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Students, Faculty and "Sustainable" WPA Work

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, here is the chapter's first paragraph:

Despite several cycles of reforms spanning the last fifteen years, we three composition colleagues were unable to achieve widespread student engagement in our required one-semester writing course. At California State University, Chico, the WPA oversees faculty development and program assessment for a first-year writing program that serves 2700 students each year with over 100 sections of first-year writing. Several different WPAs experienced fatigue as they undertook challenging and often unproductive work: resisting an outdated California State policy on the aims and goals for General Education, including what constitutes appropriate aims for writing courses; revising notions of student writing that are too tied to the "modes" and views of information literacy that end in exercises rather than in the activity of scholarship; developing and delivering assessments whose findings frequently conflict with budgetary, ideological, or departmental constraints; and promoting the complex underlying assumptions of our work despite widespread and reductive beliefs about the writing capabilities of first year students.

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STUDENTS, FACULTY AND “SUSTAINABLE” WPA WORK

Thia Wolf
Jill Swiencicki
Chris Fosen

Despite several cycles of reforms spanning the last fifteen years, we three composition colleagues were unable to achieve widespread student engagement in our required one-semester writing course. At California State University, Chico, the WPA oversees faculty development and program assessment for a first-year writing program that serves 2700 students each year with over 100 sections of first-year writing. Several different WPAs experienced fatigue as they undertook challenging and often unproductive work: resisting an outdated California State policy on the aims and goals for General Education, including what constitutes appropriate aims for writing courses; revising notions of student writing that are too tied to the “modes” and views of information literacy that end in exercises rather than in the activity of scholarship; developing and delivering assessments whose findings frequently conflict with budgetary, ideological, or departmental constraints; and promoting the complex underlying assumptions of our work despite widespread and reductive beliefs about the writing capabilities of first year students.

As Bruce Horner and many others have chronicled, for most readers, the avalanche of challenges we have just listed is nothing new and may seem like “business as usual” for program administrators who work in composition studies. We borrow the term “business as usual” (BAU) from climate change researchers Steven Pacala and Robert Socolow because of an analogy we see between climate scientists’ battles with “normal” but harmful environmental practices and WPAs’ battles with normal but harmful institutional practices. For Pacala and Socolow, BAU “refers to a whole range of projections” about carbon emissions levels, “all of which take as their primary assumption that emissions will

continue to grow without regard to the climate” (qtd. in Kolbert 136-7). BAU establishes a trajectory for levels of carbon in the atmosphere if current emissions trends continue unchecked for ten, twenty, even fifty years out. In addition to charting the rapid destabilization of the Earth’s atmosphere, BAU is also in itself a powerful argument in favor of the status quo. Because there is currently no direct or immediate cost to emitting CO², and because many of the proposed mitigations or “wedges” seem inadequate to the scale of the climate change problem (Kolbert 141), calls for action can be subsumed by stall tactics and feelings of helplessness. And unlike many other fields, the BAU scenario in climate modeling is much more serious and pressing to experts than to laypeople. In an interview with Elizabeth Kolbert, for example, Socolow notes with some irony that while nuclear scientists are far more relaxed about the potential for Chernobyl-type radiation leaks than the public is, “in the climate case, the experts—the people who work with the climate models every day, the people who do ice cores—they are *more* concerned. They’re going out of their way to say, ‘Wake up!’” (133-4). BAU is both a direct and a symbolic measure of the effects of a human preference system on the environment, one which mitigates against seeing long-term damages to the environment and girding ourselves properly for the deep paradigm shifts in thinking and acting that are needed to adequately meet the climate crisis.

While research on global climate change is not equivalent to our challenges in articulating a sustainable model for writing instruction, Pacala and Socolow’s model is inspiring to us as literacy workers because it represents a way of collaboratively intervening in large-scale, seemingly intractable, institutional practices using available methods and resources. It also helps us parse the current, real-time effects of historical assumptions about student writers and writing. For us, BAU represents a constellation of staggering state budget cuts, crippling ideological divides about writing instruction, and an increasingly problematic framework for managerial efficiency-and-accountability models of teaching and learning. The most recent material effects of these have been, in part, individual and group failures to move course caps below 27 students; lost reassigned time for WPA work involving TA supervision and program coordination; and the closing of our Writing Center. While it might prove difficult to map the trajectory of these issues linearly along a graph, as climate researchers do, or to plot their direct effects upon the university “environment,” it is clear to us that

we've reached a steady state in which, doing all of our usual work, everything is slowly getting worse.

