

---

# Strange Resistances

*Patricia Donahue, Lafayette College*

---

With my title, “Strange Resistances,” I mean to characterize the difficulties that arise, especially in the area of faculty development, when a WAC program at a small liberal arts college (Lafayette College in Easton, PA) acquires a certain degree of success. Since my criteria for “success” are primarily local and institutionally determined (although broader disciplinary standards could apply), I will begin by describing the program itself.

## **I. WAC at Lafayette College**

Our program—the “College Writing Program” (CWP)—was conceived and piloted sixteen years ago, during my first year at Lafayette College. I had been hired by the English Department as its first writing specialist to teach writing and literature and to provide “leadership” in composition. While my “leadership” responsibilities were never defined—although I was advised to lead by example not dicta—the allocation of a tenure line in composition was itself a radical move, signaling a desire for revision and the expectation of change. The impetus for a new program came, surprisingly, from the Department of Economics and Business. Its faculty had arranged a meeting with the English Department to express its concerns about the writing abilities of their majors. (At that time the college’s writing requirement consisted of a two course freshman sequence and five additional writing intensive courses, whose only condition was the completion of twelve pages of formal writing). The proposal made by the Economics and Business Faculty was that they would assign more writing and the English Department would review it for grammatical ac-

curacy and logical consistency. My department head suggested instead that a newly hired woman in Economics, Mary Beckman, and I spend a semester designing an alternative.

Our recommendation was that the college make use of its best and most plentiful resource: smart and talented undergraduates (Lafayette College is a highly selective institution of 2,000 undergraduates). We had in mind a program in peer response similar to the one designed by Tori Haring-Smith at Brown University. But while the Brown Writing Fellows played the role of teacher *manque*, reviewing papers in the privacy of their rooms and making marginal and final comments, our Writing Associates (“WAs”) would discuss student writing with student writers face to face. For our program’s conceptual base, we drew heavily from rhetorical and composition theory (peer tutoring, collaboration, the reading/writing transaction), literary theory (dialogics and reader response), and Paulo Freire’s theory of radical praxis. Eschewing a writing center model, we decided to assign each WA to a single course for an entire semester, and require that they meet at least three times with every student in conferences of approximately thirty minutes. WAs were to serve not as proof-readers or editors but as informed readers who, through a process of strategic questioning (“What are you saying and doing? Why? What’s next?”), would help students revise their writing and reflect on their rhetorical choices. To receive the assistance of a WA, faculty members would need to participate in workshops, modify writing assignments if necessary (although they were given remarkable latitude in terms of what to assign and how to grade it), and meet regularly with the WA assigned to their course. In the faculty development workshops, they would be introduced to a range of “best practices,” and, most importantly, provided the opportunity to engage in pedagogical self-reflection and to cultivate a common language for writing instruction. In keeping with the spirit of much WAC/WID work, we expected these occasions to be “empowering.” As the story goes, faculty members are themselves writers: therefore, they possess a great deal of tacit and intuitive knowledge about writing which, with assistance, they can learn to articulate. Finally, it was our hopes that since small college faculty tend to be more receptive to students than to colleagues (with whom they may share long and bitter histories), WA training might have a bottom-up effect. What we taught the WAs they would then teach the faculty. WAs seemed in the best position to make the case for a revision-based strategy and to enable the faculty to distinguish be-

tween teaching writing and teaching *with* writing.

For sixteen years our program has remained remarkably true to these framing principles (I am grateful to the many campus visitors over the years who helped us refine them: Elaine Maimon, Tori Haring-Smith, Kenneth Bruffee, Nancy Sommers, Mariolina Salvatori, Jean Carr, John Gage, and, especially, Toby Fulwiler). Over that period it has grown considerably: from a pilot with six WAs to a campus-wide program of fifty-plus WAs; from one writing specialist to three (but neither of my junior colleagues is yet tenured); from no administrative assistance to a program coordinator (but secretarial support is inconsistent). It displays all the markers of success. Its goals are widely advertised. It is often featured in the college's promotional literature. And it has been praised by external review boards as a site of ongoing innovation. Student writers regularly state in evaluations that they appreciate having the chance to meet with a trained peer who has faced and overcome similar writing challenges, and they look forward to working with WAs in the future (the acronym "WA" has even entered the college lexicon, in the form of "to WA" or "to get WA'd.>"). The WAs themselves benefit enormously from the program and are the most persuasive evidence of its success. Listen for example to one of our current WAs, Vilas Menon, reflecting on himself as a writer in an excerpt from a literacy narrative he wrote in Fall 2001:

A Writing Associate is meant to help others examine their writing in ways they would not under normal circumstances. Over the past year, I discovered that this relationship works both ways: by examining others' writing, the Writing Associate also ends up examining his or her own written work. I learned several skills—critical analysis, stylistic variation among them—and was able to adapt them to different situations. I learned that writing is not an absolute process....

