

6 Curriculum, Genre and Resistance: Revising Identity in a Professional Writing Community

David Franke

When I was invited to direct our Professional Writing major, the first steps were clear: my PTW colleagues and I were to find students, promote the program, and develop a curriculum.¹ Much of this work was informal and occasional—conversations in the elevator with the dean, talk in the mailroom. My colleagues and I were surprised, however, at how much of our time and energy was devoted to writing, and writing that was not exactly scholarly. Our subject-matter expertise played a much smaller role than our rhetorical ability: we learned quickly how to make a complex point simple, what points not to raise, and how to anticipate the niggling unasked questions of our readers. Functional writing, in prescribed genres, was how work got done: getting the program proposal to the bureaucratic center of our system in Albany, NY was a labyrinth in its own right, but then came the course proposal revisions, emails, funding requests, webpages, syllabi, memos, minutes, class-size projections, assignments, and the like, each of which serving as an “important lever” that allowed us to “advance our own interests and shape our meanings in relation to complex social systems” (Charles Bazerman 79).² As Bazerman says elsewhere, these genres are not cold and mechanical, but “forms of life, ways of being” (“Life,” 19). In other words, in a complex literate system such as a professional writing program, our ways of being—our behavior, our identity, our style—are strongly shaped by the way we engage with key administrative genres. In the pages that follow, I want to tell the story of our program’s evolution as embodied and enacted in our administrative writings, and I focus on the curriculum because it is the center of this web of genres. Although the curricular text we wrote is neither profound nor even very long, being nothing but a completely humorless and efficient page full of prerequisites and other technical paraphernalia, it defines the nature of our program and the way subsequent and linked genres are written. Once the curriculum is approved and published in the college catalog, we become animate.

As the center of this “web” of genres, the curriculum is often printed (or downloaded) to a page or two of the college catalog, and it serves as a semi-legal document that gives sequence, shape, unity, themes, and minimums to students, providing them with a loose road map for how they can complete a degree in un-

der four years. Most curricular systems are complex gerrymandered intellectual districts when it comes to course requirements—a *minimum of two from category A and three from category B, but at least six all told*, for instance—and this system serves as the program’s DNA, what potentially gives it life and order. Just as we ask people to spell out words when we want to really understand what is said, so too we look at a program’s curriculum in order to truly make sense of it. Many conventions are widely accepted: the sequence of courses in the curriculum is indicated by prerequisites and level indications (such as 300-level courses for juniors, etc). The courses, for all their richness, are usually written in deadening bureaucratese, never read until necessary, and perhaps for those reasons the descriptions retain a sense of finality and authority, what Bazerman might refer to as a “reducible” genre (90), one that “exists only in its consequences.” And despite the reductive quality, this authority is something that faculty are likely to appreciate, especially after struggling two or three years to get courses through the system and into the catalog. Because curricula are written, they tend, over time, to appear factual, not contingent; purely practical, not theoretical; a firm answer to a set of fixed problems rather than a tacit question about how a program can best adapt and grow.

Yet these conventional assumptions are incomplete. The curriculum, while “reducible,” is a form of activity that engages dynamically with the other powerful genres common to a writing program. This case study examines the curriculum not in terms of the logic and technicalities of our graduation sequences and requirements, or even the frustrations of finally getting the thing into print (though doing so *did* severely test our patience), but rather as a source of both continuity and change. In our experience, the curriculum is in fact less like a pronouncement from Zeus than a dialogue with Hermes, both the messenger and trickster, stabilizing and destabilizing our program. By learning to respond to this dynamic, we came to value our functional, administrative writing; in turn, we came to understand better how programs mature and how writing functions for members of a small community such as ours. The effect of our developing understanding and rhetorical savvy is not just that we became better at manipulating the administrative genres of our program—though I think we did—but also that we came to understand better how to sustain a small academic community of “writers-in-training”—a category that includes ourselves. I am advocating that program designers do more than simply “expect the unexpected” or “remain flexible,” but rather that they intently look for places to take reasonable risks, and the curriculum is often the most important place in a writing program for that to happen. It is hoped that this narrative will help other program designers decide what a “reasonable” risk might be given their particular situations.

