We Can't Work It Out: 
The Alienated Labor of the WPA and the WI

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I have been thinking about some of the issues Bruce Horner raises in “Redefining Work and Value for Writing Program Administration” since about 1980 when I first became a full-time Writing Instructor (WI) with nine classes a year, 25 students per class, at a salary of about 13,000 dollars per annum. I thought about these issues even more and more systematically when, in the mid-1980s, I became involved with the UC-AFT, a union representing the interests of all non-tenured lecturers employed by the University of California. And, right now, as I look ahead and can see retirement almost on the horizon, I am thinking about work in a more personal way. What have I been doing for the past 25 or so years? What was its value? The way I answer those questions has important implications for how I feel about the life I have led.

But I can't answer these questions easily. Part of my problem—one that may give me a slightly different take on the questions Homer raises—is that I come from a working-class background. My father was a bricklayer, one of my brothers lays brick, another drove a beer truck for 14 years, and another worked for the post office until his back gave out. In light of this background and during those down moments at the end of a quarter when I feel all I have managed to do is move a pile of sand from one arbitrary point to another, I wonder if what I do for a living is work at all. What I do for a living is talk. I am a professional talker, and I get paid to do this because I have acquired one of those credentials (a PhD in literature) that afforded me entry into one of those middle-class professions, albeit one not so highly respected.

I feel a bit troubled when Homer seems to argue that WIs should not define the value of their work as the selling of a skill (170-71). This definition, Homer suggests, may devalue the work of the WI by turning it into a commodity. But what has my brother the bricklayer done, but sell a skill going on 25 years now? Am I to infer that work based on the selling of a skill is somehow inferior or less than work not defined as the selling of a skill? And how can this be, when in a good year without much bad
weather my brother can easily make more per annum than I do? This is befuddling. I don’t want to conclude that the work my brother does is of less value than the work I do because he is selling a commodity, and if his work is of less value than what I do, why does he get paid more for his work than I do for mine?

Of course, as Horner knows, the value of work is determined by its socially assigned exchange value. What one makes may have little or no relation to the real or use value (whatever that might be) of the work one does. He offers a good example when he points to the fortunes made by CEOs who lead their companies to wrack and ruin (172). It’s really hard to understand the relation of what they do to what they get paid for doing it. Horner points also to the way these socially assigned exchange values are frequently determined by ideology. One instance of this, especially pertinent to the work of Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), is the ideologically maintained relationship between “intellectual” labor and manual labor.

Horner rightfully asserts that arguments for the value of WPA work based on the claim that this work is a form of intellectual labor buy directly into and do not challenge the ideologically maintained distinction between intellectual labor, as this is defined in institutions of higher education, and that other form of labor, “women’s work,” that is frequently not recognized as work at all (168). What the university recognizes as work worth rewarding, in multiple ways, is “research.”

The notion that research is intellectual labor that can be rewarded is underwritten, I would add, by another mainstay of capitalist ideology: the myth of the individual and his or her right to the fruits of his or her labor. Unfortunately, the work that WPAs do, as well as the work of WIs, does not result in research that can be rewarded because much of WPA and WI work is collaborative. Even if one could somehow argue that this work is intellectual, the fact that it is collaborative makes it difficult for any one individual to claim, “I did it and should get paid for it.”

In a case of the tables turned, Horner argues that the ideological valorization of research as the intellectual labor of an individual serves to obscure the fact that research is itself “collaborative,” or made possible only by the work of multiple other individuals and social institutions (165). I learned this lesson the hard way when, back in the 1980s, I kept
thought I could somehow research or write myself into a tenure-track job. I researched, wrote, and was rejected over and over again because, I came to see, I simply did not have a social system that supported research efforts. I did not, for example, get sabbaticals so I could devote myself full-time to research. I did not have money for travel or to attend conventions. I did not have the money to purchase the person power of a research assistant. I bore the full brunt of what I didn’t have in massive bouts of self-doubt and even self-loathing. “What’s wrong with me?” I wondered, until I began gradually to see that what was wrong with me was what I didn’t have and was struggling to get—a position in the system that would support me in my labors—and that until I had that I was probably hitting my head against a brick wall.

These considerations get us to Horner’s more theoretical point about the flaws in many arguments for the value of the work of the WPA and the WI. The myth of individual accomplishment (accomplishment that is not “collaborative”) and even, I would say, the myth of the individual (except as a legal fiction), along with the exchange value socially assigned to any particular form of labor, serves to obscure or “occlude,” as Horner puts it, the “use” value of a particular form of work (or even if it has any at all) and all of the social institutions and ideological apparatus that make possible the labor of the individual (171). Arguments that buy into the myth of individual accomplishment and attempt to establish the value of that accomplishment by appeals to the selling of a skill or simply to the number of raw hours put into doing whatever it is that one is doing necessarily “commodify” that labor, and once that labor is commodified it may be assigned an “exchange value” that occludes the real use value of a particular labor and the social system that supports that labor.

