

## Joe Harris: Teaching Writing Via the Liberal Arts

CAROL RUTZ

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of interviewing one's professional colleagues is the chance to present a candid and approachable picture of a well-known scholar. Some of us come across majestically in our scholarly prose—a contrast to the informal, down-to-earth selves we present in person. Such is not the case for Joe Harris, the kind colleague who cheerfully submitted to an interview for this issue. Joe's lucid prose is the real thing—a reflection of his personal presence. If there is a difference, it lies in a bit more overt humor in face-to-face conversation. Otherwise, the author of works that include *A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966* and my personal favorite, *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*, exhibits the kind of wordsmithery that trades polysyllabic obfuscation for transparent, idiomatic prose that is always informed and interesting sans foppish erudition. (That last phrase would be the kind of thing Joe would never write. Not ever. Thank goodness.)

Joe earned his BA at Haverford College and his MA and PhD at New York University. After a few short stintsteaching at various institutions, he settled in at the University of Pittsburgh for eleven years, departing for Duke University in 1999. He is currently an associate professor of English, having spent his first decade at Duke as director of what is now known as the Thompson Writing Program, which employs postdocs from a variety of disciplines. One might characterize the program as writing across the curriculum (WAC) in action. Because the interview touches on Joe's work at Duke as well as his considerable experience as an editor, I trust readers will find details about all of that rendered much better in Joe's words than in anything I could provide here.

The following evolved through e-mail correspondence and an extended conversation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in St. Louis in March of 2012.

**Carol Rutz:** If I remember correctly, our first conversation occurred at least ten years ago in an elevator in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the subject was Jesse James. Do I have that right?

**Joe Harris:** Yes! As I recall, you were wearing a nametag that said you were from Northfield, Minnesota. Recalling a boyhood filled with stories and movies about cowboys and Indians, outlaws and lawmen, I blurted out that I had always wanted to visit Northfield, which we all know as the site of the James/Younger gang's final, disastrous bank heist. A few years later you invited me to talk with your faculty at Carleton College (it turns out, also located in Northfield, but strangely omitted from the tales of the James gang) and, as a special treat, took me afterwards to a storefront museum commemorating the failed raid. I was very happy.

**CR:** I remember your happiness, which was later exhibited with your trademark wit when you posted autopsy photos of the hapless gang members on your program bulletin board over the inscription, "They didn't get their book orders in on time!" Man, talk about gallows humor. I assume the orders came in swiftly.

**JH:** That's really not so far from how people like Jim Sledd and Marc Bousquet seem to have imagined me as a "boss compositionist," but my day-to-day approach to working with teachers is actually far more low-key. The task of a writing director is not to tell faculty what to do; it's to create conditions that allow them to do their best work with students. If I were to name a model for my work as an administrator, I think I'd pick Jean-Luc Picard from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or, maybe, the Lemur King from *Madagascar*.

**CR:** I see—quite a range of models, from the cosmic to the arboreal. Which leads me to a question about a different kind of variety: Your teaching has been predominately in universities, yet you also taught high school when you were just out of college. How did that early teaching experience affect your career trajectory?

**JH:** The three years I spent teaching high school English made me view teaching college writing as an honor. I couldn't believe that anyone would actually trust me to do it. I was thus startled to find out that many of my fellow teaching assistants considered it a kind of scut work. I feel lucky I was never tempted to think that way. This wasn't only because teaching high school had convinced me that teaching was hard and serious intellectual work, but also because the people in the NYU Writing Program who first hired me as a TA, Paula Johnson and Cy Knoblauch, made it clear that they didn't want me to teach some sort of predesigned staff course, but rather that they expected me to design my own class. Since then I've been convinced that

we need to make sure that writing teachers feel real ownership over their work if we hope for them to do it well.

**CR:** I like that idea of ownership over one's work, and it occurs to me that a number of fine composition programs try to instill that notion in TAs by having them design and teach their courses while others are reluctant to do so, reasoning that a common syllabus and textbook offer undergraduates an experience that is closely supervised and qualitatively uniform across sections. Would you say there is a right way or better way or more defensible way to deliver first-year programs?

**JH:** Well, to return to our discussion of outlaws, you've probably just given me enough rope to hang myself with because I don't believe that *uniformity* of instruction is a proper goal of writing programs. When you hand a standardized course to teachers to execute or to students to undergo, you are inviting them to produce standardized work in response when we should be asking for writing that is thoughtful, imaginative, distinctive, and individual. I don't think you get that sort of work from predesigned assignments and templates for writing.

