

“A Little Coda . . . Before We Go”: Kenneth Bruffee, WPA, and Editorial History

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Harvey Kail: Well, Ken, let’s just do a little coda here before we go because one of the things I forgot to ask you about has been your involvements with writing program administration, and you were, I think, one of the co-founders of the WPA and its journal. I wonder if you could just give me a little history of that. . . .

Kenneth Bruffee: Somebody wanted to do the magazine,¹ and they did it—it was just a Xeroxed thing—and they said, well, they needed a journal, and they asked me to do the journal. I mean, I got money for the other thing.² The president [of Brooklyn College] was willing to that; maybe he’d give me the money for the other thing. I said, “Fine, I’ll see if I can get it [money for a journal]. I got the money, so I was the editor, and, of course, since we called it WPA, we had to have a red cover on it, didn’t we? . . . So I got to be the first editor, and we made that a refereed journal because, at this very same conference that we went to and I decided that I would try to get money to run the thing out of Brooklyn College, I went to—there was a section on scholarly journals, and one of the things they said unequivocally was, there are two kinds of scholarly journals: refereed and all the rest. So in order to be what we were, we had to be refereed. So we set it up. That was a great thing to know; otherwise, I would have not known anything about that. And I set it up, and the publications people were very gracious from the College, and they helped to put the whole thing together, and that’s how that happened.

—From an interview with Ken Bruffee by Harvey Kail (30).³

At the conclusion of Harvey Kail's 2004 interview with *WPA* founding editor Kenneth Bruffee, we not only see the pedestrian yet requisite base upon which an academic discipline is built, but we also get a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the usually invisible work of journal editing. That is, while we may be eager as journal readers and sometimes anxious as journal authors, we are rarely privy to the processes by which these titles, so important to advancing our community as well as to our individual success, get started, vetted, and physically produced. Bruffee's casual anecdote, however, illuminates many of editing's intrinsic concerns. For along with the financial issues that facilitated Bruffee's inaugural position ("I got the money, so I was the editor"), we see the symbolic and practical importance of the journal's physical manifestations evident in its "red cover." We note too the influence of both longstanding professional networks, such as those individuals who asked Bruffee to launch a journal, as well as serendipitous conference interactions, such as Bruffee's claim that he inadvertently learned of the need to referee submissions at a most opportune time. In my experience as a past editor of *Writing Center Journal* and current editor of *College English*, this confluence of the practical and the symbolic, the planned and the happenstance, represents well the life of the journal editor in writing studies.

Given the centrality of this journal to both the Council of Writing Program Administrators and to those of us pursuing WPA research, it might seem surprising that this narrative of the journal's creation has not circulated widely among the *WPA* readership. And yet, when we turn to the scant writing studies scholarship on journal editing, we find that this elision is not peculiar to *WPA*. The few extant considerations of journals (Goggin) focus more on the role of the journal in disciplinary identity than the construction and development of the journals themselves. And while there have been recent attempts to foreground this omission in our professional knowledge (Ianetta, "Dull"; Ianetta, *Scholarly*; Ritter), the gap in the knowledge nevertheless remains. Here, then, I address the editorship of Kenneth Bruffee not just to contribute to our understanding of a central figure in the early days of CWPA and *WPA* but as a means of illustrating the traces of editorial work—and the unyielding elisions such narratives contain. More specifically, by drawing on Bruffee's work as editor of *WPA*, I identify two forces in tension during the publication's earlier years: namely, the perception that how-to articles comprise the basis of WPA knowledge and, paradoxically, the need to establish writing program administration as an externally legible—"respectable," to use Bruffee's term—field of academic study. This brief essay, then, works both to serve as "a little coda" to Bruffee's editorial contributions as well as a part of an ongoing inquiry into our understanding of the role of editors in our field.

At first glance, the work of Kenneth Bruffee would seem a rich site for such exploration. A leading figure in writing studies, Bruffee is perhaps best known for “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” (1984), which is widely credited as foundational to the collaborative underpinnings of the field. Published in the same year, “Peer Tutoring and ‘Conversation of Mankind’” has made a similarly impactful contribution to writing center studies as has his earlier *A Short Course in Writing* (1972). As a founding member of the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Conference of Peer Tutoring in Writing, Bruffee’s legacy is immense, and this influence is reflected in the published record. In addition to his own work and its many citations, there have also been interviews (Eodice; Bruffee, Kail), critiques, responses, and an entire issue of *Writing Center Journal* devoted to his impact (Kail), and, most recently and perhaps most germane to the readers of this journal, a recent chapter examined his present and potential contribution in “Learning from Bruffee: Collaboration, Students, and the Making of Knowledge in Writing Administration” (Malenczyk, Lerner, and Boquet). Given the depth and breadth of the published record, then, one might expect to find legibility in his editorial legacy.