Defining one’s work as a commodity is dangerous. The first year I taught a full class load, I was completely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of time I had to put in to do my job at all responsibly. With the sudden jump in the number of students, what had once been the engine of my pedagogy—the attempt to establish what I call an “intersubjective” relation with the student—became an onerous burden. I was on campus (or at the plant, as I came to call it) nearly daily and not infrequently on the weekends. I came to notice, though, that sometimes I was the only person there, at the plant I mean, and that some of the senate or tenured
faculty didn’t seem to be there at all. In light of my working-class background, I believe it understandable that at that time I began to calculate the number of hours I put in and the pay I received and concluded that I was vastly underpaid for the really hard work I was doing, while members of the research faculty were getting paid three or four times what I was getting paid while not showing up for work at all.

What I was doing, in attempting to assign value to my work in this way, was to commodify my labor, in this instance simply as the time I put in and for which accordingly I should get paid. The problem with this argument, however, I came to see, as I worked it through, was that it could lead to a “de-valuation” of my work. If my colleagues and I continued tabulating the hours we put in and complaining about how little we got for that time, somebody was bound to say, “OK, if what you are selling is your time, we will need to keep better track of those hours. We will put in a time clock, and we will pay you by the hour.”

I didn’t want this to happen. I had gotten into academic work partly because I didn’t want to be a slave to the clock. Additionally, trying to measure and assign value to what I did by hours put in didn’t seem to represent accurately the reality of my work. I wasn’t selling my time and whatever connection there is between my eyes and my fingertips as I did when I worked as an egg candler. My working-class background, however, led me to assign value to hours put in relative to something produced. When I candled eggs, I candled a certain number of them in a certain amount of time, as dictated by the conveyer belt, or I ceased to be a candler. When I ask myself what I did as a teacher, I could come up with no number of eggs counted relative to time put in.

I believe part of what Horner would like to see in arguments for the value of the WPA and the WI is something like an actual representation or reflection of what it is WPAs and WIs do (178–79). The problem with defining a teacher’s work in terms of hours put in and product produced (say a skill) is not only that it might lead to the dangers of commodification but also that it is very difficult to define hours put in (without a time clock, that is) and product produced. So difficult, indeed, is it to define the work of the WPA and WI in these ways that one is led to conclude that one is doing something else entirely. Surely the complicated business of teaching writing and education more generally cannot be boiled down to
contact hours, as officially mandated by the state, and one must ask: precisely how long does it take to learn something and, if something is learned, is that a testimony to the worth of the WI's labors or the readiness of the learner to learn?

The difficulty in defining precisely (in terms of hours or things produced) what a WPA or WI does opens the door, of course, to questionable idealistic or utopian claims for how really truly important such labors are. One finds that WIs have a hand in liberating students, or making them good citizens, or teaching them to think critically. One can even find the claim, if one looks hard enough, that writing classes, conceived as transitional environments, may play a critical—indeed, central—role in the self-development of students in the context of an educational environment intended not as preparation for a career, but as preparation for life. That's a much abbreviated version of a claim I made in a book called *Self-Development and College Writing*.

I have made no end of idealistic and utopian claims for what I do, and I will continue to do so, but please note: I did not say the writing class *does* serve the purposes of self-development. I said it *might*. A colleague retired a few years back, so she had the time to read my book, and when she needed a bit of money to cover some expenses, she went back and taught a few classes utilizing what she thought she had taken from my book. We both got a laugh out of that one. "Nothing new happened," I said. "Right," she said. One teacher here and there pushing an idealistic agenda, no matter how commendable, is not going to produce the results he or she might in theory expect. Not when the teacher is teaching students who want to be prepared not for life but a career, and who are working their butts off to pile up as many units as possible as quickly as possible so that they may go out into that real world for which they are completely unprepared.

