

---

**Rhetorical Work:**

Social Materiality, Kairos, and Changing the Terms

Libby Miles

With his article “Redefining Work and Value for Writing Program Administration,” Bruce Homer builds a crucial argument for the field: that to affect real change, *we must change the terms of the conversation*. Homer’s work is a call to act; in his formulation, it is now time for us to change the terms of our own valuation. I agree, wholeheartedly.

Homer illustrates how current discourses around writing program administration (WPA) “contribute to the debasement of both WPA work and the work of composition generally” (163). In Homer’s analysis, we undermine ourselves not only by accepting but also by promoting the means through which we have allowed our worth to be evaluated by others. In teaching and in scholarship, those invested in the field of rhetoric and composition tend to exalt the collaborative, the social. And yet, Homer notes, we undermine those very principles when we “participate in commodifications of the work of composition that operate to the detriment of its value in the economies in which those commodities circulate” (163). Homer demonstrates our complicity through his analysis of three types of WPA-centered discourse: a position statement on “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration” sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators; posts to *WPA-L*, a
listserv established for aspiring, current, and recovering writing program administrators; and a more scholarly exchange surrounding labor conditions Horner labels "a discourse of unionism" (163). In these three different venues, with three different expectations for genre and audience, Horner shows us that similar problems arise when we use the terms that others have defined for us. His analysis invokes Gramsci's classic definition of hegemony: the \textit{willing compliance} of the oppressed. I read Horner to suggest we examine that willingness to comply.

Horner's call is also for a widespread institutional change. He examines micro-level practices (participation on a listserv), and he fronts the local, particular, and contingent nature of the work in composition, the "location of that work in specific concrete labor practices and material social conditions" (165). At the same time, though, Horner argues for a more sweeping institutional change throughout higher education, a strategic move to more appropriately value work that does not fit within the traditional individual-centered triumvirate of teaching, research, and service. Part of Horner's aim is to help us negotiate for better conditions for all our workers; to do so, we must think and act differently, and create new categories that neither hide the labor of those who make our own possible, nor denigrate such labor by making "claims for the intellectuality" of WPA work at the expense of others (171).

Elsewhere, colleagues and I have written that each of us \textit{is} the institution, insofar as we participate in its maintenance and circulation (Porter et al.). We cautioned that institutional change takes time. It takes rhetorical tools. It takes the wherewithal to know which tool is the right one for the job, and how much force can be applied without doing damage—the procedural and strategic knowledge to know the available means appropriate to the situation. Rhetoric. Thus, each of us needs to find the fissures in our own institutions that allow the space to reject old frames and create new ones. Institutional change \textit{is} rhetorical work.

Horner introduces into this simple equation a phrase worth examining more fully: social materiality. He notes several problems with attending only to a simple linear view of production and consumption in any valuation of work. Most importantly, the simple production-consumption diagram renders social materiality invisible, or in Horner's
phrasing, it "occludes the full material social process of production" (180). If we follow a loose Marxian scheme, it is in circulation and perhaps distribution that social materiality becomes visible (see Trimbur). More on this later.

In this response essay, I want to extend Horner's charge farther beyond the scope of writing program administration and composition. Using the same three examples Horner employs in his analysis, I suggest that as an intellectual and social field, we need to come to terms with coming to our own terms. In other words, we need to address why it is so difficult to even imagine responding to Horner's call. Why have we missed the call from others in the past?

Timing is a tricky beast. And so is location. Despite clichéd admonitions that either timing or location is everything, neither one is. Both time and location, however, must figure into any understanding of material realities (see Reynolds).

In the pages that follow, I further explore Horner’s notion of social materiality for each of the three discourses he examines using two additional approaches of my own: 1) discourses as forums embedded in social networks; and 2) discourses as strategic community-building documents situated in time and place, participating in the development of a more kairotic moment for another time and place.