SITE

SUNY Cortland is a semi-rural, mainly tax-funded, solidly established branch of the State University of New York system. The division between the liberal and applied arts is especially sharp. A former “normal” (teacher-prep) school, we still carry the pre-professional major of Education as our largest contingent, followed closely by Recreation and Sports Management; “traditional” Arts and Science majors, those not in a professional track, take up only a third of most incoming freshman classes. Furthermore, many of our students are first-generation academics, perhaps not encouraged by family to entertain seemingly frivolous majors. We are not an endowment-rich school and must therefore work within a very tight and unpredictable state budget. There is little largess for experimentation; it is expected that any venture show a clear and positive relation between expenditures and results – an approach most students are likely to understand well.

For all these reasons, the college, like the culture at large, is pushed to understand success as a lack of error. The number of solecisms in grammar, usage and mechanics can be what determines “good writing.” Casual conversation can turn into a lament when the topic of student writing comes up, and too often “students nowadays can’t write” emerges as a commonplace marking the travails of teaching. Teaching writing is too often understood as remediation, an unfortunate prerequisite to the real content any course might offer, a way of displaying remembered knowledge, rather than as a process of making or discovering knowledge. Despite a dynamic and persuasive Composition Program and WAC director, writing can function more as an inoculation against diseased prose than a way to join a community and tradition of inquiry.

We developed a writing practice in our PWR program that is often at odds with these conventions, and did so structurally. Our goal, most textually embodied by the curriculum, but echoed in syllabi, assignments, and a thousand other pieces of writing, is to graduate writers who are creative professionals, able to imagine the *textual* needs of their community and immediate audience. Our mantra is that students need “to be taken seriously” as writers, and getting that to happen in our program means they must absorb a rhetorical awareness and familiarity with the conventions of grammar and style, as well as the ability to invent and complete new writing projects. To reach this goal we made our program commodious enough to attend to creativity, analysis, technology, history, theory *and* practical skills—in other words, we chose to build a program that approached professional writing as a liberal art and committed to developing

students who will, in order to be successful, have to understand and join writing communities as creative professionals—not merely avoid error.

Our English department’s focus on reading and historical periods—no writing courses—allowed us to create, without competing, the several writing strands indicated below. Undergrads must take eighteen credit hours of required courses (with asterisks), and fifteen credit hours of elective professional writing courses, six hours of which must be at the 400 level.

	Creative	Workplace	Rhetorical	Digital	Bookends
200-level	Writing Fiction Writing Poetry			*Writing in the Digital Age	*Introduction to Professional Writing
300-level	Writing Creative Nonfiction Writing Children’s Literature Writing Sports Literature	Grant Writing Technical Writing *Revising and Editing Writing for Online Publication Business Writing	*Rhetoric	Writing in Cyberspace	
400-level	Advanced Creative Writing Experiments in Creative Writing	The Publishing Industry *Internship in Professional Writing	The Evolution of Writing	Contemporary Poetics	*Senior Seminar in Professional Writing
grad					

As with many PWR programs in English departments that “have begun recognizing the power of a more eclectic writing program,” our challenge is to make coherent course offerings that are united mostly by what they are *not*: literature. The net is cast very wide, from creative writing to “technical and business writing, feature writing, autobiography and biography, research and other modes of

advanced composition,” (Adams 152). Yet at the same time, our “property” is also spoken for by our extended family in the humanities: journalism, literacy, communications, English, business or management, composition and rhetoric. While most PTW program leaders would be quick to make alliances with some of these before others, the fact remains that we are operating both in the margins and at the intersections of disciplinary territory. It’s an odd place and ultimately, I’m not sure it is possible to resolve. As I discuss below, we experimented with several structures to lasso the disparate courses together, but never felt fully satisfied and comfortable. On reflection, I suspect this is simply something we have to accept and I would argue with Adams, above, that this is in fact our strength. We are forced to constantly reflect on our practices and offerings, and there is little room for complacency; likewise, however, it takes a long time in an institution to develop the momentum and recognition that other departments are born to, despite the fact that the courses we teach are informed by a rhetorical lineage that extends back over three millennia.

