person, based on a knowledge of one's environment. Like power and authority, it entails the intent to control others. Linguistically, it takes a multitude of forms, including acknowledgment, question, and recommendation (Bell 26-30). For example, influence might sound like this: "I think X because I understand Y." Influence talk relies on exchanging information, on asking and answering questions. And while influence does not seem as heavy-handed as power and authority in its ethical implications because it is based on expertise, rather than on external resources or institutional titles, its conceptual framework also implies the intent to control other people. Like power and authority, influence provides for a model of persuasion based on doing something to someone. The motive underlying influence, while more subtle, remains that of control—to change someone's mind, to exert influence over someone else by drawing on our expertise. While the basis of influence is different from power and authority, the intention to control or change someone else remains intact. In the influence schema, information—rather than property or a title—is used as an instrument of persuasion. In this conceptual framework, information has the potential to serve as weapon.

By distinguishing among the terms of power, authority, and influence, Bell's lexicon reveals a gap in conceptualizing WPA efficacy, for none of these three terms enables us to describe a dynamic where mutual agency—not control—is at the center of the relationship. In each case, the intent is singular: to change others, without opening ourselves up to reciprocal influences. This lack of reciprocity worries me because it implies an ethically dangerous model—one that endorses the individual's interests at the risk of others' free will. Therefore, I see a need to add a fourth term to

Bell's schemata: rhetorical agency, which I define as the potential for effecting change based on the extent to which the collective resources, titles, and expertise of a particular situation are made available for the individual and common good.

If we define the WPA not only as an individual position, but as a site—a space where rhetorical agency is fostered—we move away from an anachronistic model that parallels the shift in our fundamental attitude toward rhetoric itself—away from a limited view of rhetoric as persuasion in strictly agonistic terms—toward the expanded view of rhetoric as persuasion in cooperative terms. While there has often been a lack of reciprocity in the history of rhetoric, I see more potential for reciprocity in rhetorical exchange. As Robert Connors notes, at one time rhetoric was more about the individual warrior "fighting with words" (27).<sup>5</sup> Whether classical rhetoric did allow for an interactive view of persuasion, as Ede and Lunsford maintain,<sup>6</sup> it certainly has left a legacy of self-interest and a tendency to attend more to individual efficacy than to collective agency. If we writing program administrators truly see ourselves as rhetoricians, then we need to talk about ourselves with language more compatible with this evolving need for reciprocity.

In a conceptual scheme where rhetorical agency is central, persuasion is not about exerting control over others either by virtue of what we own or what title we have or what information we are privy to, but about how we negotiate truth with others. It's not about controlling others; it's about understanding our common needs. It's not about forcing others; it's about choosing with them from an array of perspectives available. It's not about managing others; it's about analyzing a situation and figuring it out—together. Because rhetorical agency is situated in a particular context, it is a potential that resides in the dialectic interplay between actors, not in any one actor.

Certainly, it may be appropriate in certain situations for an individual to wield power, display authority, or exert influence, but I question whether our almost exclusive reliance on these terms does not belie a confusion about how we view the potential agency most available in the WPA site. Because this language privileges individual efforts over communal interaction and because it implies competition and hierarchy, these terms insinuate a model that ultimately limits our sense of agency and undermines our attempts at collaboration. And because our actions result from our self-perceptions and self-deceptions, I see the merits of describing WPA efficacy

in terms of rhetorical agency. If we perceive our agency exclusively on the basis of power or authority or influence, we are perpetuating a system of moral compromise, either by forcing others to defer to us or by surrendering our decision-making options to others. Either way, we risk ethical compromises.

Interestingly, while professional talk about the WPA position is usually framed in terms of power, authority, and influence, our professional activity frequently reveals a collective desire to resist programs that rely on the personality of a single administrator and to explore non-hierarchical models. The Spring 1998 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* was devoted to such collaborative efforts,<sup>7</sup> and the recent awarding of a WPA 2000 research grant to an administrative team from Washington State University reflects our professional quest for collective agency. We just need to use language that enables a more precise representation of that disciplinary ethos and that assists us in thinking more self-consciously about the ethics informing our work.