California's budgetary woes are driving the writing course in predictable ways, and our arguments about class size, the important contribution writing makes to learning, and so on no longer have rhetorical weight. As with the public debate about climate change, dissensus reveals the differences in perspective between laypeople and experts. As faculty trained in literacy, writing, and teaching, we believe the situation is far more serious than do non-experts, who don't recognize BAU writing instruction as a problem. As with carbon emissions, there might be no appreciable "cost" for continuing with BAU in this fashion that anyone but writing experts could measure.

According to Pacala and Socolow, stabilizing carbon emissions is possible through the use of available strategies and technologies. The idea is to reduce toxicity, to reduce what is problematic by changing the trajectory of carbon emissions to more sustainable levels—first to a holding pattern and then in the direction of a reduction. By "ramping up" energy-efficient technologies and deploying them on a grand, cooperative scale across nations, the pair argues that we buy ourselves needed time for developing the more substantial changes in technologies and human practices that are ultimately needed, changes that reduce emissions and evidence a changed "preference system" from destructive to more ecologically informed practices. Socolow and Pacala's development of wedge theory provides a two-stage process whereby a system is first held in check so that no increased damage is done, and then shifted in the direction of a new system, undergirded by changed understandings of humans' eco-behaviors, eco-impacts, and eco-responsibilities. Wedges are an ordering of new constellations of human practices, relying on cooperative uses of available resources in new/broader ways, and thus providing room and time for technological innovations that address global warming by "substituting cleverness for energy" (Socolow and Pacala 52); and for an altered "planetary consciousness" where "humanity will have learned to address its collective destiny—and to share the planet" (57).

We argue that "business as usual" (BAU) writing program administration is not sustainable and cannot lead to robust engagement or agency for the stakeholders involved—faculty, staff, or students. Our chapter details the "stabilization wedges" we are putting in place to enable progressive literacy work—integrated, coherent curriculum that enables identity formation focused on engaged scholarship—on behalf of first

year students. We understand that the wedges—for us, as they revolve around civic writing pedagogy—provide us room and time to respond purposefully to the crisis now while we seek more radical, structural and bureaucratic changes for the long term. In the pages that follow, we analyze the set of very recent conditions and actions that allowed us to engage in meaningful, authentic WPA practices.

In his book *Defending Access*, our colleague Tom Fox rightly characterizes the period of WPA work in the 1990s at Chico State as “a coordinated practice” where literacy reform happened “simultaneously across multiple programs and sites” (71). Starting in 2000, as our composition faculty grew in number and some took on duties outside the English Department, the First-Year Composition Program’s WPA became for a period more isolated and pressured to work individually. While filling this WPA position at Chico State, Jill’s determination to change the nature of this work was enabled by her closest colleagues’ locational shifts across the university that happened in the fall of 2006. These shifts opened up the possibility of productive new exigencies and communities in which to do curriculum development in the first year and enabled the fluid and emergent structures for collaborating on this work. The changes resulted in new understandings of how administrators collaborate, how communities of literacy workers are created and supported, and how all this work is made public and institutionally supported. For us, these three elements guided the formation of “stabilization wedges” supporting our shift away from “business as usual” models of campus literacy work.

Our use of wedges helps to address and alter BAU models of teaching and learning, moving away from current-traditional assumptions about students as malleable objects and teachers as certifiers and to an insistently interactive, public-oriented model of teaching and learning involving variously situated participants. In this model, teachers, staff, students and administrators all exist first and foremost as learners; learning occurs through ongoing inquiry and participatory dialogue, such that all learners engage in identity work focused on participation in a democracy. Our example of the first-year composition program’s Town Hall Meeting as one wedge helps us outline new notions of practice and identity by which we might build a bridge away from business-as-usual models of administrative compliance and toward more institutionally-sustainable WPA work.

INITIAL INTERVENTIONS

Three interrelated changes helped us to build a bridge from BAU models of administrative compliance to more institutionally-sustainable WPA work: changes to our positions in the university, our mission statement, and the structure of the composition course itself. These changes all brought campus and community leaders into more direct contact with compositionists, creating new partnerships with the potential to change WPA work and writing instruction. First, when we situated ourselves differently in the institutional hierarchy, the meaning of our collaborations changed dramatically. When Chris became Chair of the General Education Advisory Committee (GEAC) he began to research and write about the history of general education, comparing that history with our present goals and working with the Dean of Undergraduate Education (UED), William Loker, and GE faculty to create a coherent vision of general education for the campus with writing taking a central role. Thia became the university's director of the First Year Experience Program (FYE), and began researching liminality, identity formation, and learning communities in the transition from high school to college. Inspired by that research, in collaboration with the UED, she launched a pilot restructuring of a portion of the first-year curriculum. This curriculum featured an emphasis on teaching-teams, with teams comprised of faculty from across disciplines and students serving as Peer Mentors working together to create an integrated thematic approach to course development. An introduction to civic inquiry formed the backbone of the entire curriculum revision effort. Jill's work as WPA at the time had been to pilot a more streamlined version of first-year composition (English 130), one that mainstreamed remediation and rested on an inquiry-driven curriculum.

