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“So, that’s sort of wonderful”: The Ideology of Commitment and the Labor of Contingency

Sarah V. Seeley

Abstract: *This article explores the emotional outcomes related to language commodification within an organizational context: the first-year writing program at Binghamton University, which is a public research university in upstate New York. In this setting, the meanings of effective writing instruction are discursively constructed in terms of a multi-faceted commitment to ‘the process.’ This entails an ideological commitment to both recursive process writing and the process of collaboratively evaluating the product that derives from it. I first offer an overview of the Binghamton context, including the details of collaborative portfolio assessment. I then analyze a specific sociolinguistic strategy: pep talking. I argue that pep talking is integral to cultivating localized technologies of the self through simultaneously bolstering the ideology of commitment and effacing instructors’ emotional outcomes.*

Introduction

Much recent work across the social sciences has examined the employment and organizational contexts in which “care” is performed (Pugh; Lane; Murphy). In particular, Arlie Russell Hochschild’s work has been foundational for contemporary discussions of emotional labor and the work of caring. Feelings are, of course, rule governed: people are socialized to express, repress, or act on their feelings based on context. What’s more, workplaces are key sites for examining these socialization processes and their attendant outcomes.

Workplace contexts have also served as the location for linguistic anthropological analyses of language labor and language commodification. In particular, Bonnie Urciuoli and Chaise LaDousa as well as Monica Heller offer reviews of each respective body of literature. We are thinking here about language as a kind of cultural capital: as a framework for socioeconomic success. Following Judith Irvine, studying language in this way means that we conceptualize it as “a complex social fact that can be looked at from many angles, including the economic” (250). Given the complexities surrounding contemporary job (in)securities, it is unsurprising to see that material approaches to language are increasing (e.g. Shankar and Cavanaugh).

Publications on the subject of emotional labor in writing program contexts have been similarly increasing (Caswell; Adams Wooten, Babb, Costello, and Navickas). The work of assessing and commenting on student writing is an obvious location for examining “the toil of feeling.” In particular, Jacob Babb and Steven Corbett have analyzed writing instructors’ emotional responses to different kinds of student failure. They found that guilt was a common emotional response to student failure, with one survey respondent stating that, “I feel I have failed to support the student adequately.” In effect,

feelings of guilt reorient the concept of “failure” by shifting the evaluative gaze from a material stack of papers back onto oneself.

While guilt is not the specific focus of this essay, these circumstances may prompt us to ask: how are we socialized into feeling and expressing work-related emotion? How does language function as a social framework wherein socioeconomic success is linked to whether we possess, express, or repress particular emotions? Here, I take a synthetic approach to analyzing language-focused work. Drawing on the results of two years of ethnographic fieldwork, I will be considering the emotional outcomes related to language use within one specific organizational context: the first-year writing program at Binghamton University, which is a public research university in upstate New York.¹

In the Binghamton case, language becomes a commodity as instructors participate in the program’s system of collaborative portfolio assessment. This system tasks instructors with the continuous discursive negotiation of what effective writing instruction “looks like.” Furthermore, these negotiations often unfold as enactments of one’s commitment: to effective teaching practices, to objective writing assessment, and to the program’s administrative goals. This is, in short, what I will refer to as an ideology of commitment, which functions like all language ideologies in that it enacts ties of language to the negotiation of the self.

In this case, we are observing how emotions—ranging from anger and annoyance to fear and uncertainty—shape individual negotiations of the self. This ideological stance functions as an uptake of Michel Foucault’s technology of the self, which he describes as a tool for pragmatic self-transformation (18). Urciuoli and LaDousa have characterized technologies of the self as “means for fashioning a subjectivity compatible with dominant practices, institutions, and beliefs” (177). In short, we are thinking about subjective means for self-fashioning that are wholly context dependent. Social contexts are, of course, multiple, overlapping, and hierarchical. This is why Foucault’s concept can be productively dovetailed with Terry Eagleton’s assertion that ideologies often work by construing particular beliefs “as arising not from the interests of a dominant class but from the material structure of a society as a whole” (30). At its core, ideological commitment is a multi-faceted means of reconciling the social activities demanded by one’s

1. I conducted fieldwork during 2013 and 2014 while also teaching for this first-year writing program as a graduate student. As such, I was a participant in the Pedagogy Group system that I will go on to describe in detail. The names of all study participants, with the exception of myself, have been anonymized. My contributions to the conversation represented in the Extract 2 transcript are labeled as “Sarah.” Further, I have applied pseudonyms in a way that disguises gender. I made this choice in order to protect the integrity of the study.

Institutional anonymity is, on the other hand, not possible. In order to maintain methodological integrity, I must contextualize my own positionality as a participant observer which makes any attempt at institutional anonymization a very thin veil. In addition, there are a number of published texts associated with this writing program and having to avoid citing them would negatively impact this argument. Finally, institutional anonymity is not stipulated in the IRB-approved research design.

work. Because of this, the writing program presents itself as an ideal organizational context for observing real time manifestations of this ideological stance.

For example, the ideology may manifest through the tacit commitment to maintaining what Brad Hammer has critically referred to as a “‘worker vs. intellectual’ construction for compositionist inquiry and teaching” (A5). It also underpins what Kelly Ritter has critically described as “train[ing] new [writing] teachers to unquestioningly accept these often-crushing pedagogical practices as ethically, or even morally, superior to other methods” (412). Regardless of why teachers of writing become/remain committed to their work, it is important to recognize that the degree to which an ideology overlaps with, supports, or reflects social actors’ views of the world is an indicator of how successful or powerful it is. This idea, then, may complicate our efforts to reject “worker” subjectivities, and it may actually thwart our ability to do the work of revising our pedagogical choices.

