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The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist

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# The **W**riting **P**rogram **A**dministrator as Theorist

**Making Knowledge Work**

Edited by Shirley K Rose & Irwin Weiser

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## 1

**Ideology, Theory, and the Genre of Writing Programs**

Jeanne Gunner

In studies of the institutionalization of composition—in the works of Susan Miller (1991), Robert J. Connors (1997), and Sharon Crowley (1998), for example—writing programs typically appear as the conventionalized structure that is the eventual institutional context for what we take to be the historical foundation of the field, the required freshman course. In such works, writing programs seem little more than the background setting for the work of composition. The history of composition instruction explains this foregrounding of course over program: writing programs are in fact a later historical construct, emerging many decades after the widespread institutionalization of the first-year writing course. But by a particular historical point—by the early 1970s, certainly—the first-year course began to be administered through increasingly elaborate institutional forms. The course was separated from a general English department curriculum and set off into a formal writing *program* characterized as much if not more by administrative practices than by a set of coherent disciplinary offerings, as in a Women's or American Studies program, for example. What this (neglected) history means is that the work we do *in* writing programs and *as* writing programs, as writing program administrators, exists in relation to a social construct not entirely commensurate with a given course or courses, and so not entirely explained by the historical studies on first-year composition.

In our attempts to theorize our work in and as writing programs, as well as to articulate particular theoretical orientations for the writing instruction sponsored by our programs, a primary concern should be consideration of the social institution that writing programs materially constitute. If writing programs are meaningful social structures and sites of meaning making—if they are more than a value-free housing of the first-year course—then they are ideological entities, and the writing program theorist is necessarily engaged in ideological work. Indeed, the daily business of writing programs seems preeminently ideological: in their everyday practices and policies, they embody, enact, and

reproduce a set of beliefs that take discursive and material form at sites of cultural power. They are economic units charged with cultural work.

Because definitions of ideology are themselves ideologically interested, I should clarify immediately that I use this term in a way derived from Terry Eagleton, who argues that we must differentiate ideology from culture: “[I]deological’ is not synonymous with ‘cultural’: it denotes, more precisely, the points at which our cultural practices are interwoven with political power” (1991, 11). Ideology in this sense—as practices mediated by political power—forms a kind of cultural operating system: it provides the unstated codes that determine the functions and manner of functioning of any given operation within a social unit. Ideology thus *precedes* not only practice, but also theories of practice, and theory in general, since theory evolves from and is a way of describing, predicting, and/or explaining phenomena. However we taxonomize theory—critical, rhetorical, compositional, political—and however we attempt to locate or apply it, to the writing program as a social entity or to composition courses, we do so within an already existing ideological operating system that controls the material effects of theoretical work. In concrete and historically specific terms, I can point to my own institution’s theory of education: it is a liberal arts–based school dedicated to (in its mission statement language) educating the “whole person” within an ethic of service and social justice. As a member of this community, however, I can, by examining the material discontinuities between theory and practice, see ways in which larger ideological values limit tolerance of linguistic/cultural diversity, allow for gender inequity, promote economic privilege among already privileged groups, and so on. The institution’s educational theory is mediated in practice by more powerful ideological forces.

In the same way, the structure—the social genre—of the writing program semiotically and materially precedes the program’s theoretical base. As a consequence, theories that come into being within, or are imported into, established writing programs are already discursively constrained: they will comply with or be contained by the larger ideological structures and purposes of the program. Basic writing theory, for example, has shifted from remedial models of student incompetence to models of contrastive cultural and linguistic literacies (in the work of such theorists as Bartholomae, Bizzell, and Lu), and empirical studies have demonstrated the validity of curricular mainstreaming (Soliday and Gleason; Grego and Thompson). But neither theory nor research findings have disrupted the dominant ideological models of linguistic (in)competence, as recently remounted attacks on access and remedial courses and increased demand for “competency” testing show. Theory-informed shifts within writing programs—to rhetorically and culturally based curricula and learning outcomes, for instance, which I take to be some common goals of theoretically informed programs—are equally likely to have little effect on the larger ideological values that form the programs we administer and in which we teach.