Although we didn't know it at the time, a crucial shift in our BAU approach to administration occurred when the three of us, through our new roles, agreed to collaborate on a pilot syllabus focused on civic literacies. We agreed to do most of this work in the summer months. Prior to doing this work, Jill spent the spring semester listening to the speakers invited by the university to lecture on civic engagement initiatives at the college level, and became concerned about a number of aspects of the discourse of civic engagement: the centrality of the identity of citizen; the focus on appreciating U.S. democracy rather than critically engaging with its most intractable problems; the maintenance of the noble

citizen narrative—individuals who persevere and achieve the promises of the American dream by doing good for others. Jill knew that campus initiatives like civic engagement could be little more than the campus branding itself amidst an increasingly competitive educational marketplace. Her fears were allayed when she saw this articulation of engagement at Chico State:

CSU–Chico Mission Statement

We see civic engagement and sustainability powerfully linked as a way to help students understand that democracy must be actively created and nurtured and as a way to work with others to build and live in the community . . . Believing that each generation owes something to those who follow, we will create environmentally literate citizens who embrace sustainability as a way of living. We will be wise stewards of scarce resources and, in seeking to develop the whole person, be aware that our individual and collective actions have economic, social, and environmental consequences.

We understand how context-specific this definition is, and how strange it might seem to other compositionists interested in advocating engagement. Chico State’s identity is being actively reformed from “the party school” to “the sustainability school,” and in under five years, its effects have been real and powerful for our campus and city community.¹ We appreciated the complex understanding that community was less something to celebrate than something to actively make and remake; that the notion of being engaged required historical knowledge of who did what before you, and why; the tacit assumption that all education should be clearly relevant to the present time; and a notion of scholarly identity that had embedded in it an ethics of living, a notion that what you think becomes what you do, which then becomes “a way of living” that has resonance and consequence. If we were hemmed in by BAU practices within our college of Humanities and Fine Arts the mission statement

1. Some of CSU, Chico’s sustainability plaudits are the following: having been awarded the 2007 Grand Prize by the National Wildlife Federation for efforts to reduce global warming; recently being ranked rank as #8 on a top green colleges and universities list by *Grist*; CSU, Chico faculty such as biologist Jeff Price, Department of Geological and Environmental Sciences, who is one of the authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report that received the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize; our “This Way to Sustainability” conference, the nation’s largest sustainability conference of its kind; and our Rawlins Endowed Professorship of Environmental Literacy, which has the responsibility to prepare all students of all majors, across the campus, for dealing with a world environment by working with faculty from across campus to integrate the concepts of sustainability into the curriculum.

allowed us to link to a new set of values for our literacy work, and build wedges into our location's BAU from there.

We three had all used rhetorical approaches to writing instruction: writing for real audiences, purposes, issues, and genres that students have a stake in. With that focus, we saw an opportunity to put into practice the campus civic engagement initiative, and to involve the college President and Provost as co-literacy workers. With Jill and Chris taking the lead, we designed a first-year composition syllabus focused in the areas of civic pedagogy and engagement and responding to these declared relationships, practices and values. It became a challenging and creative process to author and implement curriculum in dialogue with these campus-wide aims with faculty, students, staff and administrators who wanted this kind of integrated vision front and center in the curriculum. Thus our first crucial collaboration-toward-change occurred when we set ourselves an administrative goal, but responded to that goal by thinking and working as teachers. With civic inquiry the guiding focus of our curricular writing work in the first year, we were persuaded by the work of Susan Wells that engaged writing is "not always found in the clichéd public act, such as the letter to the editor, but in the relationships and practices that a person *engages in* to recast their prior knowledge and do something with that knowledge." For Wells, who draws on Jurgen Habermas, public writing is communicative action, "a relation between readers, texts, and actions" in engaged stances (338):

Public discursive forms . . . require a reconfiguration of the writer, and of agency, beyond the figure of the modernist scribe. Communicative action is an attempt by speakers and writers to coordinate plans, to come to agreement, to 'make up the concert.' . . . Habermas's definition of communicative action does not require a warm bath of mutual understanding or respect. It does not require shared styles of communication. All that is required is an agreement to undertake reciprocal action, based on shared problems and possible solutions (336).