Having an idealistic goal, as long as one does not trick oneself into believing that it is anything more than a remote possibility, can serve to protect one from the debilitating cynicism that may arise when one begins to think about what it is one is probably actually doing: processing students, handing out units, and doing it in way that might serve not to educate (unless indoctrination is education) but further socialize students into an acceptance of the class divisions of capitalism (see Bloom). Or as
Bowles and Gentis put it in their prescient analysis back in 1976:

It [the educational system] is best understood as an institution which serves to perpetuate the social relationships of economic life through which these forces are set, by facilitating a smooth integration of youth into the labor force. (11)

Bowles and Gintis describe here the purpose of the entire system of education from kindergarten through higher education. I would suggest that higher education, especially the four-year college, serves most especially the social and economic needs of the middle class. Barbara Ehrenreich writes, “The professions are indeed the unique occupational ‘space’ possessed by the middle classes” (78). The only way into that “space” is through higher education. Aside from perpetuating itself by carefully culling from the rank and file the meager few who might become professors, that really is what higher education is mostly about relative to the great mass of students. As middle-class institutions, institutions of higher education serve the interests of that class by handing out credentials that allow one to enter, as a proper middle-class person, one of the “professions.”

Regarded in this light, the WI is a functionary, and not a very highly respected one, representing and enforcing middle-class goals, mores, ethics, work habits, and expectations (see Bloom). I don’t think I am the only person who sees higher education this way; in fact, having sat on many campus-wide committees (where, as a lecturer, I could not vote, though I could speak and listen), I believe the administrations of many institutions see it this way. I don’t know what else to make of discussions in which students are referred to as “through put.” As in: if we are to meet our goal of getting so and so many students to graduate in 4.5 years, we must increase our “through put.” Students, in this context, are not conceived as persons to be educated but as units to be processed. And the number of units processed, and the time taken to process them, is very important to the health and well-being of the university since the amount of funding one receives is directly related to the number of units processed.

Recently the president of the UC system said he would be quitting soon, but that he would make good use of his lame duck time by
continuing to form and cement alliances between the UC system, industry, and government. Oh, and along with that, he would do his best further to enhance the global presence of the UC system, meaning possibly that he intended to be out of the country a good bit. I found no mention in his remarks that he intended to spend any time or effort in improving the quality of education in the UC system (see Paddock). The reasons that the UC president should busy himself in this way are obvious and twofold. First, alliances with government and industry mean more grant money for the university for research which in turn, depending on the success of the research, produces even more grant money (see Washburn). Second, improving the quality of education won’t bring in any money at all.

The bureaucrats at the top don’t just buy unthinkingly into the ideological distinction between research as the intellectual labor of the individual and that other kind of work, teaching; they buy into it because, in fact, research brings in bucks and teaching doesn’t. Certainly students do bring in bucks, but to regard students as things that bring in bucks means regarding them not as persons who might benefit from an education but as economic units. In light of the low regard afforded students as persons, no wonder those who service these students are afforded little respect. And no wonder WPAs and WIs have tried to argue that what workers in writing do is a form of intellectual labor or “research.”

In fact, I understand, given the context, why many of the arguments that Horner rehearses for the value of the labor of WPAs and WIs have been made. Horner suggests these arguments may be fatally flawed to the extent that they serve to commodify that labor. But finally I have to say, so be it. I don’t think these arguments were made because the people who made them were not thinking about the long-term implications of their arguments. Rather, they made these arguments and commodified their labor because that’s the only game in town. Our society is based on capitalism, and the only way to get any return for one’s labor is to offer it up as a commodity.

That’s why when a union, the American Federation of Teachers, came along in the mid-1980s and wanted to organize lecturers in the UC system, the great bulk of whom work in writing or language programs, I jumped right on the bandwagon. Not that the bandwagon was very full.
Actually, at my campus, there were only initially three or four of us, but we did manage to get about 30 of the 200 lecturers working on the campus to vote, 90% to ratify the UC-AFT as the sole bargaining agent for lecturers in all negotiations with the UC. Horner expresses concern, however, with the way union discourse might play into other forms of discourse that commodify the labor of WIs and WPAs (177). That is a concern, of course, but when it comes to unions you simply can’t have the one without the other. The purpose of a union is to represent the interests of labor, and there is simply no way to do that in the context of capitalism without presenting that labor as a commodity to be paid for by such things as dollars and cents and increased job security.

Marx had mixed feelings about unions. He recognized their historical necessity; he lauded their efforts and noted their achievements. However, he also saw them not as a be-all and end-all but as a step towards fully achieved socialism (Communist). In “Instructions for the Delegates,” he wrote:

The immediate object of Trades’ Unions was therefore confined to everyday necessities, to expediences for the obstruction of the incessant encroachments of capital, in one word, to questions of wages and time of labour. This activity of the Trades’ Unions is not only legitimate, it is necessary. It cannot be dispensed with so long as the present system of production lasts.