The particulars of language use have always formed an integral part of how success is measured across a variety of employment contexts, but applying this idea within the Binghamton context is to say that we are witnessing an intensification of the general principles of process writing and portfolio assessment. Instructors are continuously discussing how each other’s students should be coached through the writing process, and eventually how each other’s students’ portfolios should be evaluated. As I will illustrate, these activities discursively expand the limits of instructors’ responsibilities to include a variety of undue time investments. Instructors deploy the ideology of commitment as a means of reconciling the emotional responses that emerge from this expansion of responsibility.

Insofar as the social activities demanded by one’s work are potentially inconsistent with one’s own best interest, the emergence of negative emotional outcomes is not particularly surprising. In order to frame these emotional responses, it may be useful to think in terms of Niko Besnier’s assertion that, “the activities that take place ‘around’ literate communication (i.e., simultaneously, in the same social space, with the same people) provide a specific flavor to the literacy activity, a flavor that becomes part of its inherent meaning” (142). We can, then, expect to see how the activities that take place “around” writing assessment contribute to the “flavor” of the writing program.

When we consider the origins of and socialization into labor-intensive process writing pedagogies, it is important to note that such methods are dominant for a reason: because they tend to yield positive results. This success is, however, quite problematically contextualized by the fact that contingent laborers most often enact this work. It has, for example, been estimated that contingent faculty were teaching over 80% of first-year writing classes at public institutions in 2007 (Ritter 388). The American Association of University Professors further confirms that, as of 2015, “non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for over 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in American higher education.” The AAUP also notes that, “contingent appointments are often clustered in programs with very high levels of predictability— such as freshman writing courses that are required for all students.” It’s no wonder that the “worker” subjectivity is hard to disavow. It is similarly unsurprising that the “hyper-caring” or “super-committed” writing professor persona may be easily reconciled by contingent laborers within

the context of what Alison Pugh has referred to as “insecurity culture” (218). These character traits map directly onto likely-to-be renewed contracts for the new faculty majority.

As an example of the self-fashioning that comes along with the ideology of commitment, we can consider this comment made by Natasha, who was a graduate instructor of first-year writing at Binghamton University:

I warn them in the beginning. I tell them I’m going to be making them feel uncomfortable about a lot of the things that they’re going to write. I tell them that I’m not invalidating their experience, but that I’m challenging how they’re going to communicate their experience to us. It’s really uncomfortable at times, but it often seems to work out if they’re receptive. But you always have some students who just maybe aren’t going to be there yet, right? I mean in terms of their life and how they can perceive themselves. And then there are the people who write a draft, and I read it. They write another draft, and I read it. Then they write another draft, and all of a sudden they come running into the class and they’re like, “aaah! I get it!” So, that’s sort of wonderful.

In reading Natasha’s words, the tensions between time, generosity, and remuneration emerge quite clearly. Yet the process she describes does not exclusively hinge on student receptivity, as her words may suggest. Rather, process writing is defined and enacted based on her receptivity, her willingness to undertake hours of work for a single student. Yes, the results certainly can be “sort of wonderful,” but these labor-intensive expectations can simultaneously become “sort of taxing,” which is to say the very least. Natasha’s words illustrate how faculty contingency can lead to situations where “positive” or “care-based” types of emotional labor may be accepted as simply being a part of the job. Here we can see hierarchical circumstances and pedagogical values working in tandem to push forward a powerful ideology. Natasha’s willingness to give of her time may map directly onto those likely-to-be renewed adjunct contracts and hopefully-to-be secured tenure-track contracts, but she may be betting on a labor system that scarcely exists anymore. In this case, “positive” emotional labor is being problematically elided with the effort process paradigms exact from instructors.

In what follows, I draw on a data set comprised of dyadic, semi-structured interviews and 50 plus hours of naturally occurring group conversation that took place among writing instructors in order to argue that the meanings of effective writing instruction are discursively constructed in terms of a multi-faceted commitment to “the process.” In the Binghamton case, this entails an ideological commitment not only to recursive process writing but also to the process of collaboratively evaluating the product that derives from it. Moving forward, I will first offer an overview of the Binghamton context, including the specific details of collaborative portfolio assessment. This background will be essential to a discussion of one specific sociolinguistic strategy that simultaneously bolsters the ideology of commitment and effaces instructors’ emotional outcomes. I will refer to this communicative strategy as pep talking, and I will illustrate how it is integral to cultivating the technologies of the self that yield the very specific “flavor” of first-year writing at Binghamton University.

The Writing Initiative and Collaborative Portfolio Grading

At Binghamton University, first-year writing courses are taught primarily by graduate teaching assistants, in addition to a small number of senior faculty members who are almost all off the tenure track. Although this type of staffing is standard at many public research universities, it merits further examination here because of the assessment system in place in Binghamton's program. When the Binghamton University Writing Initiative was established as an independent writing program in 2008, a collaborative portfolio grading system² was implemented. This system is relatively unique and based on the one in use at Grand Valley State University (Kinney and Fenty 2; Royer and Schendel).

In order to promote consistency within and among approximately 50 sections of first-year writing each semester, the program uses collaborative grading, which requires instructors to meet weekly in Pedagogy Groups, each consisting of five or six instructors. The main purpose of these meetings is to discuss individual evaluations of student writing and come to consensus about evaluation criteria. The former writing program administrators described the meetings in the following way:

All of our teachers gather in small groups for weekly meetings led by experienced full-time faculty or graduate student administrators. Our Pedagogy Groups instill a sense of community and support for instructors through candid discussions among beginning and experienced teachers. In sum, Pedagogy Groups allow us to discuss classroom dynamics, share teaching activities, examine scholarly trends and—most centrally—practice effective strategies for responding to and grading student writing. (Kinney and Costello)

In a move intended to support programmatic standardization, the Pedagogy Group-based collaborative grading structure is supposed to provide an opportunity at the end of the semester for “teachers to reflect on how successfully they have internalized the grading criteria embraced by the program as a whole” (Kinney and Costello). Dan Royer and Ellen Schendel further describe this collaborative work:

