Writing and Technology in *WPA*: Toward the WPA as an Advocate for Technological Writing

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Writing studies scholars have long argued for the meaningful incorporation of technology, multimodality, and new media into writing instruction (New London Group, 1996; Wysocki et al., 2004; Yancey, 2004), but despite these calls, little scholarship has addressed both technology and the work of WPAs. As Carrie Leverenz (2008) observed a decade ago, new media composing seemed left to "the impetus of individual teachers" and "not yet . . . a widespread feature of many writing programs" (p. 42). However, increasingly, *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has published work addressing technology as a central concern of program administration, despite sporadic attention in the first few decades of the journal.

This bibliographic essay synthesizes scholarship about WPA work and technology in the journal's 40-year history, identifying two general trends in the journal. First, scholars in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* have shifted their attention from concerns about equipment and specific technologies to an understanding that technologies ask us to reconsider our understandings of writing and should therefore be infused throughout a writing program. Second, one point has remained constant over the last 40 years: since the early 1980s, WPA scholars have been concerned with developing technological knowledge in addition to their "overburdened intellectual and administrative demands" (Holdstein, 1996, p. 29). I conclude with a call for understanding WPAs as advocates of writing as technological in localized contexts based on the contingencies of their programs.

From Concerns about Equipment to Arguments That Writing Is Technological

Articles in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* in the early 1980s provided overviews of equipment and software as writing programs were developing computer labs. However, computer technologies were developing at

a fast pace; Bruce Herzberg (1983) quipped, "How did this field get so far advanced? . . . What the hell is computer literacy? There's a new dispensation, and under it, most of us are illiterate!" (p. 23). Herzberg and others (Catano, 1983; Gendron, 1983) offered practical advice about purchasing equipment and argued that WPAs needed to stay up-to-date on computer technologies, to make arguments for funding, and to evaluate the claims of technologies in order to purchase technologies that could help students write.

While these early articles focused on the state of the art in computer software and hardware, Jeanette Harris and her co-authors' (1989) article represented an early turning point in the conversation about technology. They shifted focus from specific technologies toward theories of writing: "Computers are only machines; their effectiveness depends on using them to reinforce theories that inform our pedagogy" (p. 35). An interesting tension existed in their article, though. While they claimed that "Computers are only machines" (p. 35), they also suggested that computers were "changing our perception of a text" (p. 39): students could become designers of texts using desktop publishing, and because of hypertext software, readers instead of writers could determine the organizational path of a text.

The 1990s saw only four articles about digital technologies in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* (Allen et al., 1997; Holdstein, 1996; Taylor, 1996; Zimmerman & Strenski, 1997). As WPA scholars began to shift to larger institutional concerns these writers showed technology to be "the means, not the focus, of the work itself" (Holdstein, 1996, p. 22). Deborah H. Holdstein (1996), for example, told the story of a faculty member who did not earn tenure despite acquiring a large grant supporting computers in a writing program and completing other scholarship. As Holdstein's narrative made clear, those who engaged in technological innovation were often on the margins of the field, leaving them "open to critique within our discipline and certainly by those outside of it" (p. 25). WPAs and writing teachers need to address misconceptions about technologies, how technologies align with the goals of writing instruction, institutional expectations about tenure, sustainable technological adaption in programs, and more. Todd Taylor (1996), in his overview of writing technologies, also suggested that technology was interrelated to issues of power. He warned that virtual classes, made possible by new technologies, could contribute to the further marginalization of writing instructors because administrators could cut costs and hire under-qualified, part-time teachers—a trend he observed had already begun.

Technology gained more attention in the journal after the turn of the century, and scholars in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* began to

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 42, Number 3, Summer 2019

understand that an "add-on" approach to technology did little to challenge "epistemological assumptions" about writing and writing pedagogy (Hocks, 2001, p. 26). Scholars argued that technology should be infused throughout writing programs and that technologies would require us to reconsider our assumptions about and understandings of writing. Jeff Rice's (2007) critique of the rhetoric of prepackaged learning management systems (LMSs) was one of the earliest calls for this approach. He argued that the adoption of these LMSs "shifted intellectual production to a force other than ourselves" (p. 99) and did little to change how we viewed and practiced writing. Instead, WPAs should be critics of technological rhetoric and educate themselves and their programs' teachers on basic technological writing. Indeed, new technologies ask us to reconsider the writing students do, and prepackaged LMSs often fail to offer students and teachers the opportunity to explore the affordances of writing in new media.

