Where We Are

Dialogue and Disciplinary Space

"Where We Are" highlights where we are as a field on matters current and compelling. For this installment, we invited two groups—the WPA-L Reimagining Work Group and the nextGEN Start Up Team—to dialogue about disciplinary spaces. In particular, we invited them to think through the events of the last year in our discipline's public, electronic spaces. We proposed that recent conflicts were rooted in at least two tensions: the first, that writers and rhetors do not feel mutually understood in these spaces. In other words, in many cases the one thing all parties can agree on is that they are not being read carefully and interpreted generously. The second tension is that strong responses to such events often take one of two paths: folks either decide to stay and attempt to reform the spaces into something more hospitable; or, folks leave those spaces to find and found newer, more hospitable spaces. We, borrowing from The Clash, thought of this the "should I stay or should I go?" question. As you will read below, both groups productively pushed back against that frame. In doing so, their responses contextualize recent conflict in (electronic) disciplinary spaces, chart paths of advocacy and support, and extend invitations for collective action and activism. We are thankful that both groups took up the invitation as they did, and in the spirit of equity, we present their dialogue in alternating order.

The WPA-L Reimagining Work Group members are Kyle Bohunicky, Kefaya Diab, Karin Evans, Christine Garcia, Traci Gardner, Mara Lee Grayson, Regina McManigell Grijalva, Holly Hassel, Brian Hendrickson, Adam Hubrig, Barry Maid, Cara Marta Messina, Bernice Olivas, Mike Palmquist, and Iris Ruiz.

The nextGEN contributing start up members are Sweta Baniya, Sara Doan, Gavin P. Johnson, Ashanka Kumari, Kyle Larson, Virginia M. Schwarz.

Opening Statements

WPA- L Working Group

Our WPA-L Working Group formed in response to list discussions on WPA-L in Spring 2019, but we had all been observers and list participants at various points before then when list conflict erupted around discussion of Vershawn Ashanti Young's 2019 CFP for CCCC (in Spring 2018); the "WPA ListServ Feminist Revolution" mansplaining series of discussions; and then most recently, the "Heterodox," Asao Inoue's "CCCC's Chair's Address," and "Grand Scholar Wizard" posts. We saw how these incidents disproportion-

ately harmed marginalized people, including graduate students, and continued to make the list a hostile and combative environment when it—as we understand its history—was intended to serve as a professional support community. To experience such marginalization in a field that claims to do the opposite was (and is) troubling to us.

As academics and activists, we believe that our social justice work cannot be solely limited to teaching and publication: it must start from within.

To reclaim and enhance the WPA-L as a just space, we decided to assist with transitioning the WPA-L to a new listserv platform that allowed for a multi-institutional moderation board. It was serendipitous that Barry Maid, the WPA-L's current administrator, had been looking to rehome the list in advance of his retirement. For some of us, the WPA-L had long served as a unique place that allowed for interactions on professional issues across rank, geography, institution, and specialization; much valuable scholarship in Writing Studies references discussions that started on the WPA-L. Others, like graduate students and rising scholars, have imagined and are advocating for a more equitable, antiracist, and anti-misogynistic field. We all, however, recognized that the list—and the field at large—would not magically transform itself in the absence of specific intervention. We anticipated facing many challenges in our efforts to revise the WPA-L toward what we perceived as its potential. To intervene with an amorphous structure that has been there for a long time, with no specific rules, governing structure, or formal mechanism for resolving conflict beyond rhetorical participation, and to attempt to change people's attitudes and practices with no guarantee that our initiative would be credible in the eyes of the WPA-L audience—these were all challenges for which we aimed to account.

Thus, we approached the revision effort with the intention to energize and engage all WPA-L participants; had we worked solely within our comparatively small working group, we would have been contributing to the culture of exclusion we sought to revise. Assembling a group comprising individuals with diverse positions in the field, career stages, and identities was also critical to effective intervention.

While these efforts are in progress, we agree that marginalized and vulnerable groups benefit from having their own spaces to guarantee academic growth in a relaxed and motivating space. For this reason, two-year college faculty whose priorities were rarely addressed on WPA-L (though first-year writing instruction is core to their work) started the TYCA Listserv in 2016. Thus, we do not see the situation as either/or. Both the WPA-L and the nextGEN are needed in our field, and each serves a unique role that we believe complements the other.

nextGEN

nextGEN is a networked advocacy space for graduate students and those who actively support graduate students to build a social justice-oriented community. nextGEN's emergence in the field offers a new discursive space for the cultivation of a horizontal-mentoring culture of mutual respect and upliftment. Members of the list, nevertheless, remain committed to multi-pronged organizing efforts by continuously working to make all disciplinary spaces (listservs and beyond) radically open and safe. The question of when to stay, leave, and/or renegotiate the relationship with a space is not new or simple: many graduate students invested in social and institutional change perpetually face these dilemmas in the context of their programs, communities, and families.