If power-related talk, and its implicit associations with adversarial relations, was confined to journal articles, it might be explained as simply a reflection of academic discourse and its contentious nature. However, even when WPAs tell their stories in a less formal academic forum, such as the accounts we read in the recent collection, *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*, they frequently rely on the same language to paint what editor Diana George calls a "portrait of a profession" (xiv). In a key segment in the Introduction, George characterizes the frustration that many contributors have experienced with the WPA position saying:

WPA work is hardly a world filled with selflessness and noble goals. [. . .] And, yet, it isn't the power trip some might have imagined. [. . .] Many of these writers remind us—as they remind themselves—that they have little of the sort of power that makes others envious. The power they do have, though, might be what keeps them in the job: They have power to shape a curriculum. And what frustration, disappointment, and even sadness we see in some of these stories comes from not realizing that power to its fullest. (xiii)

"That power" to shape curriculum alluded to by George suggests some kind of agency other than the kind of power we usually point to, some other

source of efficacy that these WPAs envision but seem to have trouble capturing with the language of power.

Perhaps part of the difficulty contributors like Beth Daniell say they had in writing their stories<sup>8</sup> results from the fact that we have such limited language to frame our professional ethos and, thus, an inadequate way to theorize our professional challenges. I sense in these voices the same sense of dissatisfaction that I have with the language we usually use to describe ourselves, especially the language of power, with its capacity to turn into a debilitating form of control. We need other words that describe not only what we're thinking, but also that enable us to think in new ways. I do not mean to dismiss the value of power language entirely because it has been useful in carving out an institutional niche and as a corrective to the view that writing administration is inconsequential, but we could jeopardize the integrity of the position itself by continuing to frame our agency exclusively in individualistic, adversarial terms.

To illustrate how these conceptual frames might constrain our choices of action, I want to trace a representative anecdote from my own experience as a WPA. In a 25 September 1999 e-mail exchange on WPA-L (not surprisingly with the subject heading of "Power and the WPA"), Rebecca Moore Howard expresses the need for bringing such personal narrative into our professional conversations when she says: "I do wonder where there's a place to get specific about the things that many of us have experienced—that sound like sour grapes and losers' stories when one talks about them, yet things that others in the profession (and especially WPAs) would really benefit from hearing."<sup>9</sup> Howard's reluctance to get too specific about her own story, she notes, results from wanting to avoid a focus on victimization. I agree and, like the storytellers in George's informative collection, I seek not to tell a victim narrative, but rather a tale that will inform our professional identity. In fact, my story is not a loser's view; nor is it a winner's view. It's a story of clarification. And, ultimately, it's a story of how individual power, authority, and influence gave way to collective rhetorical agency. I offer it here because analyzing it through the lens of Bell's definitions has helped me understand better how writing program administration is fundamentally rhetorical work.

The situation began in 1992 when I assumed a position as a writing center assistant director and faced the challenge of dealing with an intermediate-level writing exam put into place before my arrival and for which my administrative position had been expressly created. The test,

called a "rising junior exam" because it was intended for students to pass as they moved from sophomore to junior status, had originally been designed as an informational, diagnostic exercise only. However, in the fall of 1991, it had become what we now know as "high stakes" writing assessment because students needed to pass it before being eligible to enroll in a writing proficiency course, which together with the exam, became a graduation requirement. Soon it assumed a life of its own with a growing appetite for consuming more resources. By the time I entered the scene, the fail rate had become significant (averaging 40-50%), and my position was funded to respond to the large number of students who needed remediation. Thinking (naively) that this position was about writing instruction, I was pleased to accept the call.

It soon became apparent, however, that something was amiss. Not only did the Writing Center become aligned with all the negative response associated with failing the test, but also the limited nature of the exam served to convey a reductive sense of writing with serious curricular implications. Composed of two parts, a multiple-choice section on identifying sentence-level errors and a one-paragraph summary of a reading, the exam represented writing as a series of de-contextualized skills. It bore little relationship to the writing-as-critical-inquiry model that we were trying to inculcate into our writing curriculum. Furthermore, the practical problems created by the exam became monumental. For one thing, since students could take the exam only once each term, if they failed one or both parts, they had to wait another whole quarter before re-testing. Without going into further detail about its flaws here, suffice to say that the test became increasingly unacceptable to me.