DESIGNING IDENTITY

Our first curriculum was a loose collection of courses, a list composed by the diligent efforts of faculty who wrote proposals before any of us were hired to the proposed PTW program. Yet we started getting students in our courses even before all of our faculty were hired. And once the three of us were in place, we immediately began writing course proposals, researching other programs, talking to students, contacting potential employers, imagining sequences, picturing our program in disciplinary terms as a place to develop knowledges and practices that would be unique in the context of our pragmatic college. The goal was to create an identity for ourselves, a “space” in which certain kinds of conversations could take place about style, process, rhetoric, and technology. We hoped to actually hear these topics being bantered about in and between classes, to have readings in the afternoons, to connect our program to the ongoing WAC work and faculty development writing in our college.³ We were trying to design a community, not just a set of classes, and assumed that once we “published” our PWR curriculum in the college catalog, we would be done: our program would be in place, the black and white document would function as a machine to automatically sustain this small academic colony.

STUDENT WRITERS

Students generally joined PWR with an open-mindedness that allowed them to experiment with a broad spectrum of genres and concepts. Even before we finished our first revision of the curriculum, we accumulated our small village of creative, irreverent kids who seemed capable of anything and surprised by very little. Our first line-up of courses was bare: a few creative writing courses, a technology course, a tech writing course. From the start we hoped to elicit reflection, judgment, and a life-long practice of writing and felt we were at odds with the conventions of our college, in that we taught writing as a strategy rather than a skill, linked more to reasoning and imagination than polish—though now in retrospect it's clear that being at odds with the conventions of the *someone* is part of being a new program. Where rhetoric was assumed to be facile posturing, we developed rhetoric into a course on “being taken seriously,” and though technology was often assumed to be a set of recondite technical skills, we developed courses that assumed new media to be culture-altering and mind-altering. With the focus on the rhetorical situation, audience, authority, and motive, we were able to move into and among various genres with facility.

Our first true draft of the curriculum was quite broad and, as Kathleen Adams recommends, we tended to teach and talk about writing in a way that blurred the lines between PWR's disparate sources and traditions (152). We sincerely hoped that the disparate motives for writing implied by the curriculum—writing used for play (creative), for solving problems (technical and business), and for critical reflection (rhetorical theory and history)—and through it all our emphasis on technology—would intertwine and fertilize each other. As we added more courses we also assumed that the differences in subject matter between, say, a grantwriting course and a poetry course would become secondary to the strong unity provided by reflection, peer-review, collaboration, audience analysis and revision. We would emphasize close reading of any text, be it technical, creative, or digital; promote an ongoing analysis of motive, content, purpose, and situation; approach grammar as a strategy, not a shibboleth. It would be a struggle, of course, but we aimed to create a set of practices and perspectives that would allow students to speak each other's language regardless of what course they enrolled in. We expected a peaceable kingdom, and waited for our solid and published curriculum to guarantee us just that. While we encouraged students to do some “free range” thinking while in the program, it's also true that their curriculum was pretty strictly managed. As I discuss below, it is perhaps a little ironic that our students were expected to embrace their freedom in the terms we dictated.

A TIE-DYED MAJOR?

Our well-wrought curriculum was not playing out as we had intended in reality. Our students, instead of connecting to “writing” or “rhetoric,” broadly conceived, instead attached themselves with a passion to certain genres and formed small sub-groups that codified and confirmed an increasingly restricted writing identity. They played it safe. The larger group, a fairly tie-dyed group of “creative writers,” soon took all their classes together, generally eschewing the more theoretical classes, a group that included a trial creative nonfiction class, the digital writing (technology) classes and, most intently, the technical writing class. Though a small minority of techies emerged as the mirror image of these creative writers, most of our students became deeply invested in developing a “voice” and a body of work that could be read aloud at one of the many public performances and poetry slams, both on campus and at nearby Ithaca, New York. Certain poems and stories soon became touchstones for this dominant community: Martin’s long poem about coming out, read aloud to his surprised peers at a public gathering, or Tanika’s fictional account of an attempted suicide that chilled many readers.

But the development of a shared history was only one manifestation of this group’s identity; just as we had defined our program by its contrast with the college at large, these student-writers were defined by what they were *not* writing. I first came to recognize the students’ identity-by-contrast when I was teaching technical writing in our second year. We were reading some of the scenarios provided in our technical writing textbook and going nowhere fast. Most of my students couldn’t get beyond the immediate personal details of the characters in the scenario who were, if I remember correctly, simply trying to buy forklifts for their company. The emotional / personal interrelationships of these fictional characters seemed to be extremely important to them—my students were obsessed by whether the co-worker might be a slacker or the boss a tyrant—and the writing problem, the challenge to them as technical *writers*, was either misinterpreted or overlooked.

