

# Cross Postings: Disciplinary Knowledge-Making and the Affective Archive of the WPA Listserv

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As the future of the WPA Listserv (WPA-L) remains uncertain, this article reflects on the ways the WPA-L has functioned as an important site of disciplinary knowledge-making and emotion work for the field of composition studies. It examines the potential of the listserv format for democratizing participation in the enterprise of disciplinary knowledge-making and examines how perspectives and lifeworlds of a diverse field have come into contact on the platform. Such a dynamic showcases tensions, ongoing dialogue, and emotionally felt perspectives not often visible in (or sometimes erased from) traditional sites of scholarly publication.

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On April 28, 2021, Barry Maid, the longtime administrator of the WPA Listserv (WPA-L) wrote to the list announcing that upon (or shortly before) his retirement on May 15, 2021, all listserv operations and posting privileges would be (at least temporarily) suspended. This unexpected announcement occurred at a turbulent time in the listserv's history. Many had been questioning the usefulness of the platform and some had already suggested dissolving it entirely, arguing the hostility, racism, and sexism exhibited on the listserv left it unredeemable. Over the last several years, I have seen the WPA-L referred to on Twitter and Facebook as, among other things, "a dumpster fire," "a car crash you can't look away from," and "an irredeemable cesspool of everything that is toxic in the academy." I understand where these characterizations come from and why so many have questioned whether the listserv could remain a productive site of conversation and resource sharing. Like many others, I have been shocked and infuriated by messages and conversational turns that have taken place in heated threads. I am thinking, for instance, about the discussion of Vershawn Ashanti Young's CFP for the 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication that (d)evolved into a debate over the legitimacy of codeswitching and codemeshing; about Michelle LaFrance's brave calling out of a culture of mansplaining on the listserv and the clumsy, sexist commentary that resisted her apt charge; and about the shouting match about Heterodoxy and whether rhetoric and composition as a field suffers from a lack of viewpoint diversity that inspired dozens of messages in early 2019. I am also thinking about the terrifying moment in which an anonymous user going by the name "Grand Scholar Wiz-

ard” wrote in to the list. Not only did this anonymous troll dismiss the significance of points being made by scholars of color as they engaged in a dialogue about issues raised in Asao Inoue’s 2019 CCCC Chair’s Address, this person did so under a moniker clearly inspired by racist and white supremacist rhetorics. These and similar threads have been examined, both directly and indirectly, in several recent publications, including in a *CCC* article by Marnie Twigg, a symposium in *Writing Program Administration* edited by Michelle LaFrance and Elizabeth Wardle, and in a book chapter by John Trimbur. These threads were also discussed extensively in a “Where We Are” dialogue published in *Composition Studies* in fall of 2019 between the recently-formed WPA-L Working Group and founders of the nextGEN listserv. While there was clear overlap in the philosophies of these groups, their responses could be read as a tension between reformers and revolutionaries, the former who sought to remedy the many problems of the WPA-L and the latter who suggested an exit and new build would be more appropriate and safer for many.

I saw the appeal of both of these responses. I read the threads inspiring these reactions—and the backchannel commentaries about them across social media—with great interest. I have been thinking about the listserv and its disciplinary functions for several years. While I understand why these moments inspired some to unsubscribe and to dismiss the value of the listserv entirely, these moments, rough as they were, further cemented my belief that the WPA-L should be seen as an important archive of disciplinary knowledge-making, one warranting further attention. To be clear, this article is not an apology for the listserv or the many members who have rightly been called out for their complicity in systems of racism and sexism in its threads; rather, it is a rumination on the types of knowledge and experience that could be encoded and archived through a digital platform that, at least theoretically, allowed a broader cross section of the discipline equal voice and opportunity for contribution. Specifically, I argue the listserv has functioned as an archive of affects, an archive of the felt impressions and vibrating emotional intensities surrounding the field’s work and the experiences of its members.

