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Rewriting Institutions: Rhetors in Action

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Rewriting Institutions: Rhetors in Action

3/8/2018

This week, we read Juan Guerra's book, *Language, Culture, Identity and Citizenship in College Classrooms and Communities*, as well as Michelle Kells' article, "Welcome to Babylon: Junior Writing Program Administrators and Writing Across Communities at the University of New Mexico". While much of Guerra's book focuses on theory and clarifying terms and concepts, the end of the book focuses on the WAC (Writing Across Communities) program at UNM, which is also the focus of Michelle's article.

In our class discussion, we talked about how our FYW (First Year Writing) classes might (and may already) integrate some of the WAC ideas in order to empower students not only to write in the academic register but to engage rhetorically in public spaces. UWM's FYW is already undergoing positive improvements in this area; however, how can we keep pushing towards a more empowering space for students to practice rhetorical action?

In her article, Michelle Kells would encourage such questions. She suggests that we should be complicating issues like these, not trying to contain them (Kells). We do this each Monday night in class, and I hope that these discussions can lead to tangible ideas and practices to incorporate in the FYW classroom. Here are a couple of considerations to make when thinking about whether more WAC principles should have a place in FYW programs at UWM.

Scholars have researched and critiqued limited programs similar to WAC. Guerra refers to some critics of college writing programs, including one which states that "limiting the focus to academic discourse in a WAC program disempowers students" (Guerra 146). These critics insist that "students need to figure out how to become effective readers, writers and rhetoricians in a rich array of personal, professional and civic spaces as well" (Guerra 147).

Academic research and conversations surrounding writing programs confer that students need to be expanding their practices to reach outside of their own community in order to engage across communities. WAC provides tangible ways to do this.

FYW programs should be willing to change – and that's not a bad thing. FYW at UWM might need to consider how to work with other departments in order to give students real practice in engaging with concepts from various genres and subjects. Michelle Kells advocates for this strategy: "Writing Across Communities does not fit neatly into any one institutional category or space. It cuts across the academy, engaging what I call the 'four P's of the writing process': poetics (cultural aesthetics), pragmatics (rhetorical contexts), polemics (political possibilities), and pedagogies (educational practices)" (Kells).

In order to allow students space to practice what it means to be a rhetorical agent of change outside of the classroom, they need access to more than just English and Composition content. In public spaces, various subjects are folded into discourse. How can students be learning these 'real world' strategies before they leave college?

WAC principles can allow students to regard the FYW classroom as a new space in which to find their voice and empower themselves. Instead of enforcing a space of enclosed

power dynamics in FYW classrooms, UWM Composition instructors have been trying to find ways to give students more agency in the classroom. Guerra states that “we cannot prepare students for active participation in the personal and public spheres of their lives if we do not take into consideration what they bring with them to the classroom” (Guerra 106).

Altering the power dynamics of the classroom allows students to bring their own knowledge, experience, and identity into their creations. It may even change the classroom into a different space, a type of ‘third space’.

As one member of our seminar class suggested, each student should be allowed to speak from their own seat of knowledge. Each should be recognized in their positionality – not as a student that needs to learn from an instructor – but as a person who brings unique ideas and perspectives that can have a voice both in the classroom and in public rhetoric.

WAC principles can allow students a space to gain the confidence to stand up from their seat of knowledge – their culture, identity, experience, and positionality – and be rhetors in action. Thus, empowered, they can help to rewrite the structures of the educational institution, enabling more student empowerment.

Students are rhetorical agents. The most important and empowering aspect of WAC is that the driving force of this program is the students. Guerra cites Porter et al stating: “Institutions, as unchangeable as they may seem (and, indeed, often are), do contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action. This method insists that sometimes individuals (writing teachers, researchers, writers, students, citizens) can rewrite institutions through rhetorical action” (Guerra 154).

If UWM is to continue improving FYW, it will not be through systematic changes to curriculum (though that is happening), but through graduate students and undergraduate students who are empowered to take rhetorical action.

By allowing students a space to learn about and practice writing across communities, by being willing to grapple with the ensuing complications of WAC principles, by experimentation and lots of trial and error, and by empowering students to take rhetorical action, UWM can build a collective of students who are writing and communicating both in the classroom and in public spaces in order to make change on campus and across communities.

~DMK~