Despite our profession's familiarity with the concept of “portfolio group grading,” our approach at Grand Valley is unique. We are unaware of any other program that weekly norms teams of teachers as graders for reliability over the course of the semester and then requires two- and three-reader agreement on student letter grades (not merely pass/fail) at the end of the term. At the end of the term, a group of five or so teachers of this class that have been grade-norming all semester using drafts from the students and finished portfolios from previous semesters determine the grade as a team for each student. The grading standard is in this way a very public standard, not based on a once-a-term workshop norming session or, worse, private, teacher-specific standard that allegedly adheres to a program rubric. Instead we have a two- sometimes three-reader grading group that is hyper-local to the five teachers' sections that

2. This assessment system was implemented in response to a series of institutional deficiencies. See Kinney and Costello 2010 for a full discussion.

has been communicating this achieved public grading standard back to these students in these sections throughout the semester. (28-29)

This system is still in place at Grand Valley and, as they do “not have graduate teaching assistants to rely on for staffing,” it is currently enacted by a combination of full-time writing instructors and Affiliate Professors (Royer and Schendel 27). Their description of the process merits quotation at length because it expresses the very same rationale that guides the Binghamton application. The Binghamton University Pedagogy Groups, then, offer specific contexts for examining precisely how the charge of “communicating this achieved public grading standard” is experienced in real time by contingent faculty. On a very basic level, this charge is shaped by a series of negative assumptions about individual instructors. The existence of the Pedagogy Group assumes an unproductive binary between the individual and the group, with the former being characterized by potentially flawed perspectives, incomplete knowledge, or problematic motives. This binary clearly presupposes that individual actors are unreliable, and therefore casts individual choice as being incompatible with the best practices in the teaching of writing. While objectives like mentoring new teachers and cultivating a community of writers are a part of the Binghamton Pedagogy Group rationale, the common experience of participating in these groups does not appear to be that of receiving mentorship. Because the group system relies on the assumption that homogeneity is both desirable and attainable, group meetings were more often experienced as a form of surveillance and/or an undue draw on instructors’ time. In turn, those realities yield their own emotional entailments and sociolinguistic responses.

To put a finer point on what collaborative portfolio assessment at Binghamton involves, all instructors read and evaluate their own students’ portfolios at the end of each semester, but they also read an equal number of their colleagues’ students’ portfolios as well. Most graduate students teach two sections of the course. These sections are capped at 16 students each, and since the portfolios are about 20 pages apiece, this means we read and evaluated a pile of portfolios amounting to approximately 600 pages of writing. Then, we read and evaluated another 600 pages of writing produced by students from other instructors’ classes before finally convening to hash out all the grades. All of this work continues to take place in the span of a week or less and it raises an important question: how do individuals move within a system like this, continuously participating in something they tend to recognize as not necessarily being in their own best interest? We have an idea why this happens. Perhaps we do this because we love to educate, or perhaps we do this because educating is a part of our identity. In another sense, we do this because teaching is our livelihood. Graduate students do this because their education and career prospects depend on it. Yet the question of why is only one piece of the puzzle.

Defining teaching effectiveness in terms of commitment importantly echoes the idea that writing is best taught through hands-on engagement with individual students. As Chris Anson has suggested, being open to such engagement allows educators to move beyond a “passion for sharing high-mindedness with high minds,” and start “getting down close to the ground with young people who needed someone to help them discover literacy for themselves” (167). As an educator who loves teaching writing, I can easily recall my experiences of working with countless students and say: yes, this kind

of discovery is a powerful thing. It is “sort of wonderful.” Yet, insofar as the work done in writing classrooms is understood in terms of this commitment, which is mobilized in the service of large-scale learning outcomes, we are participating in a powerful ideology. As Tony Scott says, “writing is always ideological because discourses and instances of language use do not exist independently from cultures and their ideologies” (“Writing Enacts” 48). So, too, the curricular and the assessment choices that shape the teaching and learning of writing are always ideological. To this end, we can also frame our understanding of this case study in terms of Clifford Geertz’s assertion that ideologies attempt to,

render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them—this accounts both for the ideologies’ highly figurative nature and for the intensity with which, once accepted, they are held. Whatever else ideologies may be—projections of unacknowledged fears, disguises for ulterior motives, the phatic expressions of group solidarity—they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience. (220)

The Writing Initiative’s collaborative assessment policy not only shapes pedagogical practices and pursues uniformity in evaluation. It also shapes how individuals understand and perform their roles as writing teachers. In turn, the ideology of commitment becomes a tool for reconciling these social realities.

This program’s “separate, but together” ethos of support, mentorship, and standardization offers an important opportunity to listen to stories about how programmatic assumptions trickle down to be experienced by instructors themselves. As one graduate student instructor, Louie, stated in our interview:

I don’t know that the program encourages us as instructors to voice opinions. I know that when putting forth different ideas or concerns, that’s when the toe the line comes about. This applies to us [the instructors] more than for the students. If a student does it, okay. But if we do it, then it starts to get a little funky. What I don’t like is the straightjacketing, especially when we’re told that we’re not being straightjacketed.

Louie’s words illustrate the importance of seeking out and paying attention to individual experiences. As Scott has argued, it is important to recognize that, “discussions of academic labor and writing program management rarely touch on the specific effects of faculty hierarchies and pervasive managerialism on day-to-day pedagogy” (“Dangerous Writing” 38). By illustrating one such case, I suggest that language use is not merely a reflection of the systematic work of teaching and assessing writing within a particular hierarchy. Rather, language is actually constitutive of that work. Since “talk” is at the center of this collaborative enterprise, it is important to understand how a “collective conscience” is discursively constructed within these Pedagogy Groups. Such an understanding is meant to highlight the need for reexamining our labor assumptions in the same way we rightly reexamine our pedagogical approaches and assessment mechanisms.

