

INTERVIEW

“It’s been a long learning process”: An Interview with Edward M. White

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Edward M. White (Ph.D. Harvard, 1960) has written or edited 13 books and about 100 articles or book chapters on writing, writing instruction, and writing assessment. In 2007, he co-edited (with a former student) his 5th textbook for college writing students, *The Promise of America*, and fully revised the 4th edition of his book for teachers, *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*. His best-known books are *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, which won a Shaughnessey award from the Modern Language Association in 1994, and *Assessment of Writing*, an MLA research volume, in 1996. After taking early retirement in 1997 as an emeritus professor of English at the CSU San Bernardino campus, where he was named “Outstanding Professor” in 1994, he joined The University of Arizona English department, where he continues to teach graduate courses in writing assessment, writing research, and writing program administration. Now in his 51st year of teaching, he is also rewriting *Teaching and Assessing Writing* for a third edition, working on another writing textbook, and—that supreme indulgence—writing a memoir.

Q: Writing teachers and program administrators often launch unthinkingly into large-scale writing assessment projects—or are launched unwillingly into them by external pressures. What mistake do you think they often make but can easily avoid?

EW: Back in the spring of 1971, I spent a day with probably the greatest of the scholars of early assessment. His name is Paul Diederich. He was an ETS senior researcher, and he did the studies which finally led to holistic scoring and to the establishment of the advanced placement program essays. Now, what Diederich found out in his very early study is if you don’t do some work trying to harmonize your test readers into the same discourse community, into using the same criteria for grading, then every

paper gets every score. And that's what you'd expect really, because there are so many different ways of evaluating writing, and teachers come to the evaluation process with their own way of doing things. Normally that's fine. Maybe not fine for students who have to figure out the teacher each time, but in a test situation when you're confronted with that wide range of differences—you've got to get people all on the same track if you're going to be fair to students.

Now some people, Peter Elbow most notably, find norming horribly oppressive because they are asked to score in the same way that the other readers are asked to score. If you score a paper a five while everyone else in the room scores it a two, *you are wrong*. You might have good reasons for why you scored it a five, but since the whole group has brought its values to bear, and those values are stated in a scoring guide and they're illustrated in sample papers, if you go off on your own hook and *you're wrong*. You're wrong because of the rhetorical situation of grading such a test. It's a unique situation because what you want from a test is different. Test grading is different from essay grading when you get a bunch of papers in a class. When you get a bunch of papers in a class, you want them all to be great. When you give a test, particularly a large-scale test, you don't want them all to be great. You want the grades to spread out because the student abilities are spread out. A lot of teachers don't realize the difference—they hate to give bad grades. But you need to have bad grades to have a spread of scores and if your results are to be meaningful.

Q: Aside from the problem of readers making judgments based upon their own non-communal values, what other problems can spin out of a large-scale assessment that directly impact the reliability of the results that are gathered?

There's the inherent difficulty of evaluating any aspect of art. There are differences of opinion: Which is the best modern song? Which is the best Beethoven symphony? Which is the best Shakespearean play? We *love* to argue about those things, and we don't find it a flaw if we have sharp differences of opinion. But if we can't agree on a test—in our distribution of test scores which is a very specialized kind of reading, if we don't have some kind of fair, reliable and valid way of distributing scores—then we're not being fair to the people who take the tests. They want to feel they're being treated fairly, which means consistently. This means there is an inherent conflict between the need to have reliable scoring that means something on a test and our delight in having differences of opinion when we try to evaluate an art form. So that has to be accommodated somehow.

Reading a test means deciding “Did the student meet the test criteria or not, and to what degree?” And if one of the test criteria is that the student must answer the question, and the student writes a brilliant paper that doesn't

answer the question, then you give a failing grade because that's what you've decided on as the principle criteria. So you've got inherent contradiction between the way we read and value most things in the area of the arts and what we do when we give a test when we try to have a reliable distribution of grades from the best to the worst.

We've got to decide on what's the best and what's the worst, and that is always very, very difficult. That's why a professional essay reading brings readers and table leaders together from very early on to decide on what the criteria are. You decide on the criteria before you decide on the question; once you decide what you're looking for, you can decide how to look for it. So you decide what you're really measuring, what you're really trying to test for, then you try to find a good way of eliciting that material from the students with a test question which gets at what you're trying to measure, and then you read the student papers and you try to come to an agreement on which papers have met the criteria and which have not. And then you try to divide them up consistently.