I do think, though, that a program should strive for intellectual *coherence*. At Duke we've centered our first-year writing course on a set of shared goals and practices that we've developed together and go back to every few years to revise. When I was directing the program, I often pressed teachers to explain how they had designed their courses to work toward those goals, and sometimes those conversations led them to rethink what they were doing. But I never told faculty that they needed to assign certain books, or have students write a certain number of pages, or complete a certain number of revisions, or write certain kinds of papers. I find that sort of uniformity deadening.

What is crucial, though, is finding ways to get faculty to share their course materials, to visit one another's classes, and to talk about their work together. Predesigning a common curriculum legislates a superficial conformity; keeping teachers in conversation with one another about the sorts of work they're all doing offers each of them a chance to develop a sense of contributing to a larger, collective project.

I'd add that we've followed a similar strategy in working with tenure-stream faculty at Duke who are teaching writing-intensive courses across the disciplines. I'm eager to ask my colleagues in other departments to tell me about how their courses align with our writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) guidelines, but I'm not about to argue with their answers. I assume they're working in good faith toward their understanding of our curricular goals, and so I want to work with how they want to use writing in their classes, not tell them to do something else.

**CR:** Sounds good to me, especially from my perspective at a small undergraduate-only institution. Even though you serve on dissertation committees, your teaching emphasis seems to be at the undergraduate level. What do you find appealing about teaching undergraduate writers?

**JH:** It seems useful work. I like it. I'm good at it. I'm particularly drawn to the first-year course because it seems to me a space of intellectual freedom. You're not constrained by the need to teach a certain set of canonical texts or disciplinary methods; rather, the challenge is to get students writing about texts and ideas that matter to them—and there are a million ways to do that, though none of them are particularly easy. Also, to be frank, I think I like the age group. Going to college was a pivotal moment for me. It was there I discovered that you really could have something like a life of the mind—which was not anything I'd seen a lot of in the neighborhood I grew up in. And so I'm glad to have the chance to invite others into the same world of books and ideas that college opened up for me.

**CR:** *The WAC Journal* readers are always interested in how scholars find their way to WAC, not to mention how such scholars theorize WAC or WID. You led an expository writing program at Duke University for ten years where the faculty are postdocs from a range of disciplines. Did your own view of WAC/WID change or develop while administering that program?

**JH:** I'll pound the table a bit here and insist on a distinction between *expository* and *academic* writing. To my ears, *exposition*, along with terms like *composition* or *argument* or *rhetoric*, suggests the teaching of a set of general skills that can be carted about from one situation to another. I don't think that way of thinking about writing gets you very far. *Academic* writing is still a pretty big term, for sure, but at least it specifies a particular context of work and a particular type of writing, one that deals with texts and ideas. At Duke, we've tried to narrow that context yet a bit more in actual practice by setting up a program in which teachers from a wide range of disciplines design courses that ask students to write about very different materials and issues. There are some commonalities to our courses. We're all interested in having students seriously engage the work of others, and we all try somehow to inculcate the work habits of practicing writers—drafting, workshopping, revising, and so on. But the ways in which the members of our writing faculty work towards those goals are incredibly varied.

So what have I learned from participating in this curricular experiment? Well, to put it bluntly, that you don't need a PhD in English or in rhetoric and composition to teach writing with skill and imagination. You do need time and encouragement to rethink your work in the classroom though, and you do need the support

and wisdom of more experienced writing teachers. And you should have a PhD. *Academic* writing should be taught by practicing *academic* writers. Indeed, a debilitating irony of many writing programs housed in English departments is that they end up hiring people to teach academic writing who are not themselves very accomplished in doing it—who have only just earned an MA in literature, for instance, or an MFA in poetry, or who are journalists or tech writers or whatever. In that sense, and contrary to much of the fretting over disciplinary expertise that has characterized the recent discourse of our field, I think that WAC programs offer us a real chance to professionalize the teaching of intellectual writing by putting that teaching primarily in the hands, not of grad students and adjuncts, but of experienced full-time faculty who are themselves active writers and researchers.

**CR:** I stand corrected on the *expository* vs. *academic* issue, at least as it pertains to the Duke program. You point to the value of hiring experienced scholars who have accomplished academic writing themselves. That observation connects with my earlier question about the use of TAs in first-year writing courses. You and I both served as teachers of record as graduate students, and I would say that the experience was invaluable for me. However, I still wonder what damage I may have left in my wake through rookie mistakes. Is this a worry for you? Should it be a worry for those learning to teach in similar situations?

