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An English Teacher's Manifesto, or Writing My Way into Labor Activism

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..... This is the story of my first attempt to write myself into labor activism
..... in higher education. As an untenured teacher protesting retrenchment
..... and increases in class sizes at a public university, I explore the risks
..... inherent not only in directly addressing critique to management, but
..... also in publicly posting that critique via blog and Facebook. I note
..... the potential protections of public writing at a unionized school, and
..... discuss the surprising benefits of even small actions for a culture of labor
..... consciousness.

“See and Say”

My father, Jim Lynch, co-founded the Scranton Diocese Association of Catholic Teachers in 1984. I grew up eavesdropping on the union's meetings in my kitchen, rehashing negotiations over dinner, and helping to paint picket signs in faculty garages. A high school English teacher for thirty-five years, he wrote countless pieces on behalf of the labor union: letters to the editors, public relations releases, and even contract language. My dad taught me early on that what we do—including what we write—can contribute to significant change. What's more, he instilled in me the belief that every person has the privilege and the burden of fighting for social justice.

My dad also warned me that even good, hardworking folks often have a very difficult time taking the leap from sympathizing with the fight to joining the fight. During his many years of union work, my dad was regularly disappointed by the dearth of volunteers to run for union



offices, serve on committees and walk picket lines. While the majority of the membership supported action, he told me, they often assumed someone else was better equipped or positioned to do the work. He was never embittered by this, always keeping a practical and empathetic mind. At times, teachers in his union were indeed risking firing or nonrenewal. He especially understood the fears of new teachers, wary of losing a first position. He would sigh heavily speaking of the veteran, tenured teachers who demanded union actions, but never stepped up to the daunting tasks.

I carried my Dad's lessons with me through years of work as a graduate assistant and an adjunct. The labor situation in higher education seemed to reflect my dad's experiences in secondary education, and I promised myself that when I finally had the opportunity to join a union (still rare luxuries in higher ed), I would not be a spectator in the battle for fair labor practices. I believe, moreover, that fair labor and quality education are symbiotic; fighting for my own employment conditions is fighting for my students' best interests as well. I take to heart the words of James Sledd: "Whatever else is done or not done, we should practice the critical thinking that we talk so much about. We should see and say—see our work in its full social and educational context, speak out against the hypocrisies of our society and our profession even when whistle-blowers take a beating and our best efforts seem ludicrous and pretentious" ("See and Say" 145). In 2006, I was fortunate to land a tenure-track position at Kutztown University, a union school, excited that I could be a part of the tradition of labor activism both in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education [PASSHE] and in my own family.

For three years, I have served my faculty and my union as a member of Representative Council, a body consisting of two faculty from each department and the Executive Council of the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties-KU [APSCUF-KU]. I was learning KU culture and learning how the union worked, so for the bulk of this time I kept a low profile on the council, reporting back to my



department and voting as they instructed. In Spring of 2010, however, I had an opportunity to take on a more proactive role—and I hoped to make a difference. This is the story of my fears, expectations and the consequences of my attempt to write myself into labor activism.

Kairos Comes Calling

After weeks of rumors and whispers, the administration at Kutztown University informed the English department chair that she must reduce the number of temporary positions on the faculty from twelve in the Fall of 2009 to seven in the Fall of 2010 (that is, from eleven fulltime temporary positions and one halftime position, to seven fulltime temporary positions; a loss of four jobs). She was not directly asked to fire any faculty; rather, the provost did not approve the twelve temporary lines needed to cover the already approved Fall 2010 schedule. He was forcing a reduction in course sections offered. Whatever the semantics, the results would have to be a reduction in staff. Likely accompanying that would be an increase in class sizes, as the remaining faculty worked to serve the same number of students.

The provost and president insisted that these cuts were not retrenchments, defined in our union contract as the reduction of workforce due to budgetary crisis. Rather, the president claimed that nonrenewal of temporary lines was a part of management's authority to restructure the workforce to increase flexibility, a power also defined in the contract. What's more, the president noted that temporary faculty served at his discretion. These lines had been deemed unnecessary in the restructuring, that is, they were nothing more than fat to be cut.

