

Tributes to Sally Boland

Robert Miller

At its December 1999 meeting, the WAC Editorial Board decided that this year's issue of the WAC Journal would be dedicated to Sally Boland. It was an easy decision. Without Sally there may never have been a WAC program at Plymouth: she was its founder and a consistent source of inspiration to all of us who have worked to make the program successful.

In the early 1980's Sally Boland was a member of the ad hoc committee exploring what the Plymouth faculty wanted General Education to do for our students. One goal that clearly emerged was to make them better writers. Sally had heard about a new national movement in the teaching of writing: Writing Across the Curriculum. She persuaded the committee that writing should be a component of any general education course, and that the basic composition course that students take through the English Department should be followed by a writing course in which they learn the discipline-specific writing of their major. With implementation of those changes came the need to support faculty across the disciplines who would

now be called upon to assign more student writing, and the WAC program was born.

We have solicited tributes to Sally from several colleagues and students. Mary-Lou Hinman, commenting on Sally's role in the founding of the program, captures her extraordinary ability to translate a new idea into action and inspire others to join the initiative. Bob Fitzpatrick recalls the highly successful "Make'em Sweat and Learn" workshop series that Sally coordinated the year she was interim chair of the WAC Task Force. Sarah Miller, a student in one of Sally's last Composition classes, remembers a writing teacher who skillfully challenged her to overcome her "writing ego" and develop further as a writer. Meg Petersen reflects on her colleague as a source of inspiration for students and faculty alike. Finally, in a dialogue, which captures Sally's own playful creativity, Roy Andrews and Tony Koschmann, another of Sally's Composition students, recall Sally's ability to facilitate good writing and good thinking.

These warm tributes make clear that our memories of Sally Boland are likely to inspire our efforts for many years to come.



Sally Boland and the Origins of WAC

by Mary-Lou Hinman

During the fall of 1985, Sally Boland approached me with a request: "Mary-Lou, would you be willing to serve on a Task Force studying Writing Across the Curriculum?"

"Sure," I said, even though I knew nothing about the Writing

Across the Curriculum movement, then in its infancy. I was a first year FIR, however, and couldn't say "no" to any request, especially one from an admired English Department colleague.

At the first meeting of the Task Force, I was elected Chair, obviously because I was a member of the English Department. (At that stage we all still had the misguided notion that the English Department was responsible for the quality of writing on the campus.) It certainly wasn't because I knew anything about WAC or about the college community outside my own department. I was an ignorant woman.

Left to my own devices, I'm not sure WAC would ever have developed at Plymouth. But Sally Boland did what was second nature to her—gave me the support I needed, then faded to the background. She delivered a stack of journals to my office, which contained early articles outlining WAC principles and pedagogy. Those articles and their bibliographies were a starting place. From there, the Task Force read and researched further and finally became conversant with WAC theory. We were enthusiastic. This was not another committee assignment; it was a way to make a tangible difference in how our students learned and wrote.

Sally had carried out another important piece of research before the Task Force was formed. Because the new General Education Program mandated writing intensive courses in every discipline, she knew we would have to train faculty to teach those classes. She had located a possible practical theorist to offer a model faculty training writing workshop. She gave me the name of Toby Fulwiler, who had recently moved from Michigan Technological University to the University of Vermont. She had even contacted him in advance to make sure his workshop would accomplish what we required. My only role was to organize the three-day workshop and convince the then Dean of the College that Toby Fulwiler was worth what he charged.

During the workshop, I was a wreck. We had convinced some fairly high-powered faculty to join us, and Fulwiler's approach seemed so simple, so straightforward. Instead of lecturing, he had

us all write—over and over again. My journal from that first workshop is full of anxiety laden entries that ask, “What are they thinking? How is this going?” I shouldn’t have worried. At the end of the three days, the participants were hooked. They had learned new teaching techniques, and they loved the contact with colleagues from different departments. They volunteered to go to President Farrell and demand support for a program they thought could positively influence teaching at Plymouth.

On the final day when the workshop disbanded, Sally asked me to have lunch with her. “Where do we go from here?” she asked. I wasn’t sure. We began to bat around possibilities. Certainly, we would have to support faculty as they tried new techniques. Perhaps we could offer some “follow-up sessions.” We should advertise successes when they happened. What about some “brown bag” talks by WAC enthusiasts? The Task Force needed a budget. Let’s see; how much would we need to support two faculty training workshops? How about extra help for the Writing Laboratory (later the Reading/Writing Center)?