Another graduate student instructor, Vivian, echoed Louie’s words: “there’s more than lip service to the [idea of] autonomy. It’s problematic though, right?” She went on

to note that, “a lot of people have never done this [before]. The best way to do anything is to fail, but this is not just a job. Your funding for your education also depends on it, so it’s a weird place.” Winston, who was a member of the senior faculty, expressed similarly mixed sentiments:

I am a teacher in the program, but, you know, the curriculum was decided before I got here. If you think of expressing yourself as a teacher through the way you organize curriculum and classroom activities, then this isn’t possible quite as much as [at] other places. As far as curriculum goes, it seems to me that teachers have a lot of room to do what they feel works within the strengths of the program and that the people who made the curriculum were thinking about that when they did it.

We can see a range of opinions over whether there actually is room for making the class “one’s own.” Yet, insofar as instructors do feel able to make individualized pedagogical choices, their choices are directed and constrained by the nature of the Pedagogy Group. Since individual approaches must be explained and accepted by one’s Pedagogy Group, these choices must be adapted to conform to the program as a whole. As a result, instructors experience a dissonance between the creativity that characterizes teaching and the standardization that characterizes the program. While such constraints exist to some extent in any department or program, the Binghamton University model compels a particularly high degree of normalization. Frankie, a graduate student instructor, expressed her experience of this dissonance:

I think that the Writing Initiative thinks that it’s creating a really good space to hear the concerns of students, myself as a student. But I don’t think that I feel very heard [as an instructor]. I think that Pedagogy Group is something that is probably designed to try to hear the voices of the students that are teaching its classes, but I don’t feel particularly heard. It feels sometimes more like a big brother than something that is concerned with solving the problems that we confront in the classroom.

Despite the opposite intended outcome, the collaborative grading policy, as brought to life by the complexity and dynamism of Pedagogy Group talk, makes a standardized experience of first-year writing—whether for students or for instructors—an impossibility. As I will illustrate in the coming section, the pursuit of standardization creates negative emotional outcomes not only because of the social cost of what it takes to conform, but because conformity is often unsuccessful.

The “Community Standard” as Unstable Signifier

In what follows, I analyze two extracts from naturally occurring Pedagogy Group conversations. These extracts are meant to illustrate how the programmatic intensification of labor creates new affective demands. In other words, Pedagogy Group contexts dictate that it is not sufficient to only engage one’s own students in recursive process writing. In addition, instructors are also called upon to commit their time and energy to enacting this objective at the programmatic level. My analysis of the following extracts

aims to contextualize a specific sociolinguistic strategy, or speech genre: the pep talk. Pep talking is, of course, a common managerial speech genre that responds to problematic situations of one variety or another. In the present context, pep talking constitutes an attempt to filter, unify, and reconcile programmatically specific expectations. Pep talking also denies workers' emotional responses while simultaneously doubling down on programmatically specific emotional demands. This deny/amplify framework, as we will see, seems to define the experiences of teachers at all levels: both Pedagogy Group leaders and members.

To construe the "community standard" as a stable signifier—as an ontologically secure position—denies the fact that individual classrooms are distinctive social microcosms: sites of fluidity and multiplicity. Because of this, I have approached Pedagogy Group conversations as a discursive system of knowledge that is being continuously rearticulated and reshaped through individual practice. In doing so, I illustrate how deployments of ideological commitment attempt to preserve social stasis, which results in the denial of instructors' varied emotional reactions. Invoking the ideology also serves the larger goal of keeping the collaborative grading system intact, which results in the creation of additional emotional demands.

Extract 1: "Binghamton Writes is frustrating me"

In the conversation that follows, Pedagogy Group participants are discussing the student-written sample essays that are published in *Binghamton Writes: A Journal of First-Year Writing*. This is a required course text that contains genre samples written previously by former students. Everyone participating in this conversation is concerned, in one way or another, with the question of a community standard. This question is constantly at stake within a system where people do not seem to agree, and yet they need to agree. We are looking at how the group's leader, Josh, invokes the idea of commitment as he engages in pep talking in response to one particular group member's criticisms.

Stanley: Binghamton Writes is frustrating me. So far, they [the researched arguments] are both not very good at all. And I'm just kind of wondering: why we are selling this to our students? Like, this [one] essay has totally unprovable claims. There's no evidence. The claims are ridiculous. I mean I have no idea how this – this is a C, if it's lucky. The second researched argument is a glorified op-ed with no real argument. It's very conversational in tone. It's kind of an informative essay. It never really makes an argument. These [essays in *Binghamton Writes*] are supposed to be what I'm like: hey, look... And I did, stupidly, because I hadn't read them yet. I was like: you guys need to read the *Binghamton Writes* essays and we're going to talk about them. It's going to help clarify things and see where the bar is set. And now I have to come back and say, well: this is garbage.

Nick: I say that all the time.

Josh: It's perplexing. A lot of that is contingent upon the editorial team for that semester, for that particular genre. A lot of it is dependent [...] A lot of it is subjective but, I mean, we can fix that by encouraging our own students to submit. And by being on the editorial staff, which counts for all kinds of brownie

points toward the teaching certificate. But that is surprising. I guess not too surprising. I have seen some of that myself, in previous editions, so... To your point about it having no argument, that is one of the basic requirements of it [the assignment]. And, you know, we can use Binghamton Writes in other ways. I've actually had them read things and say, you know, these are picked for a variety of reasons, not just because they're the best of the best. In many cases, it's about variety. It's about trying to find and encapsulate their voices. But, you can look at it critically and I'm sure you have.