### **The WPA-L as a Site of Disciplinary Communication and Knowledge Making**

It is strangely difficult to research the extant scholarship on the WPA-L, because while there has been very little scholarly work focused specifically on the listserv, the platform and its conversations are referenced across hundreds of articles, book chapters, and monographs, most often as a site of invention or inspiration. Scholars discuss conversations on the WPA-L that motivated or supported their inquiries and the developments of their projects. In its twenty-eight-year history, the WPA-L has served as an invaluable resource

not only for writing program administrators but also for teachers and scholars of composition and rhetoric at all levels and from all institutional contexts who have used the space to dialogue about issues of the discipline. The WPA-L has been a central clearinghouse for disseminating CFPs for conferences, special issues, and edited collections; for advertising jobs, programs, workshops, and events; for distributing surveys and recruiting research participants; and for gaining, sharing, and making knowledge. In perhaps the only piece of published scholarship to examine knowledge-making on the WPA-L, Huiling Ding utilized a grounded approach to analyze posts from October of 2005 and identified nine categories of knowledge-making activities regularly occurring on the listserv. Ding writes, “the notable content generated via the list identifies this technology-mediated communication as a valid platform for intellectual contribution and innovation, in doing so expanding concepts of scholarly knowledge making as formal only” (118). Ding showcases the importance of informal knowledge-making taking place on the list, especially with the sharing of personal experience. Ding, however, does not consider the affective context shaping and performed through that work, which is also archived on the list. Examining the WPA-L archive reveals that knowledge-making is not just informal, tacit, and experiential; it is also emotionally loaded and felt, shaped by the affective contexts surrounding and inspired by the work.

After all, during its nearly three decades, the WPA-L has functioned as a site of conversation and community building. Members of the list celebrate promotions and publications, they mourn the deaths of scholars in the field, and they engage in storytelling about their personal and professional lives. It might be easy to forget this now in the age of social media and constant connection, but historically, these emotionally loaded relational functions of the listserv have been important for the field of composition and rhetoric because, as so many of our disciplinary histories have argued (Crowley, S. Miller, North), the short history of the field has regularly been marked by experiences of marginalization and struggles for legitimacy. These emotional experiences shape the work. Additionally, because practitioners in the field have often been isolated as the only (or one of only a few) composition and rhetoric specialist(s) in their home departments and because many in the field increasingly lack access to conferences (or sometimes even access to journals) due to funding constraints, institutional locations or adjunct or contingent statuses, the WPA-L has often been an essential way for individuals to find allies and advocates and to feel connected to the discipline and its current conversations, research, and political objectives.

The WPA-L archive is a unique site to study because it is one of the only places where one can witness members of the discipline respond to and dialogue

about issues en masse and in time. In the listserv archives, one can go back and read the emotional responses to elections, to the 9/11 terrorists attacks, to natural disasters, and to a whole host of cultural and disciplinary events. These conversations on the WPA-L are fascinating because the back-and-forth communication allows one to see numerous voices literally *in conversation*, and through that conversation, to see ideas developed, revised, confronted, contradicted, dismissed, and even attacked. With such a conversational dynamic, one is able to occasionally witness ruptures and breakdowns in the disciplinary civility typically characterizing published accounts of the field. These emotionally charged moments afford glimpses into the felt-realities of listserv participants and allow readers to witness theoretical discussions and generalizations about the field come into sharp contrast with the material circumstances and personal narratives of specific members of that field. Additionally, these listserv discussions are important for the field to confront because, in many ways, they have been the most open and publicly accessible accounts and representations of its field. Unlike the disciplinary conversations taking place behind the journal subscription paywalls of our field's publications or in the air-conditioned meeting rooms of our field's increasingly unaffordable conferences, the WPA-L and its archives have been freely and publicly accessible to anyone with an internet connection.

Just what counts as disciplinary knowledge-making in the field of composition and rhetoric has long been a contentious issue, one inspiring debates about what exactly "scholarly activity" looks like. These debates are often connected to larger conflicts about the purpose of the discipline. Often, this debate comes down to a tension between seeing composition and rhetoric as a pedagogically focused discipline and seeing it as a theory-building enterprise with an empirical research agenda. This is, of course, a false binary, but it has remained a tension active on the WPA-L. Each vision inspired conversation threads, and the varied perspectives often came to a head in heated moments on the listserv.