Why, then, did graduate students and one faculty accomplice decide to create a new space, nextGEN? A long-overlooked need for a disciplinary community space became visible and pressing when those needing that space did not have it. Namely, graduate students challenged complicity in white language supremacy during a March 23, 2018, discussion on WPA-L, introducing their perspectives and supporting them with insights from well-respected linguistic diversity scholars. The listserv quickly became dismissive of, inhospitable to, and aggressive towards these contributions in both public comments and even private comments to graduate students' directors, professors, and mentors. From these experiences and numerous discussions, both good and bad, it became clear that, for graduate students, reforming an entrenched disciplinary space (that was not built for us) through a single-pronged approach—that is, through staying only on WPA-L and advocating from a disadvantaged position of power as individuals—would be a commendable effort but a deeply flawed organizing strategy. An open call was then circulated seeking volunteers to join the "Startup Team" and form a new listserv that centered graduate students and their networking, learning, and advocacy needs.

As a collective, the Startup Team organized quickly, worked diligently, and announced the launch of the nextGEN listserv on April 5, 2018—less than two weeks after its exigence. The community work of building nextGEN and the subsequent overwhelming response from graduate students and faculty accomplices demonstrate the potential for collective power inherent in communicative, kairotic spaces like disciplinary listservs. Since its launch, nextGEN has attracted 586 subscribers, held conference meetups, enjoyed an official presence at CCCC, received recognition from *Inside Higher Ed*, won the 2019 Kairos Service Award, and been invited to three publications and three interviews. But more importantly, nextGEN has given space to graduate students and accomplices to build discussions around honoring colleagues' academic

and personal achievements, practicing self-care, building disciplinary resources, compiling a list of graduate student scholarship, celebrating Juneteenth, and committing ourselves to the observance of and continued resistance against tragedies and injustices inflicted upon each other's communities. Furthermore, while primarily used as a listserv to facilitate dialogue between graduate students, nextGEN also moves beyond institutionalized genres by taking on a social-movement orientation when necessary. This orientation afforded us a genre-inventing method of communication that we did not have before as individuals; this genre materialized in nextGEN's 'listserv to listserv' response, which provided an avenue for nextGEN subscribers to voice their concerns about the (recurrence of) ongoing WPA-L crisis.

Long-standing institutions are not infallible and often need to be rethought, redefined, and re-established, which should be commonplace in a field that claims to value revision and metacognitive reflection. As we grow, we hope to continue looking for shortcomings in our practices, in our genres, and in our institutions. We need the field to learn that whatever the context, our commitment should be to a simple, consistent, and hopeful praxis: we rise together.

Responding

nextGEN

As we consider and respond to the WPA-L Working Group's opening statement, we, representatives of nextGEN's Startup Team, keep returning to thoughts about who asserts power in disciplinary spaces and how power relates to those whom these listservs are meant to benefit. While we agree that social justice work starts from within, this point raises a question: how can we create socially just spaces when some participants are not committed to—or even hostile to—doing this kind of work for themselves? In some cases, those who do not treat others with dignity on the WPA-L have doubled-down on their offensive and toxic views after being challenged or made aware.

To further this conversation, we raise a series of questions:

1. When toxic views are expressed openly and without caution, who should stand up against those espousing such toxicity?
2. When dangerous effects spill over into "non-digital" spaces, how can our collectives counteract professional, emotional, and psychological violence?
3. What roles do those in precarious employment positions, particularly graduate students, have in reforming and contributing to disciplinary spaces designed by those with stable positions?

4. How might we discuss the creation of new spaces and collectives that prioritize the well-being and safety of members without resorting to rhetorics of exclusion?
5. In what ways can our two collectives, and perhaps a host of other collectives and organizations, form coalitions to better address issues of power, marginalization, and democratic discourse that currently animate discussions within and beyond our discipline?

WPA-L Working Group

Since the WPA-L crises of 2018 and 2019, we have been impressed with the thoughtfulness, dedication, and courage of the nextGEN members who have challenged the entrenched white supremacy and misogyny of the WPA-L and created an alternative disciplinary space tailored to the needs of graduate students. The Reimagining WPA-L Working Group is much smaller than nextGEN, and, unlike nextGEN, we have limited our work to the purpose for which we were formed: the revision of the WPA-L. Though we are a diverse group of established and young scholars, many of our members are active within various professional organizations, caucuses, and special interest groups (see: note 1). We aimed to draw from some of our experiences with our other professional spaces to help with the reimagining work.

We see our efforts working in tandem with nextGEN's: nextGEN is creating a space that has a more defined audience, purpose, and mission, as well as a set of guidelines for participation that WPA-L has lacked. By contrast, our Reimagining WPA-L Group's work toward reforming WPA-L from within, while challenging and imperfect, aims to learn from the work of nextGEN and other online communities in order to do better in the existing spaces—and expect community members to be better. One important example of us learning from nextGEN is our use of nextGEN's 'listserv to listserv' response in proposing participation guidelines for the new WPA-L.

This suggests to us that, despite the marginalization that occurs on WPA-L and in many of our disciplinary spaces, there is reason to hope that we can collectively rearticulate the values and practices of these spaces so long as we're willing to learn from the experiences and contributions of emerging scholars such as those who led efforts to create a more social justice-oriented community in nextGEN.

