

## **A Writing Program's Assets Reconsidered: Getting beyond Impassioned Teachers and Enslaved Workers**

*Richard E. Miller*

George Levine's (2001) essay on "the two nations" in English studies, those who teach and those who do research, makes an argument that he himself says "will surprise no one" (7). Levine describes the relations between these two nations in terms that no one would dispute: at research universities, scholarship is valued over teaching; few scholars take "teaching scholarship" seriously; the reward system is set up to favor those who publish over those who teach. Because he has accepted this admittedly familiar account of the problems that beset the profession, Levine has no alternative but to resort to a set of equally familiar "utopian" solutions, including "a radical transformation in the whole system of graduate training, undergraduate teaching, and professional employment" (17). However appealing such solutions may be in the abstract, though, Levine can't even pretend to be optimistic that they will ever occur: since neither he nor his colleagues have any incentive to alter a system that has rewarded them so handsomely, he holds out little hope that the tensions between the two nations will ever be resolved voluntarily.

Because I am ostensibly a resident of the other nation, I've been invited to respond by Levine and by the editors of *Pedagogy*. Based on the experiences I've had helping run a writing program that employs over two hundred teachers who are responsible for staffing more than five hundred sections of composition annually, I have to agree that those who are indifferent to both the practice and the scholarship of teaching are no more likely to change than the institution that fosters and rewards their disdain. But, unlike Levine and many of my colleagues in rhetoric and composition, I don't see the cli-

mate of indifference as the most pressing problem facing those who value teaching. In fact, understanding the problem in this way leaves those who are interested in improving the quality of undergraduate education with no other option than to play the role of missionaries, preaching pedagogical fervor to the indifferent masses. But is it really possible to create in others a “dedicated, even passionate commitment to students and teaching” (7)? Even if it is, will this commitment materially alter the working conditions that most writing teachers experience?

There are plenty of reasons to think that just getting people to care about teaching will make a difference in how the business of education is carried out. Hollywood, which has had a long and profitable relationship with the dedicated, self-sacrificing teacher, loves to tell the story of how important passion is in the teaching profession. *To Sir with Love*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, *Good Will Hunting*: these are just a few examples of the story about teaching and its powers that audiences are always ready to consume again. No one seems to notice that these heroic teachers, who have the courage to venture into forbidden places and sow hope where before there was only despair, tend to end up crushed, alone, trapped in dead-end jobs or unemployed. This is just what happens to those who are brave enough to stand up to the system, those who persist in caring in an uncaring world. It is, we are supposed to believe, a price worth paying.

Should caring about your work be a criterion for employment? In the program I help run, we don’t consider passion or dedication a requirement for employment or distinction. We ask only that our teachers do their job, which is to train students to read, write, and think critically and imaginatively. Whether the teachers in our program have passionate feelings about what they do is not what determines whether they are allowed to stay in the classroom; demonstrated success at improving their students’ writing is. We would like for our teachers to care and be committed, but because we know that there’s no necessary correlation between a teacher’s ability to care and her ability to get students to produce better writing, we focus instead on ensuring that our teachers do what they were hired to do.

You might well wonder what is to be gained by recasting the work of teaching in such an unsentimental way. I do so here because I believe that the most serious problem facing those who are truly committed to improving writing instruction in the academy is not people’s feelings about teaching but the inhospitable working conditions experienced by those who perform the bulk of this instruction. I believe, as well, that this problem will never be

meaningfully addressed so long as we persist in thinking of the work we do as a vocation rather than a job. We will be in a position to devise practical strategies for raising salaries, lowering workloads, and improving employment opportunities for those who teach writing—strategies that are less predictable, less utopian, and thus less likely to fail than those founded on goodwill alone—only after we stop thinking that we’re in the conversion business and recognize that we’re in the education business.