When it became painfully clear that the test was not serving the best interests of students or of writing instruction, I expressed my concerns to my supervisor. While I was outraged by the use of writing center resources to support a bad test, I chose not to threaten my supervisor or the writing committee with my non-participation because I felt removing myself as a resource would only harm those students who needed my help. In Bell's terms, I declined to use the conditional rhetoric of power.

Instead, I began to consider how I might use my authority to change the writing committee's collective mind about the test. I proposed and acquired a newly expanded position as Associate Director of the Writing Center Programs with more writing across the curriculum duties and hoped that having a higher institutional rank would increase my chances of

winning over the committee. Even though Howard would say that I had acquired more "institutionally sanctioned power," my title did not provide enormous leverage because as a writing center administrator, I had less institutional clout than other administrators. As Olson and Ashton-Jones observe in their 1988 study, even directors of composition have tended to regard writing center administrators as institutionally lightweight: "Friendly, cooperative [with] lots of personality" but not "scholarly" (qtd. in Perdue 13). If, as Olson and Moxley contend, most English department composition directors are constrained by the authority they can exert based on their institutional placement, as a WPA outside of an English department, I clearly lacked the positioning necessary to draw on institutional authority. Besides, I wanted others to understand the problems with the exam, so I concentrated on using my expertise about writing assessment to persuade them.

Instead of relying on institutional authority, I was hoping to exert what Howard has termed "institutionally-changing power" by working to change the mind of certain people about the test by providing them information. Or, as Bell would term it, I was banking on the rhetoric of influence—hoping that if I could just share what I knew about writing assessment with the right people, I could convince them that the test had to go. I can still recall the relief I felt in reading Edward M. White's 1994 description of the problems with high stakes barrier exams because he confirmed what I was observing with our test. I remained confident that I simply had to find a way to ask the right questions and to communicate the right information to the right people.

Relying on influence talk, then, I continued to attend the writing committee meetings and insinuated information from the burgeoning literature on writing assessment whenever I could. When Brian Huot's 1996 piece "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment" appeared, I eagerly copied it and forwarded it to all the committee members, confident that the sound information would persuade them to end the test. Unfortunately, since the committee meetings were generally consumed with the practical concerns of administering the test, we rarely had a chance to talk about its flawed conceptual model, as Huot's article urges. At the same time as I was trying to convince the writing committee, I was recruited to be a member of an assessment advisory committee and began to see a point of entry for voicing my concerns. I read everything on writing assessment that I could find and took it back to the assessment committee in an effort to direct

attention to the writing exam. After a few meetings in which I urged (okay, badgered) them to pass a motion advising the writing committee to eliminate the exam, they agreed. But when the day came for the assessment group to present their motion to the writing committee, the other members of the assessment committee had a hard time articulating the rationale behind the motion in response to questions from the writing committee, and it failed by two votes. Though the assessment committee had found my arguments against the test compelling, they were not able to explain the reasoning conclusively to some of the others. I realized that I had influenced many people's individual thinking about the exam, but I still had not effected the change I was seeking—to kill the test.

Before long, I received a memo from my supervisor instructing me not to attend the writing committee meetings any more. Using her own institutional authority, she simply ordered me to stop coming and, thus, eliminated any direct influence I might have with that body. While I was still on the assessment committee and could have chosen to continue exerting my influence there, I began to realize that I needed to approach the problem indirectly. Instead of trying to control the situation in such a way that would leave others (especially my supervisor) no room to move, I stopped explicitly pushing for elimination of the test. I stopped trying to change outright the mind of certain people (actually only two resistant writing committee members by now) and began to concentrate on mobilizing the forces for change.