The students’ confusion has to be put in context. This is a group of young adults who have successfully negotiated the political and administrative problems of juggling friends, relationships, one or two jobs, a full load of classes and, for some, the demands from home placed on them by their children and families. Identifying and solving problems was not beyond their ken. But it was not until I brought in my own personal issue to class, the need to write an effective response to a major company that sold me a poorly designed hard drive for my computer, along with all the attendant emails and correspondence I had accumulated, were my students able to see the writing as a means of problem

solving. When I asked these same technical writing students to write a letter of complaint for me, I received many adequate responses, some equal to my own draft, and several wonderful, excellent examples. Many were expert ventriloquists and did an excellent job of speaking for me in their letters, picking up on my “voice.” I am not ashamed to say I cribbed some of their strategies, the ways they positioned themselves as the consumer, delineated the problem, and persuasively argued for a particular solution. I suspected then and still do that these early PWR students wrote from a sense of community—“us” against the forces of coldness and technology—a community that developed its most fluent voice and vivid identity when challenged by “foreign” discourse.

It was clear that we had come to a kind of stasis—a quiet crisis of homogeneity, at least within this large group of creative writers. The majority had become surprisingly self-satisfied with their small constellation of genres. As writers, they didn’t seem to be *working* in the ways that we expected. They didn’t seem curious or invested in what was “outside” their immediate domain. What encouraged this parochialism? There are the usual suspects: a distaste for “mainstream” academic argument, fear of working hard and failing, the thrill of being able to take the self as a subject—but there were bureaucratic reasons as well. Taking a close look at the way we described the courses, I found that after students got beyond a small set of “core” PWR courses, we only really described two tracks or “clusters”: one led into creative writing (Writing Poetry, Writing Fiction, Writing Children’s Literature, Experiments in Creative Writing) and one led in the opposite direction to technical and business areas (Computer Technology, Business Writing, etc). There were many shades of gray, but our students seemed to insist on the black and white.

Their resistance was surprising and troubling. Dr. Victoria Boynton, also in Professional Writing, found that her poetry class had several disaffected technical writers in it who were seemingly unable to picture themselves as “readers” of each other’s creative work and were having small emergencies of confidence. Dr. Alexander Reid, also in PWR, reported that his new media theory classes seemed to produce anything but a body of enthusiasts for the theoretical and practical issues brought up in his discussions. It was too “cold” to some, too “abstract” and too “impractical” for others. Instead of producing a pervasive program *ethos* for our thirty or so majors and minors, we had unwittingly produced writers who were constantly undergoing minor crises. Small groups were defining their collective selves as being allergic (or immune) to genres outside their purview; for these students, “foreign” genres were threatening and uninteresting. We were not producing writers who were commodious and inclusive. We were producing niche writers who shunned the difficult and unfamiliar. We had written the wrong curriculum.

IN OUR OWN IMAGE

A small program, we three faculty had few options. We could force a broad range of genres on students by increasing the number of required introductory courses, dredge up the truism of how the “real world” expects great flexibility in writers, or just come out and tell students we wanted them to assume a commodious writing identity more in line with our expectations. I am reminded of Richard Bullock’s admission of the deep urge to create students in our own image, to have them “*become like me*” (21). And though we wanted students to take up our pluralism, not to wall themselves off to courses that were pragmatic, realistic, and unfamiliar, the irony is that our students were acting just as we were, defining themselves by resisting. But they didn’t do it in a way we found comfortable. As teachers, we tended to dismiss our students’ “creativity” as shortsighted; yet as program designers we had gone out of our way to de-emphasize the discourse of “writing as correctness.” The curriculum we had developed gave both groups—PWR faculty and students—an identity-by-contrast. In fact, we had created students who were, in deep ways, very much like ourselves. This pointed to some difficult questions. In what ways might our program’s identity be as narrow-minded as our students? If so, how does community grow past its first identity?

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Near the end of one of our first semesters, I stumbled across Chris Anson and L. Lee Forsberg’s useful discussion of how writers—in this case, interns in a new environment—created identity. As they put it, “Conflict and initiative seemed to be relatively concurrent in the cycle of transition” (218-219). In other words, Anson and Forsberg found it possible to picture moments of conflict as inevitable, even as a necessary part of development.