Now, some people use a five-point scale. A five-point scale is really bad because if you think of the theory behind what we're doing, the five-point scale has that three right in the middle. And so whenever you have a conflict of some sort with the scoring guide, readers will tend just to score it a three. And fully 50% of the papers get the three in a five-point scale, so you might as well not give the test if you're not spreading out student scores. This is why Diederich recommended strongly that we use a six-point scale. The virtue of the six-point scale is that it doesn't have a middle. You force people to make a decision between the bottom of the upper half, which would be a score of four and the top of the bottom half which would be a three.

Q: What is the point of diminishing returns? If six points is good, then I can imagine people saying seven, eight and nine are better.

EW: Well, one of the things Diederich taught me is all your data depends on the size of your scale. For instance, if you had a two-point scale and you decided that any rating within one-point of the other was agreement, you would have 100% reliability. The more you expand your scale, the more opportunity there is for difference. The six-point scale is a nice compromise. It all depends on what you are in fact trying to find out. Testing is a way of getting answers. You have to know what your questions are. If you have clear questions, then what you're focusing on is a way of getting clear answers.

Now even with a good, clear, fairly simple scoring guide that uses a six-point scale, there will be papers which are sort of inevitably between a three and a four. And so we work very hard to make that distinction. We say there's no middle grade; you've got to decide if it's the bottom of the top or the top

of the bottom. You know you're working in a world of approximation, and you do the best you can, knowing you're not going to be perfect.

Q: What relationship does this knowledge of approximation share with the concept of the “true score”?

EW: The true score is an assumption that test makers like to make about a trait. That is, there is *something* that we are trying to measure—which might be intelligence, or mechanical ability, or writing ability—a construct which we're trying to measure. Now, we know we're never going to measure it perfectly because we can't get at its essence, so we construct the best test we can and score it the best possible way we can. That lets us have something called an achieved score. Now the achieved score, whatever you score the paper on that six-point scale, has a relationship to the true score but it's never identical. This is in classical test theory. You try to get your achieved score to be the true score, but the true score is an abstraction that doesn't exist in the real world. There is a statistic called the Error of Measurement (EOM), and that is the statistical way of measuring the difference between anyone's achieved score and true score. In any test, any statistician working on the test is always going to give you that EOM, which you use to tell people not to believe your scores too much.

Now the real problem with this issue, and we're getting a little profound here, is that no one is really sure about these constructs. Think of intelligence for a minute. An IQ test was used to measure a person's intelligence. The assumption was that there is such a thing as intelligence, and we are trying to measure it, and so we put together an IQ test. But if you assume there is such a thing as general intelligence, you're making a false assumption, and that throws the whole statistical operation into peril. This is very profound in test theory because all these tests, all the multiple choice tests, are assuming there's a true score, that there's an absolute construct that you can't see but can measure by these phenomena that appear on the test.

The metaphor I like to use for this is true love: Everybody likes to believe in true love, and when you get married, you hope you have achieved true love. Now, if you wanted to do a standard Error of Measurement, you could measure the difference in the abstraction true love and the love you've managed to achieve in your marriage, and there will be some distance there. Of course, maybe there is no such thing as true love, and the best you can get is some achieved love.

Q: Ed, this is why your grad students ask you to speak at their weddings.

EW: (laughs) The people who do testing really like to have right and wrong answers. They really like things to be cut and dried. And I think one of the

things I have always contributed to the field is to say, “It’s not that simple.” These things are horribly complex. Even a two paragraph, twenty minute essay written by a freshman is complex, and it’s not open to easy answers.

Q: In the past, you have described writing assessment as “the hack work of hack work” and composition teaching itself as occupying “the lowest rung of the prestige ladder in English departments.” Is this still the situation—in composition in general and assessment in particular?

EW: Years ago I had an experience in a Writing Program Administration course I was co-teaching with Theresa Enos. We were talking about the general run of English departments which are usually dominated by literature people who don’t have a whole lot of respect for composition people. And one of the students in the class said, “Oh, but that’s historical information, right? I mean that doesn’t happen anymore because the composition people are some of the most respected people in the department.” I looked at Theresa and she looked at me, and we both burst out into laughter. Because this student had only had experience with the English department at The University of Arizona, where the people in rhet/comp are highly respected by the English Department. But the minute our students go out to get jobs, they find that that’s not usual at all.