All the time we talked, Sally wrote notes on a paper napkin. By the end of lunch, the next year of WAC activities had been outlined and a tentative budget designed. Sally handed me the napkin as we left the restaurant, and then she backed away.

From time to time when I had a special problem to solve, I would approach Sally. Once I remember needing new presenters for a faculty training workshop. She had heard about an interesting project David Zehr had incorporated into one of his psychology classes. But then, Sally always knew what was going on at Plymouth, who the innovators were, who had devised interesting writing assignments. She was a walking reference.

Two or three years later when PSC was named a “Best Buy” by Barron’s for two years running, one of the key elements mentioned was Plymouth’s Writing Across the Curriculum program. Of course, the WAC Task Force was pleased. We had watched 60% of the faculty attend training workshops. When we presented at conferences, we discovered how far ahead of other institutions we were

in terms of faculty commitment. We knew the program at PSC was special. *I* knew that Sally Boland was directly responsible for that success.



Sally Boland and the “Make ‘em Sweat and Learn” WAC Workshops

by Robert E. Fitzpatrick

It was typical of Sally to come up with a program that would provide the maximum benefit for the energy expended. And she was certainly not reticent about expending energy.

In January of 1992, it was my pleasure, along with Roy Andrews, Robert Miller, and Dick Chisholm, to join Sally in planning a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) workshop. I can hear Sally’s recommendation for a title for the workshop, “Make ‘em Sweat and Learn.” She said this with a mock snarl as if she were trying to imply that she intended to be rough on the students. Well, Sally may have been a demanding professor, but she was extremely considerate of her students. She knew what her students were capable of, and she knew how to coax most, if not all, of their potential out of them. But Sally really being mean? No. Impossible. That’s what made the title so funny for the rest of us.

Her title was really typical of her personality. While nearly anyone else who was trying to be mean, or even just funny for that matter, would have stopped at “Make ‘em Sweat,” Sally had to add, almost apologetically, “and Learn.” Sincerity, concern, *and* a sense of humor.

The program was divided into four sessions: Creating Assign-

ments, Research Instruction, Writing Instruction, and Grading and Evaluation. That didn't sound too bad to me, but the approach she encouraged...! We would have to model the whole process. We even had to write the paper. Well, as Patricia Breivik states in her book, *Planning the Library Instruction Program*, a good assignment requires six elements: it should be real or at least imitate reality; it should require the active involvement of the learner; it should be individualized; it should provide for a variety of learning experiences; it should be up-to-date; and, finally, it should be non-threatening. How could we have asked participants to do something we were reluctant to do ourselves? But then, most faculty probably wouldn't give students assignments they hadn't tried out themselves.

We started with what Sally called an assignment from hell — “Was Hitler a Maniac?” — an example of a typically bad assignment that might seem clear to the professor but is meaningless to the student. It was the kind of vague assignment that results in unhappiness on both sides of the podium. Over the course of the four weeks we managed to improve the assignment so that it read: “Examine the presentation of Hitler in the American press. How is he presented as a leader? What are the most significant events of the time period your group is covering? Summarize your presentation with a description of how you feel the American people viewed Hitler at the time.” The workshop guided us through creation of the assignment to the final product. We even wrote that paper together.

Our stated goals were to “create a workshop that would give faculty hands-on experience in developing the skills that make classroom writing productive and pleasurable for both students and faculty, stimulate faculty conversation on using writing to enhance teaching and learning, and give faculty first-hand experience with the difficulties and rewards of collaborative work.” Okay, these were the stated goals, but Sally's real goals were all of these and more.

The unstated goals included involving all possible activities and resources, such as the library, the writing center, faculty with real assignments, the *WAC Journal* editorial board, the venerable pot-luck supper, and even a small amount of wine and cheese, and

to combine them all in order to get the largest group of people possible involved in a cooperative activity that would really help students. To this mix she added her own enthusiasm, determination, and sense of humor.

The synergistic result was more than we could have hoped for or expected. The workshop, thanks to Sally, was not about what we were doing wrong with our assignments, but rather let's take an honest look at writing assignments and see what might make them more understandable as learning experiences – for both the professors and the students.

And so, we sweated, *and* we learned. We also laughed a lot.