We started to look more closely at these small moments of crisis. It seemed that students were doing a very good job of forming a writing identity, which we saw, perhaps more vividly than they, as not only an individual “writing self” but a self-among-others, a Vygotskian social self where meaning was made by the hard-to-see collaborative work produced by students reading and writing texts written for particular social purposes within particular social contexts (*Thought and Language*, 1962). Seen from this framework, their reluctance to change—their deep commitment to one particular image of themselves—could be understood as not so much a personal writing block or distaste for particular genres, but a necessary moment in which identity and meaning are made. It was

literally a “pre-liminary,” a hesitation at the threshold. Our best goal might be to support, not lament, the way students reactively formed sub-communities of writers, to explicitly identify and seek those places where they could confirm their identity in one area and *from there* explore the big world of alternative writing identities. Instead of seeing a writing identity as a destination—for a program or a student—I came to see it as a necessary but contingent role, an identity-by-contrast, a set of attributes, behaviors and attitudes such as a character from a play or novel might possess.

If I gave up my attempt to define a “professional writer” as someone who seamlessly moves through various rhetorical situations, I gained the ability to see what these writers were actually doing in our program—and what we as faculty were doing. The successful professional writer was perhaps better understood as someone able to join with the struggles for authority and identity in one community, and only after immersion in that community, imagine the conflicts and purposes of other, less familiar situations, again not unlike our attempts to build our program’s identity into a small island, separated from the larger academic community. My students, connected to creative writing, had refused to be “managed” by rhetorical theory or fundamental skills of writing; they were ineluctably drawn to celebrate identity as a writer’s key accomplishment. We could accept this as their first principle, and only then begin to imagine other writers’ identities.

I started to imagine ways to base my classroom questions on identity. What clichés describe a writer of digital media or technical documents? What do such writers really think about their role? What do they really do? What does a short story writer know about organizing in his genre, and what expertise in creating patterns might he bring to the challenges of organizing a business proposal? What does “the writing process” *mean* to a writer in a different situation? When I personalized my problem with the buggy hard drive problem, I had been on track. By emphasizing the lines between writers, the tension between “them” and “us” was highlighted and made more useful, not erased or transcended. Only by attending to these conflicts did my students get what they needed to proceed, a “home base,” a perspective from which to eye, with mixed curiosity and suspicion, the new. Creating an identity, however provisional and mutable, needed my attention more than the possibility of teaching my students skills that were immediately “portable.”

CONTINGENT IDENTITIES

It was a short step to apply this not only to the individual student writers, experiencing their own crises when confronted with unappealing genres, but to the program as a whole. We as faculty, those who had painstakingly designed the program, were ourselves engaged in a conflict that pitted our aspirations for a “peaceable kingdom” against our students’ unexpected resistance. The main document we used to establish our expectations was the curriculum we had written. The curriculum did not only organize our program, giving it shape and character, but as we could now see, also built in complications. Just at the curriculum “shaped” our students (in ways we didn’t expect), so they in turn created the exigency—a conflict—that propelled us to take the initiative and reflect on our status. We had rediscovered that even “reducible” documents are endemic. Or to take it home to our situation, we had to learn there is no “identity” cut loose from the complex swirl of texts and communities one writes within, contexts that produce both frustration and the initiative to change. Really (re)committing to our students’ development as rhetors meant giving them a room with a view before we asked them to roam the neighborhood. Likewise, the development of our program required that we had to accept the reality of what we were handed: a difficult college context to develop a writing program, a depressed rust-belt employment situation not favorable to writers of any stripe, a small faculty and limited resources.

We soon began three changes. The first and hardest was to recognize that we were ultimately competing with other liberal arts degrees to provide students with an identity. Like it or not, we had to recognize that the diploma was, for many students, an elaborate nametag. Not a job, not a way of life, not a ticket into the Western Tradition. As our students had tacitly asserted, the royal road to their identity was most often, in PWR at least, through creative writing. In PWR we were selling the opportunity for students to recognize themselves as “writers,” and we could only set the stage for their future development. In other words, it was time for us to lighten up.

This implied opening up the curriculum again. This time, however, I think we began to see that treating curricula as they really are, as contingent documents, which allow us as administrators and teachers to develop new ideas and make interesting mistakes. We started to see that change was inevitable and necessary. Not only are the curricular requirements always subject to reinterpretation—as second-semester seniors have sometimes taught us—but what the curriculum “spells out” is also always changing as courses develop over time, teachers gathering more experience and learning how their courses are connected or incommensurate. We came to see the curriculum as a key, as in music, in

which the program carries on. Further modifications seemed less heretical and more inevitable as we came to see that anything we wrote as a curriculum would set in motion a series of responses—the activities of writing, reading, teaching that occupy and define us a community—and these responses eventually created the need for further adjustments in the curriculum.