And as long as the “present system of production lasts” (and it has lasted until now), unions, to achieve their ends, must to some extent collude with or accept the terms of engagement as these are formulated by the system of capitalism. Unions do not own the modes of production, and because they don’t they are unable to set the agenda. They are engaged in a risky business. Sometimes when a union goes on strike, it is crushed. Does that mean unions should cease to strike? I don’t think so. You take the risk and you take the good with the bad.

I have had a job to keep for 25 years for one reason and one reason alone: I am a member of a union. The union argued for and got a contract that defined my job situation and put in place a structure of evaluation that gave me and others the possibility of long-term, semi-secure, employment. The terms of the contract were arrived at through arduous negotia-
tions that pitted a weak union against a powerful multibillion dollar bureaucracy, and there were trade-offs. One of the trade-offs, pertinent to Horner's argument, came directly from the way we attempted to define the value of lecturers to the university. We said we were teachers and noted the huge proportion of undergraduate classes that we taught.

This led to a contract that gave lecturers a semi-official place in the university as persons whose job it was to teach. This produced for me a semi-awkward moment. A good 15 years after the initial contract I, as president of our union local, engaged in a conversation/confrontation with the local campus administration over workload. I don't remember who did it, but somehow or other, somebody at the table (possibly another lecturer) made a comparison between the work of lecturers and senate or tenured professors along the lines of: why do lecturers teach so many classes and senate faculty so few (three a year in the physics department)? The answer was that professors are paid not simply to teach but also to do research.

I piped up, noting that, according to our MOU (Memorandum of Understanding with the UC), lecturers, if they were to have their contracts renewed, had to show "professional development." And that to demonstrate that development some lecturers such as myself, I said, trying to be charming, did research and had even had it published. Whereupon the Executive Vice-Chancellor of Something or Other—who had been previously giving me a hard time at the meeting by repeatedly suggesting writing could be best taught in large lecture classes—looked me in the eye and said I was not supposed to be doing that. Lecturers were hired to teach, not to do research, and my doing some research (he seemed to imply) represented on my part a dereliction of duty, or something to that effect.

Sitting there, having worked my butt off writing a book for about three years and having forfeited income from summer school so that I might finish it and get it published, I felt, I don't know, gutted. So I would be among the first to say, depending on how one defines what one does, that taking the union route is not without its risks. But I would be among the first also to say that all improvements in my working situation have come about through the hard work—for which they are not paid, though they do get travel expenses—of the union officers, lecturers like myself, who are constantly engaged in negotiations with the UC.
Indeed, about four years ago these officers managed to negotiate something I thought I would never see. Right there, in front of my eyes in the contract, I saw that lecturers who had passed what we call the big review were no longer just called lecturers, but “continuing lecturers” and that the burden of proof that one of these lecturers should not have his or her three-year contract renewed had been shifted from the lecturer to the administration (“UC-AFT”). The lecturer no longer had to show he or she was “excellent” enough to be rehired; instead, the administration would have to put a good deal of time and effort into showing the lecturer was not excellent. No, this was not the holy grail of tenure, but it was damn close. Indeed, I learned later that the pay code assigned continuing lecturers ended the same way as that of the tenured faculty with a string of zeros, meaning in the case of the former “indefinite” and in the case of the latter “forever,” I suppose.

So if I were to sum up, I might say first: when it comes to unions, don’t throw the baby out with the bath water. Sure, the water is dirty. Union work is dirty work because the problems they serve to address are really, really low-down dirty problems. If you throw out that dirty water, you might have clean hands, but you won’t have the baby either. Second, I might say: when it comes to making arguments for the value of the work of WPAs and WIs, any port in a storm. WIs may make arguments for the value of their work that are transparently self-serving or assign completely bogus values to what they do and be completely aware of what they are doing. One doesn’t want to outright lie, of course, but one is not really concerned with whether one believes one’s own argument or whether other workers in writing buy it either.

Really, the last audience to which a WI or a WPA should address arguments for the value of what they do is the audience of other WIs and WPAs. WIs and WPAs, as it turns out, are usually pretty smart people, and being right in the situation they know better than anybody that WIs and WPAs have no idea at all about what they are really doing or getting paid for or the value of their work—at least not if “having an idea” means turning teaching, education, and research into a commodity and yet another form of alienated labor. But of course this work is alienated, and the arguments one makes are best directed not at one’s fellow alienated laborers, but at professional organizations or bodies like the state legis-
lature who might buy one’s arguments—maybe because they believe them or maybe just because it serves their interests to do so and, whatever the reason, have the power to improve working conditions for the WPA, the WI, and students.

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Works Cited


