

The Power of “De-positioning”: Narrative Strategies in Stories of Stopping

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When compositionists narrate the history of the field, it is hard to resist the power of casting the evolution of our discipline “as a story about how, against considerable odds, dedicated individuals managed to work together to battle faceless bureaucrats, an indifferent institution, smug, lethargic colleagues” (Miller 26). Of course, what’s missing from this heroic story of dedicated composition teachers, as Richard Miller argues, is the perspective of the writing program administrator. In “How to Tell a Story of Stopping: The Complexities of Narrating a WPA’s Experience,” Wendy Bishop and Gay Lynn Crossley note that “victim narratives [have] become a characteristic way of telling our professional stories” (75). While compositionists bask in their affirming pedagogical interactions with students, writing program administrators operate in the larger context of “misunderstanding, or lack of understanding, in English departments and central administration about our evolving field, our interest, our priorities, and the changes in writing instruction and program administration as a result of the last thirty years of evolution” (78). However, “heroic encouragement does no more good than the victimization narrative” (78).

While Bishop and Crossley investigated what prompted so many naive victim stories, in this article we are especially intrigued by stories of stopping because each of us has recently stopped our work as WPAs—but we have stopped in so many ways and for so many reasons that we find Bishop and Crossley’s hero and victim narratives less than compelling as an explanation for how and why WPAs stop. While we do feel like victims at times, and while each of us found some or all of our work as WPAs fruitless and demoralizing, we are interested here in

examining a greater variety of stories of stopping because we narrate our stories in vastly different ways from Bishop and Crossley. We see ourselves as neither victims nor heroes; in the stories we tell, victims do not become martyrs and heroes do not ride off into the sunset. Our stories of stopping are narratives of passage and choice, of development and change; but they are also narratives of limits, lines drawn in the sand, and the necessity, at times, to separate ourselves from work that we mostly love and respect. By telling and interrogating our stories of stopping, we reveal the multiple ways in which WPAs position ourselves in our own narratives.

This article was inspired by email conversations in which we were arguing about the ultimate value of describing our stories in a specialized journal such as *WPA: Writing Program Administration*. Each of us wrote our own story of stopping, which we shared with one another.¹ As we worked through and commented on each other's stories, we found that they were interesting for the interpretive strategies employed in their telling—the essence of scholarly, thoughtful writing about academic experience. However, we were also struck by how, in our narratives, we positioned ourselves as active agents, casting the various circumstances of our “stoppings” as power-moves in our careers as well as our personal lives. The way we told our stories revealed that we wanted our refusals to be positive moves toward something, not steps backwards. We have all felt—at least for a moment—that we could do more for our students and our discipline as ex-WPAs than as WPAs. Instead of seeing ourselves as denied, resigned, or demoted, we represented our transitions as a “de-positioning.” We not only described how we changed our work as administrators, but how we carried the concerns and goals of our field with us to new positions.

Although each of us has stopped being a WPA to one extent or another, we still see ourselves as WPAs in different forms. Our experiences in writing program administration do not cease to count for us, or for the profession, even when they are in the past. Stories of stopping like ours may be the reason why many new graduates in composition studies refuse to accept WPA positions, thus shaping the future of our profession. But beyond the cautionary tales of tenure denied or writing programs that resisted change, the way we tell our stories of stopping challenges the rhetoric of victimhood through the narrative strategy of investing the act of stopping with the power to change a career, or a writing program, or a discipline, for the better.

Haunted by Boxes

Ruth Mirtz's story of stopping begins with a crisis familiar to many of us who have taken WPA positions as untenured, junior faculty: she was denied tenure, an injustice that still angers her. Ultimately, however, her narrative casts this as "a terribly freeing, empowering event, because it made choices possible again, after a long period where choices didn't seem possible." Mirtz constructs her narrative around the image of boxes that come to stand, both figuratively and concretely, for the accumulated experience of having served as a WPA.

