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ABSTRACT

One writing program administrator (WPA) is convinced that writing program administration constitutes, for the most part, "intellectual work," and that this intellectual work develops a specific kind of understanding that is particularly valuable to those who possess it. WPAs mediate daily between theory, practice, institutional necessities, and personal needs and values, and this can result in a particular kind of intellectual insight. This particular WPA finds that her 12 years of work have transformed the way she reads and analyzes texts and made her acutely conscious of how texts work in the world and how the writing of texts affects writers' lives. She has adapted rhetorical analysis to negotiate between the text, the world, and the writer in ways she would not have imagined a decade and a half ago. Her textual research has dealt with life writing. Her studies of exploration narratives and in particular her research on the papers of Elizabeth Agassiz investigate how genres of nonfiction like biography and exploration narratives were produced, how they have functioned in the institutional or professional contexts in which they circulated, and how they have positioned their authors as professionals. Agassiz's work on the biography of her husband, Louis Agassiz, suggests that developing this academic voice and academic presence was a good thing for her. Theorizing her own experiences with writing program administration has led this particular WPA to think about and shape her writing programs--WPAs know that programs are not developed, courses are not taught, and ideas are not generated without resting at least one foot in theory and one foot in this unofficial underbed of talk, feedback, and gossip. (NKA)

The Value of WPA Work: Theory, Practice, Discourse--and the Person.

by Linda S. Bergmann

The Value of WPA Work: Theory, Practice, Discourse--and the Person

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There is something grimly humorous in considering how the work of writing program administration enriches the intellectual life of the WPA at a time when this particular WPA is in the middle of writing a five-year program review, and her intellectual work as a WPA runs long into the evening and seems more like mindless drudgery than intellectual work at all. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the Writing Program Administration constitutes, for the most part, *intellectual work,* and that this intellectual work develops a specific kind of understanding that is particularly valuable to those of us who possess it. WPA's often think of themselves as having to do without the theoretical latitude we imagine is available to compositionists who are free from administrative responsibilities. There is a decidedly practical bent shared by those of us who work at WPA's; as we try to put ideas into practice in programs and institutions, we perch on the intersection between composition theory and disciplinary and institutional practices and politics, and our theoretical purity is inevitably sullied by the world of practice. As WPA's, we mediate daily between theory, practice, institutional necessities, and personal needs and values; I would like to argue that this work as "Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadors" (to appropriate the title of a recent collection of essays edited by Diana George) can result in a particular kind of intellectual insight – and that this is one of the great joys of working as a Writing Program Administrator.

WPA's use theory from keeping us from going too far along with the "institutional flow" of daily demands, and we use our practical experience and accumulated love to avoid investing too much faith in conclusions drawn from pure theory.

Today I am going to talk about two ways in which my work as a WPA has shaped my intellectual work. I have been a WPA since 1989, first at a small liberal arts college, next at a small, private engineering school, and now at a moderate-sized state university with a science and engineering mission. The first influence of my WPA work I am going to discuss is the biggest, but perhaps the most significant stretch: how WPA work has shaped the textual analysis that is at the heart of my work in rhetoric. Secondly, I will talk about how the understanding I have earned as a WPA has informed the approach I bring to writing program development.

I find that my twelve years of work as a WPA have transformed the way I read and analyze texts; they have made me acutely conscious of how texts work in the world, and how the writing of texts affects-for better or worse-writers' lives. I have adapted rhetorical analysis, then, to negotiate between the text, the world, and the writer in ways that I would not have imagined a decade and a half ago. My textual research has for the most part dealt with life writing – that is, with biographies, autobiographies, and personal letters. I examine the relationship between personal narrative and public discourse, and more particularly the relationship between scholarship and personal development. My studies of exploration narratives and in particular my research on the papers of Elizabeth Agassiz investigate how genres of nonfiction like biography and exploration narratives

were produced, how they have functioned in the institutional or professional contexts in which they circulated, and how they have positioned their authors as professionals.

These research questions, as far as I can tell, derive at least in part from my observations of and interventions in the writing practices of the faculty and students I work with. I derive from my work as a WPA a way of looking at writing as doing work in the world that transcends – or transgresses – the boundaries of the text. For example I argue that Elizabeth Agassiz's published works established her as a public presence – as a personage and as a nascent professional woman – in an era in which vocations and trades were becoming professions. This work with nineteenth-century texts, in turn, also influences the structure and goals of the WAC program and Writing Center I direct.

Writing was for the most part *good for* the nineteenth century writers I have studied – it paid off in professional standing and prestige – and I expect it to be good for my students in similar ways. In other words, I am convinced that learning to write can help students develop a public voice and a public presence – and that this is a good thing for college students to be doing.