Ever since James Kinneavy reintroduced the term *kairos* in 1986, the field has generally invoked an Aristotelian sense of it: the proper time, proper amount, and proper place, the "opportune moment, right measure, and appropriateness" (Carter 105). In extending Kinneavy's work, Michael Carter traces changes in classical conceptions of the term across time and space, providing a historical roundup of sorts. He begins with a sophistic notion of kairos, understood to have "profound connotations of generation: the conflict and resolution of form and matter that initiated the creation of the universe and all that is therein" (102). Here, we have a "doctrine of opposites and harmony" (102) akin to a Confucian yin/yang, a tension and balance that generates its own energy. Later, Carter cites John Poulakos as identifying two functions for kairos: first, the requirement to "take into account and be guided by the temporality," and second, to create the situational exigency that prompts the discourse in the first place (qtd. in Carter 104). One is invention, the other initiation.
However, few discussions have complicated kairos beyond Kinneavy's reintroduction of the term in 1986 and Carter's explication. Kairos tends to be something you notice and act upon, when the moment is right (initiation), its presence something to be recognized and accounted for (invention). Kairos thus is part of the rhetorical situation, but one over which we have no control. In most discussions of the term, there is little agency for being able to create or help manifest a kairotic moment. To this day, scholarly considerations of kairos are rarely strategic: can a collective create a kairotic moment? Certainly not out of thin air. I offer, however, that in constructing our realities as we do, we often lay the foundation for what will some day become somebody else's kairotic moment. A truly collective scholarly community can actively help build the conditions for a kairotic moment in someone else's time and space. I submit this is a view of our work that is far more than mere intertextuality—it takes the social network off the page and manifests in material change. Horner's three examples offer illustrations of this principle in action.

Before I continue, however, a confession: every graduate student who has ever worked with me knows that I will at some point glitch on their papers if they employ a totalizing "we" to discuss the field. I exhort them to use "we" cautiously, strategically. In this response essay, I began using the totalizing "we" sparsely, with the desire to wield it strategically only when warranted. At the risk of sounding mildly scatological, through multiple drafts, I found myself sprinkling "we" with wild abandon, and through the writing I grew to believe in it. I cannot pretend that the "we" I use here is all-encompassing, as will become clear shortly. However, my "we" is offered as an invitation to participate, to join in this beautifully social/material world we are actively constructing with and through our rhetorical work.

**Social Materiality and the WPA Intellectual Work Document**

The first discourse Horner examines is the document formerly known as "the WPA intellectual work document." His critiques are entirely valid. To whit, he notes that it "is not aimed at countering the ways in which the academic work of writing program administrators is commonly evalu-
ated” (165). Instead, the authors of the document buy into a framework that ultimately undermines the development of a more appropriate way to assign value to the work we do. Because it buys into a preexisting frame privileging the solitary scholar, it inherently denies the social nature of the work, the intricate social networks upon which our work depends, and the material conditions within which that work occurs (163–69). Many of the practices that might count as a success, he suggests, are so embedded in social networks that they are perhaps just as much a function of being in the right place at the right time . . . or not. Kairos again. Ultimately, adopting an evaluative frame lifted from Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* (and also derived from the 1996 MLA Commission on Professional Service) requires that we reify the distinction between intellectual work and service work: we perpetuate the disconnect between what we say and what we do; we take credit for work that should be shared; we become what we beheld.

The most compelling aspect of Horner’s analysis, to my mind, is his demonstration of how evaluative frames necessarily separate our work from the social and material conditions that make it possible. Social materiality is erased. This critique sent me back in history, to prior drafts of the WPA statement. For this work, I am indebted to my colleague Robert Schwegler, who not only collaborated on multiple versions of the document, but kept careful archives as it transitioned through various iterations, and one day mentioned to me in passing that earlier drafts were crafted with a decidedly more explicit materialist base than the version adopted by the Council. Schwegler himself has suggested that prior drafts may contain “possible choices and alternatives that may be worth current development or implementation” (“Before”). Through successive drafts, we can uncover the social networks in operation, hegemony in action. And, perhaps, opportunities for change.