English was not the only department facing cuts; some saw entire programs on the chopping block. The president did have contract language behind him—he was empowered to make such decisions, under certain circumstances—but presidents had not previously dismissed temporary faculty or reduced program offerings in this way



without the recommendation of the department chairs and deans. We all knew what made this semester different—PASSHE is in the midst of a financial crisis due to the downturn in the national economy, or a history of financial mismanagement, or both, depending on whom you ask. The provost had been set the task of cutting the budget, and the dismissal of our colleagues was one of his means. In a word, retrenchment. As of this writing, APSCUF is in the midst of a statewide grievance, arguing that the downsizing should in fact be categorized as retrenchment, given the administration's clear financial motives. With this nomenclature comes contractual actions and deadlines, ones not followed by the administration in this case.

In the English department, the chair worked with the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences [LAS] to minimize the mandate's effects on the faculty and the students we serve. In the Fall of 2009, they had already managed to cut two positions' worth of classes from the schedule, eight in total, without cutting faculty, demonstrating cost-saving and efficiency to the administration. With the new round of mandated class reductions in the Spring, they were hard-pressed to find the means of staffing the department's courses. The nonrenewal of staff and increases in class sizes seemed inevitable. Still, the chair did not back down. She resisted the administration, explaining that she could not additionally reduce the course schedule without under-serving the students, as demand for our courses had not decreased; if the temporary positions were not approved, the department would have eight teacherless classes.

Among the department faculty, Kevin Mahoney circulated a memo, directed at the provost and president, in which we collectively voiced our support of our chair as she pushed to retain the positions. The idea was to take a bit of heat off of her, making it clear to the administration that she was arguing on our and our students' behalf. Temporary faculty and their allies among the permanent faculty noted the sudden and in some cases catastrophic effects of nonrenewal to their own budgets, and decried the



potential dismissal of some “temporary” faculty who had taught at KU for more than ten years.

For some weeks, however, all arguments seemed to fall on deaf ears. Anxiety in the department increased, temporary faculty wondered which of them would be unemployed, and the rest of us wondered how we would manage without them. I decided that I could and must do something—I could speak out by writing out.

Writing, Blogging and Acting Out

Writing is not commonly equated with action. One imagines an activist walking a picket line or marching in protest. Those who can, *do*, those who can't, *write*. In contrast, Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney link writing and political action directly: “Rhetorical action for political struggle—in a cultural Marxist tradition—lies in literacy: the ways in which we use language and discourse more generally to shape our society and the ways in which languages and discourses shape us” (25). Certainly the printed word has limitations, and not every document can be a *Declaration of Independence* or the *Ninety-Five Theses*. But as Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther demonstrated, writing has undeniable power and can often be the precursor to other types of actions.

As a composition teacher, I have often preached the significance of audience, encouraging students to consider readers beyond the classroom, to make writing more than an academic exercise. This process can be disconcerting for students, moving them into unfamiliar territory after years of writing solely for teachers. I found myself similarly discomforted, having for years written only for other professors or graduate students in conference presentations and academic journals. Instead, I wanted to communicate with all of the stakeholders involved in the labor dispute at KU, writing my resistance on the borders between normalized academic publications, the administration, students, and the public at large. Again I found inspiration in Sledd, who in 1977 purported that the “hope” of



teachers “is to generate public pressure for forced change against the obstructive will” of the corporate university (“Or Get Off the Pot” 83-84). He urged us to “appeal to undergraduates and their parents, who pay high prices for a shoddy education; to the taxpayers at large, who want accountability; and to their tax-levying representatives . . . who will act if the electorate demands it” (91).

In the twenty-first century, academic blogs have become a significant venue for Sledd’s appeal, as they invite a larger audience to reflect on the inner-workings of the academic of labor. I have some limited experience in this arena, writing for the *KU Composition and Rhetoric Blog*, co-authored by our Comp/Rhet faculty. As a part of the university’s official website, it has the potential to generate substantial online traffic. With it, the Comp/Rhet faculty hopes to make the work of compositionists at our institution more visible. As contributors discuss the variety of work they are doing in the university’s program, readers may begin to see Composition studies in its richness and complexity. Moreover, contributors have commented on (among other subjects) how their status and working conditions affect and complicate the jobs they do, providing readers with a peek at the environment in which instruction is taking place.

