Celebrating the Contributions of Doug Hesse

Molly Ubbesen

As a dissertator in rhetoric and composition at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, I celebrate the influential work of Doug Hesse as it shapes the way we teach writing and direct writing programs. Hesse is currently professor and executive director of writing at the University of Denver, and he edited *WPA*: *Writing Program Administration* from 1994-1998. His former roles include president of NCTE, chair of CCCC, president of CWPA, and chair of the MLA Division on Teaching. He has published over 70 articles and chapters and co-authored four books. Somehow, he also finds time to sing with the Colorado Symphony chorus and to hike the Colorado foothills religiously. This interview illustrates the expanse of Hesse's valuable contributions to the journal and the field.

Molly Ubbesen: I read your article "We Know What Works in Teaching Composition" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* a couple years ago when I was in the middle of reading for my preliminary exams, and it became an anchor for me as I was getting lost (perhaps productively) in all the approaches of composition studies. Your article still sits as a reference on my desk as it reminds me why I teach composition and the significance of how I teach it. It also serves as a reminder that I will have to continue justifying this significance to others outside of the field. Why do you think we still need to justify this and how do you accomplish that with such eloquence?

Doug Hesse: I appreciate the kind words. Any eloquence that might be in my writing (and most days it doesn't feel like it), comes through endless revision, down to the level of sentences. It's revealing that I just spent nine hours writing a three-page memo to the faculty at the University of Denver; it was a high-stakes piece, certainly, but I fussed and fussed, and that's par for me.

As for the need to explain writing, learning, and teaching, it's pretty much a Sisyphusian task. It's frustrating that our research goes unnoticed, and it's maddening every time someone "discovers" writing, Christopher Columbus-like, and offers "practical" advice for teaching it, usually in the form of handing down rules and calling for discipline. The ubiquity of writing conceals the difficulty of doing it well—and the sheer amount of purposeful practice needed to get there. No one complains about the level of cello performance in America because people aren't walking around all day with bows in their hands.

MU: Explain your approach to editing the journal. How did it differ from other editors' approaches?

DH: Editing was more casual than I think it's been for editors since. I took a pretty light touch as an editor once I'd accepted a piece; generally, the writing was good, and I thought it important to hear the writer's voice as much as possible. There was peer review, of course, but I can only remember a few cases of "revise and resubmit." I'm guessing the volume of submissions was a fraction of what it was now, and there were very few graduate students in the organization, let alone submitting work.

MU: What challenges did you face during your editorship and how did you navigate those?

DH: The main challenge was production. A quarter-time grad assistant and I managed the submission process as well as the editing, design, printing, and proofing. Then mailing was a tedious process that took up a day on my living room floor, stuffing and stamping envelopes and affixing mailing labels. It was fun, though, to see the journal headed to people whose names I knew.

DH: In your first letter from the editor "The Function of *WPA* at the Present Time" (fall/winter 1994), you remarked that despite the growth of public digital forums, "there remains a place for the professional journal function" (6). Do you think the function of the journal changed throughout your editorship?

DH: I just published (March 2019) a long essay in *College English* that analyzed the state of journals in composition studies over the past thirty-five years. I think the publication of a journal issue is no longer an event, a signaled gathering place for the field's members marking our field's knowledge as it's nudged forward. Instead, articles exist as content, discoverable through searching, independent of binding,

and getting attention at points of need. Still, the journal function of extended writing over time, writing selected, edited, marked as worthy by the expert collective of an editorial board remains important.

I don't think *WPA*'s function changed very much over my four years, with perhaps a small, representative change that occurred soon after. I continued a tradition of running an annual compilation of all the composition textbooks published that year, a thumbnail description for each. That tradition ended after me, and it was probably time—though my researcher self misses the handy archival source. That change represented a transition from the journal as conveying information, which could now be done more regularly.

MU: You introduce readers to "the journal's first attempt at an e-mail directory of members" in your fall/winter 1995 letter from the editor (6). What was the initial purpose of this directory? How did it evolve?

DH: You have to remember that Mosaic, the first real internet browser, was released in beta form only in November 1992, so finding people's email addresses was a lot more of a challenge then. There was no Google, and WPA-L regularly had queries like, "Hey, does anyone know *X*'s email?" Organizations like MLA used to publish directories of members with contact information, the phone books of their day, so I thought that the journal and WPA could perform a service by offering a directory. People would send me their emails. It was obsolete in a few years, of course.

The really significant digital contribution coming out of my editorship was creating the first WPA site. Rather than making simply a journal site, I figured it would be more useful to have a site for the whole organization. So around 1997 or so, Bill Weakley, who was a grad student at Illinois State helped put one up. The act was terribly unofficial and presumptive, which made it easier. Without asking anyone, I wrote a basic mission statement for the home page, traces of which last today. And I just added the WPA site within my personal pages at ISU, which meant its inelegant address was http://www.cas.ilstu.edu/english/hesse/wpawelcome.htm. In 2002 or 2003, the Council bought a real domain, and folks at Purdue happily took over.

MU: The spring 1996 issue offers a cluster of articles all on TA training, including what you allude to in your introduction as a "much needed review of TA training programs across the country" that was written by Kate Latterell (6). Why did you feel this was so needed at the time?