I remember staring at the boxes for hours one afternoon, trying to make a logical decision which, in the end, couldn't be made logically. I was packing to move to a new job, from an intense WPA position to an intense teaching position. The boxes held reams and reams of material from teaching assistants, five years' worth of teaching philosophies, responses to Elbow and Bizzell, interviews with students, micro-ethnographies of classrooms, teaching demonstrations, self-evaluations. What would I do with them, since I was not a WPA any longer? Those boxes were the only evidence that I was ever a WPA, the only physical evidence that I had helped many new teachers through their first years, that I had advised many students, that I had kept the program together despite the efforts of colleagues in the department to dismantle it. My name wasn't even on the latest edition of the student and teacher's guides I had insisted on and helped develop.

For Mirtz, facing those boxes was more of a crisis than being denied tenure, selling her house, or saying goodbye to friends. "Until the box crisis, I had operated with a sense of the future as a WPA, always easily envisioning a writing program that worked better for TAs and students. Now I was facing the reality that nothing had changed, there was nothing to show for six years of work as a WPA." Although she recognizes that little of her work as WPA was solely her own, since she worked hard to draw TAs and composition colleagues into the leadership of the program, she decided in the end to take the boxes with her to her new position. She realizes that taking the program materials will not make a statement, because she left a capable, composition-trained non-tenure track colleague in her position. "Certainly the university made a statement by denying me tenure," she writes, "but my message had to be what I did next, what meaning I made of my WPA experience."

What she makes of the experience—the outcome of her stopping—is at first cast in very positive terms as she narrates her story:

Taking the boxes with me taught me that I carry with me a lot of other WPA baggage. I see no reason to throw it away, even if I don't exactly use it the way it was first intended. In my job interviews, I often presented myself as someone who enjoyed WPA work and wanted to continue it. I wasn't lying; about 75% of what I did as a WPA provoked my thinking, made me a better teacher, and gave me tangible rewards as an administrator, and I came very close to taking a WPA position I was offered. But I am completely satisfied as a "regular" faculty and an elected one-year chair of the composition committee within the English department. My new colleagues have no idea how easy I find all this—sending a couple of emails to arrange a meeting, writing a draft proposal for a program assessment, talking out a teaching problem in the hallway, while teaching 4-4 and choosing my research projects. I'm delighted not to be dealing with the stress of planning five or six meetings, finding last-minute adjuncts, battling arbitrary and ambiguous demands from upper administration, and planning counter-offensive measures after unforeseen attacks on the writing program in the latest faculty meeting. Now I have the time to do other, equally worthwhile things for my new writing program. I've learned that to admit failure and find something just as good to do (depositioning, as we've been calling it) is a hugely important step both for me and for the writing programs I care about. The boxes I brought with me from my WPA position are now stacked in a closet.

However, the story is not quite as simple as that. The boxes come back to haunt her when Mirtz finds herself acting like her former colleagues did when she was a WPA:

The second crisis occurred as I talked to my new chair who, as both chair and WPA, was doing most of what I used to do, for example hiring in late August inexperienced and over-committed adjuncts to handle extra sections of first-year composition. All I did was smile sympathetically and murmur nothings—the same maddening thing that my colleagues used to do to me. And I'm angry again, at myself for being as useless on this issue as a not-WPA as I was as a WPA. My chair and I both know, without discussing it, what the answer to this problem is: funds for tenure-track composition instructors, which in turn

require commitment to the writing courses from outside the department, which in turn requires knowledge of what the course is and isn't and a willingness of upper administration to let the people who teach the course decide the conditions under which it will be taught.

Mirtz's story of stopping becomes more problematic than a narrative of liberation from burdensome administration to personal freedom. She recognizes that, as a former WPA, she will always carry with her the wider perspective that her experience has given her. She can never forget that labor and administrative issues intersect with a commitment to student writing. Her problem becomes how to use her accumulated experience and knowledge—what is in those boxes—while still insisting "I am not the WPA." She recognizes that, when she stopped being a WPA, she removed herself from the advantages of that position at the same time that she lost its disadvantages.