While the suggestion that the field's focus should extend beyond the domains of practice and pedagogy need not necessarily construct a hierarchy where pedagogy is positioned as the less significant form of intellectual work, that pattern often is inscribed, especially in the ways forms of intellectual work are rewarded with economic incentives and also with other forms of capital like publication, community prestige, and, of course, tenure and promotion. Such a division is even more fraught when considering its connections to issues of labor and institutional location, further dividing non-tenure track members and tenure track members of the field, and further separating the teaching-oriented work of both tenure and non-tenure track two-year institution faculty from the work of research and theory-building expected of tenure-track university

faculty. These divisions have been further magnified in the rather dismal employment landscape of today's academy, where "full- and part-time adjuncts, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows account for well over three fourths of all faculty appointments" (Schmidt). And a recent MLA report shows that closer to our own disciplinary home, "60 percent of faculty in English Department work off the tenure track" and "in two-year colleges, the figure rises to approach 80 percent of English instructors." In such an environment, the division between the practice-oriented pedagogical vision of the field and the theoretical and empirical research visions of the field become entangled in questions of privilege, access to resources, and employment security.

In *Constructing Knowledges*, Sidney I. Dobrin posits that "the debate [between theory and practice] emerges from a young field attempting to establish its identity. It is a political, philosophical issue, an issue . . . of where one stands. This becomes political and philosophical in that individual participants in the field must determine how the debate affects their participation—what knowledge they privilege" (26). The problem with Dobrin's characterization is its implication that both sides exist on a level playing field, and wherever "one stands," one might be able to be heard (and heard in a way that is counted and legitimized). In fact, this debate is more complicated. It is not just a problem of how to define the field; it is also a question of who gets to decide how it is defined and where such definitional work gets to be done, a question of who we remember to involve in these discussions. The very positionality of individuals in relation to this debate can sometimes prevent them from being a part of the conversation about what knowledge is privileged, especially in restricted locations of disciplinary discourse (like the pages of the field's academic journals). This makes examination of these debates on (at least slightly) more open, diverse, and democratic platforms like the WPA-L important. As Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano have argued in "Occupy Writing Studies: Rethinking College Composition of the Needs of the Teaching Majority," "not enough has been said in scholarly conversations about marginalization of open-admission and two-year campuses from professional dialogues even though such campuses are sites of engaging and essential work where almost half of all college students start their postsecondary educations" (117-118). Hassel and Giordano demonstrate convincingly that peer-review practices shaping participation in official platforms of disciplinary knowledge-making—whether in publication or presentations at the national conference of the field—often disadvantage two-year specialists. Even conferences—sites of disciplinary knowledge-making typically thought of as more open and accessible to individuals than the publications of the field—are found to be exclusionary in their study. At the time Hassel and Giordano published their article, they point out that of the 184 proposal reviewers named in the program for the

Conference on College Composition and Communication, only 4 (2%) were from two-year campuses.

The marginalization of teaching-focused members of the discipline is, of course, not a new problem. Speaking over 30 years ago (and relying on a problematic metaphor of indigeneity), Stephen M. North began his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* by directly addressing the conversation about who is granted the right to speak and who has been silenced in debates about disciplinary identity and purpose:

Composition has grown tremendously—has, really, *become* a field. But while this growth has been exciting, it has often seemed chaotic and patternless as well, and has had . . . major liabilities. The first is that the new investigators have tended to trample roughshod over the claims of previous inquirers, especially the ‘indigenous’ population that I will call the Practitioners. In other words, much of what especially teachers, and to lesser extent writers, have claimed to know about writing has been ignored, discounted, or ridiculed—so that, despite their overwhelming majority, they have been effectively disenfranchised as knowledge-makers in their own field. (3)

I want to be clear that I condemn the overly casual parallel North constructs between indigenous populations and practitioners, especially reading his words now, at a moment when the discipline is reckoning with ongoing marginalization of BIPOC scholars in our own field. However, North’s language of disenfranchisement is important, for it points to the way a majority of disciplinary members are not often granted the power, privilege, or access to share their knowledge or to take part in the shaping and defining of the field in ways that are recognized (a problem continuing today). Though organizations like CCCC, NCTE, CWPA, and others have articulated commitments to represent the voices and interests of members of the profession whose primary role is to teach, a look at the individuals leading such organizations and a look at who is published—and even afforded the ability to present at conferences—reveals that there remains a major problem of representation. As North argued decades ago, and as Hassel and Giordano demonstrate more recently, the “overwhelming majority” remains too often left out of the (more legitimized sites of) conversation. Thus, it is crucial to investigate parallel sites of disciplinary knowledge-making and conversation where a wider array of voices have been able to actively participate, platforms like the WPA-L. It is also crucial to consider how this broader disciplinary history shapes the emotional context and content of the conversations in these potentially more democratic venues.

