

Assessing the Field of WPA with Edward M. White: An Interview with an Influential Scholar in WPA

Sarah Elizabeth Snyder

Edward M. White is one of the most influential scholars on the topic of writing assessment in the field of rhetoric and composition. White has written nearly 20 books and more than 100 articles and book chapters on literature and the teaching of writing, and he was the recipient of the 2010 CCCC Exemplar Award for his immeasurable contributions to the field.

His contribution to the Council of Writing Program Administration (CWPA) is vast. He served on the Executive Board for CWPA for twelve years; acted as director and co-director of the WPA Consultant Evaluator Service throughout the late 1980s and the majority of the 1990s; co-led the summer workshop for three successive years in the 1990s; was book editor for *WPA: Writing Program Administration* for four years, and has been a manuscript reviewer for the journal for more than thirty years.

White has regularly published in *WPA* for nearly four decades. He is most widely known for his foundational work in writing assessment, but the breadth of his career is outlined in his publications in *WPA* through his study of composition instruction, placement testing, and power structures inherent in WPA work. His work in *WPA* spans nine articles, including a coauthored, three-article series on a large-scale study covering all campuses of the California State University system. White's articles also include his experience and reflection on teaching composition to the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, at Harvard in 1958.

Beyond our field, White understands how important it is to educate stakeholders from writing faculty to upper- and state-level administrators, demonstrated by his political work with the California legislators. My interview with White archives his contributions to writing program administration through the field and the journal. Ed, as he prefers to be called, dressed in his usual sea foam green, Hawaiian-themed shirt and adventure sandals, entertained my questions as we sat down for lunch in Yuma, Ari-

zona. The topics of this interview follow the trajectory of his publications in *WPA* to current positions on assessment and advocacy for writing programs, considerations toward students' mental health, and preparation as new WPAs.

Sarah Elizabeth Snyder (SES): Although many know you as the writing assessment guru, showing your depth and the contribution to writing assessment in this field, a theme that may surprise some readers is the breadth of contributions that you have made to *WPA*, which concentrate on other aspects of being a writing program administrator, for example your piece, "Use it or Lose it: Power and the WPA." What would you consider to be the relationship between assessment and other aspects of writing program administration?

Ed White (EMW): Like most teachers in the 1970s, we saw assessment as the enemy. Suddenly, I was thrust in a position where I had to learn enough about assessment and realized that it was a very powerful instrument and could be our friend as well as our enemy. The first 25 years I worked in assessment, I did it from the perspective of a classroom teacher. I was really concerned and fought against the destructive assessment that was going on and tried to find ways to make assessment more responsive to what we did in the classroom. Our goal was to make assessment help us rather than damage us.

We began to see assessment as a way of dealing with the whole field. As we talked about new ways of assessing student writing, we were talking about new ways of teaching student writing. Adding the assessment dimension of the teaching of writing and of managing writing programs has now become part of a fabric of all the research that goes into writing programs and into modern teaching of writing. That movement has given our entire enterprise new legs: New ways of demonstrating the meaning and value of what we bring to the students, teachers, the administration, and the governing boards. It has been immensely important.

SES: Your earliest pieces in *WPA* are based on a large, NIE-funded study of the California State University (CSU) system. While it is now dated, this is still one of the largest and most comprehensive studies of composition programs in the United States. With the publication of your latest co-authored book, *Very Like a Whale*, could you contrast the knowledge and questions we, as a field, have now to those at the time that the CSU study was conducted?

EMW: What we proposed was a very simple question that wound up having a very complicated answer. We wanted to know if any particular features of the college writing program would show up as improving student writing. If so, what would those features be? At the time we began the study, there were no books at all on writing programs. When I would go to campuses to review writing programs, most people on campus felt the writing program was a first year writing course—and that was the writing program. This is when it occurred to us that the writing program at an institution needed to be thought of as a program, not just one course. As we realized that, I started writing the book that came out in 1989, *Developing Successful College Writing Programs*. I tried to consider in that book what it meant to have a writing program as opposed to simply a writing course. Our question started the idea of a writing program as something that could be demonstrated to have value for a liberal arts education itself. We could find ways to actually demonstrate that the writing program had some measurable educational benefits that we could demonstrate to skeptical funding agencies, deans, provosts, and college presidents.