Theories developed and applied within an unexamined system of cultural power thus seem to remain insular—to obtain within a limited curricular sphere only; theory remains subject to the ideological forces that organize experience. And theory without ideological critique creates the ideologue, a purveyor/enforcer of governing principles that, in all likelihood, govern invisibly and so cannot come up for question and challenge (as I later illustrate with an early writing program experience of my own). My starting point in this essay, then, is the claim that the writing program is a social construct that helps establish and reproduce ideological values, and that its ideological work exceeds the program of courses it administers; it is therefore likely to be resistant to change via “theory” alone.

The project of theorizing the writing program—studying its historical elements and operations and developing an explanatory and critical system for reshaping it—is thus constrained by the program’s ideological context and formation as an institutional genre. How can we, as WPAs, find power to intervene in the material effects that emerge from writing program practices? If, historically, the discourse of writing programs begins *after*—if the writing program is a later structural development than the institution and, in most cases, the department (and the modern form of the WPA position historically comes after program formation, further alienating the WPA from program form)—then it comes into existence in the wake of culturally sanctioned assumptions about language and in the fullness of already established cultural and institutional values. Any change to the ideological context, therefore, is likely to happen in concert with larger historical change, and any agency we may have is likely to be found in understanding the historical moment. What might emerge from such conceptual work is the WPA’s potential for material agency. I hasten to add that I do not intend to claim that a single methodology will lead to an ideal program state. We inevitably ground our choices on shifting and conflicting values; our local conditions change in ways that exist beyond any sphere of our influence, and historical forces affect us, if less clearly and if unpredictably, over time. But ideological awareness at least lets us form our theories and make our decisions in relation to real factors and conditions. Should a program seek independent status outside the English department? Can a system of self-placement dislodge a poorly conceived placement testing system? Should a common text or syllabus be adopted? Which administrative battles ought to be fought, which deferred? A WPA facing such choices will perforce be operating out of a theoretical model; how carefully and consciously formulated, however, and how effective in outcome, to a large degree depends on a WPA’s ability to connect theory with the ideological forces at work, in the program and in the local institution. Analyzing a program’s ideological imperatives and its shaping historical forces, a WPA may better be able to develop a materially effective theory of program operations.

## The Genre Function of Writing Programs

That theory is embedded within an ideological web becomes obvious when we begin to theorize the concept *writing program*. What do we mean by this term? If used to name an academic course of study, in many institutions it then refers to a single required first-year writing course—in itself, hardly logical to call a program, as John Trimbur (1999) has argued. If by *program* we mean all the administrative activities attending enrollment of students in this required course, then the academic foundation of the concept falls away. A phrase from Edward M. White's *Developing Successful College Writing Programs* (1989) stays with me because of its very strangeness to my ear: he refers at one point in his introduction to "writing instruction programs" (xvii). I had never heard this phrase before; the insertion of *instruction* within the term *writing program* struck me as novel, unfamiliar, almost neologistic. Trimbur varies the phrase to propose "programs of study in writing" (1999, 11), but each formulation seems equally alien to the historical use and meaning of the term *writing program*, which elides such academic values as instruction and study. The definition of a program as an academic course of instruction and study is likely to apply when we are referring to a specialized field, and such a program requires administration, but the necessary administrative tasks are clearly supporting structures for the central academic goals; the defining work in such a program is curricular (and, as with gender studies programs, openly political). The defining work in a writing program is traditionally administrative; curriculum is subsumed to more prominent operations, and the cultural work a program does and is controlled by is almost completely obscured by these formal attributes. An administrative program serves a different agenda than does a primarily academic program of instruction and study. Instruction happens within the confines of the writing program, certainly, but instruction does not name the program's purpose in a way that even approaches equivalence. *Program* in this sense exceeds the instructional, the curricular. What, then, fills the program space?