Sally Boland as Writing Teacher

by Sarah Miller

As a first-year student entering my Composition class for the first time, I was energized. I felt that I would not only polish up my writing, but that I would amaze the professor with my fluency, grammar, and style. The first assignment was perfect. It was a personal essay, and if there was one style of essay that I was good at, it was the personal essay. I felt so good about the paper when I finished it. It was my first paper ever written for a college class. I handed it in knowing that I would get an A. The professor expressed her amazement at my work by giving me a C. I couldn't believe that she had given me a C. Did she know how long I had worked on that paper? Did she know how much that paper meant to me? Did she know

that I rarely got C's on anything?

So I rewrote the paper and went to talk with this professor, this Sally Boland. My first meeting with Professor Sally Boland was interesting. She was rather short, shorter than I was, which was rare. She always had dimples on her face, just at the corners of her smile. Her eyes were wide and glowing and her cheeks were rosy. What did she know about writing anyway? My writing was its own style. But together we went over the paper and she asked me all sorts of questions. "Why did you use this?" "What did this mean to you?" "What could you use to symbolize this challenge?" "How could you expand here?" Why was she asking me all these questions? The writing doesn't mean anything else than what it says. Or did it? So I rewrote the paper again.

"This is better, but..." But! What did she mean by but? Now what was wrong with it? So I rewrote it again and again. The final paper was worth every part of the A that I got. The experience that I started writing about ended up being more personal than I had expected.

I visited Sally Boland's office many times that semester to discuss my writing and things we were reading. She helped me get over my writing ego and see that I had a lot to learn. I was sad to hear that she had passed. I know that I still have a lot to learn about myself and my writing and I am grateful to have had Professor Boland my first semester to smash my ego and make me write what I really wanted and needed to write.



Of Karma and Courage

by Meg Petersen

I inhabit her space. I think of that every day. I think of it as good karma. I remember her shifting her diminutive form out from behind her massive desk to give me a tour of what was then her office and now is mine. She pointed out the large windows that catch the morning sun and the hole in the upper left corner where hornets entered freely. She said I might want to call maintenance. She'd never gotten around to it.

She hadn't always occupied this office. When I first came to PSC, we were neighbors on the third floor of Reed House—part of a wonderful group of women in the attic. I would often overhear Sally's writing conferences. She would be saying things in her firm but caring way, such as, "Right now this is a private poem. If you want your readers to be able to understand what you were feeling and to feel it too, you will need to give them more information to let them in."

Once I remember overhearing a long conversation with a student about her experience and perception of the 60's. Many times I would hear her patiently making her way through a poem from some introductory literature anthology line by line, image by image, until a light would go on in a student's mind.

So small, she would sit behind her desk when I would come in for advice about handling a class. She would never let herself be intimidated. Sometimes she'd come to class armed with a fistful of yellow drop slips and offer to fill them out for those not quite ready for the maturity and thoughtfulness she demanded of them. She would indeed make them sweat, and learn. But at the same time she believed in her students. She taught to their best selves, and helped them to discover that within themselves. She demanded a lot of them.

Life demanded a lot of her, and she of herself. So many times she showed incredible strength. In the midst of her cancer treatment, I have an image of her trooping across the courtyard between

Reed Hall and Rounds, off to class like a bald elf, her bare head gleaming in the sun.

But when I think of Sally, the moment I will most remember is the hush that followed her reading of her poem “The Patient Addresses her Disease” at the Plymouth Writers Group gathering to celebrate the publication of *Lessons Learned*. She had stunned us all into silence with that reading, in which she addressed her cancer as “old shadow, long time companion.” In that moment I knew I had never known anyone more courageous.



Tony:

Dr. Boland seemed to really care how well students were doing.

One time I got a B and asked if I could redo it, and I did and got an A-.

I think she was seeing if I had ambition.

Roy:

Sally had an eye and appetite for things delightful: literary risks like

a loop

in a loop
dee a

poem
!

Tony:

Dr. Boland organized a debate in our class and then unexpectedly she made us all switch sides.

She wanted to see if we could argue the side we didn't believe in; that would tell her if we were willing to do the work to really understand.

Roy:

Sally believed in the importance of everyone developing their voice and expressing their ideas.

She encouraged discussion and tolerated dissent, even while she fought fiercely for her own ideals.

Tony:

Dr. Boland had us write a lot of personal papers.

She wanted us to get to know ourselves better.

She wasn't one of those people who just says "here's knowledge, put it in your head."

She was kind of a personal teacher.

Roy:

Sally was quick to recognize the potential in your writing, especially when she sensed you had shared your heart.

She could praise your best with genuine and open enthusiasm, and she could question with concern what you were trying to say that was not yet intelligible.