The resolution Mirtz comes to is not simple, but a delicate negotiation of power and responsibility. "Now I can do what I wish I had been able to do as a WPA: work outside the administrative role with an eye toward what's best for the composition program, unite my teaching and research interests with that of the composition program, and get as much deserved attention to the program as possible by leading committees and publishing articles." The larger implication of Ruth Mirtz's story of stopping is that, as more of us transition through writing program administration, our field needs to draw on this broader base of knowledge and experience. The practice of writing program administration can gain valuable support by including those whose administrative experience may be hidden in a closet, but who still carry—and value—the boxes.

Saturday Mornings Spent in Tears

While Ruth Mirtz negotiated an unbidden change in her career from WPA to faculty member, Susan Taylor actively rejected not only writing program administration but also the university as an institution. She stepped out of administration and off the tenure-track to become an adjunct teacher at a community college. Looking back, she rejects not only the pressures and politics of directing a writing program, she rejects the value of the experience itself: "Being a WPA was not worth anything to me. Being part of the university academic community meant nothing to me." She casts the outcome of her rejection in entirely positive terms:

Like Ruth, I have boxes. Mine are not kept for the sake of another university job; rather, they are kept for future possible reference. I do not want to be a WPA or a university

professor ever again, but I know the key to any type of job in academe is information. So, I have kept the information from my time as a WPA to save myself time in case I need time to do other tasks. However, I am finding that I have more than enough time nowadays, even though I teach four or five classes a semester. I do not need time like I used to; I can manage time quite well and still have time left over for myself. In other words, I now have a life that I can embrace instead of visit. I am quite happy now. I did not think I could be since I had been trained to get a tenure-track job. I am an adjunct for a community college and a branch campus of a small four-year liberal arts college. I get to do what I do best, teach. No committee work and minimal contact with “colleagues.” Quite often, I get asked when I will go back on the job market and get a university job. My standard reply is “never.” While my positions do not afford me financial security by any means, they do offer me a blessed sense of peace and no more Saturday mornings—or other days—spent in tears.

While Taylor presents her rejection of writing program administration as a power-move, in the painful narrative of her experience as an administrator, there are echoes of the rhetoric of victimhood. Because Taylor’s doctoral work was in women’s literature, not composition, she entered into our field with the same step that took her into administration:

I was not “trained” to be a WPA. I took no classes in Rhetoric and Composition. Instead, I chose to attend the proverbial school of hard knocks, reading Rhet/Comp theory on my own because I was appointed Assistant Director of Composition in my first year out of graduate school. As a result, I thought I needed to pay attention to the extraordinary discipline that I was now a part of, by caveat, not qualifications, and threw myself into the scholarship that I admired as Rhetoric and Composition. I attended WPA conferences, participated on the WPA-L, gave papers at CCCC, and so forth. And hard knocks I got because I was falling in love with a discipline that I had not “done my time” in. One of my favorite sayings once I had made the switch was how much more fulfilling it was to go to a Rhet/Comp conference than a literature conference. The founders of the discipline were alive and not French and, therefore, would talk to me. I was enamored by such witty

and intelligent folks as Peter Elbow, Ann Berthoff, Lynn Bloom, and Anne Ruggles Gere. I felt I had found my intellectual home and thought it could sustain me because my physical home, or the place I was employed, was nightmarish. I needed to be Matt Damon in "The Talented Mr. Ripley" because I needed to be a charming killer who did not get caught except in a mirror at the end of the film. Instead, I was horrified by what I saw. I was not prepared for the back-stabbing and pettiness I encountered as a member of the academic and administrative branch of my former institution. I was not prepared for the general nastiness and disdain my literature colleagues bestowed upon me. I was not prepared for the lack of care for students. I was not prepared.