Indeed, frustrations with what is privileged in official spaces of disciplinary knowledge making and tensions between research and practice regularly have erupted on the listserv in ways that reveal the affects shaping these conversations and the individually felt experiences of individuals. In fact, I see these tensions at play in many of the recent heated threads on the WPA-L. Given the still-heightened emotions surrounding those threads, though, perhaps turning to a slightly older example would be useful. In March of 2015, a thread emerged on the WPA-L responding to Adam Banks's CCCC Chair's Address entitled "Funk, Flight, Freedom." The WPA-L's discussion of Banks's address began relatively innocuously. Participants discussed the emotional impact of the talk and began unpacking its implications, especially Banks's call to "retire" the essay as the dominant genre we teach. At the same time, though, a parallel, more heated conversation developed questioning the very premise of the initial conversation—the premise that the essay (and print-based prose of students more broadly) continues to be a key form and intellectual concern of the field of composition and rhetoric. This was challenged early in the discussion in a response from Fredrik deBoer, the most active thread contributor (both in terms of number of messages and numbers of words). At that time of this discussion, deBoer was completing his PhD at Purdue University and was on the academic job market. deBoer responded to the discussion, explaining, "I was surprised to see so many react to the speech on Twitter as a call for the field to abandon the essay as a principal [sic] intellectual concern. That abandonment happened long ago. After all, how many panels at that very conference had anything to do with the essay, or with writing instruction in general?" (deBoer "Re: Video of Banks' Talk?"). DeBoer's responses to the thread focused on what he saw as a disciplinary move away from print-based composition and writing pedagogy, a move that unfairly disadvantaged doctoral students like himself who have focused on such work. In this moment—when deBoer had just been on the job market—the listserv functioned as an outlet for him to express his frustrations with the field and to speak back to the very people that might (or might not) have been hiring him, an opportunity graduate students on the market are typically not afforded.

deBoer's assertions were, of course, rightly challenged by several other listserv contributors, who pointed to the substantial body of scholarship in the flagship journals of the field that is focused on student writing and writing instruction. Kathleen Yancey, who at that time was relatively fresh from her tenure as editor of *College Composition and Communication* and thus had a personal stake in this conversation and deBoer's controversial charge, provided probably the most direct rebuttal to deBoer's argument, calling it "a pretty large overstatement" and then providing a list of articles that had appeared in *CCC* in the previous years as a counter to his assertions.

Outside of the listserv, deBoer's claims have also been refuted by empirically-based research projects, perhaps most notably by Benjamin Miller's dissertation *The Making of Knowledge-Makers in Composition*, an ambitious project examining 2,711 dissertations in composition and rhetoric published between 2001 and 2010. Miller specifically references deBoer's listserv claims about the lack of dissertations in the field focused on student writing and writing instruction. Counter to this assertion, Miller reveals dissertations centered on the teaching of writing actually accounted for the largest cluster of texts in his large study (nearly one-third). Miller discusses the significance of his findings in relation to the comments from deBoer:

Needless to say, heated email messages are not often known for their high standards of evidence; they are not refereed articles, and deBoer and others may have been simply glib in declaring the presence or absence of certain dissertation topics. Even so, claims like this were repeated and repeatedly grounded only in anecdote. My study, and future distant reading projects like it, provide a means of checking anecdotal impressions against a wider scope, rendering them either falsifiable or defensible. (70)

While it might be tempting to use research from scholars like Miller to simply dismiss and then disregard the arguments of deBoer in this listserv thread (or even to disregard the value of platforms like the listserv), I would argue that Miller's words help highlight an important function of the listserv as an archive of disciplinary knowledge-making. It is an archive of those "anecdotal impressions," those felt claims that might not survive the referee process. And those "anecdotal impressions" have impacts. They give a window into the feelings of the discipline or at least the feelings of members of the discipline. This is important and something worth paying attention to, for it might help us consider and think about how we relate to one another within this field, how and why divisions develop, and how we might better understand the psychological and emotional dimensions of the discursive and professional landscapes we traverse.