Off campus, fellow compositionists Kevin Mahoney, Seth Khan, and I have published a public blog called *Ink Work: Organizing, Advocacy and Knowledge Work*. In it, we explore and critique the corporate university’s relationship with Composition studies and its effects on the lives of teachers and students. In my first post to the blog, I critiqued and connected national trends in higher education to the situation on my own campus. I concluded by listing some of the questions I hoped to tackle at *Ink Work*:

Composition is the only class that all . . . students [at my university] take. As we work to reform our own program, then, we need to ask: What effects, both long and short term, do our labor practices have



on student learning? How do the terms of labor contracts affect the pedagogical choices teachers make? How do teachers for whom Composition is not an area of specialty (temporary, tenure-track, and tenured alike) see their role as teachers of writing?

While blogs such as these have relatively small audiences, the nature of the medium may make readers more influential. In his 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power Of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky argues that social networking tools like blogs have transferred the power to determine what issues matter from traditional media outlets to the audience. With the power to comment, forward and link, “a story can go from local to global in a heartbeat. And it demonstrates the ease and speed with which a group can be mobilized for the right kind of cause” (12). Shirky believes that texts produced with social networking tools, with the standards of multiple authors and reader participation, “are dramatically improving our ability to share, cooperate and act together” so much so that “it is leading to an epochal change” (304).

My intent in the matter of our retrenched faculty was to compose something for both public and internal consumption, sending it to the KU administration via our interoffice snail mail, but also posting it on the *Composition and Rhetoric Blog*, cross-posting on Facebook, and linking it via our program’s Twitter feed. My use of three social networking tools was an attempt to rally more faculty and students to the cause, encouraging them to get involved and to speak out against the cuts. In this way, I was demonstrating a reversal of the “old order of group activity” described by Shirky as “gather, then share.” Instead, sites like Flickr and Twitter allow us to “share, then gather” (35). Rather than invest in the complicated tasks of organizing, gathering, and managing groups of people in order to inform them of shared concerns and to propose actions, Shirky explains that social-networking platforms create “tools for the self-synchronizations of otherwise latent groups” (39). Twenty years ago, my father and his secondary education colleagues had to use brick and mortar facilities for informational meetings or circulate paper



announcements every time they wanted to assemble like-minded folks for a union cause, relying, what's more, on a limited list of persons they thought might want to be invited into the conversation. Today, in contrast, the interested parties have already self-selected, choosing to "follow" or "friend" KU Comp/Rhet and APSCUF pages. I can potentially reach a larger audience than any I could imagine when composing a traditional mailing or calling list, as our Facebook and Twitter streams can be posted, forwarded and reposted by those interested; I can share my concerns, and they in turn may virtually gather, respond, and spread the word further. I imagined our department circulating a document that would be read across our campus, shared with faculty at other PASHEE schools, and perhaps even forwarded beyond our system. Students might read and repost as well, gathering even more people into the conversation.

But I did not settle down to work at once. Despite my previous disdain for the passive union members for whom my dad retained compassion, I had to admit it: I was afraid. In my previous online writing, I had assumed a friendly audience. In the crisis at hand, I was imagining readers with similar concerns, but I was also singling out potentially hostile readers: the provost and president of KU who were mandating the faculty cuts. Any critique in my previous public writing on *Ink Work* had been relatively abstracted; in contrast, in this new project I would reference very specific actions of the KU administration.

Digerati in Danger

Public critique can single one out; untenured teachers may worry about its effect on their employment—especially if they are not at a unionized school. The world of online discourse carries many examples. One case in point is the blog of The Invisible Adjunct. The anonymous blogger was a critical success for her commentary on the academic hiring system. Until her decision to shut down the blog and leave academia in 2004, the author says her writing "was my attempt to provide a space between a chronicle of my angst and a policy paper" (qtd. in Smallwood). The



Invisible Adjunct never revealed her name, even in her final posts and in the interviews that followed. She explained to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “She imagines that eventually she will write again about some of the issues she dealt with on the blog -- this time under her own name. For now, she’s just trying to get out without making any trouble” (Smallwood). She says, “The academy, on the one hand, puts a very high premium on originality But in certain areas you’re supposed to go with the flow” (qtd. in Smallwood). Critiquing the administration’s labor policies comes with a cost and may even risk one’s position in the academy.