So what happened to the materialist base? The end of the published statement itself offers a brief history, a nod to an iterative social process:

Robert Schwegler, Gail Stygall, Judy Pearce, and Charles Schuster—consulting with Executive Committee members and others—developed approaches which Charles Schuster drafted into the version published in the Fall/Winter 1996 issue of WPA as a way to solicit additional response. Following discussion of that
Whereas this coda celebrates the collaborative nature of the document, it leaves out more than it contains. Our archives begin with a proposal to the Executive Board in 1994. The initial drafting process took at least two years of work before the circulation of Schuster’s version, and another two years of revision leading to what I’ll call the Gebhardt version (the document that now appears as the official statement). In naming these drafts after the lead author, I am consciously perpetuating precisely what Horner decries: attributing to one the work of many. In choosing to do so, I’m invoking the truism that the last person at the keyboard controls the discourse. In any case, those years between revisions entail vast textual, organizational, and ideological alterations. For the purposes of this essay, I cover four such alterations.

First, the pre-Schuster version contains no Boyer, but rather a hard-nosed distinction between “mere” work and “intellectual” work:

> Mere work is something any intelligent person can do. As a result, the person doing the mere work can easily be exchanged for any other reasonably intelligent person without the likelihood that the quality of the work will suffer. Intellectual work is a task that requires specific expertise, intelligence, training, and creativity. (Schwegler, “Draft”)

This distinction does not appear in the Gebhardt version. At some point, the collaborative process removed this definition of intellectual work and replaced it with Boyer’s definition, in which intellectual work is nearly indistinguishable from mere work.

Second, the earlier draft constructs WPA work as a form of inquiry or knowledge-making (4). More strongly, the text states that “the emergence of rhetoric and composition studies as an academic discipline has made the design and administration of composition programs into an activity that both produces and enacts disciplinary knowledge” (5). The adopted version drops the reference to rhetoric and composition studies as an academic discipline, and reduces the phrase “produces and enacts”
to “advances and enacts.” Thus, in the official statement, WPAs are no longer held to produce new knowledge; rather, they spread existing knowledge around. They should advance the knowledge of others, but they needn’t create new knowledge of their own.

Third, the early draft repeatedly emphasizes the importance of “dissemination,” operationalizing it in various manifestations, not simply as print publication. In each category of work, WPAs would be evaluated for their ability to appropriately disseminate their work to various audiences using various means. There is a clear understanding that the published article may not always be the best means for changing practices. Rather, the draft’s emphasis is fully rhetorical: the WPA must use the activities best suited to disseminate her/his work in light of local conditions for each of the major categories of effort (6). In the Gebhardt version, the section on “Dissemination” now reads “Program-Related Textual Production.” As Horner might have anticipated, the final version reduces a more localized and situated knowledge-making activity system to a simple production-consumption loop.

Finally, the earlier draft makes plain that a reconsideration of evaluative criteria must take place both nationally and locally. The draft on my desk is keenly attentive to local material and institutional conditions. Very few references to local conditions appear in the approved version. At the end of his version of the draft, Schwegler proposes a robust six-part solution demanding attention to local material conditions: taxonomies of administrative work, documentation strategies, evaluation criteria specific to WPA work, clearly articulated levels of expectation based on institutional situation and material conditions, suggestive evaluative practices that honor the social nature of the work, and a WPA peer evaluation service.

I suspect Schwegler would agree with much of Horner’s critique: in his address to the 2006 WPA summer conference, Schwegler argued that WPA work should be evaluated “in its own right, for its own ends without being drawn (as a default) into habitual evaluative practices that establish and maintain the priority and prestige accorded to the production of scholarly texts” (“Before”). This approach, he claims, is radically different from finding a way to view administrative work as “intellectual.” As if anticipating Horner, Schwegler implies that we need to change the
terms of the discussion rather than importing those from Boyer. As he
explains: "Early drafts offer a detailed evaluation grid based on specific
categories of WPA activity, evaluative criteria, and levels of expectation
and achievement, designed to provide a framework of local WPA
evaluations of WPA work or an external peer evaluation program
sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators." The
Schuster and Gebhardt versions do not retain the overall framework,
fitting instead a less detailed set of categories into Boyer's framework for
scholarship. Because the WPA document's frame was, as Schwegler puts
it, to "extend the category of scholarship," it has become "more useful for
research institutions and less useful for teaching institutions and commu­
nity colleges" ("Before"). And, although it may have helped create more
fruitful job ads, in time it has proven to be "less useful in actual
evaluations."