It should be noted that these changes, however, are not simple revisions: they required of us that we engage in constructive arguments, read and research other programs, discuss our students' writing and summary evaluations to start. Then a long and excruciating process of creating new course descriptions and courses began, meeting with faculty from other departments, arguing our case in front of various committees—some of which disagreed with each other, making progress seem impossible. Patience, not insight, is what kept us growing and changing, and this process, however uncomfortable, was absolutely necessary to our success.

LOTS OF ROOMS, LOTS OF VIEWS

Developing for our students a room with a view meant deepening their opportunity to establish themselves as a particular “kind” of writer, and in response we began, now five years into the program, the process of creating and herding through committee the new courses that would allow students to align themselves with an identity. Students needed deeper experience in more and narrower areas for all the reasons I've mentioned above, but we also felt the effect of having our first students hit the job market and we were learning from *their* experience how to revise our program according to regional and local employment pressures. No one was knocking on our doors looking for graduates. We could barely find internships for many kids.

Furthermore, I think it slowly became clear to us also that we could never completely prepare our students for any particular writing career: there simply were not enough faculty nor enough hours or even semesters. We decided the small group of core courses would have to suffice; we quit trying to provide all the theory and context for our writers and turned to our strengths. As teachers, we saw that our curriculum and our expertise tacitly cohered into four areas: play and the personal; form-driven writing that engaged in problem-solving; the study and practice of new media; finally, history and rhetorical theory. To return to Forsberg and Anson, the “cycle” of frustration and initiative is a useful metaphor, but it was the faculty, as (curriculum) writers, not students, who took initiative first.

We modified the program's appearance on the page, making room for the various identities students would create, their various provincialisms. To do this, we simply realigned these four territories on paper, calling them "tracks," more explicitly defining various options for our program: a creative writing track, a workplace track, a new media track, and a rhetorical theory track. We retained an introductory and capstone course, along with the internship. We added more hands-on lab time to the two sequential digital media courses, and added a senior-level digital writing course to extend and deepen the track. Creative writing gained Writing Children's Literature, Writing Creative Nonfiction, and Writing Sports Literature. This new shuffle of the deck helped us more easily visualize and advertise our program's options, and we could quickly show our degree offered many niches (of which Creative Writing was the deepest), thus emphasizing distinct spaces one could inhabit—or visit—while an undergraduate. Whether it was this change or whether we just "jelled" at this point, our identity as a program became clearer. It was a thrill to hear in the hallways "after-hours" conversations about writing and reading, and our enrollment jumped to twenty-five majors and about fifteen minors—with a great many students sitting in just to fill an elective.

BEYOND THE CURRICULUM

Until this point, we enjoyed strong support from our president, dean and chair. Soon, however, the inevitable changeover took place. In a short time we found ourselves with a new Chair, Dean, Provost, and President, not all of whom saw Professional Writing as an integral part of the college's development. We were disappointed in house when English literature faculty (now referred to as "the liberal arts" faculty by our chair) decided to stop counting PWR courses as a legitimate part of the English major's requirements. It was uncomfortable, perhaps inevitable, and unfortunate—many of the promises that had been made when we were hired were now lost in the seas of institutional memory. But we were working seriously. All of us had taught four new courses a semester, kept learning new software, met weekly to plan, and kept up our own writing. The paper load was enormous both from teaching (all our courses were Writing Intensive, of course) and from pushing proposals through the various committees. In purely practical terms, we realized we could not sustain our work at this pace forever. The belief that we could continually create new course options and new combinations of classes was becoming untenable. We had other projects, too: our own creative and scholarly writing, the dream of an MA program in Rhetoric that would let us (for the first time) to teach graduate courses in our own

area, the possibility of joining the National Writing Project. There is a human element that needed attention, too, for we were juggling the demands of new families, children, and elderly parents.

