Episode 56: Elizabeth Wardle
Pedagogue podcast
Transcript

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In this episode, I talk with Elizabeth Wardle about her experiences as a writing program administrator, what guides her administrative philosophy, the role of mentorship in administration, and the concept of transfer.

Elizabeth Wardle is Roger & Joyce Howe Distinguished Professor of Written Communication and Director of the Roger and Joyce Howe Center for Writing Excellence (HCWE) at Miami University (OH). She is co-author/co-editor of Writing about Writing, Naming What We Know, (re)Considering What We Know, and Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity. Her scholarship includes writing program administration, faculty development, curriculum design, and leadership and change, among other interests. She also edits the Writing Research, Pedagogy, and Policy Book Series for Southern Illinois University Press and the Retrospectives section of Composition Forum.

Elizabeth, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: You directed the writing programs at the University of Central Florida and the University of Dayton. I'm interested in what you learned about writing program administration from these earlier experiences and how those experiences helped you develop as a Writing Program Administrator (WPA)?

EW: At University of Dayton, I was just out of grad school. I had not gone there to be the writing program director, but then halfway through my first semester, they were like, "Hey, would you like to be the writing program director next semester?" I think most of us learned that job by just doing it. Very few of us are lucky enough to have extensive mentoring in it before we do it. In that particular job, I learned a lot of things about what it means to have authority or not have authority and how you help guide a program when you don't really have any institutional authority.

So I wasn't tenured, I didn't know what I was doing. And on top of that, the comp director job there, you really didn't have any institutional authority, right? I didn't hire people. I couldn't fire people. I didn't evaluate anyone. A lot of the people teaching in the program were literature

faculty who really didn't have any interest in writing studies scholarship. So looking back now, I think, "Well, what actually was that job?" What is a comp director job if you can't do any of those things? But I had no idea what I was doing. So I was like, "Okay, let's be the writing program director." And really what it meant was, I worked with the GA's really closely, there were a lot of lecturers, people who were very interested in just trying something new. So I think the main lesson I learned from that is that if you can tap into people's intellectual curiosity, you can actually start working toward a really interesting and comprehensive program without any of the institutional authority.

So that sort of ground up, what are you interested in? Let's learn more about it together. What would you design out of your expertise if we were working from that together? But with literally no ability to enforce that, it becomes a really different project than sort of a top-down mandate. I think that was probably a really important lesson because even when I had more institutional authority, I still felt like that was a better way to do the work. I think if you learn anything as a WPA or just an administrator in general, it's that you can put things in writing and say that this is our policy about what you'll be doing in your classroom, but when people go into their classrooms, they're going to do what they want to do. So unless everybody has a collective interest and will in making new curriculum, they're still going to be doing what they want to do.

And so mandating things from the top, even though it might feel satisfying, I actually think is not really how good writing program administration actually happens. I think I was really lucky to learn it that way at a place where I didn't have any authority, and so I had to do it like that.

At UCF, I had more institutional authority, but I think that I still did it the same way, which is when I got there, I said, "Is anyone interested in piloting something new?" I didn't know anyone. It was a huge school. We had 33 adjuncts and a bunch of them just said, "I don't know you. I have no idea what you're talking about with Writing about Writing. But I'm really bored. I'd like to try something new."

That's actually how we moved toward a Writing about Writing curriculum at UCF. It was not through me coming in and saying, "Now this is what you're all going to do." The entire project really came about because people were interested. We had reading groups, we shared teaching materials, those people tried things. Then, they told their colleagues, "This was amazing, maybe you should try it." And so about two or three years in, then we started saying, "Enough people are doing this. We have good assessment on it. We're going to start moving the program toward this." But it's because we already had like a tipping point of who said that this was working.

I guess what's the principle here. I think that real change happens from the bottom up out of intellectual curiosity and interest, not really top-down mandate. So even if you have institutional authority, that's probably not the most effective way to run a writing program.

SW: Writing program administration is tied to local contexts and the affordances and resources, or perhaps constraints attached to those places, as you were describing through your

experiences at UCF and Dayton. What have been some guiding principles or what tenets have helped shape your administrative philosophy?

EW: I think I'd like to go back to your comment about everything is tied to local context. I think that is true, but I also think as a field, sometimes we cop out on that or like, "Everything is different. So there's nothing that we can say is true across every context." But I actually think that there are real principles that could work across contexts. At least for me there are things we know from the research to be true about writing and how writing works and those should inform whatever we do. And I think that's true, like what's the point of expertise if we don't act from it, right? But also I think there are principles about how people do their best work, if they're acting from their own expertise and if they're able to have ownership and agency of something that they built together, then that's more effective than telling people what to do.

So, regardless the vagaries of the institutional context, I still think we can say, but some things are still just always true, right? Which is why we have research. We should see what it says. We should act from it. Otherwise, why do we have all that research? And then there's just truths of our human nature. Then there's also quite a lot of stuff about leadership and change that I think, as a field, we've not been as familiar with as we should be, that can really help us think about how to get things done. And so really my principles have been act from the research and best practice, right? Above all, but also empower people to act from their own expertise and have agency in terms of how curriculum operates so that everybody feels ownership over it.