**JH:** All teachers make mistakes. It's not a problem in itself for a writing program to employ graduate students, since one of our jobs is to train and mentor new teachers. The problem occurs when a program *relies* on TAs and adjuncts as a cheap source of labor. A program that hires scores of TAs to teach hundreds of sections, as so many do, is an intellectual factory. Little meaningful mentoring can occur in such situations. Learning to teach writing should be an integral part of a graduate education, not simply a way of funding it. Programs need to be set up to allow TAs to work closely with experienced teachers, so they can learn and grow from the mistakes they will inevitably make.

**CR:** It's also interesting that while you speak of the first-year writing course as a "space of intellectual freedom," your program at Duke asks teachers to draw on their disciplinary training in designing their courses. Is this a contradiction?

**JH:** I don't think so because none of the first-year courses that our postdocs design are intended as introductions to their disciplines. That is, we don't try to teach freshmen to write as archeologists or political scientists or literary critics. Rather, we draw on the materials of such fields to get at problems in intellectual writing. A result is that, in many of our courses, students end up writing about current, pressing issues in the culture at large—issues like sustainability, identity, the environment,

immigration, the media, race, gender, sexuality, and so on. The difference is that what the writing students do is informed by and responds to what academics and intellectuals have had to say about those same issues.

**CR:** Speaking of academics and intellectuals, your work as an editor is justifiably praised. You edited *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), the flagship journal for the CCCC, from 1994 to 1999, and you are just finishing a five-year appointment as editor of the monograph series *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric*. (Disclosure: I have served as a reviewer for CCC, although not during your tenure, and I was honored to be a member of the SWR review board from 2008 to 2011.) What connects your teaching and editing lives? Does each professional activity draw upon the same skills and sensibilities? Or do they differ in important ways?

**JH:** I'm glad you ask about connections between editing and teaching. The more I've done both, the more I've grown convinced that they're similar activities, since the goal of each is to set up a productive interchange between a writer and her readers. When I first started sending out articles to our journals back in the 1980s, I was startled by how unhelpful, and often how harshly dismissive, the (usually anonymous) responses I got back from reviewers were. How did these people respond to student writing? I wondered. I think, as a field, we've since learned to do a lot better as reviewers of one another's work. I'd like to imagine that I've had some hand in this improvement through my policy, which I started as editor of CCC and continued with *Studies in Writing and Rhetoric* (SWR), of asking reviewers to sign their comments and to try not merely to evaluate a manuscript but also to offer its author advice toward developing and revising it. In that way I suspect that my work as a writing teacher helped me become a better editor.

I also think that working as an editor has improved what I do as a teacher. In particular, I've learned to distinguish between playing the role of a developmental editor, the person who's trying to help an author take a piece to the next level, and the role of a copy editor, the person who's helping a writer refine the final version of a text. One result has been that I now write very few marginal comments on student drafts—almost none really. Instead I'm far more likely to write a student a note saying something like: "Here's the thing I think you really need to work on in revising." That is, I want to help students develop what they have to say before asking them to refine and edit it.

**CR:** I couldn't agree more about reviewing as a means of teaching. In fact, I would say that reviewing is one of the most important teachable moments any of us has the honor—and I mean that seriously—to offer. To waste that moment through insult

or mockery seems unethical, not to mention unprofessional. How does your knowledge of and sensitivity to WAC affect your editorial approach?

**JH:** That's a good question, and I wish I had a better answer to it. But I have to say that the kinds of conversations I have as a WAC consultant with faculty across the disciplines and the kinds of work I do as an editor with writers in our own field feel very different. Authors sending manuscripts to CCC or SWR hope to contribute to a disciplinary conversation. This is true even of most writing about WAC and WID, which although it may be about writing that goes on in other fields, still tends to be targeted pretty specifically at scholars working in WAC or WID. That is, even when the sources of a manuscript come from a wide range of fields, its readers are usually imagined as members of *our* discipline. I don't think that's necessarily bad, but it does feel quite different from the WAC work I've done at Duke and elsewhere, where I usually find myself speaking with faculty from a wide range of disciplines who have, for one reason or another, decided to come together in the same room. In such cases, while the pitch I'm making might have a disciplinary ring (give students opportunities to revise! Think about the moves scholars in your field make as writers!), the audience is multidisciplinary. The situation seems almost the reverse of writing to fellow specialists.