A funny thing happens in collaboratively written documents: they
often reach such a compromise that they lose their edge. Some might call
it a lowest common denominator. However, consider what would have
happened if the four items described above had appeared in the 1998
published version. Consider it in terms of our social materiality at the
time. There was, to be sure, a Boyer-loving zeitgeist rampant in higher
education; Scholarship Reconsidered provided an easier hook for most
academic audiences than Schwegler's more materialist approach. More
importantly, however, consider the constraints placed on the authors and
revisers of that text: how many WPAs would not have been able to survive
and thrive under a fully rhetorical, disciplinary framework for evalua­
tion? It is no accident that references to rhetoric and composition were
removed; after all, the majority of WPAs even at that time could not claim
such a credential. The field was still too new, and we needed to be able
to open our doors to interested colleagues without demanding the special
disciplinary knowledge that might separate intellectual work from mere
work. We could not demand a more robust epistemological stance for
WPA work, because so many of its members were still trying to retrain
themselves after years of literary study. Without those moves that
ultimately weakened the document, we would have excluded legions of
good colleagues and friends, good citizens, and (yes) good bureaucrats.
The time wasn't right. Yet.
I want to believe that, whether done with full cognizance or unwittingly, the revisions were strategic and rhetorical for that moment. They contributed to someone else’s kairos. Now that Horner has explicated the document’s limitations, and now that we are in a different historical moment with an increasing population imbued in the discipline, we may want to consider choosing the paths rejected a decade ago. Recent social materialities might make it possible. We currently inhabit a different kairotic moment, helped along by what appears now to be an antiseptic text.

Social Materiality and the WPA-Listserv

The WPA-Listserv is possibly the most widely known and used electronic forum in the field. Whereas other electronic lists may pre-date it (H-Rhetor, for example), WPA-L has continued raucously year after year, with scores of new members joining as generations of graduate students and new administrators cycle through our ranks. Its social network is as disparate as it is vast. Many of the field’s first and second generations participate, sharing their historical perspectives and wisdom. Seasoned WPAs offer suggestions and strategies. Publishers lurk in hopes of keeping their fingers on the pulse of the field. Graduate students join to let what they perceive to be the discourse of the field wash over them, and many of them judiciously choose when (and how) to post their own contributions to the discussion. New WPAs turn to it for practical advice and comfort. Its primary function, whether stated explicitly or not, is to build and maintain community. To welcome, to share, to inform, to arouse, to inflame, to instruct, to commiserate.

As with the “Evaluating” document, the beneficiary function of the WPA-L board is also its greatest liability. Much of the staying power of WPA-L resides in its ability to bring new members into the fold. As such, it does function as a contact zone between rhetoric and literature, albeit one clearly located closer to the composition side of the border. As an unmoderated forum, it often serves as an ad hoc training ground for smart and well-intentioned professors trained in literature who need a support group as they try their best to credibly, ethically, and responsibly
administer a writing program without the benefit of an advanced degree in rhetoric and composition, with a workforce whose training resembles their own. To be sure, this is not the only function the WPA-L list serves; however, it has been an important starting point for many underprepared WPAs nonetheless.

Thus, its very strength becomes its limitation: because it functions as a contact zone, its discourse is always already an uneasy compromise between fields, and in those compromises, the lowest common denominator often prevails (for example, the series of “poor me” posts Horner describes are a safe trope in this forum, a comfortable way to find common ground). At some point, those of us fortunate enough to work in a mature writing or rhetoric department outgrow the need for WPA-L, tiring of the “newbies” who post “I’ve just been hired as a WPA at X College, and need to get up to speed on Rhet/Comp. Can anyone suggest a few books I should read?” At some point, some of us get tired of seeing our entire graduate training reduced to a list of the Top Five Books the concerned literature student should read. At some point, the discourse of WPA-L is no longer recognizable as our own.