So the way that really played out at UCF is we hired a bunch of full-time non-tenure track faculty and of the ones we hired, maybe one out of sixteen, maybe two out of sixteen had Rhet/Comp degrees. Everyone else came from literature, creative writing, library science. And so if you think about the two principles that I just named, like we know stuff from our research that we need to act from, but you also want to empower people to act from their own expertise and experience. So we've got people who don't have any expertise and experience in writing studies, but they do bring other things. And so the challenge there was to say, "Look, there are some things from our field that all of us need to know, and so we're going to learn them together." We had to set up, basically, reading groups, study groups, opportunities for people to gain knowledge about a field that they didn't really have a lot of knowledge about. But then to say, given where you come from, what would you add to this?

We had someone who had a degree in literature and he really got excited about all this stuff about intertextuality. So he said, "As a literary scholar, I actually understand this and I bring other things to it." He designed a really interesting set of assignments that melded writing studies and literary studies around intertextuality.

I think the point of that is to say, to be able to act on those two principles, then, empowers people to act from best practice, but also to have agency in terms of ownership over the curriculum. Then the stuff that they would design went so far beyond anything I would have thought of. Right? And so it's not just me saying, "We're going to do this. And here are the four assignments

I was able to think of." They're all thinking of really cool, innovative stuff, but at the bottom, it is grounded in the scholarship of our own field. So to me, those two principles, I think gets you a long way toward having a program that is functional and also intellectual and where people have a lot of goodwill toward each other and recognize each other's expertise. If that makes sense.

SW: So you mentioned empowerment and agency. Can you talk about the role of mentorship as a program administrator or the different kinds and different layers of mentorship that exists as a WPA?

EW: I think when you're a comp director, part of mentoring is figuring out the different needs of the many different kinds of people who are teaching in a program, right? So at UCF, we had adjuncts, we had full-time non-tenure track, we had tenured and tenure track and each one of those groups of people needed something different, especially from me. We had all these great, really smart tenured, tenure track people from writing studies. They did not need me to say, "Hey, have you read this? Are you acting from this?" They needed me to empower them to really innovate and help them take leadership roles. Like, so when I would see them doing something amazing or they brought something in new that we didn't know, those people, then, felt empowered to lead workshops. I would send other people to them. So even though they were untenured, there's a lot of leading and mentoring that they could do that maybe they don't even know they could do. So part of my job was to facilitate that.

With our non-tenure track faculty, a lot of it was helping them have access to the communities of practice that could support them in gaining the knowledge that they needed. First as comp director, but then later when I was the department chair, one of the things that I really wanted to do was make sure that non-tenure track faculty had money for conferences, because how do you know what's going on in the field if you don't ever get to interact with anyone in the field. Right? So if you're non-tenure track and you have a degree in literature, and you come to work, you teach your four sections and you go home and you never interact with anyone in rhet/comp, you can't afford the journals, you can't afford to go to the conferences. There's nothing that I can do personally, that would take the place of that. You need access to the community of practice.

So just helping them gain that access and support, like I would tell them about LISTSERVs and encourage them to subscribe. I would give them money to go to conferences. So maybe that doesn't seem like mentoring in the traditional sense, but I think it's more like facilitating them to gain access to what they needed to have agency. I want them to be active independent agents who are then part of a community of practice. I don't know that we think about things like that at a system level, right? So in the system and the activity system, if they're completely cut off from all the social interaction, with the other people who know about rhetoric and composition scholarship, they'll never have the agency to act independently. I think that was a really important part of mentoring, if you want to call it that.

But then of course GA's need totally different things. They've never taught before. They've never even walked into a classroom before. So they needed a lot of encouragement and then really

specific things like nuts and bolts of like, how do you handle a classroom, right? So you have these multiple levels of things that they need. You're introducing them to the scholarship of the field, but you're also helping them be competent teachers who can, you know, not have a classroom get away from them.

I think part of being a comp director is figuring out what you can do to help people get where they want to go, but then also what the program needs in order to be successful. All of that is very, very different than what I do in the Howe Center for Writing Excellence. I don't have any direct oversight of curriculum. I don't have any direct oversight of teaching faculty. Everything that I do is supporting faculty from across all of the disciplines. And so again, back to the very, very early lesson that I learned, which is if you don't have any authority, that's probably fine because really what you want is for people to know that you support them in the thing that they want to do. And that really is my whole job now.

Where the mentoring really comes in is the grad students who work for us in the Howe Center. So we have a lot of doctoral students who work for us. I think what an amazing opportunity for them to learn how systems work, how programs work, how universities work and to gain experience without having all the responsibility. And so really thinking about like, how do you prepare them for a job market where they could go be writing center directors or rhet/comp directors and give them experience doing the things that will help them be better at that, but then making sure that you're valuing what they do and what they know, but not taking advantage of them as labor to just do this stuff that you don't want to do.

SW: Your research is connected to the concept of transfer. I am thinking specifically about Writing About Writing and your article, "Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study" that was published in WPA: Writing Program Administration in 2007. Can you talk about how the concept of transfer helps you in the context of writing program administration?