While these emotionally charged debates might be read as disciplinary problems, others have argued that such debates about knowledge-making are central to the discipline's success, rapid growth, and even core identity. In *Constructing Knowledges*, Dobrin argues that "in order for rhetoric and composition (or any field, for that matter) to evolve, debates concerning useful knowledge must proliferate" (19). Dobrin positions the debates within the field of composition and rhetoric as dramatically different from those of other disciplines, arguing that our field, unlike others, is at its most productive when it does not



reach any sort of consensus or resolution. Near the end of his book, Dobrin makes this point even more firmly, arguing that “as composition has searched for identity among this transformative amalgam of knowledge and within the academy, the theory debates have produced many advances in the field’s recent and rapid evolution” (155-156). Even a cursory look at the dynamic and often heated nature of the WPA-L conversations illustrates that these ongoing debates have remained a characteristic of the life of the discipline. And if, as Dobrin argues, this sort of antagonistic theory-building is central to the field’s evolution and distinctive disciplinary identity, then disciplinary sites like the WPA-L are imperative to study because the nature of the medium facilitates such back-and-forth dialogue.

If debate about identity and knowledge without resolution is, in fact, our field’s mandate and a key feature of its success and identity as a discipline, the question becomes how such work should be conducted. Dobrin argues that since “the *debate* has become crucial for all scholars on all sides” that “the responsible position compositionists [should] take in this debate is not one of moderator, not one of having answers, but one of teachers and scholars who must participate in practice and who must engage that practice through theory” (26). Thus, Dobrin suggests that compositionists need to engage in practices of genuine inquiry, continually participating in conversations about and reflecting on their practices and conceptions of the discipline. Dobrin helps to explain the importance of such work in his earlier discussion of the nature of theory:

Most often theory is organic, receptive to new observations, additional facts, further speculation. Theory accounts for experience and allows new experience to alter or contribute to the evolution of that theory. Theory provides a framework within which one can operate, ask questions, even alter or refine principles of that theory based on new experience, new observation. That is, theory does not allow itself to stagnate. It pushes and pulls its way to understanding how a set of phenomena, a field, a body of knowledge, operates. (8-9)

I like Dobrin’s account of organic theory-building and knowledge-making because it so closely resembles how really good conversations in the WPA-L archives progress. In those moments, queries are sent out, and they are met with narratives of experience and citations of research and existing theory. Individuals come together, wrestle with ideas, and share resources. And importantly, the participants in these conversations are diverse, coming at posed questions from a range of institutional contexts and perspectives, allowing more disciplinary stakeholders to participate in the knowledge-production of the field, not just those whose job titles specifically position them as “schol-

ars” or “researchers.” Then, in light of what is shared, original posters and responders alter and refine their ideas, often rethinking their positions. In such moments, you see individuals push on, resist, and expand their ideas and the ideas of the discipline in light of other voices.

### **Who Gets to Author a Discipline? (And Who Doesn't?)**

Still, the type of in-time and actively dialogic knowledge-making and theory-building found in the listserv archives is not what is usually imagined when one thinks about official histories and narratives of field, and it is important to question why this is, to consider the forces shaping whose voices are invited, recorded, heard, archived, and remembered and to explore the politics behind who gets to author a discipline and, perhaps more importantly, who doesn't. It might be more accurate to talk about the “politics” of these issues as political economies and material conditions that shape access, membership, status, power, and (abilities to make) contributions to the discursive landscapes of the discipline. In *Terms of Work for Composition*, Bruce Horner reflects on the material realities enabling and constraining participation in authorized forms of disciplinary knowledge-production. Drawing on A. Suresh Canagarajah, Horner argues that “while scholars have long recognized the ‘sociality’ of scholarly ‘knowledge-production,’ they have typically ignored the material constraints on such production” (223).

Horner makes clear that the ability to participate in disciplinary knowledge-making (at least in traditionally legitimized ways) is, largely, a function of privilege, and specifically privilege mediated by material realities, arguing quite convincingly that “lack of the availability to meet these ‘nondiscursive’ requirements makes it difficult for scholars to materially produce, send, and have their writing read by journals and publishers” (224). Horner calls on the field to recognize and confront the significance of “the small percentage of the field’s membership represented by the authorship of published essays and the lopsided (over two to one) ratio of male to female authors in scholarly journals” (225). And in addition to the troubling gender disparity that Horner points to, we should also be cognizant of the lack of representation of scholars of color, contingent faculty, and faculty in non-research roles.

Especially important for my work in this article, Horner’s text also showcases how our failure to attend to material realities shaping participation in official spaces of disciplinary knowledge-making both emerges from and further contributes to a product-based mindset. Horner describes this as a “commodified view of scholarship” and theory-making (225). Theory and knowledge, thus, become treated as consumable products rather than as generative and dynamic processes of idea-building. Perhaps this provides some explanation of why we might not ordinarily think about conversations from the WPA-L

archives as knowledge-making and theory-building; their ongoing, in-process nature feels counter to our typically commodified and product-based conceptions of such work.

