DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 133 CS 214 346

AUTHOR Ingham, Zita
TITLE The New Director of Composition Composes Herself.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Effectiveness; Administrator Responsibility; *Cultural Context; Department Heads; Faculty Workload; *Higher Education; Nontenured Faculty; *Program Administration; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Arkansas State University; *Faculty Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A new director of composition at Arkansas State University explains how she has had to mentor herself, write and revise herself, read herself into her new bewildering environment, and in short, make her job as easy as possible. Reading the new environment and understanding how faculty members fit into it may be one of the hardest aspects of a new position. If a dean asks new faculty members to do what they do not believe in, well-timed fits of anger and conditional acceptance may be effective, at least at Arkansas State. The faculty member must learn to define and focus, to back out of certain matters, to revise deadlines, to inconvenience other people, and to let some things go. She must insist on choice in her own life. She must recognize that her greatest strength is that she does not really want the administrative position she has. The best advice to a pretenured person taking such a position as a first job is do not settle in, do not buy a house, do not let your kids think this is the last place they will ever live, think of the job as transitory because all jobs are. "Your own priorities come first" such as time for research, if that is needed in the quest for tenure, or the move to another institution. (TB)

Zita Ingham

The New Director of Composition Composes Herself

This is a personal essay. I came to Jonesboro, Arkansas in Fall 1992 for a tenure track position in the Department of English and Philosophy, at Arkansas State University, a college of about 10,000 students. I came from the University of Arizona, where I had spent 10 years pursuing the master's degree in English and a doctorate in rhetoric and composition. My position included a one course (out of four) release to be "acting Director of Composition," because the faculty member in that position would be on sabbatical. I understood, even before I was hired, that I would be "Director of Composition" in my second year, because the present director wanted out, although she said the job was easy,"nothing to it." At that time, we had no graduate students teaching and a core of non-tenured but full time instructors to help with the composition courses. Most of our 40 or so faculty teach, even now, freshman composition for two or three of their four course load.

This year, I am "Director of Composition." The department has no fulltime instructors, and I supervise 10 parttimers and 15 teaching graduate students. The job is not easy, although much energy, on my part, has gone into making it as easy as it can be, as a matter of my own survival. I'll tell you how.

First, I mentor myself. I've done a lot of reading about mentoring in the field of composition, in higher education, and

in business and management, and so I'm very certain about what kinds of mentoring I want. The kind of mentoring I want for myself is imaginary. I have at least three imaginary mentors in my head whom I call on constantly. One of them is Tilly Warnock, and in particular her presentation about four years ago at the University of Arizona's Spring Conference on English, which she delivered the semester before she accepted the position of director of composition there. From that talk I learned to see revision as a form of grace, the manifestation of hope, in writing but more importantly in living. Revising our writing in school is illuminating, but the concept plays an even more important part in our lives, in the ways we revise ourselves from one day, one minute, to the next. I believe Tilly will forgive me if she never said any of this. As I said, these mentors are imaginary.

The next year, bell hooks visited the university, and she told us, a group of hot-shot whiney tough-girl graduate students, that it is not enough to "come to voice," you need to know why. bell hooks put intention back into my work, as Tilly had edited the personal into it: I saw that what was most important was how my work expressed my life.

That year, the year I finished my Ph.D. after many unsuccessful job interviews, I consulted a therapist at a psychic fair, if you can call paying someone $10 to sit on a folding chair at the Ramada Inn and watch you cry a consultation. This woman, a Jungian from San Diego with the biggest head I've ever seen on a human being, told me three extremely important things. One, she said, these people to whom you've been talking are

deceitful; they give me the creeps, she said. Two, when you sit there talking to them, imagine them as trees, as whatever you think is most beautiful, as different kinds of trees, sycamores, aspens, junipers. Three, she told me I would get a job, and she actually told me where. She revised me (I let her) as confident but quite detached, as living still in a natural world (what ever that is), a stance that has gotten me where I am today.

This gives you an idea of my personal mythology: I think about these women, and other people (for instance Tom Miller, who once told me "There's room for all of us in this field," a motto which perks me up when I'm feeling odd); I think about what I heard them say all the time. My personal mythology is one way I write myself into my work. How I do my job depends on my personal mythology.

It also depends on how good at reading I am. I begin with the assumption that my reading of the expectations others have for me define my opportunities for improving writing on our campus. Several audiences have expectations for my performance: undergraduate and graduate students, colleagues in the department and in other departments, the department chair, the dean and other administrators. When I arrived on campus, my expectations included improving opportunities for writing campus-wide. At the end of my first year, I saw my purpose as improvement in the freshman composition program--improved teaching and improved opportunities for writing practice by students. Now, in the middle of my second year, I see my purpose as seeking to improve writing instruction in my classes and the classes of those I

supervise--a marked diminishment of territory, but now the territory is one I can almost totally control. I feel more successful, and I hope I can build on that.