EW: It depends on what you're looking at, right? What's your unit of analysis, so are you talking about at the level of curriculum design, are you talking about the level of faculty development? Obviously I started thinking about transfer because I was directing a program and I just kept thinking like, what are we doing? Is this actually helpful to anyone beyond this class? And so that's about curriculum design. So obviously there was a whole part of my scholarship and my career that has been thinking about that in terms of first-year comp, like if this class is going to be useful, how can it be the most useful to students beyond this moment? Right. So that's where Writing about Writing came from; that whole entire curriculum is really around that as a starting question.

And that's not at all what I'm thinking about anymore. I still get to write new additions to that book and still really think about what that curriculum is, but I don't direct first-year comp. I have a wonderful colleague here who does that. That's not my lane, so I stay out of it. So really, now, what I'm interested in is how faculty across the disciplines, no matter what their own disciplinary

background is, can be thinking about what do students already know about writing? What do they need to do with writing? What do they need to do with writing in my class and after my class? And those aren't really questions that they've thought about, they're frustrated by them, but they don't know why they're frustrated because it's not what they're thinking about. Right. They're thinking about why can't you do calculus?

I do lots of faculty development training, now. We don't really talk directly about transfer, but I think it is of course informing because I'm thinking about how I teach them in faculty development in ways that will then transfer to their own classrooms. But then I'm also thinking about how to help them teach their own students in ways that will be useful. So one of the things that comes up the most in WAC faculty development here is that the minute faculty start talking about the struggles that they face with their students, they start to realize that part of why they're having trouble is that faculty within departments are operating as islands, and they're not talking to each other and coordinating their own curriculum. So this was always a question for us in first-year comp, but we were like an island out there all by ourselves. Like we just hoped that what we were doing would transfer to wherever the students were going.

But when you're talking to faculty from say gerontology or philosophy, and they're saying, "I know my student had my colleague Gayle's class, but then they come to my class, they can't do the things I think they need to do." They're talking about issues of transfer within their own major and then their own curriculum. So part of what I do is help them work as teams. So we have a semester long program called the Faculty Fellows. They come as teams from their department and they work together as a team the entire semester. And most of the time, what they end up doing is redesigning their entire curriculum so that it's coherent and scaffolded and sequenced. That's not what I asked them to do, but that's what they start doing when they realize part of the problem that their students are having is that there's no coherent curriculum that helps them transfer what they're learning to the next class. They don't ever use that language. I don't think I use it with them, but that's really what I think that they're doing.

You did not ask this question, but I think this is a much more satisfying job to be doing than first-year writing. And the reason is that first-year writing is always going to be this one course, that's kind of out there on its own at the very beginning of a student's career. Then, everything else they take after that is somewhere else. Right? I spent years of my life thinking, how can you help students transfer what they know from this one course in their first year? Now, I'm able to help faculty think about the other three and a half years of their student's academic career. How do you create curriculum and writing to learn and learning to write assignments that help them across that time in a really scaffolded and sequenced way? That's really exciting because when those faculty get it, they have the students for this really long period of time and they can really design cool and innovative stuff that I think does encourage transfer.

SW: This is my last question. How has program administration influenced your teaching? And how has teaching influenced your program administration?

EW: If I were not a writing program administrator, I don't know what I would research. I actually don't know what I would be teaching. All of my curriculum that I've ever designed in my scholarship has been around teaching. And those are things that I've been trying implement as a writing program administrator. So to me, these things are totally inextricable. But now at Miami, I mainly teach in grad classes. I'm teaching in the spring on writing program administration and leadership. I think part of what I get to do now is take all these years of experience and help prepare graduate students in really explicit ways that I was never prepared, I just did it, I figured it out. But how much better would it be if people were actually prepared in an active way?

The other thing is that I think because what I do now is help faculty from across all these disciplines with their curriculum and their pedagogy is I couldn't do this if I hadn't taught for all those years. Because most of the time they're like, "Well, what do I do about X?" And like, "Oh, well I have an assignment where I did that." Or, "I have an assignment sequence that I can share with you where I had that very problem." And if I hadn't taught for all of those years, I don't think that I could do that job very well, or I wouldn't really have any credibility despite whatever my title might be. If they come to see me and I don't have any teaching materials to show them, I don't know what's going on, I would have no credibility.

So I just think these two things are just really related and I think, to be a good WPA, you need to be a good teacher, but then your teaching can really benefit from the structural thinking that you do as a WPA as well. And many, many of the questions that I get from faculty are "I'm really struggling with the capstone class and the major…I'm really struggling with the sequencing of courses in a major." I think I'm very, very lucky that when I was the department chair at UCF, we were creating a new major group just from the ground up. There had not been a department or a major. Then I was able to teach across that and then go back and revise the major and respond to it. So the questions that I'm getting are very much like, "They're in my capstone and they don't know anything about methods, they've never done any of the analysis. They don't know how to use the library or collect data." And then we have to have a little conversation about like, "Well, how has your major sequenced? What are you expecting them to know? Have you asked them when they come in, what they already know, have you done a survey to find out what their prior knowledge is?" Right. So all of that I think is very helpful.

SW: Thank you, Elizabeth. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.