I concentrated on bringing faculty together to talk about enhancing writing instruction. It wasn't long before some members of the writing committee approached me (outside of the regular meetings) to help them craft a new motion for replacing the exam. At the same time as we worked together to draft a sounder motion, I served as a consultant to our general education committee, which recommended a task force be formed to study the possibility of creating a university writing program. As part of a task force team, I visited thirty-two departments and talked with them about writing instruction and invited their discipline-based ideas. I met with follow-up focus groups and tried to establish a format that put people in conversation with each other. In short, I tried to work sophisticatedly—by serving as a rhetorician at large—analyzing the situation and taking advantage of any kairotic moments that presented themselves. One of those faculty forums led to a specific recommendation from an economics professor for replacing the exam, an idea which was incorporated into the writing

committee's final motion. In the spring of 1998, the writing committee asked me and one of their official members to present the revised motion to eliminate the writing exam to our campus curriculum governing body. It passed unanimously. Two weeks later, as a newly appointed member of the faculty senate, I had the pleasure of voting to ratify the elimination of the exam, again in a unanimous vote. Using Bell's terms and my added one, I would gloss this story saying that I began by appropriating individual power, authority, and influence but ended by employing rhetorical agency—tapping into a collective dynamo—to which I credit the elimination of the writing exam.

Paradoxically, I had to risk not achieving my goal of eliminating the exam in order to position myself and others in such a way as to achieve it. At the same time as I jeopardized my own individual interest, I discovered that as a result of the collective agency that emerged in getting rid of the exam, my own personal capacity for power, authority, and influence was enhanced as well. For example, in a new position as Director of Interdisciplinary Curriculum and Assessment, I have much more potential institutional authority to exert. And even though I consciously rely on and promote rhetorical agency now as my primary *modus operandi*, I have come to appreciate the value of all three modes of action, not only as linguistic frames as Bell first proposed them, but also as discursive practices.

As other WPAs have reminded me, too many have worked too hard to achieve powerful and authoritative positions not to use them where appropriate. Every once in awhile we need the powerful sway of controlling external resources; sometimes we need the authoritative clout of using institutional positions, and even more frequently we need the influential force of sharing information and expertise. For one thing, achieving rhetorical agency takes time, and some occasions require more urgency than others. If someone is threatening another person's physical being, I might need to resort to a conditional power move: "Stop doing X or I will do Y." And, certainly, there are occasions when we have a professional responsibility to influence others by sharing our expertise. To do otherwise could prevent them from making an informed choice and thus upset our whole ethical stance.<sup>10</sup>

Besides time, grounding our work in rhetorical agency also requires nerve. To push beyond power-speak requires us to use language that is not in vogue. But it's not just a matter of the words we use, but also of the actions we choose. Rhetorical agency represents a choice that can require

enormous courage and mature judgment because it entails risking self-interest by inviting reciprocity. As Catharine R. Stimpson notes in critiquing an obsession with powerlessness, those who become overly "wary of taking on leadership roles" often do so "because they are, at heart, immature and irresponsible" (2). Interestingly, an ethos centered in rhetorical agency represents a daunting challenge, for it requires that we be willing to release responsibility, to take the lead in suspending control of a situation in order to free up the resources available in the group.

By performing actions that position us in relation to others in such a way that we can mutually influence each other, we leave them room to move. By not focusing solely, narrowly, on changing their minds, but rather on the situation itself, we can foster shared agency. But this approach requires vulnerability and represents an ongoing challenge for it means that we have to keep going to the table, continually ready to negotiate, to redefine, to re-invent, to revise—all in the company of others. The kind of courage required here is the nerve to enter the fray each day. Just as it can take enormous courage to rework our writing because it means holding on to some fundamental values at the same time that we open ourselves up to the composing process, so too does it require integrity to act as rhetoricians because such action means being willing to articulate our most strongly held beliefs at the same time that we resist imposing them on others and remain open to being influenced by them.