We can answer this question by listing the usual administrative tasks of a writing program: testing, placement, grade dispute adjudication; TA preparation, faculty development, evaluation; curricular development, assessment; and so on. By doing so, we may account for much, though not all, of the space. But so defining *writing program* raises questions about purpose within an academic institution. Why is the value placed on the administrative instead of the academic, if truth claims are made in academic, disciplinary ways? Why might a program shift so heavily away from the academic into the administrative—why might administrative tasks become the primary set of operations? Why make administration visible in this way? Who benefits from this foregrounding of administrative activities? The extended nature of the writing program's administrative tasks and titles suggests a panoptic design; who, in this case, is the agent of surveillance? And why is knowledge so devalued in and by this panoptic

structure? Is it that the structure contains and constrains the knowledge, forming a barrier between it and its institutional location?

In “The Genre Function,” Anis Bawarshi argues for “genre theory and analysis as a method of inquiry” (2000, 335). Examining writing programs as a genre, a social and institutional genre, yields some fairly familiar answers to questions about program purpose. In their social and institutional setting, writing programs as a genre serve both an ideological and hence also epistemological function; they help structure a relation of language and culture. They help establish the cultural rules for language use, what its cultural work is: how we are to form categories of language users; how we are to hierarchize discourses; how we are to correlate specific discourses with ability and social worth; how we are to validate the differences produced. As a genre, writing programs authorize a discourse in which writing is already fetishized—it is already endowed with special cultural meaning and social importance, for the genre itself predetermines a focus on writing as an activity in need of surveillance, producing a valence system of competence/incompetence and thus social differentiation. By their very existence, writing programs establish the value of writing as it is ideologically defined, and they administratively reproduce this ideology in a way unrelated to their “content”—their theoretical, curricular, and pedagogical work. As a genre, they function by presence but also by absence: the lack of a writing program at elite schools is a sign of eliteness, because the valence function and gatekeeping the writing program enables has in these schools been enacted at a more rarefied level. Because the ideological work performed by writing programs is in such schools unnecessary, their material presence is as well—their form has no function in such locations.

As a genre, writing programs are thus clearly formalist in nature, and hence their administration-heavy shape: their shape follows their tracking purposes. Their form supersedes content and “naturally” reflects an order inherent in language use: a major social purpose of writing programs is to help tease out the “natural” differences among groups of language users (see Horner and Lu 1999, who analyze the material processes by which writing program practices constitute these groups). What happens within the (limited) curricular space has little connection to the material existence of the writing program as an institutional genre; its existence is a physical assertion of the social role of language use, a privileging of certain discourses. If the courses offered under its aegis aid individual students in developing their language abilities, then the structure provides a bonus in excess of its purpose, for its primary function is found in its material existence alone. And by virtue of certain key operations—placement practices, for example—a program’s most important ideological work is done before any instruction begins. In their remedial origins (see Berlin 1987; Brereton 1995; Connors 1997), writing programs cemented an agenda to use language difference as the basis of social difference—an ahistorical, synecdochic use of language reified for ideological purposes, language as measurable and

relative to social worth. And writing programs serve a naturalizing function; they both produce the “need” they serve and make their existence thereby seem naturally necessary.

In examining the conservative nature of writing programs as forms, I find myself continually returning to Sherrie Gradin’s essay, “What Happens to the Writing Program Administrator When the Writing Requirements Go Away?” (1997). In her account of one program’s experience with the rescinding of required writing courses, what stands out is the apparent indifference to the program the loss of these courses made. This is not to say that the WPA and others in the program and the students who took its courses were unaffected; Gradin gives a vivid account of the long-term disruption all faced when the required courses were reconfigured as part of a general education program. But the program and WPA position not only were undiminished by the loss, they actually expanded in scope and university visibility. The WPA work continued to include teaching in writing-intensive and graduate composition courses, but new and broader demands were made in administrative areas—in placement, assessment, university service, and staff/faculty training. Even after abolition of the requirements, the genre function remains.

Programs thus do not simply reflect but actually constitute social and epistemological categories. The particular expressions of a genre—a particular lab report within scientific discourse, for example—may shift in specific conventions, but they continue to impose the dominant paradigm of the genre. Thus, courses can change in curricular values, pedagogies can be developed that center on students, and requirements can be abolished, all without fundamentally altering the epistemological order their larger genre creates. Whether they exist as WAC programs, basic writing programs, Freshman English programs, or some other configuration, writing programs still function according to the ideology of administration of produced and reproduced student difference; they still produce effects in the forms of exploited labor, testing, assessment/surveillance, and other “ills,” as Sharon Crowley (1998) has noted. Writing programs are productive and effective, then, but in ways that operate without our direction, as the historical sequence of course–program–director shows. One of the functions of the writing program is to limit WPA control.