Stanley has drawn attention to the problem of having to teach essays that he feels are poorly written, and Josh attempts to reorient this criticism through invoking the ideology of commitment. Josh argues that the members of his group can "work within the system to make it better" through further investing their own time in "the process," writ large. Specifically, he notes that the members of the group can fix this "problem" through encouraging students to submit and by volunteering as editors in the future. He reminds the group members that working on Binghamton Writes constitutes professional experience that is institutionally validated in the form of a Certificate in Teaching College Composition. In proposing these fixes instead of engaging in a critical dialogue, Josh's management of the meeting works to efface the root of the problem: the journal of first-year writing is a highly visible artifact that implies what effective uptakes of the course assignments should look like, and it is under fire. Instead of engaging in a critical dialogue, he suggests that the members of his group should assuage their frustrations by further committing themselves to the program in order to effect change from the bottom up as team players.

Stanley's problem is structural in nature: it derives from the unstable community standard. This fact accounts for not only how Stanley experiences his work, but for how the Binghamton Writes editors experience and enact theirs. All parties are equally constrained by the "rules" of the program. In other words, the unstable community standard is not a symptom of the Binghamton Writes selection process. Rather, the selection process and its material expression—the journal itself—are interrelated symptoms of the instability. Instructors' critiques and disagreements are similarly interrelated symptoms of the instability. The same rubric is used for selecting essays for publication and for assessing live student writing, and so the tension surrounding the question of a community standard permeates all programmatic activities.

As he voices his frustrations, Stanley calls the rubric into question by implication, yet the rubric is rarely criticized explicitly. The slipperiness of the rubric manifests in two contexts. First, it emerges throughout the process of assessing "live" student writing, which will become particularly evident in the next extract. Second, it emerges throughout the processes of selecting and teaching genre samples, which is evident in this extract. Since these essays continue to be produced and edited by a local community of writers, it is unproductive to degrade them as "garbage," as Stanley and Nick have done. That said, Stanley's frustrations are quite understandable. Even leaving aside the issue of quality, he is required to teach a prescribed set of texts, which erodes his authority to teach.

Further, Stanley likely derived very little satisfaction, let alone any sense of renewed authority, from voicing his complaints because Josh's replies skirt his feelings in favor

of bolstering the program rationale. Yet, Josh's communicative strategies are also constrained by the system. He is, perhaps, unable to entertain Stanley's critiques even if he actually agrees with them because such an acknowledgement would contribute to their collective work truly going off the rails. Josh is, after all, doing the job of trying to create consensus. As a member of the senior faculty he may not—ironically—have felt that he had access to the same freedoms as Stanley and the others (myself included) because we were part of a continuous stream of graduate students who continue to cycle in and out of the program. In contrast, a position like Josh's has different stakes. His motivations were surely complex and reflective of his own compromised status. In real time, however, his pep talk was experienced as an ill-fitting Band-Aid. As he deployed the ideology of commitment in order to smooth out differences of opinion, the primary entailment was a denial of Stanley's frustrations, which he nonetheless continued to voice:

Stanley: More often than not, I've been using these [Binghamton Writes essays] to teach them what not to do. Which, the way this [book] was sold to me in orientation is that this is something I can rely on to teach them what to do. And so that's really disappointing, because I do want examples. I want A papers that I can show them, and that's what I was promised that this was going to be and it's absolutely not.

Nick: Over the years and over the semesters, I've had essays come through where I'm like: this is really good. But the problem is, they push you to use this one [the current edition] because of, well, they pay a lot of money for it. But it's kind of hard. I definitely see the frustration. I see it becoming more about the topic and less about –

Josh: [stuttering] I mean ...

Nick: the craftsmanship. I would much rather see an essay every semester about violence and video games that's written very well.

Josh: A lot of it is clearly different interpretations of requirements of the assignment.

Stanley: Which I guess is a little concerning. For all of the management in this program and for all of the ways that we're trying to get standardized, just how wildly divergent these opinions still are.

[silence]

Josh: These are all interesting conversations, but I would tell you that – I would encourage you to work within the system to make it better if you're frustrated by this. So these tensions are really interesting and what I think is most important is – in the small – like these are all big picture things that maybe we can address long-term, but what really matters to us now, and that's what we're doing today, all that really matters right now is that we're all on the same page [regarding assignment criteria]. We can set the bar where we want it and we can articulate that to each other and we can talk about that. And another thing that I think is fair, as long as we're aware of it, and we discuss it and hash it out early – we don't even have to come to a consensus about that, y'know? Part of the norming thing is to understand what is important to each of us. If I can get a sense of what [you] really care about and I was evaluating one of [your]

portfolios, I would try as much as possible to consider that in my evaluation of those portfolios, and likewise for [all members of the group].

Here, Stanley has called direct attention to the fact that there is no “community standard.” Meanwhile, this idea is the centerpiece of the collaborative grading system. Recall, the very existence of the Pedagogy Group format is underpinned by what I have identified as an unproductive binary between the individual and the group. Insofar as collaborative grading is conceptualized as an intervention against the flawed perspectives, incomplete knowledge, or general unreliability of individual actors, Stanley’s critique is particularly noteworthy. Yet Josh skirts it again: he neither acknowledges nor discusses the fact that members of the program can be seen working from “wildly divergent” interpretations of the assignment criteria. In this case, his pep talk unfolds a little bit differently: he attempts to redirect everyone’s attention back to the “task at hand.” Whereas Josh’s first pep talk denied Stanley’s emotional reaction, this pep talk actually creates an emotional demand. In denying larger programmatic incongruities, Josh thrusts Stanley’s problem back upon him by implying that the absence of a standard somehow doesn’t matter: let’s just ignore our frustrations and have faith in the process. This position serves a very particular semiotic function. It attempts to re-cast the tensions of the conversation, so that the group members may be repositioned in places of power. Instead of feeling constrained or strained, they should, rather, try to control collaborative outcomes through committed expressions of logic, reason, and collegiality.

The problem is this: Stanley and the others did not actually have the power to merely “set the bar where they wanted it,” either as individuals or as a stand-alone Pedagogy Group, because the material artifacts and discourses that bring the entire program to life were all indexing the shifting nature of the “standard” as a meaningful signifier. This collective work is characterized by wild divergence, and so it is necessary to continuously smooth creative, individualistic wrinkles into the face of standardization. In this way, the content of group discourse becomes evidence of the very need for collaboration. As they disagree, critique, and emote, instructors are either enacting or being propelled toward a commitment to the collaborative process.