We can still don our power suits for special occasions, but we had better be vested with a wardrobe for everyday wear, one appropriately durable for the give-and-take that moving rhetorically demands. We can still use our titles when they serve to establish our credibility, but we had better be prepared to keep talking to colleagues when they express confusion. We can still profess disciplinary expertise when called upon, but we had better be prepared to listen when others offer countering views. Though it requires a mighty commitment, rhetorical agency provides a more expansive way of representing WPA ethos. Power, authority, and influence alone entail many ethical limitations and constrained movement, while rhetorical agency enables a freer range of motion and thus provides the most satisfying and enduring kind of self-efficacy .

Despite its clear ethical appeal, grounding our WPA work in rhetorical agency is not without its obstacles. I have found it challenging because others so frequently conflate the notions of power, influence, and authority as simply "power" moves. When others blur these lines, it is easy

for them to interpret all our actions as threats to their resources or positions, so that we never gain the kind of trust needed to develop collective agency. Before entering higher education, I worked as a paralegal for a prestigious personal injury attorney—one of the most successful trial attorneys in the country. Over lunch one day after I had worked with him for several months, this legal boss offered me a book about the psychology of power. It was all about accruing power on a daily basis. The one technique I remember from scanning the book involved taking control of a luncheon conversation by placing a water glass over an imaginary line running down the center of the table—what I understand now as a blatant power move because it entailed taking possession of a physical space, an external resource. At the time, though, I was bewildered by the offer of the book. Because I frequently overstepped the physical spaces he was so conscious of—both inside and outside the courtroom—I realize now that he perceived me as trying to assume control not only of the court room space, but of the litigation itself. If I had understood the physical basis of power, as distinguished by Bell, I could have explained to this attorney my inability to stay in one place by attributing it to my exuberant Italian heritage—not to any designs on his power base. Furthermore, I would have clarified that my motive was not to usurp his authority as lead attorney, but rather to advocate for our client's rights.

If we are to achieve rhetorical agency, we must be able to recognize and anticipate how our actions might be interpreted as coercive moves. If we work to be intellectually humble, we will pay attention to the resources, positions, and expertise of others. As Irene L. Clark and Dave Healy warn, we "must not let a sense of ethical liberation lead to arrogance or tactlessness" (45). Of course, there will always be some people who choose to perceive us exclusively as threats to their own power or authority or influence because they have grown accustomed to seeing the world only in those terms. Not only are they sometimes unable to conceptualize relationships based on mutual agency, they are unwilling to do so because it means that they would have to give up control of others. Nevertheless, rhetorical agency offers such a superior ethical model for human interaction that overcoming these obstacles is a small price to pay for its many benefits.

So what are the practical implications of conceptualizing writing program administration in terms of rhetorical agency? If we endorse this model as the ethically preferred one, then certain actions follow:

- *We will be sensitive to power language and the implicit model of*

- potential oppression that it conceals.* By replacing the usual power-speak with talk of *agency* in our professional conversations, we can clarify our self-representations and enhance our disciplinary ethos.
- *We will treat information, not as a weapon, but as a resource.* By freely exchanging information, we engender agency in all participants, regardless of institutional rank, and thus generate that liberating spirit which fosters a communal sense of efficacy.
  - *We will acknowledge resources available within a community.* By asking group members to identify whatever contribution—resources, titles, and information—they bring to a collaborative enterprise, we facilitate mining those collective resources. Such articulation would also reveal whether an individual felt bereft of any individual agency and would provide a way of ensuring that everyone's contribution was named and used.
  - *We will promote collective rewards for writing program work.* By finding ways to reward an entire group or program for its collective success, we acknowledge and honor shared agency. Awarding team research grants and rewarding co-authored articles/books send a clear message to the members of our profession that we endorse an ethics of collective agency.

No matter how we choose to enact this ethical model, the work of communicating a professional ethos built on rhetorical agency will be ongoing. In a discussion of collaborating "across the power line," Karen T. Romer and William R. Whipple characterize this dynamic nature of political action as "a social construct; and like all social constructs, it is not static" (66). Whether we choose to rely on individual or communal efficacy, our agency is always potential and our choices forever situated. Whether or not they are ethically sound depends on the extent to which individual efficacy provides for a range of opportunities for actions by others so that all participants have choices. By concentrating less on power relations and more on reciprocal relationships, we stand to accomplish more meaningful and human achievements over time.