This, I claim, is an important piece of the social materiality of a venue such as WPA-L. Compromising discourse is embedded into its circulation practices, because the power of its function is in bringing implicated people into the field. However, normalizing discourse has its place: as new workers join the list, and as they learn and grow, many of them continue on and join the field as a whole, and we are all enriched. Now, if they could join without devaluing our work, that would be even better. If they could do it without imposing their terms on us, that would be the best yet.

Social Materiality and Unionist Discourse

Which leads me to Bousquet and his colleagues, and their series of pieces that Horner dignifies with the label “unionist discourse.” Horner rightly says, regarding their impassioned calls to arms: “However inspiring, such rhetoric necessarily begs all manner of questions about movement building, the use of critique, and how to engineer and recognize collective
organization and the mutual support of labor” (177). As Horner captures the situation, “In making the case for what should be, these [unionist] arguments neglect details of the concrete reality that is” (174). Let’s look briefly at “the concrete reality that is.”

Horner stops just short of saying what we all know to be our working conditions: that a large percentage of composition workers are either aspiring or passed-over students of literature who cannot obtain work in the literature economy. This is part of our—and their—material reality, and it actively prevents innovation in curricular and program design. Not saying it doesn’t make it go away.

I’ll go farther: at most institutions, the first-year course inevitably entails intellectual, ideological, and pedagogical compromises because it is designed with the knowledge that most of the teachers will not be saturated in (or interested by) the scholarly discourse of rhetoric and composition. Thus, the first-year course often shows up as a moment on a spectrum, helping to move everyone along, closer to a “Writing & Rhetoric” course rather than an “Introduction to Literature” course. Just as with the WPA Intellectual Work document, just as with WPA-L, we take two steps backwards for every one forward, giving others a chance to catch up and join us.

The wild success and persistence of the Ways of Reading approach speaks to this. It continues to offer a very comfortable way for literature students to teach writing, while sneaking in some excellent opportunities for rhetorical instruction. Again, WOR fills a particularly strategic role (see Tischio). The subversion is sneaking some rhetorical instruction into what is essentially a literary approach. Given the social materiality within which composition operates, this particular act of normalization will contribute to a kairotic moment somewhere down the line.

However, if we buy into the discourse of outraged justice—accepting their terms—we are left with two alternatives: 1) work with the literature graduates who continue to flood the market, the surplus labor of the literature economy, in precisely the ways they decry; or 2) refuse to let them in the door because they have inappropriate training for the work that we do. Is the truly ethical stance to not hire them to teach our writing classes in order to create enough pain and loss of face that literature departments slow down their over-production? Or, is the ethical stance
the one we’ve been employing: to bring them along, one rhetorical compromise at a time? Composition’s history is punctuated and enriched by workers the literature establishment has spit out. What a loss if we were to close our door to them.

As Bousquet’s publishing activity illustrates, no good deed goes unpunished—sometimes it is precisely those we have given an entry to who decry our work as anti-intellectual, non-academic, and exploitative. As Horner points out, critics of Bousquet’s work within composition studies “fault Bousquet for failing to ground his argument fully in the past and ongoing history of composition” (175)—a history for which Bousquet’s literary training has not prepared him. We no longer have to accept those terms. The kairotic moment is near. For some of us, it has been recognized and acted upon. As both Horner and Schwegler suggest, we need different categories, new terms. I add that we need to reject a discourse so saturated in literary studies that it occludes our own intellectual traditions, suffocates our working conditions, and extinguishes our future aspirations.

Coming to Terms with Coming to Terms

In writing these words, admittedly rant-like, in this particular forum, I’m keenly aware of my audience: *JAC* has long held an important and impressive niche in the scholarly journal market by blending literary and rhetorical theories. It has created a place to provoke and push, to explore a wide range of theories and far-reaching scholarship, a place where those in our midst with dual loyalties and identities commingle, where our co-workers in literature might recognize themselves in us, and we in them.