The hardest thing about being a new director of composition is learning how to read the situations around me. I spent my first few months at Arkansas State University reading my place there, reading myself into the place. In the spring of my first year, a crisis hit: the dean announced he wanted to form a basic skills center outside the English Department. At that time, most of my time was being spent revising the pre-freshman composition course in the department: planning it for the various populations who would eventually teach it (gas, parttimers, faculty, antique and otherwise)--in general, garnering support for a process-based course rather than the grammar-based course we had in place. As I read (and read) the situation, the dean wants to have the students who are most at risk for staying in school be taught by GAs because that would be far cheaper than the present situation. He even wants the Center to be supervised by a GA, and not a very experienced one, because we don't have a Ph.D. program. The Center will remove from our department, during their first year anyway, those students whom the full professors complain most about, whom many tenured professors simply refuse to teach. I see the Center as a way of managing students, undergraduate and graduate, and not necessarily as a way of improving opportunities for writing.

I quickly revised my reading: improvement in writing instruction--what I wanted most to be part of at ASU--was not a

priority at all. I wasn't hired to do a good job; I was hired to do this job. First, I resigned. I wrote a one-sentence memo of resignation as director of composition to my department chair. I wrote that I trusted that my tenure-track position would not be jeopardized, given the fact that I was not hired expressly for the position of director of composition, but at that point, I didn't particularly care. I keep that file on my computer even now. I thought of Tilly, of bell hooks, and the psychic fair lady, revised myself and took a stand and imagined the dean as a willow stump, always sprouting but not visibly of much use to anyone.

I stayed home, not answering the phone, for two days, except for class and office hours. The department chair, a lovely but slightly tilted fir tree of a man, sent the assistant chair--the post oak who had picked me up at the airport for my campus visit--to my house to see if I was all right. I was very fine. That was the happiest week I had my first year. Eventually I went to see the chair, who asked wouldn't I please help with the graduate students; what did I need that would help me do that job? I agreed to continue, making it clear that I would always need Tuesdays and Thursdays free for my research work, that I was overworked, that I thought the dean should be asking me what to plan for the writing program, and that I was no sucker. I explained my concerns to the dean in several long meetings, and I continue to register my uneasiness with our programs. Fortunately, I don't quite feel alone in all of this: my counterpart in the Math department, a pre-tenured supervisor of 20 new

GAs who teach College Algebra, is in a similar situation. When I last saw him, he said, let's get out of this business--they (meaning the administration) want it all done right but they don't want to pay for it. He has agreed to direct the algebra program for one year only, stipulating that he could quit it if he didn't like the work. The dean's center has not yet materialized because he doesn't have the resources, and he has now revised his plan into that of a tutoring and advising center, not a separate department. So at Arkansas State, anyway, well-timed fits of anger and conditional acceptance of administrative work seem to be useful strategies.

If I can't act from a place of power within the institution, I can't show my students how to do that. If my choice is between not being able to do that and keeping my job, then I can't do this job. My most important audience, my principal constituents are the undergraduates, especially the undergraduates who don't write very well, who don't have the choices I've had so that I could be here, where I can insist on having choices. Lessons for being a good parent reverberate through my work; perhaps you heard one of them on your way to this conference: "Passengers traveling with small children should secure their own oxygen masks first, then secure the child's mask." Showing people how to have choices in their writing and in their lives <u>is</u> my job.

Not all of my self-composing involves how I fit into the larger landscape of the campus. Sometimes I define myself against other faculty. In September of this year, my first year as

"Director of Composition," I woke up worried about everything in the middle of the night and wrote in my journal.

Journal entry 9/21/92: lingering tensions

1) the people on the department composition committee have mistaken me for someone with the time and resources of a director of comp. They want a lot done, all by me.

2) they also mistake me for someone who cares about all this departmental history; for instance, who won't participate in exchange grading because of something someone else did 10 years ago, exactly why we don't have a grade appeal process, who slept with whose wife so don't invite them to dinner on the same night. I must try not to make enemies of these people who want to unload all this sad history on me; after all, it's the main thing they have to offer. I don't want to share their history because I don't want to become one of them, and I would like to make my naivete work for me.

3) many faculty seem stuck, in some fundamental way. They want to use textbooks that are ten years old--if the textbook committee tries to leave one of those off the list, they call and whine about it, not even having the sense to just go to the bookstore and order it themselves. They can spout off about process with the best of us, but they still want a handbook with lots of grammar exercises in it. And they want new solutions to old problems, like plagiarism, but my solutions don't fit their antique ways, which translates as a failure of my ideas.

4) What I really don't like is having to support and promote things I don't believe in, here, like this tired old version of

freshman composition, the exploitation of GAs, the pretense that a MA or a Ph.D. in English is a good idea for most students in my classes

5) What I also really don't like is being charged to do things--improve writing instruction, for instance--and then not being given the help to do that but feeling I'll fail if I don't. But I can see that I won't fail. I'll just end up like all the other grownups here. Withdrawn.