Note

1. Our members are also part of the following professional organizations and affinity groups: CCCC Feminist Caucus; CCCC Intersectional Approaches to FYC SIG; Coalition for Community Writing; Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of

Rhetoric and Composition (CFSHRC); Coalition on Community Writing (CCW); Council of Writing Program Administrators; NCTE/CCCC Jewish Caucus; NCTE/CCCC Latinx Caucus; National Writing Project (NWP); Society for Disability Studies (SDS); and the Two-Year College English Association, among others.

Continuing the Conversation

WPA- L Working Group

As you—our nextGEN peers—identify through your questions, this conversation is about more than the specific platforms that house our disciplinary discourses: it is a conversation about the power, vulnerabilities, and privilege baked into the structures of academia. The harmful WPA-L discussions are only symptomatic of more deeply entrenched inequalities in Composition and Rhetoric.

Because of these asymmetries in power and privilege, it is vital to recognize that any platform feigning neutrality supports structural inequalities and creates space for professional, emotional, and psychological violence. As such, we think multiple spaces—like the space provided for graduate students by nextGEN—are necessary for those most vulnerable among us to have (often difficult) conversations. Simultaneously, we hesitated to leave the WPA-L precisely because we worry that not challenging the harmful ideologies expressed there would allow these discourses to proliferate. The WPA-L Working Group is committed to building ecologies that make a more equitable, more socially just vision of the field possible. That commitment requires constant and consistent effort, and yet must be sustainable.

We acknowledge that this effort—and risks of this effort—all-too-often fall to those who are already vulnerable because of the structural inequalities we are trying to challenge. We hope that by adopting policies and appointing moderators to ensure those policies are followed, this labor on the WPA-L will fall to the most vulnerable among us less often, as was the case in responding to misogyny and racism in recent months. But we acknowledge that is not enough.

So what can we do and who should do it?

We can work to demand more from scholars in positions of power. We can recognize that policy changing needs activists, and activists need policy changes. We can continue to build professional relationships that have both compassion and accountability. We can acknowledge that working within the inequitable system will never be enough to fully change its inequity, but knowing how systems function can facilitate change.

We can demonstrate the power of policy creation: it might not rid us of all the harmful behaviors, but it makes explicit that there are consequences for hurting others.

We look forward to collaborating with nextGEN and other groups who seek to create new spaces for more equitable discourses as well as to challenge inequalities in existing spaces.

nextGEN

Members of the Startup Team established nextGEN to answer growing, kairotic calls for a graduate-centered space oriented towards social justice and community uplift. Working on and against entrenched systems of power is as daunting as it is necessary. What makes it even more daunting is the extent to which toxic individualism remains a structural barrier to wide-scale, coalitional action and accountability in the field, in academia, and in culture writ large.

After using this brief exchange to reflect on the work done in the last year, we continue to be energized in our commitments moving forward. The authors of this response—the "we" here—are particularly excited by the coalitional possibilities resulting from this exchange with the WPA-L Working Group. In closing, then, we want to suggest paths for thinking and moving forward while the field continues to invent, reform, and imagine disciplinary spaces.

1. The question is never "should we stay or should we go," but rather "what are the series of actions made more possible or likely through staying and/or going?" This shifts the question from a single decision to a framework for unfolding and ongoing inquiry and emergent interactions rooted in invention, fluidity, and persistence. No space is perfect; utopia does not exist. But we should be determined to find ways in which spaces are made and maintained as livable, accessible, and possible for all who want to join and contribute.

2. As these conversations continue, we need to remember that reform is happening in small pockets and moments. In our organizations and at our institutions, justice work is often compartmentalized, and collaboration can be contingent upon having overlapping members. Relationships might also be mediated through friendship and dialogue at an individual level. While important, these methods are not reliable, sustainable, or fair. We need to be attentive to the whole of our communities. We believe Rhetoric and Composition scholars should foster more sustainable practices at the structural level that strengthen communication and enhance the likelihood of collaboration. This kind of praxis would benefit from a networked, genre-blending and -bending structure that recognizes and values spaces and collectives like nextGEN. It's a structure that—in contrast to traditional, hierarchical organizations—embraces a more

tactical orientation for responsive fluidity, kairotic movement, and justice advocacy.

In the spirit of rising together, we would like to extend two invitations to the WPA-L Working Group:

1. We invite members of the WPA-L Working Group to collaborate with nextGEN and interested others on a position statement and subsequent rhetorical, material, institutional actions about how the job market marginalizes international graduate students. The field should be against border walls in all forms.
2. We, the nextGEN Start Up Team invite members of the WPA-L Working Group to help nextGEN and interested others build a public spreadsheet detailing disciplinary graduate programs' stipends and benefits. Collective knowledge inspires collective action. WPA-GO has begun this work in their Labor Census published last spring, and we hope to build from their important labor.

As representatives of an advocacy space, we end this dialogue where we began: We rise together. Justice is never achieved in isolation, and we hope this dialogue continues and extends beyond these participants and spaces allowing various emerging and established scholars to work together in moving the field forward.