Extract 2: “I’m concerned about my ability to keep from creating problems”

In what follows, we will observe how discussions of live student writing similarly reify instructors’ commitments to their collaborative work. During a discussion of a researched argument in progress, Pedagogy Group leader George engages in extended pep talking. His encouragement is primarily directed at one member of the group, Patti, who is teaching the course for the first time. At the beginning of the meeting, the five members of the group were split among three flat letter grades: one A, two B’s, and two C’s. By the end of the meeting, the balance had shifted to two B’s and three C’s. Patti is the instructor who brought what she believed to be the A essay. After everyone else had stated their grades, she immediately remarked, “Oh wow, I’m concerned about my ability to keep from creating problems.” The conversation unfolds from there:

George: No, don’t be concerned about that. What I can tell you is that I’ve never seen any group just come to consensus. But, I’ve also observed that it gets a lot easier after the first semester. It’s a skill. And you practice it and you norm

with different groups. What did we like about the paper? What did we want the student to do more of?

Patti: I liked how he included all the different types and compared the pros and cons. It was thorough. I thought it was thorough.

Cecelia: I think it had some good discussion. It's clearly written, with focused paragraphs, and some good use of sources.

Sarah: The focus was clear. And in most cases, there's good integration of sources.

George: But you mentioned you had thought C originally. Why was that?

Sarah: Because it's borderline report-like.

George: Do you want me to change your grade to a C?

Sarah: Yeah, I do. I wrote in my notes that I think it's borderline on meeting the assignment criteria, but that I could see it being part of a solid C portfolio.

James: I liked that the argument is not a myopic one. It's not making an either/or argument. I appreciated the complexity and I think that's a sophisticated move. There are transitions that advance the focus of the essay – I thought that was done well at the end of each paragraph. I saw a “yes, but” construction happening in a lot of paragraphs, and I thought that was very successful. [But] what kept it from being an A for me was [the fact] that the writer didn't integrate and put sources in conversation with one another. And in terms of the reportish thing... looking at the citations, you can see that most of the paper is [based on] one particular source. Once we get to the bottom of page three, that source dominates the rest of the essay. Also, I thought that there were a lot of unsubstantiated claims. I don't really think that argument is fully supported.

Sarah: There's a lot of good information, it's just that you're left to read between the lines.

James: I agree. But, these are things that, I don't think it would take too much for the student – in terms of coaching for the student – to really work on those characteristics. The paper has a lot of potential.

This stretch of the conversation goes quite a long way toward illustrating Stanley's problem with pervasive differences of opinion. The instructors' initial assessments range from thorough, clear, focused, and in control of sources on one hand, to report-like and not fully in control of sources on the other. This range of characteristics becomes more noteworthy once it is mapped onto grades ranging from A to C. Preliminary discussion of the essay indicates that the draft exhibits some potential, and the writer needs more coaching. Yet when George immediately indicates that Patti need not be concerned about causing problems, he foregrounds a tension between theory and practice. In theory, collaborative work is necessary because outlier opinions are 1.) presupposed to exist, and 2.) understood to be inconsistent with the best practices of teaching writing. In practice, however, it is not always possible to veto an outlier opinion because the ideas and assessments presented in Pedagogy Group do not exist in a vacuum: they are constituted by the underlying work performed in individual classrooms. The conversation continues to unfold:

Sarah: I'm kind of curious – just because we're so close to the end [of the semester] – about how everybody teaches this? Since we have a pretty solidified split between all of us here, this would almost certainly go to a third read, which is fine, but ... For me, I teach students that this essay tasks them with describing and analyzing a social phenomenon – more analysis than description. And like what's been said – this should involve putting sources into conversation with one another. And, all the bits and pieces for that are here, but it's not done. But at the same time, if it wasn't taught that way, then I can't just come in and give it a C.

Patti: And that's one of my biggest struggles – I'm not even familiar with these genres as I'm teaching them. So, this is probably why I don't recognize these things and teach to them.

George: Your students will not be sanctioned for that.

Patti: Well, yeah, because that has concerned me...

George: I think I'm answering your question [Sarah] and also addressing it in the context of this essay: how I teach it is, you have to see where the current scholarly debate is and there is no indication to me that this paper was written within the last three years. There are three scholarly sources here – one was from the 1980s and two were from the 1990s, so it misses the genre in terms of that, and I think a C is generous.

Cecelia: That's probably true. In thinking about it, I have a lot more here that is wrong than what is right. And so, I don't actually know if this would go to a third read, because after somebody told me the reasons, I'd be like: yeah – I guess I can see that. This is more like a C.

In this stretch of the conversation it becomes clear that George's pep talk is not only for Patti's benefit. He is strategically addressing concerns that I had voiced, which were of an order that usually emerges toward the end of each semester. In this particular case, Patti may be amplifying these concerns through continuously indexing her own uncertainty, but regardless, this is the point when instructors begin to wonder whether the final portfolio meeting will go smoothly. Such thoughts include: will the students actually receive the grades that I believe they've earned? Will there be conflicts? Will my time be wasted? Several types of emotional labor are being performed here. Pedagogy Group surveillance compelled Patti's self-disclosure, which eroded her authority in the eyes of the group. Group surveillance similarly compelled me to acknowledge how the collaborative grading system erodes everyone's authority. Despite the fact that consensus will be impossible because we must account for how a student was taught in the context of their own classroom, we must still participate in the process.