At seven years, as the first sabbaticals came into view and we were granted tenure, it was time to review and reassess our first years. Our students had changed from our first tie-dyed contingent. A new community had formed, one that didn't seem to need us to direct them as much; students arrived at our program with clearer ideas about what they wanted to do for themselves. We saw them use writing to pursue their passion, not just to "hone their skills"—a term we never liked. The change was slow but definite. Becki had been fascinated with the environmental and social role that zoos played—and she loved the animals. Because she had no aptitude for zoology or medicine, she used writing as a way to get her foot in the door and soon started writing publicity for the local zoo. Likewise, Raymond, a skilled auto mechanic, decided to join our program so he could pursue his passion for cars by writing better repair manuals than now exist. Others majors joined to work in comics, or to prepare themselves for working in politics; still others went on to become teachers or to attend graduate school in creative writing. We were not a "professional" track in the traditional sense, as was the case for our neighbors in the departments of recreation or education, but we were finding our own rhythm and playing to our strengths, much as our students were doing as writers.

We saw that few of our students were trying to apply the PWR degree to get an immediate job as a freelancer, editor, or technical writer. Our best were going on to graduate school in creative writing or applying to Masters of Arts in Teaching programs. Unlike Recreation or Education majors, for us there was no large institution looking to hire writers; the local rust-belt economy was tightened to the last notch. To develop the maturity and facility needed to move from rural New York to where the jobs are, on the coasts and big cities, would take more than a long time—it might take generations. It was a little unrealistic to say the least to assume that by tweaking our curriculum and pushing students to travel afar for their internships we could meliorate the challenges presented to us by our uncertain students, our local economy, and our new administration.

Yet we could not ignore that our students were enthusiastic about our program, and that it was still growing, presenting us with new problems as other departments asked us to offer service courses for their students, many of whom were anything but expert writers. Technical, business and creative writing were in high demand, but soon all of the courses were filled, from Creative Non-fiction to Writing Children's Literature. Clearly, we had lined up an attractive roster of offerings, but we no longer had the teachers we needed to take the classes. The fourth faculty line we had been promised was clearly never going to

materialize, though our classes were more in demand than ever. Our exit interviews indicated that students wanted to be challenged intellectually, to go deeply into a subject, and to have more freedom to pursue their interests. The result is that we were pulled in two directions: on one hand we saw ourselves becoming a service department for other disciplines; on the other hand, we felt we needed to open up to accommodate our students. After all, the best ones weren't leaving us for jobs—they left for more advanced academic work.

We had to recognize that much of what students were learning was happening outside the classroom. Every semester we took students on a writing weekend to a verdant (or gelid) island in the nearby Adirondacks for workshops and readings; the literary magazines had been revived in both print and web forms; our learning communities were taking off; our online international news journal *NeoVox*, through the tireless work of Alex Reid and Lorraine Berry, was serving as our own in-house site for internships. Reid also put our program at the front of the technological initiative from Apple called iTunes University. Students were learning to write by writing, and their audience was not simply the teacher.

Furthermore, as faculty we came to understand better how to see our own workplace writing, seeing that writing (and revising) curriculum was a form of composition, no less challenging or influential than writing scholarship, and in some cases more so. Though we never explicated the “administration as scholarship” argument as developed by Christine Hult nor leaned on Ernest Boyer’s redefinition of scholarship—we didn’t expect our various committees would be receptive—we had accomplished some good things through the construction and reconstruction of the curriculum over this period. We saw how the functional, administrative drafts challenged us to revise our understanding of how writing governs a community. We started to see the curriculum as a constantly negotiated response to what various communities of students were doing—rather than a set of rules that codified their identity. We came to appreciate and respond to the way the curriculum set in motion certain ways of acting, having direct and indirect effects on how we acted as a community of students and teachers. Our community and its texts developed a sort of feedback dynamic I want to call a “voice” or stance, a certain tone or characteristic way of acting, of asking questions and making decisions. The character of our program, its evolving identity, had been created in large part as a function of how this curriculum resonated with other documents—syllabi, assignments and even student papers. The bureaucratic process of writing our program’s curriculum helped us become better writers and better teachers of writing, which in turn shaped our next rendition of the curriculum. I think we became more realistic and even a little more humble. We had to learn to read our curriculum for what it always was: a

powerful proposition, a set of propositions about learning that enabled and constrained—not an identity in itself. It was time to use the curriculum as a space in which the program and the students could determine their identities.