The Invisible Adjunct and I differ in key ways, of course. I am not an adjunct, putting me in a more secure position. Most significantly, I work at a unionized university. In that context, the public nature of blogging may serve as a protection for activists, creating as it does a public record of what one said, in what context, and when. Administrators at unionized institutions may actually be less likely to target a professor who critiques them in a public forum, as long as that critique is accurate and appropriate. Any systematic attack on critics may be actionable under a collective bargaining agreement. Mahoney notes that activists do not underscore the potential benefits of public writing enough: “We have a well established discourse on the scariness of being in the public. Yet, we do not have a corresponding discourse of safety in the public when it comes to political activism” (Email to author). Of course, this safety may not be felt by those in the non-union environments in which most professors work.

The anxiety of untenured academics is not rooted in fear of administrator-backlash alone, however. Duncan Black, a.k.a. the well-known political blogger Atrios, is a case in point. He did not reveal his identity until after leaving higher education; as an assistant professor, he “worried that a trenchant political blog might be perceived as inappropriate for a young academic” (Farrell). Farrell notes that untenured professors “may worry that their colleagues may find their blogs objectionable, damaging



their career chances.” In my own context, even in a unionized school, I certainly cannot assume that the entire faculty approves of any criticisms I might author. And here, I admit, I am especially concerned with those on the tenure and promotion committees.

My fears were not only for my job. I worried about my relationships with administrators as well. After four years, the president and the provost, I believed, were just beginning to recognize my name, and I had established a strong working relationship with the Dean of LAS. I selfishly worried how they might regard and support my work if I wrote a critique of KU’s practices. Would they associate my name with trouble? Likewise, The Invisible Adjunct “worries that showing her face would allow those she knows in real life to see her as a misfit, a malcontent” (Smallwood). And vainly, I just wanted them, well, to *like* me.

But I could not shake Sledd’s words, any more than I could shake my dad’s influence. I knew I had to both *see* and *say*. At the next department meeting, I pressed my colleagues for ideas. “What else can we do to protest the retrenchment?” I asked. “I was thinking we might come at it from a new angle, write an argument as to how the cuts will damage us and the students from a pedagogical standpoint.” While the faculty supported the idea, none offered to contribute to the composing, and none offered additional means of resistance. I recall making some crazy suggestions, trying to get the ball rolling (“Puppet shows! Guerilla Theater!”), but the ball stayed put. I am not criticizing my colleagues; rather, I think, like I had been, some may have felt paralyzed by the enormity of the situation. Here we were, teaching four/four loads, running committees, writing scholarship, advising students, feeling overworked most of our week. Add to that the responsibility of fighting the administration, a body at whose discretion the untenured among us still served, and inaction seemed reasonable.

Riedner and Mahoney have dubbed these feelings a rhetoric of “despair,” suggesting that management relies on the frustration that often



accompanies activist tasks. They consider “how despair plays a key role in the everyday reconstruction of hegemonic discourse in the face of moral outrage to social problems” (71) The potential to act can be stifled by leading one “to an *a priori* conclusion: what is, must be” (71). The angry worker begins to “*un-imagine* alternatives” (71).

I wasn’t feeling reasonable, myself. That evening, I opened a Google Document and drafted “An English Teacher’s Manifesto.” My purpose was to inform the readers of the potential detriments of the increased class sizes that might follow more cuts and to persuade administrators that, even in financially dire circumstances, teaching should be protected in budgetary considerations. Initially, I shared the draft with Kevin Mahoney and another trusted coworker, Andrew Vogel, and received some thoughtful feedback. After a revision, I circulated the draft via email to the entire English department, asking for more feedback. I received several replies essentially cheering me on, and one suggestion for revision from the chair, which I made. After printing out the new version, the text of which follows, I left it in our mail room for interested English department faculty to sign. Seventeen of forty signed, and in April 2010 I sent the Manifesto to the Dean of the LAS, the Provost and the President, posted it to the *KU Composition & Rhetoric Blog* and Facebook, and linked to it via Twitter. I felt good. I felt empowered. I was in trouble.

An English Teacher’s Manifesto

The repercussions of the economic crisis in the United States must undoubtedly be felt in public colleges and universities. PASSHE schools and Kutztown University are no exception. While state and federal funding to KU has been cut, more and more people are returning to higher education--our student population rises while our resources suffer. No easy or painless answers to such circumstances exist. While the KU and PASSHE administrators make difficult decisions, however, they must take great pains to preserve the mission of our institutions. If



they abandon the principles upon which our colleges and universities are founded in order to meet a budget's bottom line, they are committing far greater sins than the fiscal irresponsibility that brought us to these circumstances.

And so, I offer An English Teacher's Manifesto.