The above description captures our aims for students' experience in first-year composition: writing to identify problems, researching to understand their complexity and possible solutions, and reciprocating with other stakeholders in working for change. This approach also captures the stance of learner-as-inquirer that defines the way we engage in collaborative WPA work; as Wells puts it, "it might be helpful to see public speech as questions rather than answers" (327).

In our “Writing for the Public Sphere” syllabus, students undertake the work of an assignment sequence that assists writers in generating the top public issues they are curious about, developing a research question, and tentatively answering it through database and internet research in collaboration with their peers. The aim of this work, amounting to about six weeks, is clarity on the past and present issues related to the question, as well as an understanding of proposed solutions.² After coming to individual notions of what is assumed or valued in question, students then co-create a public sphere called the Town Hall Meeting (THM). The THM is essentially a series of roundtable groups in which purpose-driven discussion creates multiple kinds of engaged literacy practices. It is a three-hour event that starts with a welcome in our large conference center and then moves to two one-hour sessions. In the first session, students meet with those who researched the same or similar question and exchange ideas about the history of their question, stakeholders in the conversation, and possible solutions to problems. In the second session, they break into smaller groups of people with similar assumptions or interests to decide what kind of “impact work” they might undertake based on their research to date, or follow up on aspects of the prior conversation with the help of “consultants” who provide feedback and encouragement from their own experiences because they are living the questions the students are researching. After the THM, students write their major research paper which synthesizes the scholarship they’ve examined with the enriched discussions of the issue and impact work coming out of the THM. The final writing project is a reflection on their experience in the course as it relates to the development of a public, scholarly identity.

Invited to participate in these roundtable discussions are faculty, staff, administrators and students, along with members of the community. Students who have completed the THM claim that they felt taken seriously as thinkers and researchers, that they felt clearer about their academic interests and goals, and that they saw clearly that their opinions can matter and can make positive change. One student, Chris Scott, stated,

In the past six months, I have been in and out of the library more times than I have in the last six years. The notion that there is an ongoing conversation

2. Wells argues that “the public requires . . . an understanding of what is assumed—and therefore available as value—by all speakers and writers: of what is universal without being foundational” (335).

out there in the world pushes me to find something to add to it. During the course of my research, I realized how important it is to hit a topic from every angle. Not only does doing this make my writing longer, but it gives me credibility that I leave my bias at the door; and after having been to the Town Hall Meeting, I am well aware everyone has their own opinions.

Writing in this class gave my work a sense of purpose; it became more than a paper written, graded, and handed back. Who knew that what I said would be taken seriously by those higher up the academic food chain than I? This fact also encouraged me to step up my writing game knowing that my research was actually leading me somewhere. I enjoyed writing with the thought in mind that my research is not going to ever be complete; it is going to continue to change and progress.

Another, Amy Casperson, stated:

At the first Town Hall [roundtable] discussion about education, there was a man in a suit defending the local educational system, and an ex-assistant principal calling him out, and graduate students bringing up recent issues in the education system. My friend and I kind of looked at each other and just remained quiet until the discussion was over. It was at that one discussion that a little part of me grew up. I realized I now have a voice in the community. I am an educated adult and if I want, I can debate with men in suits over issues that affect me.

Wells argues that there is a

simultaneous sense of exclusion and attraction that marks our relations to the public as students and teachers: our sense that the broadest political arenas of our society are closed to us, inhospitable; and also our impulse to enter them, or approximate them, or transform them. I have never known a writer, student or teacher who wanted a smaller audience, or a narrower readership; I have never known a writer who was unproblematically at home in the discursive forms of broad political or social address. (332-3)

As we see in Amy's response, our syllabus couples students' literacy work with inquiry into felt moments of exclusion, using writing to propel us to those moments of attraction.

The enthusiasm of students and teachers following the first THM led to a remarkable increase in the number of teachers (and therefore students) participating in the second THM—from 150 student participants and 55 faculty, staff and community member participants in fall 2006 to a total of 300 participants in spring 2007; the largest THM to

date took place in fall 2008, with over 700 participants. Assessments of students in Town Hall sections in comparison with students in other sections of ENGL 130 and in other first-year courses also revealed that students' attitudes toward academic work and their likelihood of seeing themselves as civically engaged members of the campus and community improved if they participated in a THM section of ENGL 130. A campus-wide direct assessment of student writing from ENGL 130 courses showed that students in THM sections ranked significantly higher than other students in summarizing and responding to sources in their writing. In this assessment, we also learned that Educational Opportunity (EOP) students, who three years ago had the highest failure rate of all first year writing students (23%), had a failure rate of just 6%. A growing number of students even became “Town Hall alumni,” returning for each THM and frequently serving as volunteers during the events; and beginning this spring some will serve as more capable peers, helping currently enrolled students with their research. The growth of the THM, the sudden and spontaneous movement toward better multi-section uniformity in ENGL 130, and the positive assessments and student narratives arising out of the Town Hall Meetings convinced us that we should put our accumulated energies into continued support for the Public Sphere writing course.