Perhaps the most important indicator of our success is the fact that eight years ago the program was mainstreamed, becoming a required component of two general education courses: a First Year Seminar (FYS) taken by all entering students, and a seminar in Values in Science and Technology (VAST) taken by students in their sophomore year (engineering students take a course in professional ethics, which is also affiliated with CWP). Once a voluntary endeavor, the program became an integral component of the college's curriculum, required of all students and also of all

faculty choosing to teach (or conscripted to teach) FYS and VAST. It became highly visible. It was assumed powerful. For the first time we began to experience the dark side of success: the irruption of “strange resistances.”

## II. When Faculty Behave Badly

**Strange:** 10.a. Unfamiliar, abnormal, or exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment; difficult to take in or account; queer, surprising, unaccountable. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

When the writing program was mainstreamed, every faculty member who taught either FYS or VAST had to “use” a Writing Associate, whether he or she wanted to or not. Participation was no longer voluntary but required. That meant that I no longer had the authority to refuse to assign WAs to noncompliant faculty members. If faculty refused to attend workshop sessions (for which they receive half of a \$3,000 curricular stipend, whether they show up or not), or modify assignments, or meet with their WAs, or impede their WAs’ efforts, or require four conferences, I had no recourse except gentle persuasion. A story that has acquired the status of campus legend tells of a WA who sat for hours in a friend’s third floor dormitory room, hoping to catch a glimpse of the professor whose students she was responsible for, so she could hand him a conference sign-up sheet.

This cataclysmic redefinition of The College Writing Program led to the program being more closely identified than ever before with lower-level instruction and “remediation.” And it continues to provoke “strange resistances.” Attendance at faculty development workshops has declined markedly. Faculty members ignore voice mail, claim they never received e-mails and memos, say they “forgot” about a workshop, refuse to make eye contact. This semester, for example, after one of our program’s assistant directors, Bill Carpenter, had asked the six faculty teaching a new VAST course when they might be available to meet for three sessions, and had made all room and lunch arrangements, one of the six sent him an e-mail saying that she had decided to attend a yoga course instead. Many of our colleagues seem to think our purpose is to micromanage their classrooms, pry into their professional lives, pass judgment on their pedagogical choices (some call us the “grammar police;” others say that “[we]

don't believe in grammar"). Many seem to view our offers to "help" as coercive, manipulative, or controlling. In fact, our greatest crime seems to be our desire to "help," because it seems to imply that help is needed.

Why these strange resistances? Why this bad faith from colleagues who pride themselves on their reputations as good teachers, who argue at length in faculty meetings that students are the top priority, who claim to value teaching more highly than research? Why this resistance to a curriculum the faculty itself constructed, voted upon, chose to implement?

### **III. WAC as a Site of Displacement**

The story of The College Writing Program could be summarized as a narrative of a larger institutional culture appropriating a WAC program and turning it into a convenient site for the displacement and projection of numerous institutional, professional, and personal anxieties. I will reflect on some of the tensions, conflicts, dichotomies, and representational paradoxes that now define our program in its maturity (or its decline):

- The more financial resources that have become available for faculty development initiatives, such as workshops and textual materials, the less interest instructors appear to have in pedagogical development.
- The more sophisticated our faculty's discourse for talking about writing has become, the fewer changes have occurred in actual classroom practice. In the early stages of our faculty development efforts, the goal was to develop a common pedagogical language, with the hope that this discourse would be built upon and complicated. Now, my colleagues can talk the talk and have become adept at theoretical inflection, but they continue to do what they always have. Our "intervention" is impeded, because all we really know is what they say they are doing (the other information comes to us indirectly).
- Such "representational duplicity," whether it is willed or accidental, can be also observed on the administrative level. Although as embodied in the figure of the Provost and others, the college is proud of its commitment to writing instruction, singing the program's "successes" whenever convenient, little is done to assure the translation of promise into performance. Whether there is a gap between

what the institution says and enacts does not seem to matter: what does matter is the image, the promotional fiction, the simulacrum. Repeatedly, I have shared with certain administrators incidents of faculty refusing to meet with their WAs, undermining their WAs' efforts, complaining to students about the WAs assigned to the course, failing to require the stated number of pages, and so on. (At times I am asked to be a snitch; I try to resist). I am provided sympathy, not action. And the stipends continue to flow like milk and honey.