My intent is to argue that if an institution's primary mission is to educate—to foster critical thinking and create thoughtful citizens—then teaching must be granted a protected status. If students are to be served, if teachers are to excel, if the institution is to be truly one of higher learning, then during current and future budget crises administrators must resist changes that negatively affect the quality of teaching. Herein, I explain how the administration's current actions in response to budget problems will have long lasting, derogatory effects on teachers' pedagogical practices and students' learning.

Economical Teaching ≠ Quality Teaching

Management wants quality teaching, yet its actions suggest that *economical* teaching is the priority. In addressing the budget problems, administrators have asked department chairs to reduce the number of faculty. And yet, faculty are the primary producers of value to the university. Students pay tuition for an education. Faculty create value. Management are funded out of the value that faculty produce.

At the same time, retrenchment of under-enrolled programs is being used as cover for eliminating necessary temporary faculty lines across many departments with swelling numbers. I would like to set aside, for the moment, the very real personal, economic, and professional consequences this will have for the “downsized” professors. (That is for another manifesto.) Instead, I will focus on the after-effects for the students and professors who remain.



Class Size Matters

Foremost, this reduction in faculty will result in an increase in class sizes. The administration has argued that adding seats to each class across several sections is of little consequence; in contrast, I insist that, from a pedagogical standpoint, further increases to our already large classes will significantly impact the quality of our teaching. In order to make my point, I will use the Department of English as an example. Without a doubt, professors from across the university can make similar arguments born out of their discipline-specific pedagogies (and I encourage them to do so).

The National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE] has studied the effects of class size in English studies for years, and its research resulted in the position statement: “More Than A Number: Why Class Size Matters.” The NCTE begins by reminding us of our responsibilities to students and links that responsibility directly to the working conditions of teachers. Students trust us to provide an education in exchange for tuition, and an education is not defined by lectures, tests, and scantrons:

All students have the right to engage in a variety of literacy activities, to have meaningful interaction with peers and teachers, and to receive frequent and timely feedback. Students also have a right to teachers who develop creative curricula. Students need teachers who have the time and skills necessary to honor individual learning styles and accommodate individual student’s instructional needs; who guide students in their critical evaluation and use of various technologies; who engage regularly in professional development; and who communicate regularly with students and parents. *These student rights must be the foremost consideration when making decisions concerning class size and teacher workload.* [emphasis added]



The NCTE further acknowledges the plight in which KU and other PASSHE schools now find themselves, even noting the very steps KU is currently taking: “Economic pressures and budgetary restrictions may tempt administrations to increase teaching loads.” Yet, the professionals behind this report refuse to allow the administrators to be comfortable with taking this way out. Instead, they insist that if we are more than simply to shuffle students through a pantomime education, we must have reasonable workloads, determined in large part by the number of students in our classes. Among the standards the NCTE endorses are:

...No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15. Students cannot learn to write without writing. In sections larger than 20, teachers cannot possibly give student writing the immediate and individual response necessary for growth and improvement.

...Remedial or developmental sections should be limited to a maximum of 15 students. It is essential to provide these students extra teaching if they are to acquire the reading and writing skills they need in college.

...No English faculty members should teach more than 60 writing students a term: if the students are developmental, the maximum should be 45.

...No more than 25 students should be permitted in discussion courses in literature or language. Classes larger than 25 do not give students and teachers the opportunity to engage literary texts through questions, discussion, and writing. If lecture classes must be offered, teachers should be given adjusted time or assistance to hold conferences and respond to students’ writing.

Clearly, the English department was forced long ago to abandon these best practices. The cap on an individual Introduction to Literature class, for example, is 40; other literature courses are capped at 30 and 35. Creative writing classes also have caps of 30 or 35. Our Introduction to College Composition stands at 20 seats; College Composition and professional writing courses at 25. Unless they receive a course release for administrative work, faculty teach four courses during a semester.



The administration's past decisions regarding class sizes have clearly shown either ignorance or apathy for best practices in our field. Moreover, our departmental history should give us pause when the administration makes any move to increase class size. Almost a decade ago, the English department agreed to increase the cap on Intro to Literature. They agreed to this *one time increase* in class size from 35 to 40 in response to a previous "budget crisis." The department was promised the class size would be returned to the previous cap the following year. Almost a decade later, the 40 student cap remains.