Unfortunately, however, such expectations would be largely disappointed. Aside from the interview with Harvey Kail, the legacy of Bruffee’s WPA leadership is blurred both by inevitable gaps in the archive and by the largely invisible positioning of the editor’s role in both our field and academia writ large. That is, our best knowledge of Kenneth Bruffee as editor comes from the man himself—from interviews, his occasional editorial notes, and his published essays that touch upon this work, such as 1985’s “The WPA as (Journal) Writer: What the Record Reveals.” Moreover, and as will be seen below, those comments are both few and in passing. Such obscuring of editorial work is not particular to Bruffee, however. As former *College English* editor Kelly Ritter has noted, there are limits as to “what is and can be said in the greater public about journal editing” (91); the asymmetrical power relationship between the editor as gatekeeper and aspirant authors narrows the opportunity for comment. As Ritter suggests, while editors do make public pronouncements concerning the goals and workings of their journal, these are often epideictic in function (Ritter 96), serving more to reinforce academic values than enumerate the particulars of process. When available, these texts can richly supplement our understanding, but here I turn to what Lori Ostergaard and Jim Nugent have termed “the journal *qua* archive” (8). That is, Ostergaard and Nugent argue compellingly that, ultimately, all journal editors are archivists and all journals are archives:

scholarly journals stand as sanctioned archives of scholarly discourse for their respective fields. Administering a journal also requires various forms of archival activity, such as maintaining repositories of correspondence, manuscripts, reviews and other day-to-day records or -documenting the journal's procedures to promote institutional continuity between editorships. (298)

While I find Ostergaard and Nugent's claims compelling, my work departs from theirs in focus. For while they construe the editorial archive broadly, emphasizing those essays selected for publication, here I focus on Bruffee's editorial introductions and other published work with an eye to discerning signs of his editorial philosophy and the scholarly workings of *WPA* as he understood them.

In 1978, Bruffee first appears as editor on the masthead of volume 1, number 3 of the *WPA Newsletter*, an issue that announces clearly his concern with the practical. The contents authored by now-editor Bruffee include an "Invitation" that solicits "short articles" (500–1000 words) and an "Editorial," which reproduces his 1977 MLA Teaching of Writing Division presentation, wherein he argues for the relevance of the WPA role to rank-and-file writing instructors (3). Writing program administrators, and by extension the organization dedicated to supporting these individuals, are practically oriented towards our shared goal of teaching writing. Indeed, Bruffee argues that writing program administration is itself teaching:

I would say that only when writing program administrators conceive of their job . . . as teaching, do they have a prayer of doing the job as it must be done. And in order for these intelligent, energetic and mature, but as I have said mainly young and professionally vulnerable people to begin to conceive of their work in the sufficiently large way and undertake the task with a proper regard to its immensity, they have simply had to organize. They have, therefore, associated themselves as the Council of Writing Program Administrators in order to support each other in their work, teach each other how to do that work, and focus their own and the nation's attention on the problems of teaching writing from the broad and fully informed perspective that writing program administrators alone are in the best position to hold. ("Editorial," vol. 1, no. 3, 12)

This positioning of *WPA* as a periodical focused on the day-to-day work of the administrator is an emphasis Bruffee maintained throughout his editorship. In issue 2.3 of the *WPA Newsletter*, for example, he updates the reader on the periodical by describing his hopes to direct "the membership's attention to some of the basic issues in writing program administration" (5). In

that same issue, when describing the editorial board, Bruffee notes “Each advisory Editor . . . is or has recently been a writing program administrator” (3). Bruffee’s subsequent editorials talk in the same terms, emphasizing that WPAs are “self-educated. . . . Learning by experience as most of them have done, all of them know a little bit about everything. Not many know a great deal about any one aspect of the field.” (“Editorial,” vol. 4, no. 1, 7) and again reiterating the board’s boots-on-the-ground credentials (“Editorial,” vol. 4, no. 1, 7). The impact of this how-to emphasis in the early issue of the journal is later taxonomized by Bruffee himself in an article published shortly after completing his tenure as editor, “The WPA as (Journal) Writer: What the Record Reveals” (1985). Here Bruffee looks back at the journal’s first six years, summarizing what he sees as the central trends of scholarship in the journal, namely:

- “Every issue of WPA to date has contained at least one piece intended to explain how to do something, how to accomplish effectively some particular task that is part of almost every WPA’s responsibilities” (6).
- “Articles in the second category I would like to mention are how-to articles also, but of a special kind. They put how-to into context. Instead of dealing with issues individually, these articles deal with them as interrelated” (6).
- A “last and somewhat smaller category is comprised of a few articles appearing mainly in the past two years, that address directly or indirectly the professional identity of WPAs and of our national organization” (7).