With the adoption of the WPA Outcomes Statement 3.0 in 2014, which included outcomes for writing with technology, WPAs argued that digitality afforded the opportunity to move writing programs away from "writing in school" toward "prepar[ing] students for a future of writing, one that will be characterized by multiplicity and change" (Leverenz, 2016, p. 34). Whereas Harris et al. (1989) saw computers as merely "machines" that should support pre-existing theories of pedagogy and writing (p. 35), WPA scholars at the turn of the 21st century understood technology as informing those theories. This perspective was perhaps most explicitly laid out by Sidney I. Dobrin in his 2011 review essay, where he argued, "Technology is not a tool independent of a user" (p. 176). Instead, he advocated an ecological view of writing as technological: "the study of writing cannot be separated from the study of technology" (2011, p. 195).

Technological Expertise and the WPA

If anything has haunted the last four decades of scholarship in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* on technology, it is the question of technological expertise for WPAs. From Herzberg's (1983) observation that WPAs felt "illiterate" about computers (p. 23), to Taylor's (1996) suggestion that the journal had been ignoring technology because WPAs "wear too many hats" (p. 7), to more recent arguments that WPAs need to educate themselves about technology despite their "already overloaded workdays" (Rice, 2007, p. 99), WPA scholars have been consistently concerned with how to negotiate technological knowledge in addition to their many other roles and duties.

Indeed, reviewing the literature in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* shows how much technological expertise now plays a role in the work of WPAs:

- While digital technologies were "notably absent" (Yancey, 2001, p. 322) from the original WPA Outcomes Statement, mulitmodality is now weaved throughout version 3.0 of the statement (see Dryer et al., 2014). The "transformed future" of writing is multimodal (Leverenz, 2016, p. 29), and WPAs have outlined how they have incorporated multiliteracies and writing technologies in curricular redesigns (Blakely & Pagnac, 2012; Lynch & Wysocki, 2003; Oddo & Parmelee, 2008; Takayoshi & Huot, 2009).
- WPAs are tasked with preparing teaching assistants and instructors to "feel more successful, confident, and independent" teaching with new media (Duffelmeyer, 2005, p. 35; Hocks, 2001).
- WPAs need to consider how best to design and implement online classes (Brady, 2003) that are accessible and inclusive (Oswal & Meloncon, 2017) and to prepare teachers to teach online (Bourelle, 2016).
- WPAs need to stay up-to-date on a growing body of scholarship on multimodal composition (Elliot, 2014) and be critical of technological rhetorics as they integrate new technologies in their programs (Rice, 2007).
- WPAs are encouraged to use technology in advocacy work, "for our own purposes, not just facilitate their use by others" (Leverenz, 2008, p. 48; Howard, 2003).

This list is a daunting one—and is likely nowhere near exhaustive. But, as Leverenz (2008) argued, while most WPAs are unlikely to have earned an education that "include[d] opportunities to develop skills in new media composing" (p. 42), "We can no longer refuse to engage with new media composing because it isn't our thing or because we feel we are already too far behind the learning curve" (p. 46).

Conclusion

Given the rapidly changing nature of writing technologies, as well as the diverse ways that writing programs are structured, situated, and administered, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prescribe what sorts of technological expertise a WPA should possess. However, I want to suggest in closing that WPAs should be *advocates of writing as technological in localized contexts based on the contingencies of their programs*. WPAs already often see themselves as advocates for writing and social change at their institutions (Adler-Kassner,

WPA: Writing Program Administration, Volume 42, Number 3, Summer 2019

2008); I suggest that when we advocate for writing, we should also advocate for understanding writing as technological.

Such a view does not require WPAs to know specific technologies but rather to have developed a concept of technology that allows us to ask useful questions, develop problem-solving heuristics, and seek out or develop resources in localized contexts. Scholars in *WPA: Writing Program Administration* have already been advocating for this sort of work: Leverenz (2016) and Rice (2007) argued that a technological view of writing influences how we understand writing and can help us to advocate for change and reform; Rebecca Moore Howard (2003) argued that it's more important to "be able to envision the project and lead the effort to accomplish it" than it is to know specific technologies (p. 19); and Laura Brady (2003) contended that technological adaption should "respond to the specific rhetorical context of your institution, program principles, and student population" (p. 142).

Two decades ago in *College Composition and Communication*, Cynthia L. Selfe (1999) urged the field to "pay attention" to technology and literacy in ways that "start with the local and specific" (p. 429), which allow for "a multiplicity of responses to technological literacy" (p. 430). WPAs can and should be at the forefront of this work, regarding technology as central to their advocacy work in ways that adjust to and change the local rhetorical ecologies of their programs and institutions.

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