Watching our students succeed in negotiating this exclusion/attraction pull that is at the heart of endeavors of engagement and agency has emboldened our notion of collaborative WPA work. Around what kinds of campus practices, structures, and ideas do we feel excluded? What kinds of responsive literacy work attract us to those very points of exclusion? How do we locate ourselves differently—in relation to structures, students, and campus personnel—to create possibilities for transformative change? To break from the exclusion/attraction dynamic and into reciprocal action on shared goals for first-year students? Jeanne Gunner's call to “decenter the WPA” continues to remain relevant for us and the field, especially when scholars such as Carmen Werder find that the “master narrative” in WPA scholarship is not our work and how it's enacted but ourselves and our relationship to power. Despite recent attempts to recast power talk along more egalitarian lines, Werder argues that the emphasis remains not on situated action, but on individuals maintaining, wielding, and even yielding their own power in order to overpower or persuade others. “Such talk,” she finds, “implies that we conceive of our professional identity mostly in terms of individual

charisma, rather than in terms of situated, collective expertise” (9). Discourse focused on personal power, status, and influence reveals our limiting perspective on work, “for none of these three terms enables us to describe a dynamic where mutual agency—not control—is at the center of the relationship” (11).

By constructing WPAs as individual actors, then, we reproduce a binary script of the oppositional teacher or administrator hero courageously resisting encroachments into private space by hegemonic structures of the institution. Work, as the product of individuated labor, becomes a zero-sum game of control over resources, disciplinary status, or recognition, as power, commodified into artifacts like scholarly articles or student evaluations, is won or lost through crises outside of local control. Linking agency with the individual efforts of faculty and students thus contributes to the over-determined nature of solitary and disaffected WPA work. Social psychologist Carl Ratner argues that agency is a social habitus, a project that takes place and is given meaning in a historical moment, within a particular sociopolitical framework. Enhancing it can only be accomplished by strengthening the social relations that constitute it, by going beyond agency to focus on bonds, rules, and relations in a community of practice. “The more one narrowly focuses on changing agency by itself,” he argues, “the more agency will conform to [existing] social relations because these constituents of agency have remained intact” (425-26). To focus on agency as personal decision making is thus to encourage alienation of people—students and faculty—from their own labor. This focus guarantees that BAU holds sway, much as nationalistic assumptions about energy production maintain narrow, inadequate views of our climate crisis and prevent the development of a shared paradigm for addressing catastrophe.

CURRICULUM, COLLABORATION, AND STABILIZATION WEDGES

After years of struggling to make sense of the Academic Writing Program—and to make it make sense to others—how had we emerged into this place of personal and administrative energy, collaboration, and widespread involvement on the part of our students? How had we escaped some of the problems attendant in the BAU approach to writing program administration? Most important, how could we understand and maintain a pedagogical innovation that so evidently served—and apparently transformed—many of our students? To ensure ongoing development and support for the Town Hall Meeting and Public Sphere

syllabus, we needed to understand how to make room in our university for a different way of regarding students, teaching and learning, and literacy practices. Pacala and Sokolow’s work with sustainability wedges suggested itself to us because we knew we were facing a long-entrenched set of institutional practices that (re)produced teacher-centered classrooms—in spite of our university’s stated goals of developing student-centered approaches to instruction. Their model gave us a way of understanding how major change may occur despite pervasive, systemic patterns that do harm in the guise of supporting BAU as the university’s “normal and neutral” state.

Originally, we developed the idea of the Town Hall Meeting in order to transform civic literacy as course content into civic literacy as social practice. Jill posed the possibility of a public Town Hall Meeting where students could have meaningful interactions with others around their scholarship. The embedded public event, in which students discuss their research and learn ways to make a meaningful impact, supports students’ political/civic engagement as well. The public space of the THM became an important wedge, then, in a series of wedges developed strategically to support a transformed and transformative pedagogy and set of administrative practices in both the composition program and the FYE program.