Although Taylor developed an appreciation for our field, her personal and emotional experience of the institutional realities she faced led to her "de-positioning." Interestingly, it was a research project on the working conditions of WPAs that inspired her decision:

After spending the morning of February 20th, 1999, giving a phone interview to a person in Chico, California, about being a WPA, I realized I could easily become everything I found so distasteful about academe and that the job was taking over my life. I cried as I recounted the events of my time to the interviewer. No job was worth the pain and humiliation I felt as I answered the interview questions. No university position was worth fighting for to secure being a part of academe—university, that is—that is seen as "important." I wanted to end my association with the entire construct. So I did.

While Taylor rejected her position as a WPA, her new colleagues value her experience:

When my department chairs, at either the community college or the branch of the small four-year college, are working out scheduling each semester and discuss their problems with me, I smile and repeat the cliché to myself, "there but for the grace of god, go I." I have even said it out loud to each of the chairs because they know I understand their problems. I do not offer to help, I offer to listen.

Her listening ear is valued by her colleagues not for its sympathy, but for its knowledge and experience. It is because they know that she understands their problems that her offer to listen is so gratefully accepted.

Personally, the experience of being a WPA taught Taylor that she “can close the door to the opportunity to ever hurt myself like that again.” Professionally, she decided to value what she does best, which is to teach.

Taylor’s story of becoming a WPA and of de-positioning herself addresses important issues of training and professionalization. While a background in composition won’t completely prepare anyone—especially an untenured faculty member fresh out of graduate school—to meet the challenges of writing program administration, there is no doubt that Taylor’s lack of preparation contributed to her de-positioning. In fact, during her time as WPA, she secured a WPA evaluation of the writing program, one outcome of which was the recognition of the evaluators (and later from the department) of the need to replace her with a tenured, rhet/comp specialist. Yet the recentness of her experience also points out how much education our field still has to do on the institutional level, to make colleges and universities understand that WPA positions need to be filled with appropriately trained, and preferably tenured, faculty.

Losing Faith

Keith Rhodes’s story also presents his decision to stop serving as Coordinator of Composition at a teaching university as a positive move, but the issues that led to his de-positioning are located less in the program he served than in our field’s disciplinary and professional construction of what it means to be a WPA. Rhodes’s narrative reads very differently from Ruth Mirtz’s or Susan Taylor’s in that he never presents himself as a victim of institutional or administrative circumstances. On the contrary, the problem with the position he held was its lack of an intellectually interesting challenge:

Would you take this job? Assume that your main role as Coordinator of Composition is to improve the quality of composition instruction by helping experienced, full-time teachers develop better approaches to the teaching of writing. Assume further that most of these teachers are either tenured or in positions with no “up-or-out” pressure, and that the handful who are under “up-or-out” pressure were all recently participants in excellent composition T.A. programs. Assume further that, as a newly minted Ph.D. who made a rather quick run through grad school, you have in fact taught fewer composition courses than anyone on your new faculty. Oh, and toss in that the school’s graduate program has no composition component, and G.T.A.’s work exclusively in the Writing Center, run by a full-

time instructor who, while well-informed about composition theory, is not on the tenure track. Yet another non-tenurable instructor, who in this case has little background in composition theory (though much expertise in assessment theory), runs composition placement and assessment. Meanwhile, there is no option of just declaring victory and moving over to another position; the line itself is defined by its vague administrative aspect, even if three fourths of the load is simply teaching composition and, once a year, an upper-level writing course. Finally, let us imagine that several previous highly qualified candidates had either fled or been run out in the fifteen-year history of this position. I took the job. I knew it would be dangerous, but I also knew how much I could learn from it. I set out with two goals, in this order: 1) make the job safer for those who would hold it in the future, and 2) try to be the one who held it when it became safe. As things turned out, that whole scenario shifted by the end. The job was safer, and I could have held it had I wanted to; but I didn't want to anymore.