In constructing this more expansive perception of the WPA, we can use rhetorical agency in representing a more liberating ethos. If we see ourselves only in terms of power, authority, and influence—we risk limiting ourselves to coercive action. Moreover, if our colleagues conceptualize efficacy exclusively in these terms, they may misperceive our actions as coercive even when we intended merely to inform. For too long, WPAs

(writing center directors perhaps in particular) have assumed a "narrowness of view" (Perdue 15), have constrained their own options, often by representing themselves too simply as "powerless." By acknowledging the potential that power, authority, and influence have for turning into a debilitating form of control, we can extend our choices by reconceptualizing ourselves in terms of shared agency. Finding new language can afford us new attitudes and actions as well, for as Aldous Huxley insisted long ago, "Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us" (9). We have an opportunity to resist oppression of ourselves and others by finding new ways to talk about our work in terms of rhetorical agency. In the process, we can create a "generative ethos": "a progressive form of ethical quality that is in the process of making itself and liberating its hearers" (Woodson 26). A discourse centering on rhetorical agency provides this generative ethos because it provides for an emergent sense of identity, one that is freed up by the mutual exchange of a particular situation.

And it is this kind of interaction marked by free choice that is the goal of a sound ethical system. What I seek is some kind of governing principle that assists me in making those hard decisions that seem to be a constant part of writing program administrative work. As Mary Ann Cain and George Kalamaras acknowledge, "[B]ecause of the contextual nature of writing programs," the WPA site requires constant "improvisation" (56). To improvise, we need to be clear on the underlying ethos that informs our actions. If we see rhetorical agency as the fundamental feature of our ethos, then our primary mode of action will be to survey a situation, to identify the collective resources, titles, and expertise available, and to release them for the common good. While we may choose to use power, authority, and influence on occasion, our every day attitude will be to improvise as agents of liberation. Of course, we will need to be content with an agency that is always situated and provisional, the kind that Gregory Clark describes as "agency [which] is constructed and reconstructed continually from the insights that emerge in a provisionally deferential exchange with differing others" (68). As rhetoricians, we can recognize and appreciate this agency as forever on the move. If we are open to being influenced by others, we will see ongoing opportunities for this liberating work because we will understand its fundamental rhetorical nature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the September 1997 National Writing Center Association Conference in Park City, Utah ("The Politics of a Writing Center: Power, Authority, and Influence") and at the March 1998 Conference on College Composition and Communication Conference in Chicago ("Assuming a Rhetorical Stance, or the Ethics of It All").

<sup>2</sup> "Everything That Rises Must Converge," *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) 36.

<sup>3</sup> At the December 1999 MLA Conference in San Francisco, Jeanne Gunner traced the historical view of the WPA as someone in service to the academy and presented a compelling case for redefining that role as a position, not simply as a series of tasks to be completed.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Michael Karlberg, Communication Department at Western Washington University, for this language, especially for his use of "adversarial relations" (e-mail correspondence).

<sup>5</sup> For more on classical rhetoric's focus on the language of individual battle, see Connors's "The Agonistic Tradition in Rhetoric" in *Composition—Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>6</sup> See "On Distinctions Between Classical and Modern Rhetoric" by Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede in *Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse* for a discussion of the way in which classical rhetoric did provide for an interactive kind of persuasion.

<sup>7</sup> See the *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, Spring 1998, for a representative sampling of these programs working toward collaborative models of administration at the same time that they rely on power/authority/influence terms for describing their work, as in Keller, Lee, McClelland, and Robertson's "Reconstituting Authority: Four Perspectives on a Team Approach to Writing Program Administration."

<sup>8</sup> See p. xii of the Introduction to *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* for the "lament" that Beth Daniell and others express in trying to tell their stories.

<sup>9</sup> This message cited with the permission of the writer.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Donna Qualley, Department of English, Western Washington

University, for reminding me of the need to exert influence by sharing our disciplinary expertise to ensure informed choices.

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