- Writing assignments are a particular problem area. My colleagues often complain that our students are not good enough, are insufficiently quirky, despite our designation as a highly selective institution. At the same time, these same teachers design the kind of writing assignments that call for the mindless reproduction of a field's commonplaces and foundational themes. Many of them do not want to spend their time on effective assignment design, or they too easily remember the assignments they responded to as students, or they simply want to believe that students cannot write well. It is also possible that they recognize that more difficult writing assignments might require dramatic changes in pedagogical practice.
- Certain advice and recommendations we have made over the years, generally in response to faculty requests for ideas, have become reified, turned into formula, and then used against us. Most recently, for example, a professor in the Department of Economics and Business (an early volunteer) told us that he did not want to use a WA next year for his FYS class (he has no choice) because he felt the "three essays" stipulation too restricting. However, there is no "three essays" requirement. A straw program has been erected, so that it can be attacked.

#### **IV. Strange Explanations**

Is it possible to explain why these resistances occur, why a current of discontent now runs through our program? Let me offer a few reasons, which I propose only provisionally, since this is a problem that, *in toto*, I still find mystifying.

- Perhaps our writing program is now a convenient site for the pro-

jection of neurotic energy because it is visible, because it is associated with the English Department, because the college's Provost is a former member of the department, and because power, as all of us post-Foucauldians know, is what matters in institutions and is dispersed throughout the system. Who has it, who does not have it, where is it, where it could be—these are the important questions. A well-established WAC program exists within an institutional structure dominated by rhetorics of scarcity and competition. (Although Lafayette College possesses an enormous endowment, this discourse nonetheless circulates, if only as a strategy of administrative control: for the real power—to the extent that it is identifiable—is possessed by those who distribute the resources.)

- Especially at a small college that claims to value teaching, faculty members have a great stake in their image as good teachers. The desire to protect (and promote) a reputation makes it difficult for them to speak honestly about what they do in the classroom. (Like many small liberal arts colleges, Lafayette exalts teaching, but privatizes its performance.) The early innovators were confident enough to risk self-exposure; the conscriptors are not (or perhaps they believe that there is now more at stake; if they are junior faculty, they are probably right).
- My colleagues see themselves as teachers, but not as students of teaching, and certainly not as scholars of teaching. For many that formulation would be oxymoronic (to understand why this is the case, one needs to understand how the rise of academic professionalization in the nineteenth century led to the conflict between so-called specialists and generalists, and the subsequent privileging of research over teaching. See Salvatori and Donahue). The idea of thinking critically about teaching, of theorizing a practice, or of viewing pedagogy as an enactment of theory, would strike them as strange. Teachers, they would argue, are born not made; good teaching is a product of inspiration; discussions of teaching are appropriate in education departments, but not in departments of history, biology, English, philosophy, sociology, etc. (For a history of these commonplaces, see Salvatori.)
- As writing specialists, we are inclined to emphasize the thera-

peutics of writing. But as Plato and Derrida remind us, writing is a *pharmakon*: it can cure, but it can also kill. While Lafayette has always required its faculty to sustain a coherent research agenda, only within the past fifteen years or so (about the time the writing program was created) has that research been expected to take regular and visible form in publication. Many of my colleagues, especially those hired by what they remember as a gentler Lafayette, do not want to rise to these new demands. They project upon the “writing people” their own apprehensions and bad experiences with writing; courses like FYS and VAST become scenes of personal deficiency, insecurity, anxiety. What they are resisting, in short, is the culture of writing and of writers that they see CWP promoting. In addition, there are those faculty members who do write but who see no relationship between their work and their students’. This is another reason why their writing assignments tend to demand so little of students. Finally, some faculty members prefer to think of research as their “real work”—work that is generative, intellectually engaging, inventive—and the classroom as the site where such work is merely reproduced; why, then, spend more time on teaching? (For an analysis of “work” in English Studies, see Horner.)

- Our adherence to the model of faculty empowerment ultimately placed us in an untenable position. In the early years, we believed that our colleagues possessed a tacit and suppressed understanding of discursive strategies. Our purpose as program administrators was to serve as midwives, by helping to bring this submerged knowledge into light so it could be consciously enacted. This was not mere devise. We supported this model. We still do—in theory. But we did not understand that in affirming our colleagues’ expertise we had undermined our own. If teachers in the disciplines are the “experts,” our ideas carry no special warrant.