In Pacala and Socolow’s work, a wedge serves as both a scaled-up technology aimed at reducing “carbon intensity” (para. 9) and as a strategic response working in cooperation with other strategic responses. A single wedge, no matter how thoughtfully implemented, can have no impact on mitigating the large-scale problem of global warming. A local, strategic response to large-scale destructive practices only becomes a “sustainability wedge” in the company of other wedges. Our goal for sustainable literacy instruction became linked to a broader, more pervasive goal: altering the way students are constructed by the institution. We see students as capable beginning scholars; we see scholarship—of faculty and of students—as engagement in the world.

This approach moves away from conceptually and geographically bounded classrooms, situating students in virtual and live realms to meet one another beyond individual classroom boundaries, requiring students to collaborate with unknown others who share areas of interest, and providing students with an entrance into public life. Pacala and Socolow’s vision helped us see that institutional change supporting student engagement would clearly have to extend beyond a single

person, program, or institution. Intervention by the WPA to produce an engagement-focused model of education would require multiple partnerships, resource commitments, and ongoing mechanisms for including students' voices and insights in every facet of Town Hall Meeting development and delivery. To provide for the possibility of change, "wedges" would have to be created that could, in concert with other wedges, alter the university's BAU model of writing instruction and the underlying notion of students as underprepared and undeveloped. And to effect lasting change, enough wedges would need to operate for a long enough period of time to allow many people in collaboration the space and time to change their own preference systems—and to offer up these changed systems to others as compelling models for lasting change.

In designing a workable method to affect global warming, Pacala and Socolow argue that any seven wedges from a list of fifteen they provide will produce a steady-state trajectory that holds carbon emissions at an even rate while approaches are developed to reverse the harmful trend. Using the idea of wedges, we have adapted their idea in our work for institutional change. Below we list eight wedges we are working to implement, but do not argue that a particular number will reliably achieve the preferred trajectory; our use of this theory is, of course, conceptual. We cannot quantify the effect of our wedges in the same way climate scientists quantify the physical impact of theirs. We do assert, however, that multiple wedges are needed to alter the momentum of the BAU in a large system such as a university.

POSSIBLE WEDGES

In our approach to changing institutional culture around the meanings and practices of "teaching first-year students" and "providing literacy instruction," we build wedges by constructing strategic community-building relationships, involving an array of people from within and beyond the university in meaningful interactions with first-year students. These interactions include all of the following characteristics in order to count as a "wedge":

- Individuals from more than one program, institution, or site must participate, and members' statuses within hierarchies must be varied;

- “Participation” within a wedge means a dialogic approach to program development and delivery where each participant is positioned to make meaningful contributions toward change; responsibility for development, delivery, review and maintenance of the new preference system requires involvement on the part of all participants;
- Participants’ reasons for working within a wedge or multiple wedges vary according to individuals’ background, situatedness and public and private agendas, such that participants’ view of the meaning of “engaged scholarship” remains a contested space, open to debate, ongoing review and construction, and new insights.

Wedge 1: Using Public Sphere Curriculum

Our initial intervention in our university’s BAU was the rewriting of curriculum to move students and their coursework into the public domain. This approach to working with students rests on the beliefs that the scholarship of first-year students matters; that students come to understand the potential larger impact of their work when that work reaches constituencies beyond the classroom; that John Dewey’s notion of democracy as dependent on dialogue holds true; and that students come to understand the possible relationships of their scholarship to public work through dialogue with invested, interested others.

Currently on our campus, public sphere pedagogy informs both our introductory writing course and our “Introduction to University Life” course (delivered through the First-Year Experience Program). Our adoption of public sphere pedagogy in first-year courses involves the participation of faculty, administrators and students engaging in dialogue each semester about the impact of this pedagogy on all participants. Faculty report that this pedagogy enlivens student inquiry, and students report that public sphere work contributes to their first experience a sense of belonging and contributing to an academic community. Administrators focused on assessments that support this pedagogy because of heightened student engagement in both academic and civic contexts.

Wedge 2: Forging New Institutional Relationships

From our various vantage points in the university, we engage in dialogue about ongoing and future curricular reforms that increase student

engagement in the first year. Meetings occur each term among the WPA, the English Department Chair, the First Year Experience (FYE) director, and the Deans of Humanities and Undergraduate Studies focused on recognizing BAU practices and imagining and engaging in curricular reform. In the last six months, the V.P. for Student Affairs, the Provost and the President have also become involved in these conversations.

Support for curricular reforms has arisen through these dialogues in a variety of ways: faculty meetings have given way to longer gatherings in homes, where extended conversation happens over potluck meals; students and administrators have traveled together to civic engagement-related conferences, establishing new kinds of relationships as they make public presentations about this curriculum to regional and national groups; the President and provost have each featured the work of the Town Hall Meeting in particular in their work with community members, educators, and interest groups—such as the American Democracy Project.