What kind of work on TA training would you like to see develop in the journal?

DH: By the mid-90s WPA work had well made the transition from a managerial enterprise handing down local lore and practice to new TAs learning mostly on the job, to an intellectual enterprise that situated local practices within larger scholarly contexts. This meant more complex possibilities for TA "training" (a convenient, if problematic term), than a lot of how-we-do-it-here. As people were looking to build support for new teachers, often with budgetary implications, knowing good precedents around the country was important.

As for work today, I think the higher priority is how to better support part-time and adjunct faculty in terms of professional development; given their particular needs and circumstances, what kinds of opportunities do they need—and would they like to contribute?

MU: Under your editorship, the fall/winter 1996 issue includes a draft copy of the WPA Executive Committee's statement *Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administrators*, and the subsequent issue includes several responses to it. What was happening in the field at that time to necessitate this scholarly discussion?

DH: By the mid-nineties, WPA work had largely made the transition from a managerial practice that "anyone" with a good sense of organization could do to intellectual work, where practices needed to be steeped in specific knowledge. WPA work was relegated to "service," typically the most undervalued of the promotion trio, and yet it was different from serving on committees, advising, etc. The "Intellectual Work" statement, then, offered a way to translate those aspects of WPA effort that were truly performing disciplinary knowledge into ways that could make sense to promotion committees.

At the same time, MLA was producing "Making Faculty Work Visible," which was quite similar in spirit, and I've cited both documents over the years when I'd done external reviews for promotion and tenure. It's important to recognize that "Intellectual Work" is not only an advocacy document but also a call to WPAs to perform to high professional standards: actually, to do work that manifests disciplinary knowledge and expectations. At the same time the statement was explaining our work to others, it was defining what that work should be.

MU: In your "Good-bye and Thanks" note at the end of the spring 1998 issue, you wrote, "My main lesson as editor, and I share it inadequately

now, is that the personal can and should not be cleaved from the professional. Performing the right balance is perhaps the WPA's toughest role. Collaborative work, as reflected by the pieces in this issue and by the new co-editorship, promises a way of getting it right" (215). Why was this your main lesson at the time, and is this still your main lesson in retrospect?

DH: Mostly this was a personal indulgence. I'd been divorced a couple years earlier, and a significant contributing factor (though surely not the only one) was the all-encompassing way I'd thrown myself into the job. I was always grateful for how many of my colleagues both at ISU and in the profession helped me. In a larger sense, this statement reflected what I'd learned as a deep (albeit high-functioning) introvert and short-sighted stoic (both still true). I'd imagined the professional world to be about professional things, period, but I came to realize how work was not only happier with peer-colleague friends, also more productive when something in addition to technical interests is fueling it.

Beyond that, life is larger than the job, although the consuming seductions of WPA work can sure make it seem otherwise. As you get older, you increasingly realize that, and all those tired clichés like "no one ever died wishing they'd worked harder" actually seem true. It's really hard to strike a balance. I'm pretty sure I'm no model, but I'm trying.

MU: Are there any other lessons you learned that you would like to share with new scholars, WPAs, and editors in the field?

DH: Be a writer. That's largely inevitable, I know, with scholarly interests and workplace demands. But keep part of your writing life open to experiences beyond obligations, whether personal essays, op-eds, novels, journalism, even letters to friends. For years, Kathi Yancey and I have written back and forth on Saturday mornings, and I'm happy to know how the Florida State baseball team is doing and to tell her about hiking conditions on Guanella Pass. Sid Dobrin publishes articles in fishing magazines. That seems a perfect complement to everything else Sid writes, both extending his writing range and knowledge and leveraging his time on a boat.

Also, the most important word in our titles is "Writing." It's easy to get enamored of bureaucracies, both on campuses and in the profession. Being in the center of political decisions about all sorts of matters is exciting. It's important work that can make people feel important.

However, if the managerial aspects and administrative aspects of the job are most captivating, I suggest that an MBA opens more lucrative opportunities for practice than does a PhD.

Our expertise and efforts should be devoted to understanding and teaching writing.

Works Cited

Hesse, Douglas. "Good-bye and Thanks." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 21, nos. 2–3, 1998, pp. 215–16.

—. "Journals in Composition Studies, Thirty-Five Years After." *College English*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2019, pp. 367–96.

—. "Letter from the Editor." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 19, nos. 1–2, 1995, p. 6.

—. "Letter from the Editor." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1996, p. 6.

—. "The Function of *WPA* at the Present Time." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 18, nos. 1–2, 1994, pp. 6–7.

—. "We Know What Works in Teaching Composition." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 January 2017. chronicle.com/article/We-Know-What-Works-in-Teaching/238792.

MLA Commission on Professional Service. "Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literature." *Profession*, 1996, pp. 161–216.

WPA Executive Committee. *Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administrators: A Draft*. CWPA. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 20, nos. 1–2, 1996, pp. 92–103.

Molly Ubbesen is a dissertator in rhetoric and composition with a graduate certificate in women's and gender studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM). In her dissertation, she connects disability studies with writing program administration and composition pedagogy to create a culture of access for more effective teaching and learning. Her experiences mentoring new teachers as the English 101 coordinator, teaching college and high school English courses, tutoring at the UWM Writing Center, and facilitating the accessibility working group inform her dissertation.