As George reassures Patti that this process will become easier in time, he is also tacitly reassuring everyone else that they will be able to have principled conversations and that all students have an opportunity to do well if they meet the criteria set out in their own classrooms. He is trying to reintegrate Patti's pragmatic classroom choices back into the more normative framework that seems to exist for the other members of the group. Like Josh, George is sincere, but his responses similarly skirt the program's reliance on a shifting standard. Examining any set of pedagogical principles or learning outcomes

across educational space and time will always yield diversity. This is the kind of diversity that is to be expected when comparing the experience of taking a particular class with Professor X, versus taking that same class with Professor Y. This is the case in any discipline. Professors X and Y will teach different things. They will use different approaches and styles. They will privilege different lines of thought and modes of inquiry in their students' work. Yet, in most contexts, Professors X and Y do not sit down together and evaluate their differentially educated students using a shared grading rubric. And even if they did, it is unlikely that they would feel compelled, let alone be required, to come to consensus regarding each other's students' final grades. So where do the students land in all of this?

George: The last thing I want to do is punish a student for not being my student, right. I want all students to do well, and if they fulfill the criteria in your classroom, then you would need to tell me that. And I think that's the kind of thing we could have a good negotiation about – a principled one – in the final meeting. I think if it were an A/C split then it would probably just go to a third read, but if there's still this outcome where you're [Patti] seeing something as an A and you can't see it as a C, and, more importantly, if you've conveyed to the student: "this is A quality work," then, you know, we would have to take that into account.

Patti: I've been really careful not to convey grades to them, other than telling them what characteristics the essay exhibits. And, you know, when I hand them [rubric] sheets, the bulk of almost everything I've indicated is in the C column, but this... I considered him my best student... But, I'm also influenced by classroom behavior, too, so to know that this essay does not actually fit the criteria, I need to hear that. Because, that means I'm not clear myself.

On one hand, George's comment about not wanting to punish a student for not being in one's own class was a widely repeated, valued, and acted upon sentiment. Instructors in this program were, in general, very keen to avoid negative student impacts. On the other hand, frustration comes easily when an immutable part of one's work becomes a mechanism for devaluing one's time and effort. Insofar as instructors ought to respect their colleagues' assessments of their own students' work, a situation like this one really foregrounds how futile "the process" can feel. What's the point of reading Patti's student's portfolio and assessing it as C quality work, only to learn about the context surrounding her class and be compelled to swallow that opinion? George's pep talking, then, functions very similarly to Josh's. It simultaneously skirts the problem at hand, ignoring any associated feelings the instructors may have, in order to underline the programmatic rationale. In both cases, the pep talk ironically creates a new and different emotional demand. In denying larger programmatic incongruities, George skirts the "Patti problem" just as Josh thrust Stanley's problem back upon him. In both cases, instructors are compelled to ignore their frustrations and have faith in the process.

Patti might be seen by some as a "soft grader" for her different valuation of her student's work. Of course, the problem isn't really Patti. There are many other examples of soft and hard graders. In another context, Patti's judgment might be chalked up to inexperience: she would assess her students based on the instruction they received, learn from the process, revise her teaching strategies, and move on. Yet, in the Binghamton

case, the work of collaboration consistently compels instructors to report on, contest, and align their practices and performances against a shifting, yet omnipresent standard. This has the potential to heighten the disenfranchisement that is often associated with contingency. Patti's students are producing work that others identify as "missing the mark," and in response to this recurring condition, she notes, "I'm not clear myself." In making this candid admission, she comes to embody the source of the problem because her struggles to clearly express and teach to the genre criteria are being broadcast publicly. Just as when Stanley expresses his frustrations in Extract 1, when Patti indexes her status as a newcomer, we see unfortunate examples of how collaboration yields unexpected layers of frustration and stress. Patti's struggles registered with a degree of embarrassment. Stanley's peers consistently interpreted his frustrations and criticisms as evidence of a bad attitude. The Pedagogy Groups are a kind of recurring performance among one's peers, and it is easy to see how exhausting that level of performativity might become for these instructors.

While it is unfortunate that Patti seemed to struggle so much with teaching the genres of the course, the question of whether "everything would be okay" tended to emerge at the close of each semester, regardless of whether there was an explicit catalyst. As George's pep talking unfolds, we can see an attempt to amalgamate everyone's values and concerns and to reassure the group that everything will, in fact, work out. In a similar manner to Josh's replies to Stanley, George's comments also ignore larger programmatic incongruities in favor of recuperating social stasis. When George asserts that Patti's students "will not be sanctioned," he makes a very important point: the pursuit of consensus in the name of a community standard cannot supersede the goal of assessing students fairly based on the instruction they've received in individual classrooms. Regardless, the problem is this: the pursuit of this elusive community standard persists. It is the instructors who are sanctioned in the process. The "wildly divergent" opinions create working conditions that are marked by frustration and inefficiency.

It is, unsurprisingly, clear that Pedagogy Group leaders like Josh and George occupy tense positions within this program. They, too, are simultaneously constrained and strained by the ideology of commitment. Their work also requires counterintuitive subjective self-fashioning. Each week, the Pedagogy Group leaders deal with the unenviable task of making the system work in real time. As Josh has put it: "we do our best, and hope it all works out. But, you know it's the system that we're – it's the system that we have." It is a stressful system. This is the case not only because of labor expectations, but also because it has a unique ability to discursively construct difference, and in some cases, judgment. For example, one graduate student, Chet, made the following comments in an interview:

[The Pedagogy Group leaders] are most inclined to start conversations with questions like "where are the sticky wheels that are keeping this machine from going?" And everyone else, either at the very top or at our level, seems to want to help design the machine. And those middle managers just seem to want to push it forward as is.