Let me focus for a minute on how writing working in the life of Elizabeth Agassiz. Elizabeth Agassiz (1822-1907) was the wife of one of the most famous scientists of the mid-nineteenth century, the Swiss émigré Louis Agassiz, who came to Harvard in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1865-67, Elizabeth Agassiz accompanied her husband on his major expedition to Brazil, and kept the diary which served as the basis for the expedition narrative they published in 1868. After her husband's death, she wrote his *Life and Letters* (published in 1885) – at the same time she was working to found Radcliffe College, of which she became the first president. In my study of Elizabeth

Agassiz's writing the *Life and Letters*, I argue that with the creation of an impersonal and professional biography of her husband (as compared to a personal memoir), she steps out of the space of "wife," transforming personal space into literary space and private life into public life. By writing the book like a scholar, rather than like a raconteur, she situates herself as her husband's equal in the text. While at once editing and arranging his letters to represent him more as a disembodied intellect than as the gregarious charmer and occasional charlatan his friends knew him to be, she adopted for herself a narrative presence that was detached, disinterested, and professional. This was a presence she needed, not only as a biographer, but also as a leader- even a promoter - in her concurrent project of founding Radcliffe College as a place where women could earn a Harvard degree. Producing a biography of her husband that was respected for its "truth value" and that cast her with the voice of a disinterested scholar may have served Elizabeth Agassiz as a way of putting her husband's life to rest and shaping the public memory of its significance. But, more importantly, writing a clearly "professional biography" of Luis Agassiz that showed him to be one of the "Great minds" of his time allowed the essentially uncredentialed Elizabeth Agassiz, who had no formal education herself, to access a certain "masculine" power in the increasingly professionalized university being brought into being by Harvard president Charles William Eliot. Through the efforts of Eliot – and of Louis Agassiz himself during his lifetime – the voice of the scholar had become the voice of authority in the institution that Elizabeth Agassiz was working to make available to women. All the evidence suggests that developing this academic voice and academic presence was a good thing for her – and for the women whose education she fostered.

In a very similar way, writing does good things in my world as a WPA. In addition to conveying and manipulating ideas and information, writing earns money, it makes and breaks careers, it burnishes reputations.

And here I am melding over into my second point, which is how theorizing my experiences with writing program administration has led me to think about and shape my writing programs. My ongoing work as a Writing Program Administrator ensures that I do not create a textual world of intellectual exchange separate from life any more that I try to carry out a working life that is uncluttered by ideas. Indeed, my work as a WPA ensures that I cannot imagine an abstract venue of textuality, and probably explains why I increasingly think about discourse in terms of "voice", although in a way very different from that in which an expressivist might conceive of it.

In an essay published a few years ago, "Women of Letters: Personal Narrative in Public and Private Voices," I argued that for academics in particular, our personal identities are formed in some very crucial ways by external valuations of things we write that are deemed worthy of public recognition – in the form of the academic degrees we earn, the papers we publish, the grants we receive. We all struggle with the tension between personal understanding and the development of a public voice, between meeting professional expectations and standards and expressing our particular take on ideas or events. For WPA's, this involvement with text and voice is perhaps even more intense than for other academics, because we are, in one way or another, responsible for devising programs that will bring students to a place in which they can begin to assume a public voice. Of course, few of my students will take on the public role of scholar, as Elizabeth Agassiz did, much less of college president; but most of them are aiming for professional

positions of one kind or another, and they are working at developing a public voice that is connected with – but not identical to – the voice of their personal selves. They need to try out voices – both oral and written – that will do things for them and earn them a respect akin to that which I enjoy. Ideally, of course, their voices will eventually allow them to participate in mature professional and social discourse communities, and, I would hope, not merely by imitating established discourse practices, but by extending the range and perhaps the register of those discourses.

Thus, my position as a Writing Program Administrator, situated as I am to see ideas about rhetoric and composition actualized–or betrayed–in institutional situations, has helped me to some understanding of how texts work-not just as internally coherent systems of signs, but as agents in the work of the world.

At the same time as my work as a WPA has made me see that work in the world is not a bad thing, it has also made me see how the institutional world within which writing programs exist works. The WPA has daily experience with how discourse functions to maintain the consensus and contention that bind people into communities. More over, in addition to responsibility to composition as a discipline, we have responsibility to a program and to the institutional mission of the university – responsibilities that demand real accountability (you can see that I'm thinking about my five-year report again). Much of the research WPA's do as the authors in Irwin Weiser and Shirley Rose's recent book, The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher begins in local research, show and extend its findings to under disciplinary issues. A good part of our intellectual work, then, involves understanding how to put theory into practice, measuring how well those practices work, and devising new modes of

measurement when old ones cease to work. The WPA knows that no matter what the official reports say in professional voices, when programs are up and running, they are often profoundly shaped by unacknowledged institutional contexts-the background of students, the inclinations of faculty, the particular politics of institutional governance and the alliances and enmities a program fosters. These contextual factors are more apt to be made audible in talk in the corridors and the chat on e-mail lists than to be made visible in more formal publications; in this "private" talk, moreover, we are more apt to bring up some uncomfortable discrepancies-often exacerbated by political and personal tensions between what is supposed to take place in writing courses and what actually happens. WPA's know that programs are not developed, courses are not taught, and ideas are not generated without resting at least one foot in theory and one foot in this unofficial underbed of talk, feedback and gossip. My work as a WPA has made me see that this private talk is also a part of any piece of discourse – a counterpoint to its public voice – and this understanding of intertextuality I expect to lead me to an even more interesting understanding of texts and the composing processes of the writers who produce them.

I started this talk with the grim humor of writing about intellectual life at the very moment I am drudging my way through the myriad details of compiling a major report. I am reminded of the passage in Henry James' biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne in which he lists all the "stuff of civilization" that Hawthorne's America lacked – no castles, no cathedrals, no abbeys, no great schools, and the list goes on. James asks what America had left for a romancer like Hawthorne – and fixes on its close - kept secret – its humor. The work of a WPA may be figured to have similar lacks – no great theories comes to mind – but for us, like for Hawthorne, there is much that is left. We have an ability to

circulate theory through practice and practice through theory that may constitute a humor – or a theory – of our own. And that is one of the many things that I find good about being a writing program administrator.

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