Wedge 3: Producing Public Sphere Events

Our Town Hall Meeting must be “produced” as a public event through many kinds of arrangements and negotiations, and additional public sphere events linked to our UNIV 101 course are also produced each fall. The FYE director and her student staff oversee most of the nuts and bolts work of staging the public space, publicity, and so on. The alignment of THM values and goals with the President’s stated mission, to provide undergraduate education that prepares students to work as informed citizens in a democracy, assisted the director in arguing for long-term support of the THM by the FYE program. This wedge involves the practical end of public events work, but the practical work assists in the students’ development of new institutional identities—as scholars, as Peer Mentors, as program assessors, and as Town Hall “alumni.”

Wedge 4: Acting as Members of the Community

Students, administrators and teachers all participate in community outreach in connection with any public sphere event on our campus, publicizing the Town Hall Meeting and inviting people with interests in specific subjects under discussion to attend. The WPA, assisted by our campus’s Civic Engagement Director, devotes time each semester to contacting faculty and community members with expertise in the subjects that students are exploring, inviting them to attend student exhibits

and/or the Town Hall Meeting and to meet with smaller student groups during the closing reception. Students generate lists of community guests they hope will attend their sessions and request ongoing contact with community members they have met in the context of public events. The WPA and faculty work to create pathways between community participants and students desiring ongoing dialogue, as students frequently request further conversation with consultants, and consultants frequently contact us searching for a student they met with whom they want to follow up.

Wedge 5: Creating Responsive Administrative Roles

When the budget crisis in California rapidly depleted the English Department’s funds, effectively eliminating the Composition Coordinator position and moving it into the hands of the Composition Committee, the Dean of Undergraduate Education proposed and created the position of “Town Hall Coordinator.” While the primary work of this position is to oversee the ongoing curricular and faculty development needs of the THM, as well as taking on some parts of THM production work, the invention of the position provides our campus with a recognized site for discussion of Town Hall/public sphere pedagogies in relation to other courses and/or campus projects with administrators, faculty and students from a variety of disciplines/organizations.

In FYE, new work roles have been created for students and recent graduates with public sphere experience. Students’ work roles connected to the first-year writing course and to the introduction-to-university course have become more professionalized, including some clerical and administrative duties, but mostly assessment and research tasks. Recently, students who frequently return to the Town Hall Meetings have begun to organize as an official Town Hall Alumni organization, with seed funding provided by FYE and training for classroom mentoring roles provided through the English department.

Wedge 6: Committing to Responsive, Ongoing Revision

To ensure that the THM undergoes review and revision based on multiple perspectives, the Town Hall Coordinator and FYE director hold debriefing sessions post-THM and have initiated a relationship with Chico’s City Council as we look for ways to put students’ scholarship and the THM event itself in dialogue with the surrounding community. Faculty retreats conclude each semester; here we revise syllabi based

on faculty and student feedback, as well as students' written and public work. UNIV 101 undergoes yearly revision (it is offered only in the fall) to align itself more fully with public sphere pedagogy, to review faculty and student experience, and to include the expertise of staff who work with first-year students (e.g., counselors, alcohol educators, advisors).

Wedge 7: Sharing the Model

Small-scale efforts have been made to share the public sphere model of instruction through a small "VIP" program for visitors from other campuses/organizations who come to a THM and experience a day of dialogue with students, teachers, staff and administrators involved in it. One visitor to the Town Hall Meeting, Emily Edwards of Montana State University, has implemented it in her campus's introduction to university life course. We are in the early planning stages of working with area high school teachers wanting to explore this model, and it is now being re-created to enhance the student inquiry work in the entry-level political science course on campus. The goal of this wedge is to shift the regional and national views of students' identity, of academic literacy instruction, and of student and faculty engagement.

Wedge 8: Legitimizing the Model

When a combination of direct experience attending Town Hall Meetings and positive assessments convinced the Dean of Undergraduate Education that the public sphere model of instruction made a positive difference in the lives of students, he enlisted the help of the campus director of Civic Engagement. Together they wrote a grant proposal requesting funds for design and production efforts from the "Bringing Theory to Practice" project sponsored by AAC&U and the Charles Engelhard foundation. This grant was awarded to support redesign work in the University Life course, in CourseLINK (block-enrolled courses for first-year students), in the Academic Writing course, and in some residence life co-curricular programming. The receipt of the grant brought the THM syllabus into relief for faculty from across the disciplines who were informed that the THM writing course would be the culminating experience of a one-year curriculum redesign for first-year students. Faculty and students from across campus come together multiple times in the spring term and summer months to develop a coherent first-year curriculum with the THM as a guiding culminating event for all curriculum planning. In addition, Jill, Chris, and Thia have presented on the Town Hall Meeting and

the concept of public sphere pedagogy at the National FYE Conference, and have written articles for publication about various aspects of the Town Hall. The public success of the activity contributes to its stability during a period of deep financial—and therefore programmatic—instability.