Chet's comments illustrate how easy it could be for graduate students to implicate their Pedagogy Group leaders as the source of their discontent. While it is not unique

for workers to blame their bosses for problems, this instance has some additional complexities. The mood of each group is discursively constructed throughout a given semester. However, group membership changes each semester, and so each instructor carries the accretions of other values, management styles, and general experiences with them as they move through groups over time. This experiential fact works in direct opposition to Josh's assertion that, "we can set the bar where we want it." Yes, the bar can be continuously re-set, but that is merely a temporary fix that re-enlists all instructors—graduate student instructors and Pedagogy Group leaders alike—by compelling them to navigate new stressors each semester. As Frankie has suggested, "this all kind of comes back to Pedagogy Group:"

I felt like I had more problem students, not necessarily because I had problem students, but because discussing the student writing in Pedagogy Group – that's what made me feel like had more problem students – because I was disagreeing about how I would work with my students on their writing. I had different opinions than the other people in the group and the team leader. I've had a really good last semester with the Writing Initiative – and I know that they're not sitting there like – how can we exploit our graduate students? [How can we] get the most out of them that we possibly can? But with the shared syllabus and the group grading and the daily schedule, sometimes it does actually feel that way.

Conclusion

While the Binghamton case is a relatively unique one, it demands our attention nonetheless. It reveals the ways in which managerialism, as experienced in and reflected through real time discourses, unwittingly creates unexpected layers of additional work and stress that remain inadequately unaccounted for in the labor paradigm of higher education. These narratives may form a question mark in our minds: what are the experiences of contingency in my writing program? The Binghamton case illustrates how an already labor-intensive pedagogical orientation—as enacted largely on the backs of underpaid graduate students—has been problematically intensified. This intensification is not merely a "rough patch" to be endured. Rather, insofar as "we make sense of the world around us through the ideologies to which we have been exposed and conditioned" (Scott, "Writing Enacts" 48), this intensification socializes nascent professionals to accept an ideology of commitment as a governing principle of their work. It socializes us to level those expectations on our colleagues and students. It socializes us into a bootstraps mentality, wherein vertical movement is the only goal, and questioning or terminating our own participation in this managerial culture is emotionally painful, if not financially untenable.

In order to understand how ideologies take hold, circulate within, and, in some cases, dominate the discourses of higher education, it is necessary to examine the hierarchical circumstances, capitalistic purposes, and pedagogical values that cement them in real time conversation. Here, we have looked at the experiences of a group of educators who persist within the context of a strange double bind. Their work is deeply pre-

supposed by very specific uses of language, yet their possibilities for authoritative verbal expression are programmatically delimited. The Binghamton case constitutes an ethnographic uptake of Allison Laubach Wright's critique of how rhetorics of excellence intertwine with apprenticeship narratives to efface graduate student labor. She writes:

the narrative we hold to—that of the graduate student as an apprentice who is learning a trade—helps create the conditions which erase the work of graduate students and make it that much harder to change the system. Nowhere is this tension more obvious than in English departments, where four year universities have graduate students teaching the labor-intensive first year writing course while minimizing both the presence of the course and the work of the graduate students. (276)

In the Binghamton case, the labor demanded of graduate students is simultaneously minimized and amplified by the ideology of commitment. Continuous talk about writing configures, but also denies, instructors' claims to power, authority, and even the control of their own time. Here we have seen how the ideological underpinnings of one writing program—as brought to life in the social context of the Pedagogy groups—simultaneously efface emotional reactions, while creating new, counterintuitive emotional demands.

Instead of presupposing such demands, we must listen to ourselves. While there are a number of potential benefits associated with collaborative models, it is important to solicit and value narratives of the real time experiences of enacting such models. I have argued here that attempted standardization is not necessarily guided by stable signifiers, yet the call for standardization is a perennial response to all manner of academic problems. Given this, it is important to listen to and engage with the actual experiences of contingency. I follow Seth Kahn here: “by ‘listen,’ I mean more than just nod, smile, and wring your hands in empathetic frustration when contingent faculty bring problems to your attention” (266). Solutions to acknowledging uncompensated labor—emotional or otherwise—will not be realized through individual expressions of empathy. Rather, they will arise out of structural and material institutional change.

Dorothy Smith and Alison Griffith have argued that institutional ethnography is a method “designed to discover how our everyday lives and worlds are embedded in and organized by relations that transcend them” (10). Institutional ethnographies, such as the larger project of which this argument is a part, offer much potential for understanding how the real time experiences of academic work are shaped by a complex tangle of pragmatic choices, agentive strategies, affective stances, and institutional demands. Disentangling such circumstances in localized contexts offers an important inroad toward better material and emotional working conditions.

In the Binghamton case, the collaborative grading structure presupposes individual deficiency. Maintaining such a low opinion of the individual is, I hope to have illustrated, neither defensible nor tenable. Whereas collaborative grading is problematic from a labor perspective, the core of the Pedagogy Group ethos does offer many options for preserving the best parts of an imperfect system. For example, truly “listening” in the Binghamton case could mean retaining the weekly Pedagogy Group meeting structure but reinvigorating the agenda in order to focus entirely on teaching strategies in lieu of collaborative norming and grading. “Listening” may, in the Binghamton case, be an exercise in loosening the white-knuckle grip: it may be as “simple” as trusting each other. Regardless of the

institutional setting, “listening” is an exercise that involves questioning how programmatic structures may differentially impact contingent faculty.

Again, as Seth Kahn indicates, truly listening, “is to recognize that almost anything we say is likely an overgeneralization, or a misrepresentation of at least some of the contingent faculty population” (268). A major step in moving beyond overgeneralization and misrepresentation is, of course, working with locally specific “pictures” of contingency. Are we thinking about adjunct faculty who earn \$1k per credit hour with no health insurance? Are we thinking about graduate students who are teaching classes, taking classes, and earning \$15k plus benefits annually? While the definitions and experiences of contingency are diverse, insecurity culture is not going anywhere. Because of this, questions related to graduate student socialization and professional development should be at the forefront of disciplinary debates. Disciplines across the social sciences and humanities are turning out exponentially more job candidates than their bespoke job markets can handle. Therefore, building a body of particularistic accounts of how contingency is experienced constitutes an important step beyond overgeneralization and misrepresentation. It may, rather, represent a step toward action.

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