Perhaps because those who specialize in composition cannot escape the labor that goes into the business of teaching others to write, the field itself has produced critics who judge composition much more harshly than Levine allows himself to, critics who propose even more radical solutions to the inequitable distribution of financial security and job opportunities in the profession. Indeed, if you asked those who had been in the field for more than a decade to name the most brutal critic of composition, the name at the top of the list wouldn’t be John Guillory or Cary Nelson or anyone else hailing from the nation of literary studies; it would be composition’s own James Sledd. This is not, I think, an honor Sledd would refuse. While he was certainly no friend of literary studies, which he saw as staffed by individuals utterly indifferent to the exploitation of writing teachers, Sledd (1991: 274) saved his highest contempt for “the newly risen compositionists,” who sought to represent the emerging fields of rhetoric and composition as places where exciting and valuable research was carried out. Equally unimpressed by what he saw as the pseudoscientific bean counting of classroom empiricists and the empty insights of politically driven comp hacks, this self-styled “nasty old man” dubbed the new class of rising scholars “boss compositionists” and never missed an opportunity to describe them as the academic equivalents of plantation owners, sipping mint juleps on the porch while surveying the work of the field hands. As far as Sledd was concerned, all the animated talk that composition’s scholars and researchers generate about theorizing the practice of teaching and reforming the profession must be seen as just a way to pass the time while the real work of educating students is carried out by others.

Boss comp. It’s a provocative image, one that Sledd self-consciously deployed to suggest that the working conditions endured by most of those who are charged with teaching first-year students how to read, write, and think critically are akin to slavery. The same suggestion is implicit in the arguments made by “the Abolitionists,” a loosely affiliated group of composition scholars who have called for the elimination of the universally required writing course for nearly a decade. As the spiritual descendants of the nineteenth-century abolitionists, this group, too, wants to bring down an institution that

profits from the misery of others. Once the universal requirement is dismantled, the Abolitionists believe, part-time lecturers will be free to pursue more productive work elsewhere; students will never again be compelled to receive writing instruction; and research and scholarship on rhetoric and composition, mired in the dreary world of the first-year classroom, will be liberated to explore more pressing social and theoretical issues related to language use.

Is teaching writing as a contingent laborer *really* analogous to being enslaved? Is pursuing a career in research, scholarship, or administration *really* like running a plantation? While the pleasures of producing jeremiads are real enough, the assessments that arise from such bursts of moral outrage don't automatically have a purchase on reality. I'm sure I'm not alone in thinking that the heightened rhetoric that Sledd and the Abolitionists rely on trivializes slavery's effects and does nothing to improve the working conditions that contingent teachers actually experience. The problems are real, but this way of casting them locks everyone into a set of disempowering options. Slaves can run away; they can revolt; they can suffer unbearable circumstances. What they can't do is change the system from within.

If we can agree, then, that it is no more credible to maintain that writing teachers constitute a nation of dedicated, passionate individuals than it is to liken them to slaves or plantation owners, the question to ask is whether there is a better way to describe their work and their place in the university. If not a nation, if not missionaries, if not slaves, what should we call those who labor year after year in nearly complete anonymity in undergraduate classrooms across the country, giving tests and grading papers? As I've shown, it is customary to focus on what writing teachers lack—respect, permanent employment, enviable working conditions. To move onto less familiar territory, we might ask a different set of questions: What do writing teachers have that *is* valued elsewhere in the university? Do writing teachers have any assets? Can these assets be exploited to improve working conditions for writing teachers?

Perhaps those of us who teach writing can set aside our disciplinary aspirations for a moment and let go of our desire to be seen by others—and to see ourselves—as a nation comparable to English studies. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that much of what we value will never be valued by our colleagues: the pleasures of working with entry-level students, say, or our “rich” scholarship and research on issues related to literacy and pedagogy. We will admit, as well, that all our efforts to model ourselves after the other disciplines, with our scholars and our scholarship, our national awards and our national conferences, have done little to improve the lot of most peo-

ple who teach writing. In other words, if we consider the historical divide between those who teach composition and those who teach literature, it should be clear that to locate the value of writing instruction in “our discipline” or “the profession” is to settle for an abstraction that exercises no rhetorical or economic force. It is also to persist in fighting a war that long experience proves can never be won. What those of us who teach writing must accept is the fact that, no matter how diligent or creative a teacher is, the work of an isolated writing instructor has no institutional significance. We cannot be a nation in Levine’s sense—a nation of individuals, caring or otherwise. The value of writing instruction can be created at the local level only by the *collective* action of writing teachers who have shared goals and commitments; our assets become visible only when writing instruction is considered in its aggregated form as a *program* and not a discipline.