We are a very conservative profession. If you look at the history of English departments, you find that every new concept of what an English department should do has been fought tooth and nail by the prior group. Now, I met the prior group when I went to a Harvard graduate program. The prior group was entirely linguistic. To do graduate work in English meant to learn Anglo-Saxon poetry, the relationship of Anglo-Saxon to old German. And, good luck for me, our English professor who taught that old English course was in Iceland, interviewing old Icelanders, I suppose, and instead it was being taught by a young playwright named Bill Alfred who made it a wonderful experience.

The intrusion of literature into the English department was largely, I think, the work of Longfellow, who traveled to Europe and saw the forms of English Departments, but literature had to fight its way into the English Department. And then later on, American literature, that upstart, had to fight its way into the English department. There were big fights to keep American literature out. And then modern literature—hell, you should have to study modern literature? You read that on the side! That’s entertainment. Modern literature had to fight its way into the English Department and then, would you believe, creative writing tried to get into an English Department? That fight is still going on in English Departments where creative writers are not seen as respectable citizens. And then rhet/comp started to claim its place.

Q: How are traditional power structures within English departments in flux, and can you speculate on how this will change the geography of the field for new practitioners?

EW: Well, if we knew the answer to that, we'd do better graduate programs. I think a lot of English departments are not asking that question, and they continue to teach the way English departments taught in the 1930s, and that's very convenient and very boring. But a lot of other English departments really try to keep up to date with what's happening in literature and what's happening in theory and are trying to look into the future.

The first statement I heard on this score was from the secretary of the MLA who came to California to talk to the California State English Council. I invited him in because I was the English chair at that time. His name was Michael Shugrue, and he had a large view of the profession. And I remember him berating us as English department chairs and later on berating the Associated Departments of English, which is composed of English department chairs, on being out-of-date, and he said, "If you don't change your ways," which were all entirely literary and aesthetic, "if you don't change your ways, English Departments of the future are going to be like Classics departments of the present." And there are English departments who have become like Classics departments. They have not been in flux—they are set in their ways and stable. And for awhile that works, but then students go elsewhere.

I think such stagnation is a sign of the failure of the English department to be alert to its scope. I always tried as department chair to make a really big tent in the English department that could accommodate. And we always kept the creative writing people in the English department, and we kept the linguistics people in the English department, and so on, but there is always centrifugal force: People want to go out and do their own narrow thing, and that's bad. So English departments are always in flux; they always fight off new ideas, and if they succeed in fighting off new ideas, then they wither and become insignificant.

Q: You speak often of the value of seeing lots of places and getting lots of perspective versus the danger of stagnation, but so much of what we do as composition teachers *feels* private--it's just between us and the students, and they are the only ones who see our comments. You've always been an advocate for including real students and real writing in our professional discussions, and you've taken some heat for this. When *Twelve Readers Reading* came out there was mixed response from rhet/comp folks to how you responded to the student writing in that text.

EW: Oh yes. Well, Richard Straub and Ronald Lunsford spent five years analyzing the data they got from their readers, five full years. And I worked with

them, and really loved the idea of the book, and so I was, in a sense, a consulting editor from the start. They really had a terrible time getting all these twelve different people's comments onto any kind of a grid. They finally worked out the grid as oppositions between, for example, most directive and least directive comments. And I argued with them from the start that that was an artificial distinction, but they kept it. To my amazement I wound up as the most directive of the twelve, while I don't see myself that way at all.

They did a workshop at the CCCCs in which they put one of their student essays on the overhead, and they put up my comments to the essay and Patricia Stock's comments. The student had an opening paragraph about going to Florida, but there were two entirely different topics in the opening. You can see my comment in the book—what I did was I circled one and wrote 1 in the margin, and I circled the second and wrote 2 in the margin, and I said, "You've got two separate topics at work here—you need either to connect them, so there's an obvious connection, or decide which of the two you really want to talk about."

Then they put up Patty Stock's comments on this, which started this way, "I *loved* this opening paragraph. It reminded me of the last time I was in Florida. I *loved* the warm air . . ." and she went on talking about how she loved Florida and how the student writing evoked all these feelings in her. And I looked at the comparison and I thought to myself, "Oh, this is embarrassing. They put that up to humiliate Patty." But, it turned out that I was wrong! They all, everyone in the room, just loved Patricia Stock's response. And I kept saying, how is that going to help a student? And the answer was, "Well, you've told the student what to do. You're being very directive. You've taken over the student's writing." I said, "No, I haven't!" But anyway, that whole business of being directive or non-directive struck me as being artificial and wrong.