## Program Ideology and Professional Identity

*Jeanne,*

*I have ordered a book for your section, since I have no confidence that you know what the program here is. . . .*

*Barbara*

Over twenty years later, the memory of this hand-written note still rankles. I was a TA assigned to teach the freshman writing course at one of the colleges that make up Rutgers University. While I had not taught the required freshman

writing course at this particular campus before, I had been a TA for three preceding years at two other campuses, including the main campus, the home of the central writing program. My commitment to teaching, strong student evaluations, excellent reviews—all not only called into question, but also effectively erased by this person with no confidence in my knowledge. This incident was, I think, my first conscious experience of subject formation: my own sense of myself as an instructor and the official means by which I had come to claim instructional credibility—teaching portfolio, student evaluations, faculty review—were without force in this new discursive regime. My history as a writing instructor did not function as history within the program I had now entered, and so it—and so I—had no authority. The program coordinator was the authorizing body, and because she did not know me, she formed me as a new instructor, defined as one who had not demonstrated the capacity and willingness to enact the program she had designed, and whose credibility had to be established via such replication.

Allowing and encouraging this authorizing function were the disciplinary conditions surrounding the position: in the late 1970s into the early 1980s, emerging research in rhetoric and composition had yet to inform the university's writing programs, meaning that no body of disciplinary knowledge served as a foundation for the program's curricular, pedagogic, and administrative practices. The program had a theoretical base; this theory was, however, unarticulated, and thus not open for critical questioning. But even if I could at the time have used the terminology now available—*current traditional, modes-dominated, foundationalist, skills-based, imitative*; and even if I had then had the terms for a countering theory—*social constructionist, rhetorical, process-based*—I would still have been lacking the means to argue for change, a strategy for shifting the power relations, not simply to benefit myself, but to question a set of what I believed to be detrimental assumptions about teaching and learning writing. Theory would not have helped me, because I would still have been lacking the means to ideological critique, an understanding of the embeddedness of the practices I wished to see disrupted. Theory alone would have had no authority; confined to classroom practices and what today would be called program mission statements, any theory would have had to operate within the same ideological structures of the discursive regime, for standing behind the regime were cultural assumptions about language and writing, given ideological force by their institutionalization as requirements and standards.

Where theory remains academic—where it exists as a later feature added to an existing program—then, logically, the program is always prior to it and determining of it, and the program's ideological situation/situatedness cannot come into question. In the concrete terms of my TA experience, to challenge Barbara's formation of me as an inexperienced teacher in her regime would have required not simply an ability to articulate a competing curricular and pedagogical theory but to understand the ideology supporting her managerial practices, the larger institutional system of power, and, in turn, the larger ideological

systems informing higher education, its then-current views on linguistic competence, and the administrative practices all of these structures authorized as the appropriate means of enacting these values. And then I would have had to discover or invent the means to effect change at some critical point(s) of these operations.

Lest this anecdote seem personally petty (or *only* personally petty), I should note the very detrimental effect this person's system of program direction had on my teaching. Within the program discourse, I *became* inexperienced. I did not, in fact, know how to teach under such direction. I was required to incorporate a text that was unfamiliar to me (a novel I still consider a wretched one, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*) and that I was unable to connect to my own (admittedly nascent, largely research-uninformed) theory of composing. Located in Barbara's authority, my teaching became derivative, with the result that I was unable to respond to students as individuals learners; without authority, I could not meaningfully alter the theory of teaching and learning that predefined the course, a theory that totalized student writers—and writing instructors. The authority that formed me in this way was part of the larger ideology of the writing program, and in this and many subsequent professional experiences, I was aware of its effects, if not of the means to any agency within it.