Tensions come from how I write myself against the community beyond the university, too.

Journal entry 2/20/93: As far as the administration goes, well, there is some big secret party going on all the time. Unlike some colleagues, I don't want to get invited to it, I just wish they'd stop partying at the expense of the students who want to learn. If the faculty and the students could get their own party going, together, there might be some hope here. Here in the Delta region, it's quite easy to see how social systems have kept so many people so poor. The people who run the town run the schools, and the media of exchange are social and economic favors, not merit attached to any standards of what is good for individuals and for the community. The town owns this school, and it's to the advantage of the people who run the town and the university to keep my students stupid. Who would work in the Hush Puppies factory, who will work parttime at Walmart for no benefits year after year if my students really succeed at a good college education? The money we put into the library copy machines, at a

profit of about 500% per page, supports the football team. It's been worth coming here, to see how all this works, so clearly.

I read and write myself into a more and more comfortable place here as time goes one. An entry from less fall is a little less frantic, perhaps even dangerously comfortable.

Journal entry 10/12/93: I'm sure the only WPA I can be--the only Professor of English I can be--is the one that's me, transformed, whom I haven't met yet. It's curious that I am thinking of this just as I realize what burnout would be, in this situation: the physical realization that this is all so much busywork, even what we think of as most important--curriculum decisions, hiring decisions. The classroom I can still take most seriously--it's the most peaceful place on campus for me. Doing one thing at a time, there.

. . . So I need to learn to define and focus. I backed out of the honors course on public discourse. I revise all my deadlines. I inconvenience other people. I let some things go.

I'm a teacher: I compose myself by telling other people what to do. The insistence on choice in my life comes from my first real job, in which I spent every Friday for a year in the basement of a VA Hospital killing rabbits with a quick chop to the back of their skulls. That has set the tone for my work in institutions. My greatest strength in this position is that I don't really want this position. My personality is certainly con-

trolling enough for writing program administration, my education and experiences have certainly prepared me for that, but I have never wanted to do the academy's work for itself in so obvious and direct a manner. I never would have applied for a WPA position; the thrill of power, of such public attention, is wasted on someone like me. The problem of hiring younger, "new" faculty as WPAs is not just their inexperience in furthering the causes of composition and rhetoric, not political threats to them based on their actions, but how the institution uses the fact that many new WPA's, I suspect, have fewer choices than I do, need these jobs more, and must acquiesce to that dynamic. The problem for a new WPA is how much such "positions" cost.

My advice to a pretenured person taking on such a position in a first job would be: don't settle in, don't buy a house, don't let your kids think this is the last place they'll ever live. Your advantage will come from the fact that the department and the administration really need someone to fill this slot. Your own priorities come first: time for research if you need that in your quest for tenure or your move to another institution, renegotiation of duties, a graduate student to assist you--whatever you really need you'd better get or move on. It also helps to keep in mind Robert Boice's "Hard-Easy Rule," too: "achieving hard goals is almost always rewarded, failing to make easy goals is almost always punished. . . . Restated, excelling at easy tasks such as teaching brings few rewards; failing at difficult tasks like scholarly writing brings few punishments" (4). Those are his perceptions of what is hard and what is easy,

but you get the idea. Don't fail at what those in power regard as easy, whatever that may be in your case, and succeed in one or two things they perceive as difficult. The tenure process is not a mystery, especially at the "second-rate" schools where most of us are (that's just one of the things I like so much about being at a second-rate school); start talking to everyone who has just gotten tenure or who is going up and compare what you're doing to what they did. Revise your priorities, strip away what doesn't work, don't try to be friends with everyone. Think of the job as transitory, because all jobs are.

I don't feel defeated, after all these months--more like experienced, poised on the edge of something, but what?
Journal Entry 3/9/94: Tommy Toombs stopped me in the hall today. [A former student of mine, he's a non-traditional student who barely passed my sophomore lit course but, as a preacher in the making, was an invaluable resource to the class for his explanations of Biblical references]. He wanted to know if I'm teaching "Functional Writing" (a junior level remedial writing course) in the Fall. "I need help," he said, "somebody has got to teach me how to write before I leave this place--I'm going on to the seminary and that's all they do there, make you write."

Of course, teaching Brother Toombs to write also involves changing the ways he thinks about writing--that it's not some thing you get--and the teaching of writing--that it's not something someone does to you. He's ready, but can we rise to the

occasion? I can't do it singlehandedly, and that's the point of having a writing program. I responded to his anxiety not as a teacher but as a WPA, not even one in the making: I advised him about all the classes that might be helpful, how to use the writing lab now and later, how to start keeping a journal. I advised him to consider taking freshman composition again (after a lapse of about 10 years). Sometimes it can be useful, I said.

References

Boice, Robert. To Improve the Academy: Resources for Student, Faculty, and Institutional Development. Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education, 1990.