A more typical product-based conceptualization of disciplinary knowledge-making is illustrated in projects such as Maureen Daly Goggin's *Authoring a Discipline*, which looks to the more exclusive and legitimized sites of knowledge-making (in her case, the major journals in the field) as a means of conducting disciplinary historiography. Given the fact that only a small percentage of the field publishes in scholarly journals, though, her choice in methodology, likely inadvertently, furthers the marginalization of some members of the field, neglecting entire segments of the discipline. Her project also continues to work under the type of product-focused conceptualization of knowledge-making that scholars like Horner have troubled.

Goggin “show[s] how journals, as one legitimating instrument of disciplinarity, function in a dialectical relation with a discipline” (xiv), explaining she elected to study journals and editors because they “provide an important window on disciplinary discursive practices” (xv). Further, Goggin argues journals function as one of the most important gatekeeping mechanisms of the field and play a central role in determining which avenues of inquiry, methodologies of investigation, and forms of scholarship are valued and centered in the field's attention. I certainly agree with Goggin's claims about the importance of journals in shaping a discipline, but I wish she did more to reflect on the *problems* of that reality. Moreover, though I admire Goggin's interest in “how journals . . . function in dialectical relation with the discipline” (xiv), it seems difficult to do that work, when, as Horner argues, so many disciplinary voices and perspectives are not represented in the pages of journals.

This problem seems doubly troubling given Goggin's decision to exclude from her analysis journals focused on specific subject areas or those journals with missions focused on serving narrower audiences or research/pedagogy areas in the profession. Goggin gives as examples journals focused on the work of writing center specialists or those teaching at two-year colleges as those that were excluded from analysis. Given that writing center professionals and two-year college teachers continue to be marginalized within our already-marginalized discipline, her choice inevitably skews the image of the “discipline” and its relation to the scholarly journals she studies. Goggin's argument for looking at “journals created to serve a broad and diverse readership on a wide range of topics” seems to be hinged on a conception of the field as diverse but which still sees itself as a cohesive community, and that sort of community mindset can blind one to divisions, tensions, and marginalizing practices within groups (xvi).

The actual tensions, debates, and sometimes emotion-filled shouting matches that have taken place on the WPA-L help resist overly simplistic

conceptualizations of the discipline as a cohesive community on which product-focused conceptions of knowledge-making like Goggin's tend to rely. This, paired with the in-time and in-relation-to-others theory-building that has occurred on the WPA-L, is what makes the archive so interesting to study. It is one of the few places one can glimpse theorizing in action. And, as I have said before, the WPA-L archive is an important site to investigate because it is one of the few places where individuals, whose material realities might prevent them from contributing to restrictive locations of disciplinary knowledge-making like scholarly journals, can have a voice. It is a site where individuals who might not have material support or extensive time have been able to dialogue with individuals who do have those luxuries. It is a site where we get a greater cross section of the discipline and where access to knowledge and knowledge-making is, at least slightly, more democratized.

Jeanne Gunner reflects on this democratization of access in her essay "Disciplinary Purification: The Writing Program as Institutional Brand," describing a "flattening of status" that occurs on the WPA-L (630). Gunner explains that on the listserv, "claims to special professional standing or authority are out of bounds (with a few carefully regulated exceptions), and community members, regardless of disciplinary knowledge or orientation, are interpellated as professional equals" (630). Gunner's comments about this "flattening of status" point to yet another reason why the WPA-L archive is such a rich and important site of study: it is one of the few disciplinary locations where individuals with very different levels of authority come together to dialogue on topics. Though disciplinary power and academic celebrity certainly shape the discourse of the listserv (a fact that can be clearly seen by looking at the numbers of replies that different users' threads receive), the WPA-L has been a location where full professors and graduate students, folks from two-year colleges and R1 institutions are all, at least theoretically, allowed the same voice.