### **What We Have of Value: A Local Example**

When we asked ourselves what the Rutgers Writing Program had that might be valued in the new, corporatized university, my colleague Kurt Spellmeyer and I could think of only three assets:

1. We have all the students. Because credit for Expos 101 is required for graduation, nearly every undergraduate enrolled at Rutgers passes through our program. Annually, more than eleven thousand students sign up for our courses.
2. We have lots of teaching assistants. Each year we employ seventy-two in the graduate program in English and thirty-five from other disciplines. At stipends of \$14,000 apiece, not to mention tuition remission and health benefits, these teaching assistantships represent an annual investment of more than \$1.5 million in graduate and undergraduate education. Because administrators and faculty from across the university are invested in the success of these graduate students, they are also invested in the success of the Writing Program.
3. We have a sophisticated, intellectually rich, student-centered pedagogy. To put it another way, we have a *Writing Program*. Teachers are trained to follow our approach to writing instruction, with a common set of requirements and common grading criteria. This approach provides us with a transparent system of accountability and allows us to assess individual performance in the classroom, to maintain high academic standards, and to swiftly assess and respond to student grievances.

We have many other things of value—an outstanding administrative staff, a lively community committed to innovation and excellence, and, yes, even a corps of dedicated and passionate teachers—but these assets cannot be made

visible to those who will never see writing instruction as anything other than remedial work carried out by remedial people. To outsiders, the work of the Writing Program will always register as the buzz of drudges with nothing better to do. No one, however, can argue with our numbers or our system of accountability: we have the students, and we have the means to establish that we provide them with a valuable education. These are the assets that we can deploy to our advantage in the academic marketplace.

Of course, all of the things I've listed above could be considered liabilities. All of them link the Writing Program directly to entities and activities that tend not to be sought after in a research university—entry-level students, teacher training, writing-intensive labor, service. Furthermore, it could be considered a liability that we do work that no one else in the university wants to do, work that most people feel the less they know about the better. Yet in the current administrative climate, where there is heightened interest in entry-level students and the first-year experience, all of these potential liabilities can be reconfigured as assets. While it was common in the not-too-distant past for universities to leave entry-level students to fend for themselves during the first two years, universities can no longer afford to be so indifferent. In the new economic climate, where institutions of higher learning are more and more dependent for survival on tuition revenues and philanthropic donations, the logic of the marketplace requires that entering students be seen as future donors and be treated accordingly.

Most academics decry these developments, but I see them as the most potent forces for change in higher education since the G.I. Bill. Whether the motives of university administrators are pure or not is irrelevant to me; their preference for thinking about students as consumers and about education as a deliverable good doesn't bother me, either. It is more important, I believe, for us to focus on the fact that the shift in state and national funding practices, combined with the threatening emergence of distance education, has compelled the financial caretakers of institutions of higher learning to rethink the wisdom of turning over the education of entry-level students to an underprepared, undersupported, unsupervised teaching force. In response to these developments, administrators at my university have reached the same conclusions as administrators across the country: something substantial must be done to improve "the first-year experience."

Since the university and the public continue to believe that advanced literacy skills are necessary for success, we can rest assured that no one in either of these communities is calling for the abolition of the required writing course. On the contrary, the shifting economic climate has helped everyone

see that this course plays a central role in defining the experience of entering students. This is especially true at my institution, where Expos 101 survives as the last vestige of the general-education requirement. As such, it marks the first and last time that the student body as a whole is convened for a shared learning experience. The administration needs to be able to show that students who come to the university won't find themselves in classes taught by teachers who are unprepared, but it is in no position financially to generate a tenured teaching faculty to do this work or to create an incentive system powerful enough to overcome the current faculty's resistance to such work. In such an environment, all of the Writing Program's liabilities become assets. Because we are willing to assume responsibility for training entry-level students, we have considerable freedom in deciding what to teach them and how to teach them. We also have considerable support throughout the university community for providing undergraduates with an intellectually challenging experience. As we see it, we are responsible for defining "the Rutgers experience," which we hope the students see as the foundation of a meaningful liberal education.

### **Life in the Service Sector**

Those of us who have spent our academic lives studying language and its uses and teaching others how to deploy rhetoric to their own purposes should be adequately prepared to take advantage of the situation I've described. But for writing teachers to capitalize on this turn of events, first we must abandon our commitment to transforming rhetoric and composition into a discipline that can compete with other disciplines. We aren't a nation, and we never will be. The university is not a home for people who see themselves first and foremost as teachers, and it probably never will be. If we face up to these facts (and I believe that Levine would agree that they are facts), we need not conclude that our fate is to skulk through the halls, forever snubbed by those who do the "real" work of the academy. Rather, acknowledging our position in the university and reevaluating our assets allow us to see that a brighter future awaits us if we embrace the very activity that is so disdained across the disciplines: serving entry-level students.