Q: What are the most significant changes for teachers of writing that are least significant for students?

EW: 65 graduate PhD programs in rhet/comp developed over one generation. I mean, that's stunning to think about. Now, how has this change affected students? I think many writing courses are still being taught by naïve amateurs who don't know the field exists, or don't know much about the field if they do know it exists. So I don't think that the influence of rhetoric into the field has been profound for students, though I think more and more it's starting to infiltrate. There's a saying that really important discoveries in a field of study take fifty years to work their way into the teaching of a given field. So it may not be cause for pessimism to say that it took fifty years for the concept of process to work its way into teaching, but it pretty much has, and I think that has affected most students.

Q: One of the significant questions our field is now trying to answer is how to handle the increasing separation between its two areas of study. New scholars often say that they “do” rhetoric to the exclusion of composition and vice versa. Are there consequences to that?

EW: Well, it’s really funny you should ask this, because we were talking about this recently in my job seeker’s class. We were doing mock interviews and one of the interview questions that you always get is “How does your dissertation relate to your teaching?” One student who was just finishing her dissertation on rhetoric and (underline and italicize and in bold) composition was doing the mock interview and so we were grilling her on the connection between rhetoric and composition. And she was wonderful on it, the way in which rhetoric informs composition, composition informs rhetoric. And then the question came up, “How does that actually work in the classroom?” And she said, “I don’t think it does for most teachers.” And there she is writing her dissertation on the subject.

This question came very late for me. I never considered myself to have anything to do with rhetoric until I went to Arizona. I was a comp guy, and even though my first book, *The Writer’s Control of Tone*, was really about audience, I didn’t know anything about the concept. I didn’t know anything about rhetoric. I just knew it as a writer would know it, and so I wrote a book about having an audience without knowing anything of its tradition or its history. I’m a little embarrassed when I look at that book now because, by being in a department that values rhetoric so highly, I’ve had to learn about rhetoric. So I think rhetoric is seen as an esoteric kind of thing that specialists play with, while the real business is what I do in class on Monday.

Q [SB]: When you said that, Ed, I was reminded of how you tried very hard to get out of sitting on my qualifying exam committee in the late 1990s.

EW: I did?

Q [SB]: One of your arguments was that you hadn’t read Aristotle in thirty years.

EW: Yeah, I lied. I’d *never* read Aristotle. I didn’t want to admit that.

Q [SB]: Well, Theresa Enos was there, so you couldn’t admit that you’d never read the *Rhetoric*.

EW: Yeah, that would have been humiliating. I’d never read Aristotle. There was no occasion to, because rhetoric had nothing to do with my

major business, which was literature, and my minor business, which was teaching kids how to write. Now, I'm embarrassed to say it that way, but that's the way I felt about it. It's been a long learning process.

I did a workshop for the Northern Arizona University TAs up here in Flagstaff, and all they wanted to do was talk about their teaching. I mean, they were new TAs, they were right out of college, so they were beginning graduate students who had been asked to teach. And they had to desperately figure out what assignments to give, what to do with readings, how to relate the readings to the writing. The last thing they wanted to do was to hear someone speculate about rhetoric or theories or any of that stuff. I assigned them an essay by me and one by Peter Elbow taking different approaches to assessment, and they wouldn't talk about it. They were concerned with: "What is a good assignment?" "What assignments work?" "How do you grade a paper?" And they were desperate to do those things in the time they had and not the least bit interested in theory. And I think that's still the situation for most teachers of writing in this country, except for those of us who are professional about it, and we're getting to be a larger and larger group each year.

Q: Mentoring seems to have been significant part of the line that led you from Brooklyn to the Ivy League, and your autobiographical writings reference the "shaping moments" that change the trajectories of lives. However, you have also said that such critical moments don't happen much anymore, that harried or under-qualified teachers don't have the time for that kind of inspiration. As someone who has written extensively about labor issues as well as teacher training, can you speak to the ability of our field to foster inspiration, to create more of those life-changing moments?