### **Understanding the WPA-L through Theories of Affect in Digital Spaces**

In her essay, Gunner posits that the "even playing field" found on the WPA-L is, at least partly, "produced by the listserv's *lingua franca*, which cloaks professional and economic inequality in a shared conversational, informal style" (630). While the informal communication style of the listserv may flatten status, it also likely has allowed conversations to reach emotional intensities not often seen in more formal and traditional sites of disciplinary knowledge-making, something Gunner acknowledges, arguing "the WPA listserv offers a useful environment in which to observe affective discourse" (630). Working in the tradition of Gunner, I am interested in examining the ways the affect-infused discourse of the WPA-L allows for ruptures in disciplinary convention, and because of that, I would argue that affect must be considered as a

significant force shaping and mediating projects of disciplinary knowledge-making and theory-building (and the reception of those projects). As Laura R. Micciche argues in “More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work,” there is “an affective context [which] circumscribes how we work—how we function on a daily basis, how we envision the possibility of creating changes, and how we develop a sense of efficacy and purpose in our work lives” (443-444). Micciche explains “emotion, like reason, is a vital component in the construction of knowledge and in the everyday activity of social life” (436). Expanding on this point, she argues that “the interconnections between politics and emotion . . . elucidate the way emotional needs call forth political theories” and that “they can also show us how a given culture system produces emotional dispositions for its subjects” (436). Following Micciche’s lead, I argue that affect is a vitally important lens through which to examine the processes of invention, response, reflection, and revision that take place in the WPA-L archives. Scholars who have theorized affects in digital spaces can help us understand these dynamics and how they are shaped by technologies of composing and the spatial and temporal relationships they facilitate.

Reflecting on the role of affect in knowledge-making in their essay “Towards a New Epistemology: The ‘Affective Turn,’” Athena Athanasiou, Pothiti Hantzaroula, and Kostas Yannakopoulos encourage readers to think about what “the sociality of emotions and affectivity means in terms of multiple temporalities and historical changes in local and global power configurations” (5). Their call to historicize and consider affect as situated within power-knowledge relations pairs nicely with Horner’s argument for continually recognizing the material conditions and political economies which shape the enterprise of knowledge-making. And Micciche’s work provides a bridge between these two ideas with her insistence on remembering that “our work practices are embedded in a social framework composed not only of economic and professional issues, but emotional ones as well” (452). As Micciche explains, “emotions express the valuations of a community, [and thus,] descriptions of how we work must address the way emotion structures our professional activities,” the ways emotion shapes our relations with others in the field, and how emotions become intimately engaged with issues of power and privilege (452).

Given that much of the theorization of affect and emotion has focused on issues of embodiment and corporeality, it may seem strange to discuss affect’s impact on disciplinary knowledge-making on an online platform like the WPA-L, but as Patricia Ticineto Clough makes clear in her introduction to *The Affective Turn*, there is increasing interest in the function and circulation of affect in virtual, disembodied spaces:

Affect is not only theorized in terms of the human body. Affect is also theorized in relation to the technologies that are allowing us both to “see” affect and to produce affective bodily capacities beyond the body’s organic-physiological constraints. The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the nonorganic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the preindividual bodily capacities to act, engage, and connect—to affect and be affected. The affective turn, therefore, expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology and matter. (2)

Clough’s discussion of technologically mediated affects also allows for a reflection on the ways that different platforms and genres of mediated communication might encourage more and less visible (or visibly embodied) affects. For instance, email-based platforms (like the WPA-L) because of their less formal discourse conventions and the speeds at which messages are sent, can embody affect in ways that other forms of written communication (like journal articles and monographs) cannot. They can also draw on and express affect through different semiotic tools. The repetition of letters, the use of emoticons, and the inclusion of images and hyperlinks, for instance, are common in email communication. These varied resources point to what Sara Ahmed has described as “the emotionality of texts” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed uses the term as “one way of describing how texts are ‘moving,’ or how they generate effects” (13). Ahmed’s reference to “movement,” too, can be its own indicator of affect on the WPA-L (both in how responders to list-serv queries quote and juxtapose comments for specific rhetorical purposes, and also for how the speed, acceleration, and deceleration of responses [as evidenced in time stamps] can be indicative of affect, sometimes indicating that conversation is “heating up”).

Adi Kuntsman also addresses this notion of affects as moving through textual and digital spaces in *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion*. Kuntsman describes what she calls the “affective fabrics of digital cultures” and argues for seeing digital spaces as “archives of feelings” (6). In many ways, Kuntsman begins to theorize how affectively loaded texts, those messages we craft and send out into the world, have lives of their own and do affective work beyond us (sometimes much to our chagrin). Kuntsman explains that archives of emotion are “always open to (re)emergence” and recirculation (7), explaining that “digital sites are never still: emails going viral, ‘sharing,’ postings and repostings on social networks, and many other examples of circulation call our attention to the work of emotions *as they move*” (7).