Unlike Taylor, Rhodes wasn't mistreated, at least not overtly, and his relations with colleagues were good. Unlike Mirtz, his performance reviews indicated that he would have been offered promotion and tenure. The problem was that he could simply make no sense of the position of Coordinator of Composition with his department, and the department could make little more sense of anything he had to offer. His knowledge alone had no capital among his colleagues, and they had no interest in changing their traditional English program in ways that would have given him other outlets. He was happy being a writing teacher, but he had no psychic resources for dealing with using released time for a job that had no feasible goals and apparently as few expectations—other than that he had to do something, anything, to justify it.

To find his justification, Rhodes turned to his counterparts in writing program administration. He became a house gadfly on WPA-L, the listserv for writing administrators. Needing actually to administer by persuasion rather than fiat, he began probing to find how much persuasive wisdom about writing teaching might lurk under all our professional knowledge of placement methods, management of contingent labor, and professional legitimization. In the collective wisdom of our field, however, he did not find what he was looking for:

While I found useful nuggets of information, the whole tenor of the conversation ran to matters that rarely suited my needs. I found myself particularly disturbed by the ease and frequency with which list members swapped recipes for running essentially composition sweatshops—”adjunct wrangling,” to use Cynthia Jeney’s priceless private phrase, a job not greatly improved in my eyes when it gravitates more toward TA mentoring/wrangling. Most of our discipline’s best administration seemed to require a strong top-down power grid, even if we took pains to use that power humanely. At best, we founded departments of our own—or found more composition-friendly departments, like my current one—and then collaborated as equals. If there are stable models for true “bottom up” program development, I have yet to find them.

In the end, Rhodes decided to stop what he was doing as “Coordinator of Composition,” even though it involved leaving a job in which he was advancing his career. At his school, Rhodes was able to get a graduate class in composition theory approved, but its subject matter was not included in the comprehensive examinations, the engine of all curricular decisions by the students. He was able to draft more readable syllabi and put in place theoretically informed descriptions of the outcomes for each stage of the composition sequence, but he could not enact any conceivable method by which anyone had to use them. He was able to inform colleagues about the relative value of different composition teaching practices, even winning their assent to his credibility, without much affecting what was done in their classes. As he puts it, “I simply lost faith in the prospect of having meaningful work to do.” More significant was his loss of faith in the profession as a whole:

I left rather ashamed of my associations with composition professionals. Our pretensions to being the disciples of a better way seemed entirely hollow. James Sledd’s accusation that our best and brightest were merely “boss compositionists,” most effective at and most interested in running first-year composition “plantations,” hit much too close to the mark. When it came to persuading empowered English professors and liberal arts administrators to value a strong commitment to writing teaching, our professional apparatus seemed not exactly ineffectual, but certainly unfocused. The great hopes and promise with which so many of us had been sent out to do our “missionary” work for a better approach to composition seemed founded on a mere

trick of labor conditions. The good word seemed effective only with those whom we had over a barrel. While I could understand the difficulty of intervening in complex institutional changes like those at the University of Minnesota, I felt betrayed when Ruth Mirtz and Susan Taylor made such varied and direct pleas for rhetorical backing and met with such pathetically inadequate response. If perhaps beginning or lower level administrators were not the slaves of boss compositionists, at best we seemed to be the hapless recruits of a pyramid marketing scheme, deluded by narratives of glory into taking roles that served largely the careers of a limited and self-obsessed elite.