## V. Writing Disappointment

If it is difficult to understand exactly why our program has diminished and what may lie ahead, I draw courage from the Writing Associates, who exult in their experience, turning it into attractive offers of graduate assistantships, exciting careers in teaching, and expanded opportunities in the professional workplace. I hope that we will move forward,



continue to innovate, perhaps by adding a component in oral presentation or by shifting from a WAC model to a new model of writing instruction based on the idea of disciplinary discourse as content (I thank Bill Carpenter for sharing this idea with me). I am inspired by the optimism of my junior colleagues, Bill Carpenter and Bianca Falbo, and the program coordinator, Beth Seetch, and by their insistence that we be perceived as “consultants and facilitators, not organizers and gatekeepers” (conversation with Carpenter). And I believe that it is time for me to hand the program over to my talented and capable assistant directors. As reluctant as I am to admit it, it is possible that my colleagues have turned a deaf ear to my pleas and platitudes for no other reason than that they have heard them so many times: the instrument needs tuning. The story of Lafayette College may be paradigmatic in illustrating that whenever the effectiveness of a method, or a person, or a program begins to wane (let us think, after all, about how and why traditions do not hold their value as they did initially), then is the time to hand it over, as painful as that can be, to others willing to stand by its rule.

To engage in such thinking may seem to ignore the very institutional realities I have presented here. It may mean I have yielded to what Richard Miller refers to as “an almost irresistible temptation, when thinking or speaking of ‘revising’ institutional relations or pedagogical practice or the social sphere more generally, to conceive of an absolutely compliant world ready to be rewritten in whatever way we see fit” (8). Perhaps further innovation is impossible. Perhaps the program is unraveling in ways more insidious than I know. Perhaps I will not be able to step down for years, since I would need to be replaced, and so far earning tenure as a WPA at Lafayette College has not been a simple matter. (For an unhappy tale of a former colleague’s experience, see Tiernan.) Is there no other choice for a WAC director than to become a practitioner of denial or despair?

In a recent essay in *College English*, entitled “More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work,” Laura R. Micciche examines what she calls the “climate of disappointment that characterizes English studies generally and composition studies—particularly writing program administration (WPA)—specifically” (432). Micciche’s essay has struck a powerful chord; the WPA list-serve was engaged in lively discussion about it for two weeks. Her essay has much to recommend it—its subtle analysis of emotional discourse, for example—but its resonance may result more

from its willingness to name despair and pain, to make them visible, to make them legitimate topics for professional discussion. Her essay indicates how very great is our need for *more* writing of this kind, more stories about disappointment, failure, resistance, administrative duplicity, especially at this moment, when so many writing programs have moved out of their glory years and into a period of inertia or decline. Fifteen years ago, when designing the program at Lafayette College, I derived enormous intellectual support and sheer courage from the “success” stories I read about writing programs in their formative stages. The profession needed those “coming of age” stories then; now it may need stories of a different kind.

Tales of resistance, like the one shared here, can also play an important role in further developing a scholarship of teaching within our field (see Shulman). By writing about our experiences as teachers, and as *teachers of other teachers* (which is what much WAC administration amounts to, although we seem reluctant to say it), we can achieve a wonderful alchemy: we can transform disappointment into dialogue, strangeness into professional understanding. By writing about local administrative scenes, we can make material our insistence and desire that the culture of teaching be paid more than lip service, that the scholarship of teaching be built into the institution so that it can stand side by side with other kinds of scholarship (see Boyer). Thus we will help ensure that these wonderful programs, their fruitful changes, even their strange resistances are not wiped out but acquire new life within our disciplinary history.

Author’s note: An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Writing Across the Curriculum Conference at Indiana University, in March 2001. I thank Bianca Falbo and Mariolina Salvatori for their insightful commentary.

### Works Cited

- Boyer, Ernst L. *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990.
- Horner, Bruce. *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*. Albany: SUNY P, 2000.
- Menon, Vilas, "WA Reflection." *Writing Matters: The Newsletter of the Lafayette College Writing Program* 2 (2001): 2.
- Micciche, Laura R. "More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work." *College English* 64 (2002): 432-458.
- Miller, Richard. "Critique's the Easy Part: Choice and the Scale of Relative Oppression." *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*. Ed. Diana George. Portsmouth: Boynton, 1999, 3-13.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi. *Pedagogy: Disturbing History, 1819-1929*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1996.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi and Patricia Donahue. "English Studies in the Scholarship of Teaching." *Disciplinary Styles in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. Eds. Mary Taylor Huber and Sherwyn P. Morreale. Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2002, 69-86.
- Shulman, Lee. "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform." *Harvard Educational Review* 57.1 (1987) : 1-22.
- Tiernan, M.L. "Writing Program Administration and (Self)-Representation: Paradoxes, Anomalies, and Institutional Resistances." *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell their Stories*. Ed. Diana George. Portsmouth: Boynton, 1999, 162-173.