The themes of re-emergence and re-circulation of ideas and affects are interesting to consider in relation to the WPA-L, especially in the age of screenshots and back-channel conversations on other social media platforms. In recent years, I've seen comments from the listserv being discussed on other platforms (especially Twitter), and often see evidence that such outside discussion draws people to the listserv threads, too. Also, because people have subscribed to the listserv in different ways (with some people following the list in time as messages are sent and others getting regular digest versions), readers likely experienced the emotional intensities of threads and the movements of ideas and discussions in dramatically different ways. Likewise, list members who had been active for a long time (and thus had longer memories of the discursive landscape) likely reacted differently to regularly reoccurring threads of discussions than new subscribers. And then there is the larger question of how the nature of the medium—the digital interface and the (varying degrees of) asynchronous communication—impact idea sharing and affective response differently than they might in real life. Considering this question in their essay “Contagious Bodies: An Investigation of Affective and Discursive Strategies in Contemporary Online Activism,” Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage suggest that “the Internet creates a range of milieus where the ability to affect and be affected is altered compared to face-to-face communication and non-digital media,” and they argue that “the Internet’s deterritorialization of communication, the possibility of a high degree of immediacy and personal interactivity simply engage the making of new types of environments, where collective affective processes can be quite intense despite the lack of a common physical space” (149). They argue that “the affective potential of the Internet in other words is its intertwinement of *immediacy* (the users relate to events as they occur), its *loosening of spatial constraints* (the users can be situated all over the world) and its *interactivity* (the users can communicate with each other as individuals)” (149).

While the loosening of spatial constraints also exists with scholarly publishing and other forms of traditional academic knowledge-making, the immediacy and direct interactivity of the WPA-L archive makes it an especially important location for examining a discipline like composition and rhetoric and its spirited debates about identity and objectives. While traditional forms of academic knowledge making are slow processes that allow individuals distance from ideas, on listserv threads, responses sometimes follow in under a minute. And while we might interact with other scholars through processes of citation in our published writing, we typically depersonalize those interactions by “responding to an argument” or “taking issue with a point of view” more so than addressing or reacting to a particular person. In listserv discussions, though, the affective intensity and stakes of these interactions are heightened.

The in-time nature and personal tone of discourse keeps individuals attached to their ideas to a degree that doesn't seem to happen as much with published scholarship. The nature of the listserv also presented the possibility that one might be met with a deeply personal counternarrative or that one might face a public with a very different interpretation of an issue at hand (or even that you might be scolded or publicly chastised). Making knowledge in that space has had a different felt dimension.

### **To Forward or Reply: A Conclusion**

In the wake of recent crises on the WPA-L and now with Barry Maid's announcement of its (at least temporary) suspension of operations, it is possible the platform has outlived its usefulness or that its functions are now being fulfilled primarily by other digital spaces. I now see many of the requests for materials and advice that used to come through on the WPA-L now being shared on Facebook and Twitter. During the COVID-19 global pandemic, I expected the listserv to explode with threads about pedagogical solutions, implications for promotion and tenure, and challenges presented for WPA work and TA preparation. Some of those threads were started, but I saw a lot more happening on other platforms and in groups like Pandemic Pedagogy and Pandemic Writing Pedagogy on Facebook. Part of this shift is surely generational. Email and listservs are older technologies that feel at odds with the increasingly mobile composing practices most of us rely on now. But I also think part of this change is connected to affect and emotion. When one posts on Facebook or Twitter, one typically has more control over who reads and responds to a message. There is more possibility for insulating yourself with like-minded individuals, more social filtering available, more ability to shut down threads. There are affordances to this, but there are also constraints and costs. In their defense of reforming the WPA-L published in *Composition Studies*, the WPA-L Working group reminded readers and the nextGEN respondents that the WPA-L has “long served as a unique place that allowed for interactions on professional issues across rank, geography, institution, and specialization” but acknowledge “facing many challenges in [their] efforts to revise the WPA-L toward what [they] perceive as its potential” (204). The success of that intellectual project will inevitably be shaped by the affects of the moment and by the individually felt emotions of the players involved. Regardless of its future, the WPA-L will exist as an archive of the affects that brought our field to this moment of deliberation about where and how we should talk to one another.



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