The experience of new WPAs runs along the same lines of this subject formation process. Many of the stories in *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* (George 1999) are versions of how institutional power disrupts a stable sense of self, and many WPAs whose stories form the book identify, if indirectly, ideological structures that they were powerless to combat—that they were often unable to recognize—as the source of this disruption and alienation. Nancy Grimm describes the way her collegial identity was rewritten when she moved into a tenure-track position in her department: “Well-intentioned people who wanted to acknowledge my changed status . . . greeted me with, ‘Welcome to the department!’ [I was] being ‘welcomed’ into a department in which I had already worked ten years in a full-time staff position and seven years in part-time positions. . . . I had spent most of my working life in higher education, and I was still the new kid on the block” (1999, 19). The discourse of tenure-track appointment takes precedence over personal acquaintance, history, and formerly established credentials; these are all put into new relation with institutional values—they are reprocessed and redefined ideologically. In the same collection, Mara Holt writes about how her “first experience with theory . . . provided [her] with a way to make sense of [her] life, [her] experiences with political activism, and a vision of the possibilities for change” (1999, 29)—until, that is, she enters the world of graduate school, where the theory she had read and experiences she had had differed from those valorized in the program; she perceptively remarks, “My introduction to social construction had failed to teach me about power” (29). Credentials, authority, identity—all are subject to ideological context, and theory cannot by itself be the mediating agent.

Just as with instructors and WPAs, programs, too, find their authority over-written by master discourses deriving from predetermined definitions of writing, with theory seemingly powerless to intervene. Keith Rhodes writes, in a section subtitled “Good in Theory,” “[I]t comes down to this: many of our teachers still focus on grammar-based instruction, and some tend to use composition courses as mainly another place to teach New Critical literary study; and there’s really nothing I can do about it. . . . My notion is that we could be a stellar writing department; but no composition coordinator or director yet has been able to combine expertise with enough staying power to test the notion” (1999, 90–91). Research on the irrelevance of grammar-based curricula in writing programs dates from the 1970s; despite theoretical knowledge, such curricula not only persist but thrive in the new millennium, and writing programs and WPAs, even as they have gained professional status, have had minimal effect on national practice (and, as Rhodes notes, WPAs who attempt directly to impose theory on preexisting programs risk adding to the lore of failed WPA tenure bids—a direct form of institutional containment of theory). A material connection between the theories we embrace and institutional practice, values, and power eludes us.

## Toward Agency

I have thus far discussed the writing program as an ideological system of containment of theory/theorists and practice/practitioners, the functions of its genre. Perhaps WPAs within this system can become agents of change, however local, however seemingly minor, by working to disrupt the formalism of writing programs. If we have been shaped by the social genre of the program, perhaps change comes in moments that allow for discursive reshaping.

As Eagleton argues, change has a materialist base: consciousness is transformed by transforming the material conditions that create it (1991, 6). He also argues that “[i]deology is a matter of *discourse*—of practical communication between historically situated subjects” (11). The intermingling of discourses of differing cultural value, then, might be one way to elevate the power of the lesser-status discourse. If WPA discourse and the discourse of the field as well can in particular instances be tied to more culturally privileged and hence more powerful discourses, then we create a way to situate our theory so that it might have material force. Lessening the gap between master discourses and theoretical discourses is, perhaps, one way to gain the power to enact theory in material ways.

For one example, consider the issue of attitudes toward copyediting as a writing center function. The prevailing institutional view works against allowing tutors to edit student papers, and powerful cultural arguments are provided in the form of policies on academic dishonesty and plagiarism. But this view can be opened up to question within the university and writing program/writing center by setting this discourse against what at certain historical moments form

a larger, more powerful cultural need. As our culture confronts its multicultural identity, we see increased cultural pressure in certain places—in high-labor-demand fields such as engineering and technology, for instance—to relocate standard English and mechanical correctness to a less privileged location. Of course, such change, even as it demotes correctness as a status indicator, also makes it more of a commodity, one that can be provided by a service. But we may be able to use such moments of ideological ambivalence to create change in values and practices. If a change in the cultural fetishizing of correctness can be made, we can move theory and practice into closer relation—not because the discourse of rhetorical theory has been privileged, but, through an admittedly opportunistic strategy, because our theory and practices can be aligned with a more powerful cultural discourse: the professional/corporate world's pragmatic needs to relocate linguistic difference in a system of (multi)cultural worth, along with a technology-enthused dominant culture that is potentially ready to recognize an altered, broadened definition of *literacy*, one whose privileging of technological knowledge potentially rescripts linguistic competence.