In contrast to his critique of composition, Rhodes's attitude toward his former department remains tolerant, even appreciative. As a whole, they were running what seemed to him a more ethical program than those run by most of his "betters" on WPA-L. In their program, nearly every first-year composition student had an experienced, full-time, committed teacher of writing in every class, even if most of those teachers had little theoretical acumen and made classic and obvious mistakes along the way to doing, also, much good. Had he been able to leave only that part of his job that involved coordinating composition, he might have stayed. Perhaps most disappointing to him is that, despite his suggestions of other models, that department has simply hired another newly minted PhD to fill the same position—"another Sisyphus to push the same old rock," as he puts it. "But frankly," Rhodes says, "they are trying to do what they think is right in light of what our own apparatus of professional composition communicates to them. By the time I left, I was leaving composition coordination rather more than I was leaving my literature-centered colleagues." At his new place, Rhodes has limited, sensible charges within an administrative apparatus that he can potentially improve. The work is harder even though the goals are much more limited, but it makes more sense to him. It would be easy for Rhodes to blame the former school for inept planning; but disturbingly, "that school is simply enacting the logic that we pretend to have when we make the claims we do about the state of our field."

Rhodes's de-positioning narrative resists the rhetoric of victimhood and casts his decision to stop being a particular kind of WPA as a positive one. The most compelling thread in his narrative is the story of his relationship to our own field:

I have stopped, but I haven't given up; and in the main
I've gained a further appreciation for how difficult a thing
I was seeking to do. I still maintain it could and should

have been otherwise, though; and painful as it is, I hold many of those for whom I have enormous professional respect nevertheless partly accountable for the losses being suffered in departments like my former one, where a tenure-track line has now existed for over twenty years without producing a promotion or tenure. The professional status of writing program administration has survived and grown mostly by taking advantage of adjunct and TA status to create a ready pool for artificially easy administrative implementation. It's not clear that we can grow out of that, and it is unfair to indicate to departments and job candidates alike that we have.

Feels Like Starting Over

Kim van Alkemade's story has many elements of the naive victim-narrative, but for her also the act of stopping is cast as a positive move that allowed her to renegotiate her position within the department. The WPA position she accepted right out of graduate school (and still ABD) was like Keith Rhodes's job in Susan Taylor's department. "At my interview," van Alkemade recalls, "one of the senior faculty, previously the WPA himself, asked me, 'Some of us have been teaching writing longer than you've been alive. What makes you think you can come here and tell us what to do?' I responded that as Director of Composition, I would not tell anyone what to do, but work collaboratively to develop consensus. I recognize now how unprepared I was to fulfill this promise." Although she had what Taylor did not—recent graduate training in composition and some experience with program administration—she, too, was "not well-prepared politically and vulnerable to departmental power elites" (Hult 50). Like Rhodes and Mirtz, van Alkemade expected her department would value what her degree in composition represented. "Because I was hired to be the Director of Composition on the basis of my qualifications, I assumed the department wanted me to reshape the program to reflect my recent professional training."

Reflecting on her WPA experience, van Alkemade casts her story in the terms offered by Christine Hult to categorize writing program governance:

From the beginning, mine was a weak monarchy with limited authority, kept subservient to the department chair who appointed the members of the composition committee. The committee, in turn, envisioned administration by oligarchy with a ceremonial head of state to administer the program. At the time, my own vision of my role was

as a benign dictator, bringing current practices and contemporary theory to the well-meaning but misinformed traditionalists. I soon learned, however, that young, untenured women who are still writing their dissertations do make very effective dictators. My accomplishments as WPA—winning educational technology grants, writing a computer-based curriculum, revising composition course descriptions, integrating library instruction, developing a more efficient and ethical placement process—impressed few faculty within my department, and inspired active resistance in others. The only way for me to avoid the language of victimization is to spare you the familiar litany of confrontations and humiliations that characterized my first five years as a WPA.

Despite an emotional response to the pressures of her position similar to Taylor's, the circumstances of van Alkemade's stopping did not imitate either Mirtz's denial of tenure or Rhodes's decision to change jobs. She finally completed her dissertation, earned her PhD, and was awarded tenure. The real crisis came after these hurdles had been overcome, when her department decided to fill a tenure-track slot with another compositionist.