THE FUTURE

Our identity as faculty started to change, too. We were able to let curriculum become less of a mirror of our thinking and hopes. We saw ourselves in other projects to pursue: our own creative writing and scholarship, a dream of an MA program in rhetoric, a certificate program in writing, a National Writing Project. We began to look for ways to revise the curriculum to support our strengths. An honest assessment recognized that to some degree we *were* a service program. The courses Revising and Editing, Technical Writing and Business Writing continued to be in high demand by other departments, and courses such as Writing Sports Literature and Writing Children's Literature were a perfect match for the needs of our populous neighbors Recreation and Education. Creative Writing was *always* full, and we were spread thin teaching these classes. We had the good fortune of having excellent adjunct faculty who volunteered to take many of these courses. We were in a secure place. We had a coherent and popular program, excellent faculty and a strong community of students. It was time for one more change to the curriculum.

At this writing, we are again in the thick of revision. Our changes will do two things: first, create courses that build on the work we are already doing. Some examples: a proposal has been submitted that gives students credit for semester-long work that culminates in the writing retreat; another course put into the pipeline rewards students for their public performance of work; a service-learning course has been proposed that will contribute to the community and draw strength and resources from various in-house programs already in place. We're popular, and we recently reduced the number of required courses and increased the electives. Several courses became designated as "general education" courses, thus filling a requirement for many undergraduates. They are now almost always full. This is certainly a long way from the tightly structured program we developed when we began. Student writers can experiment more and, we hope, find their particular "room with a view" as they near graduation. This openness is balanced by an increase in the total number of advanced courses we require, though students again choose exactly which ones. Advanced Creative Writing, for example, will give students a chance to specialize. 500-level courses will entice them, we hope, to stick around for a proposed certificate in writing,

and some of the courses from our newly approved National Writing Project site will bring teachers-who-write into our program.

We are obviously in process. We hope that those who, like us, juggle the various hats one wears while designing a program—those of teacher, scholar, administrator—will see in this narrative a developmental arc that speaks to their own curricular work. We have learned to be patient while people figure out where their abilities and passions lie, and that applies equally to our students as to ourselves. The curriculum we struggled to perfect is a powerful tool, the most visible example of our personal, intellectual and pedagogical agendas, but itself only part of a larger system of writing that stretches from short memos to syllabi to ponderous state mandates. While it can trace out a history for a student (and a program), it is an enabling constraint on what is possible. The good judgment that enables one to change (or resist change) is something that can't be published in the college catalog or imposed by fiat. We hope, however, that good judgment is what we have exercised in our revisions over the last few years, and that the resulting curriculum enables our students to learn the same for themselves.

NOTES

¹ I wish to thank my colleagues and friends Drs. Victoria Boynton and Alexander Reid for the intelligence and creativity they shared while we developed this program together.

² I found *Genre and the New Rhetoric* edited by Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway (1994) and *Genre and Writing* edited by Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom (1997) excellent ways in to the growing sub-discipline of genre studies.

³ The nascent “Faculty Writing Group” began meeting regularly during this time as a way to bring together faculty to discuss their ongoing creative and academic writing projects. I discuss organizing this group in “Completing the Circle,” an article available at <http://dinosaur.cortland.edu/facultywritinggroup.pdf>

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Kathleen. “A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges: Years of Acceptance, Growth, and Doubt.” *SMU Studies in Composition and Rhetoric Series*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995.
- Anson, Chris and L. Lee Forsberg. “Moving Beyond the Academic Community: Transitional Stages in Professional Writing.” *Written Communication* 7.2, (April 1990): 200-231.

- Apple Computer: iTunes University. http://www.apple.com/education/products/ipod/itunes_u.html.
- Bazerman, Charles. "Systems of Genre and the Enactment of Social Intentions." *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. Ed. Freedman and Medway. Taylor and Francis, 1994. 79-101.
- Bazerman, Charles. "The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classroom." *Genre and Writing*. Ed. W. Bishop and H. Ostrom. Boynton/Cook, 1997. 19-26.
- Boyer, Ernest. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement for Teaching, 1997.
- Bullock, Richard. "Theorizing Difference and Negotiating Differends: (Un) naming Writing Programs' Many Complexities and Strengths." *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Ed. Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995. 3-22.
- Hult, Christine. "The Scholarship of Administration." In Janangelo, Joseph; Kristine Hansen (Eds.), *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995. 119-131
- NeoVox*. www.neovox.cortland.edu
- Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich. *Thought and Language*. Ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann; Gertrude Vakar [Myshlenie i rech', Moscow, 1956]. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962.