Its current actions, increasing class sizes further, will only serve to make our classes *less* places where students "engage in a variety of literacy activities...have meaningful interaction with peers and teachers, and...receive frequent and timely feedback." Instead, our swelling rosters may force teachers to turn away from methods long valued in the humanities and replace them with efficient but pedagogically weak practices. We will move the same amount of student bodies through our classrooms, but the education we offer them will be compromised.

Yes, large classes may aid in reducing our budget woes, but prioritizing economics over quality has real consequences. Quality education is not a luxury. It is not something that we can only "afford" in "good times." Quality education is the ground zero for building a strong, capable work force and citizenry. For all the cries that American students continue to fall behind the rest of the world, politicians, administrators, and corporate gurus continue to undermine quality education. Quality education is the one investment that we cannot afford to cut.

Marc Bousquet has pointedly noted that, "Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime" (41). Large classes are detrimental to the quality of teaching, through no fault of the teachers themselves. Henry Giroux notes that working conditions, including "less time to prepare, larger class loads, almost no time for research, and excessive grading demands" can lead to teachers "becoming demoralized and ineffective" (121). To



survive in the corporate university, teachers have all too often had to compromise: pedagogy for efficiency, depth of learning for timely return, personal interactions for maximum enrollments. In the English department, this compromise in quality may manifest itself in: the assigning of fewer readings and writing assignments; the exchange of lecture for class discussion; the elimination of one-on-one conferences with students; the replacement of writing with standardized assessments; and the reduction of the feedback on written student work. The personal feedback students receive in conferences and class discussion and on their compositions has a significant impact on learning. A recent Harvard study reveals that “more than any other form of instruction,” the personalized feedback we provide is the most valuable to students regarding their perspective and performance.

With each seat added to our classrooms, we must give less attention to each student. We must design our courses in ways which allow us to manage their growing numbers as reflected in both classrooms and in our take-home work. Such circumstances may lead instructors to utilize methods that, while they are efficient, may not be appropriate for the students or the material. Teaching the student is replaced by surviving the workload. When class sizes are increased, no one wins except those balancing the university’s budget. In contrast, when teachers can use the best practices in their field, when they have sufficient time respond to student writing, when working conditions are perceived to be necessary to informed practice, progressive and effective teaching are likely to follow.

I am not naive. I know that professors *must* feel the restraints of the budget in such difficult times. We cannot expect a resolution that does not pain us in some ways. I am resolved to accept the reality that we may see reductions in resources, facilities, grants, or technology--if it means that teaching can be a protected activity. Would I give up that which allows me to be a teacher—health care and a decent wage? No. Despite



the missionary history of education, we are not monks who signed onto a vow of poverty. We are professionals doing civic work. Few of us could remain in this profession if benefits or wages were reduced. But just as a physician knows her responsibility to *first, do no harm*, so I am vigilant in my responsibilities to my students' educations. And so I put this same weight on the shoulders of the administration: as you make the difficult choices, *first, do no harm*.

The Fallout

A few days later, I joined my colleagues at the local tavern to mark the end of a day spent running our annual KU Composition Conference, a celebration of undergraduate student writing on campus. Busy with the conference, I had been away from email all day, and so it was one of my fellow faculty who, over a pint, asked if I'd heard the news: the Dean of LAS had received my manifesto, and she was upset. Checking my email soon after, I discovered a letter from our department chair. At a meeting of chairs, the Dean informed our chair that she had just returned to her office from an "intense meeting" with the Provost's staff in which she had made an argument to retain two of the lines that had been cut from our department. The manifesto was waiting for the Dean in her office when she returned, and, she said, reading it made her feel as if she had been "punched in the stomach." Because of the time lag between my first circulation of the document and the dean's reaction (perhaps two weeks), our chair was "taken off guard"—she asked to see the final draft, and inquired to whom it had been sent. The chair assured us that she was not angry, but wanted to have more information before we as a department decided how we might respond to the Dean's reaction.

My reaction was mortification. I had aimed for an intellectual protest that might positively influence the decision of the administration. Instead, I had agitated an ally in our fight for quality education. Perhaps I had been naive to ignore the relationship between protest and agitation, to believe that my offensive move would not be met with a defensive reply.