This same process of alignment with a powerful discourse has figured in a local struggle to revise the language of student learning outcomes in our freshman composition program. Some faculty objected to—indeed, passionately contested—a phrase in the revised outcomes that asserted the social context of writing and a need for attention to cultural diversity in our courses, two changes supported by social constructionist theory. Linking these phrases to the authorizing discourse of the university's mission statement, which heavily emphasizes commitment to social justice and cultural diversity, was the beginning of a process of making visible a gap between theory and ideology, in our program and on our campus: would we be bound by the mission statement's theory? If not, how would enactment of the theory be subverted? Opponents to inclusion of the phrase "cultural diversity" brought in the discourse of academic freedom—a discourse tied to individual rights. The university invokes the discourse of community and inclusion, however, establishing the terms of open debate; here and now, what is the relation of community good and individual freedom? While aligning ourselves with the professional discourse of research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition enabled us to save the phrase related to the social context of writing, we ultimately were forced to delete the reference to cultural diversity. Because this campus resistance conflicts with the university commitment to diversity, this issue will get played out in discussions beyond the writing program, sponsored by a group charged with administering a substantial external grant for enhancing multicultural education at the university. If this more powerful group can align its institutional power with the school's educational theory, then this intertwining of powerful discourses may allow for material change in the writing program, in curricular and policy-statement form, which will then give power to the program's theoretical base. We may be able to speak not only from a devalued generic location—the writing program—

but also from the center of university power, and in a discourse that in critical ways lets us share in that power in ways that transcend our usual administrative role. We may be able to reshape the program's historical service "nature," its formalist-determined administering role, making it the site of active political leadership, connecting its work not back to its functions but outward to active cultural forces, changing its practices by claiming its social connections, breaking the form of the well-wrought program.

The limits of such agency are obvious, however. The available more powerful discourses may also valorize ideological discursive regimes that we may not wish to endorse or identify with. In a current instance, for example, a planned professional writing program, one we have carefully designed according to the rhetorical theory of professional communication, depends on its linking to the discourse of entrepreneurship and vocationalism. Our campus is located in the immense wealth of Silicon Valley and in the entrepreneurial capitalist ethic that has generated this wealth. In developing the professional writing program, we see the possibility of creating an intersection of program discourse and the more powerful discourse of technology and capital, thus potentially giving the program more power in the university. While this intersection opens up the possibility of agency for us, it comes at the risk of tying our work to corporatization, capitalist exploitation, and other ideological frames we would resist. But this clearly is also an opportunity to connect our theory with a more powerful frame, which may enable us to lessen the gap between theory and power, breaking down some of the constraining barriers between theory and program. We know that we must design means of resisting a vocationalizing of the program by tying rhetorical theory to the flexibility required in contemporary workplaces, for example, establishing a functional claim for the curricular elements that are most at risk if challenged by a discourse of functional preparation in "real world" skills—a conscious ideological analysis and theorizing with a material goal.

To the extent that ideology and rhetoric overlap—and both serve as epistemological systems as well as means of connecting discourse and the material world—then this discussion of WPA agency through ideological analysis is really a matter of rhetorical knowledge and rhetoricized practice. Susan Miller, describing the function of the writing program administrator, argues that "[t]his position is a switching mechanism, under pressure to transcode low-status practices into the highest institutional ideologies" (1991, 168). But she recognizes that the director and the program that he or she directs not only fill ideological functions but also serve as a conduit between the cultural groups and practices she terms "high" and "low." Therefore, the director has a subversive, transgressive potential. We operate within the conventions of the writing program genre, but the program need not be simply the backdrop for composition work nor be confined by and to program courses and administrative practices. The writing program is a space in which the material and the ideological meet, where theory can find its ground.

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