That's what happened with that initial project. We did demonstrate a number of correlations, the most interesting of which was that we were able to demonstrate a strong correlation between student performance at the end of first year writing and the existence of an upper division writing requirement of some—any—sort. Although we could never truly demonstrate a direct causation, what we concluded was that this correlation suggested a very strong connection to the idea of a writing program as being central and important—not just to the student's growth but to the entire college program. Now, that was really fascinating. That led to us starting in general to conceive of a writing program as something that was integral, indeed as we argue now, central to a college education. By the time we got to write *Very Like a Whale*, we were surprised to notice that this idea had become pretty much embedded into the profession.

SES: Perhaps one of the most surprising pieces that you have written for *WPA* is “Dangerous Reading: The Unabomber as College Freshman.” Having contemplated the reach of composition in the students' lives, and perhaps to the students' mental health, and with increasing frequency of gun violence on university and college campuses, what are your thoughts on the preparation teachers need to respond to students' needs today?

EMW: In a chapter I named “Fifty Years of Curriculum Changes: Looking In and Looking Out In College Writing Classes,” that I’ve written for a forthcoming book edited by Norbert Elliot and Alice Horning, I concluded that the best kind of writing program seems to me to be one that does both what I call “looking in” and “looking out.” A good writing program has to have a strong element of writing “looking in” which now includes writing about writing but also writing about oneself, because students will find self-discovery important. At the same time, the writing program serves as an introduction to college writing in other fields. We have to be able to teach students about “looking out,” or writing for others, in the most creative and inventive ways and also in the most responsible and professional ways. As I developed as a teacher, I realized that it was really important to engage students with reflection about their own lives. We didn’t do much of that when I was at Harvard. We had a rhetorical program base which didn’t encourage any remarkable interaction with the Unabomber. His behavior that showed up later might have appeared in his writing if the curriculum had been different and perhaps we could have intervened.

It always struck me that what was exciting about teaching writing is that you engage with students in ways that no other kind of discipline in the university was then doing and is doing now. You could take those students by the hand and walk them over to the counseling center. You are not a psychiatrist, but you are the early warning system against suicidal students. You have that insight into students’ lives and you are there in a way that no other professor is. If you can, without being intrusive, or without being paranoid, spot students who are having serious mental difficulties, and you can get them to the counseling service, you can save people’s lives. That’s a function only you can serve. That stuck with me. I’ve always used that as an example in the workshops that I’ve done for teachers. Who you are as a teacher is really important to your students. You are not just a presence at the front of the room who grades papers. You need to have a situation where you can get to know at least some of your students and that you can be a human resource. Your positionality as an individual is important to them. That act of respecting students is crucial to being an effective writing teacher.

SES: What advice do you have for new WPAs?

EMW: You are entering a profession that has become newly professionalized in terms of the long span of education itself. You have obligations that we didn’t have when we entered. You have to know something

about rhetoric and composition. You have to know something about assessment, linguistics, and psychological development. You have to be aware of social, sexual, racial, and class differences that were previously ignored. None of this even entered our purview when we entered the profession. It's much more professionalized and difficult, and there's so much more to know. You can't know it all, just as people entering literature discover, you can't know it all. You have that same burden. When we were shaping the discipline, we *could* know it all, there wasn't that much to know. There was a handful of standard books, but that handful has kept expanding, and now is a library. You can't possibly master that library, not even in a lifetime now. You just have to know more. That being said, it's a wonderful profession and can lead to a wonderful life.

As Ed has explained in this interview, demonstrating the worth and work of writing programs through assessment is critical not only for the advancement of the field, but also to communicate our importance to outside audiences. It requires much more preparation and sustained education as the field grows and is intricately linked to the mental wellbeing of students. These reflections on Ed's almost half-century of intellectual contributions in *WPA* are a timely call from this Special Issue to recognize the importance of his work to our field.

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