What do we gain by recasting writing instruction as service work? Here's a partial list of the benefits that we have discovered at my institution:

1. *Improved working conditions.* We have been able to use our contact with all entering students to improve the working conditions of those who teach writing in our program. By focusing on service, we have been able to ask: Are students

well served when their teachers don't have offices, telephones, computers, reliable access to the Internet? Administrations that are reluctant to invest in higher wages can be convinced to invest in resources that tangibly enhance the students' educational experience. Over the past decade we've gone from having no full-time instructors to having twenty-one full-time lines. Our goal is a full-time staff not on the tenure track but on contracts that are indefinitely renewable in four-year increments.

2. *Generated revenue.* By requiring all students to use a reader that we have had custom-published and then having the proceeds routed back to the Writing Program, we have created a substantial fund for sending teachers to conferences, buying supplies, hiring consultants, and increasing the honoraria that accompany end-of-year teaching awards.
3. *Expanded influence across the university.* Because we believe that we can train any willing graduate student to teach successfully in our system, we regularly employ graduate students from disciplines other than English to teach first-year writing. While all disciplines feel that teacher training is necessary and that integrating writing instruction across all disciplines is important, few departments have the personnel to commit to this work, and fewer still have the resources to do it well year after year. By taking on this responsibility, we provide an invaluable service to the entire university and, at the same time, actively seek to persuade the next generation of teachers to see that writing instruction is properly the property of all disciplines.
4. *Established presence in the on-line market.* Distance education poses no meaningful threat to face-to-face writing instruction, because there's no getting around the fact that a real person has to read and respond to the writing that the student produces. The Internet doesn't speed the grading process or lower the cost of assessment. So we don't need to go on-line out of fear; rather, writing instructors should lead the effort to develop genuinely educational ways to bring the Web into the classroom and the students out onto the Web. To this end, we in the Writing Program have established a collaborative environment in which working groups have been able to use their collective knowledge about how texts work, about how readers behave, and about the value of interpretation to generate homegrown on-line pedagogical resources that address the needs and concerns of students at our institution. Led by Barclay Barrios, our director of instructional technology, we have begun to train writing teachers to work in the on-line environment, thereby improving their marketability; we have forced ourselves to work in the medium where we believe all important writing in the future will appear; and we have made the labor of writing instruction visible to outsiders in a way we never dreamed of before. (For an example of our efforts please visit the Rutgers Writing Program Web site at [wp.rutgers.edu](http://wp.rutgers.edu).)
5. *Creation of a vertical curriculum for nonmajors.* We have repositioned ourselves as *the* university unit committed to serving students from across the disciplines



with a vertical curriculum that provides content-rich, contextually specific writing instruction, from basic composition to the dissertation. Thanks to Michael Goeller, one of our many excellent assistant directors, the Writing Program now offers a certificate program in business and technical writing and in professional writing, with opportunities for internships in the surrounding business community. Our goal is to establish a fully flexible curriculum that is responsive to the needs of the disciplines and students in all areas, ranging from document design to historical research to literary study to legal writing.

Obviously, embracing the work and the language of service entails risks, not the least of which is the predictable disapproval of those sectors of the academic community that equate service with servility or that see in every modest success evidence of some deeper, broader failure. To be sure, the approach I've outlined here has not eliminated the Writing Program's reliance on contingent labor, but it has allowed us to give more teachers in our program the opportunity to enjoy health benefits and the security of annual contracts. (In the past five years the number of full-time instructors in the program has more than doubled, which means that some eighty-four sections that used to be taught by part-timers for \$2,300 per course, without benefits, are now taught for \$4,200 per course, with benefits.) We still have a long way to go, but if we are moving in the right direction now, it is not because we have convinced anyone to talk more about teaching or to care more about it, but because we have begun to make the value of writing instruction visible to those in a position to improve the working conditions of writing teachers. If teaching has any power at all—and I continue to believe that it does—surely it rests in this ability to help others see the familiar in new ways.

### Works Cited

- Levine, George. 2001. "The Two Nations." *Pedagogy* 1: 7–19.
- Sledd, James. 1991. "Why the Wyoming Resolution Had to Be Emasculated: A History and a Quixotism." *JAC* 11: 269–81.