CONCLUSION

Wedge theory allowed us to understand how to move forward in a systematic way to put civic inquiry at the heart of our first-year students’ experience at CSU, Chico. The Town Hall Meeting began, not as a conscious ‘wedge’ against business as usual WPA work, but as a pedagogical innovation. Our core insights as administrators, then, came from our work as teachers. One can build all sorts of programs within a university without truly keeping students in mind; we avoided this mistake by asking ourselves what could make a writing course matter to students enrolled in it. What we most wish to stress is the value of connecting students’ work to the larger world through a variety of public sphere experiences that take students seriously and require them to behave as participating members of a democracy. We learned how we wanted to practice the work of Writing Program Administration by seeing the transformative effect on our students in a literacy system that gave preference to the research and writing of first year students, listened to their work, and promoted their transformation of writing into public action.

As Pacala and Sokolow put it, what we are trying to initiate is a changed “preference system” around literacy work on campuses. Their research in the field of engineering is influencing how the climate crisis is being addressed internationally, and they are committed to solving it through mitigating and lowering carbon emissions, a most daunting and—until their relentlessly pragmatic theory of stabilization wedges—an almost unimaginable task. Sokolow says he asked himself, “What kind of issue is like this that we faced in the past?”:

I think it’s the kind of issue where something looked extremely difficult, and not worth it, and then people changed their minds. Take child labor. We decided we would not have child labor and goods would become more expensive. It’s a changed preference system. Slavery also had some of those characteristics a hundred and fifty years ago . . . [A]ll of a sudden it was wrong and we didn’t do it anymore. And there were social costs to that, [but w]e said, ‘That’s the trade-off; we don’t want to do this anymore.’ So we may look at this and say, ‘We are tampering with the earth.’ (Kolbert 143)

We tend to think of a preference system changing in single, dramatic moments created by lone, long-suffering agents of change. In some ways, Socolow reinforces this notion above when he simplifies exactly how the change in preference happens. He sees it as a tipping point, one where people awaken and see the system they took for granted in a new light. It is the supposed moment where it appears that the various stakeholders all come to a single conclusion through a single motive. While making change on the scale of global economies and cross-cultural ethics requires that stakeholders come to a single conclusion, it does not in fact require a single motive. Major shifts in systems require dialogue and action around the notion of values and morals. What motivates a shift from business as usual to a new, more ethical, responsive system? How do we negotiate our varied and sometimes competing motives for the change we collectively want, and move to what Wells calls “reciprocal action”?

Compared to climate change and abolition, the scale of the problem for writing program administrators is clearly less severe. Still, we see WPA work as existing on an ethical continuum with these problems, as it is helping students negotiate their emergent identities through scholarship in ways that produce whole, agential, socially conscious, engaged human beings. The work of critical literacy development is, for us as literacy teachers, the crucial component in this endeavor. It is the value we described to the stakeholders we work with: students, deans, grant-funding agencies, departmental curriculum reform initiatives, program directors, teachers, and staff. What we are learning in the very early stages of enacting this changed preference system is that it has little to do with sole, heroic agents like WPAs, and everything to do with relationships and practices strategically positioned to develop and enhance student writing, identity, and the creation of the very kinds of learning environments that represent engaged work for faculty, administrators, and students.

We know this because in spring 2008 our dean discontinued all assigned time for WPA work due to the massive budget cuts the State of California is undergoing, cuts that will become even more severe in the coming years. What amazed us when we processed this news was that it this change did not alter our ability to continue with our work in '08-'09. WPA work is now done by the composition committee, and the THM work is supported by assigned administrative time provided through the grant one semester and through FYE the other.

The focus on civic engagement and sustainability did not arise initially through our own personal commitments, but as our response to an exciting, emerging rhetoric on our campus. Through this experience, we have come to see the “WPA against the university” power struggle narrative as a WPA version of BAU and learned that we could actually accomplish our legitimate goals and authentic purposes for the writing programs by “engaging” with the “engagement discourse.” Now, even without a figure called a WPA at Chico State, we are finding that the change needed to happen through dialogue on the proclaimed values of the campus culture—in our case, sustainability and civic engagement—to push them toward the formation of a socially progressive vision of literacy work and literacy workers.

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