EW: I recently walked back from my Jane Austen class with a student who had written such a wonderful paper on Jane Austen's *Emma* that, as we were walking, I asked her what she was planning to do when she graduated. She said, "Oh, I don't know, I haven't thought much about it." I said, "Have you ever thought about going to graduate school? Your work is really excellent and you'd be a very good graduate student." She said, "Well, no, I never thought about going to graduate school. What is it like?" We had this whole conversation, you know, very similar to others I have written about, and then I went to my next class and she went home. And I suspect that that may have been life changing for her.

I try to run my classes so those kinds of conversations can happen *in class*, but under most circumstances I'm not sure this is possible. I'm sure it *happens*, here and there and everywhere, under the right circumstances. I know some of our TAs just love their students and really get caught up with them and serve as informal counselors to them. And I

know I've always gotten to know some of the students, and one of the wonderful things about being in rhet/comp is that people inevitably write enough about who they are, so then you're dealing with human beings and the complexity and the individuality of what people are. And so, I know it happens with me and other teachers, but it's all so spotty and the circumstances have to be right, and I think it's really hard for most new teachers to do it, particularly when they're under tight time pressures. It's really hard to make those moments happen, particularly as universities become more and more cash-strapped, and classes get bigger and bigger.

Q: You have written that your work didn't feel useful and worthwhile until you left Wellesley for San Bernardino. Yet you've returned, with obvious enthusiasm, to teaching Jane Austin. What has changed—is it you, is it the university, or is it Jane?

EW: Oh, it's the students. I spent five years teaching at Wellesley, and these were really rich kids. I mean, not all of them; there was some scholarship kids, and every now and then there was actually a person of color that appeared somehow. But it was basically upper-middle and upper class, white, privileged girls who were going through the motions, by and large, of being educated so that they could lead the lives of the upper-middle and upper class. And so Jane Austin didn't change from Wellesley to San Bernardino, but the students changed.

One of the things that excited me about San Bernardino and the University of Arizona—though it's more elite than I'm altogether comfortable with, to tell you the truth—is that you've got a range of students and the elite are elsewhere. When you teach people who've got it made, the people who know they're gonna rule the world, it's really different. I think I described it as they're doing performances. They've been to good prep schools, they've been to good high schools, and they know how to do an essay. And they do the essay sort of the way they do a dance, the way they perform at a prom. Yet when you get to the kinds of students that I really like to teach, they approach the whole idea of education differently. It's not a right. It's not a right of passage. It is a privilege. It is necessary.

The students I had in San Bernardino, because I wrote during the day and I taught late afternoon and evening classes, were all working. They were all trying to get a degree to improve themselves, to move up in the world. Part of it was to get a better job, but part of it was out of genuine interest to find out what all this stuff that people talk about was like. And so, it's really wonderful to have students of that sort for whom you really can make a difference.

Q: One of the things you said in “On Being a Writer” is that “the more we can help our students see themselves as writers, the more they will be able to stand fast and assert the power of language to resist foolish authorities and to give meaning to their own experience.” How does this translate for emerging scholars? Can we communicate a sense of power in writing to emerging scholars in this field as they attempt to give meaning to their own experiences and the writing that they do for journals such as *Composition Studies*?

EW: You know, I’m not sure I’d say that now because I had more faith that we could do that then. But that’s such a good question and it really goes to the heart of what we’re all about as teachers and as thinkers. I think every good teacher in his heart-of-hearts wants to change his students’ lives. And you know you’re not going to do it for every student—you’re only going to do it for a few students, but you never know which ones. You do have the possibility of changing your students’ lives, and it’s an awesome power if you think about it. I mean it’s an awesome power to give somebody an A or a C, but they can live with that. But to have somebody think, “hey, I’m really a writer.” That’s a profoundly life-changing realization. Or for some people it’s, “what I write really does matter.” But that’s one person at a time. I don’t think you do that with groups. You have to deal with groups, but there are people in those groups who respond and other people who are only half-listening.

Jim Berlin was *profoundly* committed to the idea that it was our *job* not just to teach reading and writing but to change people’s lives. And for him, it was to change people’s lives in that particular way: To make them unwilling to accept injustice; to make them willing to stand up and be heard. We don’t hear much about this anymore. But in fact, we are really in the business of subversion. We are asking people to think through what they believe. We’re asking people to think through what they write. We’re asking people to go back and revise what they said. That’s all terribly subversive. And, you know, the Sarah Palins of this world are right to distrust us. We are revolutionaries, and we are trying to empower people who should sit quietly, do what they’re told. And so I say to my graduate students, “if you don’t get in trouble as a teacher at any point in your entire teaching life, you’ve done something wrong.”