Of course I supported this decision, and volunteered to serve on the search committee, expecting to be its chair. After all, I was the Director of Composition and the only faculty member with a PhD in composition. Despite these qualifications, however, the department chair excluded me from the search committee entirely. I protested at our department meeting, determined to get the chair on record, but he simply asserted that enough faculty had volunteered for the search committee before I did. In the hallway after the meeting, however, he took me aside and confided, "I didn't want to say this in front of everyone, but there are people in the department who just don't want to be on a committee with you, Kim." The next day in the copy room, a colleague confided that she heard a member of the search committee remark that he didn't want to hire a clone of me. It was impossible not to take all this personally, although I know my situation wasn't unique. As Sally Barr-Ebest discovered, "women who speak up and fight for their program are doubly damned" for being aggressive rather than "agreeable and easy to work with" (66). Soon after this incident, I decided to hell with it, and told

my department chair I wanted to stop being the Director of Composition. The chair said that would be fine, that the search committee would go ahead and advertise for a new WPA, and after he or she was hired, I could exchange my administrative release for another teaching assignment and stay on the faculty. After all, I had tenure, a mortgage, and a child in school—I didn't want to start over somewhere else.

Like Keith Rhodes, van Alkemade's narrative doesn't blame her discontent with writing program administration solely on her department. Her experience led her to critique the field in which she had been educated and trained:

Not only did I resent the way I had been treated by my department, I also resented the field of composition studies. I had finally realized that by hiring me—a young, untenured woman—to be the Director of Composition, the English department assured the position would “remain relatively powerless” (Barr-Ebest 65). I could have made my life easier by simply managing the existing writing program, which is apparently what most departments really want, but that's not what my degree in composition studies had taught me to desire. Like Wendy Bishop, I believed that the WPA should be the expert responsible for the program (Bishop and Crossley 77). I was offended when I was asked to enact practices I thought were intellectually indefensible and not in the best interests of the students. I concluded the only reason the English department had hired a PhD in composition was because flourishing graduate programs in composition produce composition specialists, and university administrators encourage departments to hire people with the right specialization for the job. Thus our own graduate programs qualify us for jobs as WPAs, knowing we are likely to be hired into situations where we will “not operate in a political and economic system that can affirm our values” (Bishop and Crossley 78). Despite the WPA guidelines, writing program administrators rarely occupy respected positions of authority where the scholarly value of curriculum and program development is recognized. Proclaiming that it ought to be this way hasn't yet made it so, and as Christine Hult acknowledges, probably won't “in our lifetime” (51).

Continuing to function as the Director of Composition while a search was conducted for a new WPA, van Alkemade nursed her resentments even as she began to disengage emotionally from the politics of her position. But the search committee from which she had been excluded failed to make a hire; a small pool of applicants resulted in only one offer, which was turned down. For a second year, van Alkemade was asked to conduct the business of the writing program, this time only for one semester followed by a sabbatical. The search was conducted a second time, but again it failed. Beginning to feel vindicated, van Alkemade reconsidered her angry critique of composition studies:

At CCCC in Minneapolis, a professor on the faculty at a doctoral program in composition read my name tag and remarked, "Oh, I saw the ad from your school for a Director of Composition. We told our graduate students not to apply for that job." I began to understand that the field of composition studies was responding to the exploitation and unfairness inherent in untenured WPA positions by advising new graduates not to take those jobs. Unable to replace me, my department realized the problems I had as WPA were not unique to me, but were inherent in the position. The field of composition itself made this point to my department, but only after my de-positioning got me out of the way.