However, at least for today, I want to resist the commingling, to pause the compromises. I want to exist on the outer edges of that kairotic tension of opposites, suspended in a moment of disharmony. Near the end of his piece, Horner projects that when we change the terms of our work, “different projects can be pursued, and different values can be accorded those projects” (180). This is more than a projection. For some of us, it has already become a reality. The utopian title of O’Neill et al.’s collection on independent writing programs—*A Field of Dreams*—
invokes the now-hackneyed popularized promise, "if you build it, they will come." Although many of those collected within the pages of that book have not yet been able to fully realize the promise in that potential, some of us are very close. After all, both timing and location do matter, both institutionally and disciplinarily. Horner is correct: projects pursued by my colleagues and me in our Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island look and function differently from those he is probably able to pursue from an English Department at the University of Louisville. Faculty meetings look and function differently. Search processes look and function differently. Evaluation looks and functions differently. To paraphrase Susan Miller, my colleagues and I can assume different positions now that we are on our own. We do different sorts of work now, and we no longer have to bend over and take it in the annual review.

With a serious revision of our terms for valuation, the structures around our work can be "more in keeping with what we know about writing and reading as material social practices" (Horner 180). Each of us, using our strategic and procedural knowledge, can—and I now believe must—redefine the terms of work to affect change as we can at our own institutions.

But coming to our own terms means leaving old terms, old identities, maybe even old friends, behind. If, at some point, a working relationship within English studies is no longer filled with the sorts of compromises that enrich—when it becomes a never-ending series of concessions that keep us from celebrating our social materiality—then it is time to go.

I have to admit to a palpable fear, an unease with calling our own shots. We've long constructed a field-wide culture of nice, an ethos of compromise, of finding our proper place at the proper moment with the proper amount. We can be so very proper, so very good at compromising to our own detriment.

For strength, I'm emboldened by our history as a collective. This semester, I am teaching a graduate seminar called "Histories and Theories of Writing Instruction." As the title implies, our department has designed this course to honor multiple histories of the field, and to enact multiple theories in our work together. In prepping last week's discussion, I reread Janice Lauer's "Heuristics and Composition." On the face of it, her essay
is a straightforward bibliographic article encouraging the field to consider insights we might gain by learning from other disciplines, particularly cognitive psychology. My bone-dry description of the article does not hint at the passion contained in Lauer’s introductory sentences, where she claims that our field “will never reach the status of a respectable intellectual discipline unless both its theorizers and its practitioners break out of the ghetto” (396). She continues that “endless breast-beating, exchanges of despair, or scrambles after rhetorical gimmicks can result in little more than an ostrich solution” (396). Those of us who identify heart and soul with rhetoric do well to remember the contexts that inspired these words.

What Lauer might call an “ostrich solution” can work for several moments, even decades. The culture of nice and the compromises we’ve made have gotten many of us to where we are today, with real friendships and fruitful collaborations with those both in and out of English studies. However, if we want to inhabit the world Horner begins to construct for us, we must reject the material reality imposed on us by the institution of literary studies. Some of us have already gotten out; we would like to help others get out as well. Fair warning, though: although it sounds contradictory, getting out and going it alone will never be a solitary act. And, just as surely, it requires a healthy dose of kairotic moments, both institutionally and personally. Getting out may not be the right solution for every institution; however, I suspect the time has come for far more programs to take the leap.

Yes, kairotic moments can be partially constructed, strategically built, and designed to move things along. The weakened version of the “Evaluating” document worked for its moment in time; the WPA-L forum continues to function temporally as a connective tissue for those who cannot gather in the hall with their rhetoric colleagues and walk over to the union for coffee; unionist discourse keeps us mindful of issues we still need to address more effectively. However, Horner’s critique exposes the limitations of these discourses. To borrow a turn of phrase from writing center lore, as a field we value meeting students where they are, and helping them move along to somewhere else. Is it really so different with our colleagues, with our field? It’s time to move along to somewhere else.
As Horner’s article attests, Lauer’s words from 1970 still resonate today. By buying into the terms accorded us by another discipline, we participate in the continued devaluation of our work. However, rather than look to other disciplines, as Lauer urged us to do more than 25 years ago, I suggest we have the rhetorical tools and the strategic wherewithal to create our own.

University of Rhode Island
Kingston, Rhode Island

Works Cited