I remember the students in a literary theory class in California coming to me. One of the students lived up in one of the mountain communities, and her school board had decided to censor a particular book and remove it from the library and censure the teacher who was using it in class. I can’t remember what the book was—something as outrageous as *Huckleberry Finn*. And she said, “It’s just awful to see this happen.” And I said, “Well, why don’t we do something about it.” And I remember them all saying, “Do something about it?” I said, “Yeah. Why don’t we, as a class,

write a letter to the school board and tell them that they are infringing on constitutional freedoms of what people can read and infringing on education in ways that are totally unacceptable, and if they don't rescind that, we will begin publishing their action to the rest of the educated community. Let's sign it as a class." So we did, and it terrified the school board, and they immediately changed their votes. That was a wonderful moment. They were really afraid they were going to be held up to public scorn, and we were ready to do it—there was just such a feeling of outrage about the censorship.

I think we do need to be troublemakers. I haven't done that nearly as much as I should have.

Q: You have posted very regularly to the WPA listserv since around April of 1993, when you joined the list—sometimes multiple times a day on topics from placement to politics to Harry Potter. What is the value of that, ultimately, for you or for all of us?

EW: David Schwalm tells me that he's the most frequent contributor to the list and I'm second. So, clearly I write too much.

Q: Well, no. Clearly David writes too much. (laughter)

EW: The value is community, and I think community is a very key word for me. I love belonging to the writing community. I love belonging to the WPA-I because it's a nice, manageable community. And a listserv is a lovely community. I have listservs in all my classes that just sort of shape a community. We don't have to go bowling alone, as the book had it. We need community. And that's one of the reasons why I'm so glad I shifted from being a lit person to being a rhet/comp person, because as a lit person you really do a lot of work alone, and you lecture to large groups of students, and to form a community is much harder unless you have the privilege, as I do this term, of having fifteen students, all of whom have elected to read the six Jane Austin novels with me. That's really wonderful, and it is a community, and that's why I like the listserv.

Q: Our last question for you today is inspired by the widespread concern regarding the state of our country's economy and the impact on universities. You once wrote that "all of higher education faces an uncertain future, and Composition Studies may save English departments or may disappear along with English departments." Can you speak to the position of composition programs in these especially troubled economic times?

EW: Well, I think we have a kind of accidental ace-in-the-hole. That is, I think if literature programs were to disappear, most people would give a

shrug, but people tend to think that writing is really important, though they think of it, I'm afraid, in very simple-minded ways because, you know, writing has to do with spelling and handwriting or something. But there's an automatic positive response to the teaching of writing. They don't think we do it well. They don't think we do enough of it. But it doesn't have the sense of being a frill the way most liberal arts education takes on in the corporate university. So I think writing is going to survive. And if it hitches its wagon, as it has, to rhetoric, it's probably going to survive in a respectable way in the university.

I know our society tends to think of the arts in general as frills; it's the first thing to go in the schools when the budget gets cut. But I guess it's always been a struggle for anything in the arts to survive, and they always manage to, just like writers manage to survive and keep on writing, and poets keep on poet-ing, and musicians keep on music-ing. The prognosis is pretty grim right now, but it's been grim before, and the arts have survived and writing has survived. I think there will be jobs for our graduate students in the future. They may not be in an English department—they may be in a differently named department, and they may have a lot to do with technology or administration, and you might be teaching business memos as well as poems—but I think the field is going to survive as a more secure part of the liberal arts, in part because the corporate university sees business uses for what we do.

Q: This feels like a change, doesn't it, from the sort of tumultuous history of composition? Composition has always felt like the troubled entity, but now it doesn't seem quite as bad off as some of the others around us.

EW: Yeah, well, Mike Shugrue way back then said that composition was going to be the salvation of the English departments, and I think there's probably some truth in that. That is, the English department guys who look down on composition as a low-class activity that should be done in middle school are probably going to have their jobs saved by us. I actually said that to a faculty member at Cal State, Chico. I was on campus in my administrative days. And he saw me there and came over and said "Oh, so you're the fellow who's made us all teach composition." And I looked at him and said, "No, I'm the fellow who saved your ass." That was crude, but that was back in the 1970s.

He kind of scowled and walked away.