**CR:** Good point. In fact, when I review for *The WAC Journal*, the most common observation I make to writers has to do either with their assumption that the *TWJ* audience is familiar with writing conventions in some specific discipline (e.g., nursing or philosophy), or the assumption that their enthusiasm about a WAC technique (e.g., scaffolding a large assignment with smaller segments), is new to this audience. The rich learning that goes on within WAC communities reminds me of the liberal arts core programs many of us worked through in our college days. Do you think we need to be reminded that we are liberal artists who are still learning from one another?

**JH:** Yes. We live and work in a culture that, from President Obama on down, tends to talk about education almost exclusively in terms of preparing future workers, especially scientists, technicians, and engineers. I worry that the focus of much WID work on teaching students how to write as members of particular fields—as biologists or architects or historians or whatever—might sometimes contribute to this cult of expertise. I'm not arguing that we don't need expertise. But I do think that we also need to step back, from time to time, in order to reflect upon and criticize the work and values of the professional communities that we belong to. Such reflection has long been the domain of the liberal arts, and of writing.

**CR:** Well said. Like you, I sometimes consult with faculty at other higher-ed institutions about either starting or reviving a WAC program. In almost every case, faculty and administrators agree that students benefit from doing more writing, yet faculty worry about devoting time to writing as opposed to what they call content. Have you found ways to calm that fear? Bridge that intellectual divide?

**JH:** Sure, fears calmed, divides bridged—I do it all the time. Well, not really, of course, but I can tell you how I approach such concerns—which is basically to address them less as an expert than as a fellow teacher. And so, for instance, in responding to questions about workload, I tell my colleagues that, yes, I do work very hard, but not any harder than they do. I then go on to tell them I'm not urging them to add to their workload so much as to rearrange it—to consider shifting many of the hours they now spend grading unsatisfactory term papers to offering advice on earlier drafts of those papers. I promise them that doing so will help the papers become better and more fun to read, and that final grading will be a snap, since they will have already read and responded to versions of the papers they're evaluating. Or, in responding to worries about writing displacing content, I show my colleagues how I structure my own advanced courses in the English department—in which we talk about readings *through* the responses students have written to them. It doesn't have to be either content or writing, I suggest, it can be both/and.

I realize that these are platitudes to readers of *The WAC Journal*, that I'm restating the best practices of our field. But the point I'd like to make is that these practices are not intuitive, and that many college faculty are not familiar with them. Indeed, I often feel that I have the most to offer faculty in other fields when I am channeling the common sense of ours. We really do have something to offer the rest of the university, but it's not our theories of rhetoric or discourse or prose style, it's our approach to teaching. Or to return to the terms of your question, what we most have to offer is not *content* but method, pedagogy: a way of thinking about writing and teaching.

**CR:** Joe, we agree on this as well, and I'm thinking we should maybe incorporate and take our show on the road. Seriously, a fascinating feature of consulting in WAC is the inevitable realization during the workshop that we have all forgotten how we became experts. That much-documented move between novice and expert that so many of our colleagues (notably John Bean, among others) write about gets lost somehow. We end up sort of blaming our students for being young when it is we who have escaped our youth and found refuge in expertise. How do you make peace with that move personally? With colleagues?

**JH:** I remember listening years ago to a radio interview with Brian Eno in which he talked about his experiences playing with the Portsmouth Sinfonia, a group of



amateur musicians that was sometimes billed as the World's Worst Orchestra. Eno remarked that one of the pleasures of working with this amateur group, and he himself was playing clarinet in it, was that problems in the music that professionals would have resolved without difficulty would once again become points of interest when approached by amateurs. You notice different things when you approach a problem or a text from the point of view of an amateur rather than expert. Our terministic screens, to invoke one of the heroes of rhet/comp (i.e., Kenneth Burke), limit as well as enable what we see. One of the things I most like about teaching people outside of our field is that they continually prod me to look anew at familiar texts and issues. And that, I think, helps me convey a little better to them why such work excites and interests me.

**CR:** What would you most like *TWJ* readers to know about you?

**JH:** Handsome, witty, fond of dogs.

**CR:** And your work?

**JH:** Widely available and sensibly priced. But I suppose I'd also like to be known less as someone involved in establishing a new academic discipline than as someone interested in using writing to improve how students learn.

## WORKS CITED

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