Another year passed, during which van Alkemade let go of her resentment, the department chair was replaced, and colleagues began to value her willingness to do a job they could hire no one else to do. As the search geared up again, van Alkemade was asked to join the committee for its third attempt to hire a WPA. However, she knew first-hand how unethical it would be to hire a new untenured professor to direct the composition program. If the new chair and her colleagues would agree to work with her, van Alkemade offered to stay in the position—an offer her department accepted. She suggested that they search for a compositionist without administrative responsibilities, and they finally made a successful hire. "Although I never really stopped directing the composition program," van Alkemade concludes, "my declaration of stopping made it possible for me to start over. At least now I am what a WPA ought to be: a tenured member of the department who is accepted and, hopefully, respected by her colleagues."

A story like van Alkemade's may seem at first like a victim-narrative, but here too the act of stopping—whatever the circumstances that led up to it—is cast as a power-move that resulted in the department's new appreciation of her work, as well as her renewed appreciation for her

own field. By not throwing new, young bodies into the breach, graduate programs in composition had supported her de-positioning and made it possible for her to start over again. Her story also demonstrates that the naive victim-narratives we have so often told in journals and at conferences have had a powerful effect on working conditions in our field, even as her critique of graduate programs in composition continues to ring true, and as these four stories of stopping attest.

Including the Outside Game

The four narratives we shared with each other told very different stories of stopping. While each of us addressed the circumstances that made us feel, at times, like victims, each author employed narrative strategies to recast our experience of stopping as a purposeful de-positioning. In our stories, we downplayed or questioned our victimization, emphasizing instead the positive outcome, the lesson learned, the happy ending, and the new opportunity our stopping initiated. These narratives challenge the prevailing view of the stories we tell as WPAs. Instead, we offer the narrative of the limits of WPA work: story after story of WPAs reaching their limit and inducing change through de-positioning. One of the problems with the positions described in our stories here was that there was no end in sight, no prospect of relief coming, of substantial change happening, of solving problems once and for all. Because WPA work is intellectual, stimulating, and demanding, our narratives suggest that a career as a WPA has to be a road that branches or diverges away and back again.

Before his untimely death, Robert Connors posted his own story of stopping in an email to WPA-L. In his narrative, too, Connors casts his stopping as a power-move:

There are times when we must finally say, like Thrain, "This cannot be borne." This year, after six years as Director of the UNH Writing Center (which I founded in 1994), I was forced to resign in protest of budget cuts that threatened to eviscerate the WAC Program with which the UWC is associated. After many long memos detailing the damage we were taking, the betrayal of the Faculty Senate's WI legislation it represented, the relatively small amount of resources we needed to do the work reasonably, I had gotten nowhere. The inside game had failed. And when the inside game fails for a WPA, there are two options: either keep playing it, because you're afraid that without you things would be even worse, meanwhile

eating your liver with anger and frustration; or: move to an outside game. The problem with the outside game is that you have to cut yourself loose to play it.

Careers in writing program administration are more likely than not to start and stop more than once. Our field—in its discourse, training, and professional standards—needs to broaden its scope to include former as well as present WPAs: both the inside and the outside game. As Connors put it, “if we as WPAs bring our disciplinary expertise to bear on local conditions and find them wanting, our first task must be to work to improve them, and then, if we cannot improve them (for whatever reason), to withdraw the sanction of that disciplinary expertise from the situation.”

If every stopping is also a starting, then we hope our experiences will help others to begin well, whether they are just starting out, starting over, or deciding to stop. “Being outside of administration,” writes Ruth Mirtz, “has allowed me the perspective to see what I did learn from being a WPA.” For Keith Rhodes, “life makes sense now. I feel as if I am being paid to succeed, expected to succeed, and to use my most well-honed, well-prepared abilities to do it. I don’t always succeed, of course; but that’s because the work is difficult, not because the work is distrusted.” Connors warns that stopping “takes a strong stomach,” but as the narratives we share here attest, de-positioning can be a powerful strategy for writing program administrators.

Notes

¹ For the sake of narrative coherence, we decided to frame our first-person singular stories with an amalgamated voice, blended from an initial introduction and conclusion by Ruth Mirtz, which was revised by Kim van Alkemade in response to our reviewers’ comments.

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