The vast majority of essays in *WPA*, then, were locally oriented and practical in focus, with only a “few articles” addressing WPA identity. Whether we attribute the how-to focus to the editor’s purview, the field’s nascent stage of growth, or an ongoing characteristic intrinsic to the specific scholarly area, it’s clear that Bruffee himself identified practice-orientation as a priority of WPA studies.

And yet, even while embracing practice as the backbone of WPA knowledge, Bruffee’s editorial record also shows him fostering the “studies” aspect of WPA studies; that is, he evinces awareness that he is helping to found a discipline and his declarations of editorial practice address a need for scholarly credibility. Thus, he describes in his interview by Kail, “two kinds of journals: refereed and all the rest.” Throughout his published editorial work, Bruffee emphasizes the scholarly ethos he is crafting for the journal. As early as 1979, for example, when the publication is still known as the *WPA Newsletter*, he announces it as a “refereed journal” (“Editorial,” vol.

2, no.1, 2). At the same time, he expands submission guidelines for essay length from 500–1,000 words ("Editorial," vol. 1, no. 3) to 2,500–3,000 words. ("Editorial," vol. 2, no. 3), encouraging more in-depth examinations. This issue is also where he explains the function the Board of Editorial Advisors (i.e. the editorial board), which, he claims,

is what makes us respectable as a professional publication. . . . Because the articles we publish have been read and approved by a panel of knowledgeable and respected people in the field, publication in the *WPA Newsletter* can be cited with confidence on our authors' curriculum vitae. For the same reason, you (and I) can feel assured that our shared communication through this medium is well informed and reliable as well as (one hopes) readable and helpful. (3)

After the transition from newsletter to journal, Bruffee goes on to echo this sentiment almost verbatim in the editorial included in the first issue of the newly-christened *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, where he re-asserts the function of the "knowledgeable and respected people" who form the board as well as the journal's status as a "refereed publication" and the "result [that] publication in *WPA* can be cited with confidence on our authors' curriculum vitae" ("Editorial," vol. 3, no. 1, 7). Even while framing the journal as a mechanism for propagating practical information within the field, then, Bruffee positions it for intelligibility by an external scholarly audience.

These seemingly colliding forces are brought together in the service, I would argue, of a professional organization's larger goal: building community. Sensitive to both the in-field service his journal performed and the outward face it presented to the larger academic world, Bruffee understood the ways in which a journal helps to build community for its parent organization: "In short, the newsletter of an organization such as ours, as I see it, is one method of 'bonding' this nationwide group of people with common interests." ("Editorial," vol. 2, no. 3, 4). Resolving these tensions in a community focus that builds WPA skills and an external focus on appearing scholarly reveals Bruffee as a community builder whose careerlong focus on the intellectual power of collaboration and the productive workings of groups manifests in his editorial work.

To close with a few caveats: in my exploration of Bruffee as editor, I have attempted to avoid ascribing personal intentions which are, of course, unavailable to me; as *Teaching English in the Two Year College* editor Holly Hassel has described in a riff on M. H. Abrams, unable to evidence whether Bruffee worked to be a mirror reflecting the best that has been thought and said in WPA studies or a lamp, illuminating previously neglected avenues

of inquiry. The archive of editing is a slim one, alas, and until we develop robust archives as Ostergaard and Nugent propose, we often can only turn to the published record, read contextually for editorial actions, and honor contributions, such as those of Kenneth Bruffee.

NOTES

1. Presumably, this refers to the predecessor to this journal, *WPA: A Newsletter for Writing Programs* whose second and final issue appeared in 1978 and was edited by Robert T. Farrell (1938–2003) of Cornell University. The first issue of this periodical is unavailable in the archive.

2. Here Bruffee refers to the resources Brooklyn College committed to supporting his work with the writing division of MLA and to the founding of CWPA.

3. Thanks to Neal Lerner for providing the transcript of this interview.

4. The earliest portion of *WPA Newsletter* available in the CPWA online archive is the first two pages of volume 1, number 2 (1978).

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