Moreover, I had sent the document with only a brief cover letter, asking the readers to consider it as they made their staffing decisions. Certainly, the Dean might then take it out of context and see it as a finger pointed at her. I spent a sleepless night in worry. I don't mean to overstate the repercussions of the manifesto—the department's relationship with the dean was not irrevocably damaged. I had done my research, collaborated with my peers, and polished my argument. But I did not consider how I would feel if and when the target audience responded. I had come to terms with many of the material risks of speaking out, but had not considered how I might deal with hurt feelings.

Not only has the Dean been an ally of the English Department, but she has long been a booster of the Writing Center, which I direct, finding ways to fund the center and support my work there even in the leanest of times. I have a great respect for the Dean personally and professionally, and my manifesto risked her respect for both the Department and me. I composed two emails straight away: one to the department, noting that I'd take responsibility, and another to the dean, explaining my intent and apologizing if I had caused offense.

Colleagues were very quick to ease my mind. My email inbox filled with supportive statements; most faculty believed the timing of the document's delivery was what led to the offense, noting that no personal attack could be found in the manifesto. Many emailed the Dean expressing the intent of the document and our thanks for her recent actions on our behalf. I did get one "I told you so" from a colleague who had worried that the document might backfire; overall, however, I felt more a part of the department than I ever had before. Ultimately, the dean replied to my email with understanding, and no bridges were burned.

All of this trouble would be worthwhile, of course, if my writing had an affect on retrenchment. My intent, after all, had been to persuade the administration and perhaps to stir up concern among the wider reading audience of the *Composition and Rhetoric Blog*. I had worried that my



writing might be so incendiary as to endanger my job; if the president and provost read the manifesto, however, they did not respond in any way. What's more, no readers of the *KU Composition & Rhetoric Blog* commented. The number of views did increase briefly, but no inspired discussion followed the entry. The posting on Facebook did receive a few "likes" and general words of encouragement in the comments; a few students even stopped me in the halls to say they had read it, noting their own surprise and anger over the situation. But that seemed to be the extent of the effect—the manifesto seemed to fall flat as a rhetorical tool. I had hoped to influence policy. Instead, I felt like all I had managed to do was embarrass myself.

My failure to elicit further online response demonstrates the difference between providing information and motivating collective action in online communities. Shirky explains that "social tools don't create collective action—they merely remove obstacles to it" (159). For all I know, the manifesto may have been reposted and forwarded multiple times; I may have reached a great number of people. On the other hand, I may have only reached a handful. This is the nature of online communities: "Most pictures posted to Flickr get very few viewers. Most weblogs are abandoned within a year. Most weblog posts get very few readers" (Shirky 237). Even if the manifesto were widely shared, I could not hope to control the online responses to my writing. What's more, I realized that I did not include in the document any suggestions for direct or collective actions which students or faculty might take. The manifesto was composed as an argument, urging the KU administrators to protect teaching. The document did not invite other readers to *do* anything. In retrospect, my online posting just allowed readers to eavesdrop on my conversation with the administration. I had not adjusted the genre to attract a different response.

I was lamenting this over dinner with two colleagues, expressing my frustration with my own failure. "Look," I said, "I spent weeks revising,



almost made myself sick with concern for the ‘risk’ I was taking, and what did it get me? Apologizing to the dean. Largely ignored.”

My friends were quick to correct me, noting that my failure was in missing the positive repercussions of the whole affair. Yes, I’d felt embarrassed and perhaps made some missteps in framing the document for the Dean. No, I had not elicited a response from the university president, nor had I prompted the provost to reverse his policies. I had, however, accomplished one of my goals: contributing to a culture of labor consciousness. Labor activists can sow seeds of change by focusing on the cultures at their individual institutions. Small and even indirect actions can contribute to a pro-labor atmosphere, encouraging others to use their own resources for the cause. If we measure success by our ability to influence policy with individual actions or single documents, we set ourselves up to fail and ignore the critical importance of consistent, collective actions in solidarity.

The culture of higher education is indeed seeing a positive influx of pro-labor rhetoric. Marc Bousquet acknowledges a “substantial countertrend” to the “managerial subjectivity” that dominates English studies in higher education, “including such voices as Eileen Schell, Chris Carter, Karen Thompson, Laura Bartlett, Patricia Lambert Stock, Tony Scott, David Downing, and Richard Ohmann” (160). Still, Bousquet warns that, “the institutions of the field are overwhelmingly occupied by persons whose values are shaped in close relation to the practice, theory, and scholarship of the supervisory function,” producing “‘managerial’ theories of change” (160). In contrast, the more individuals can do to gather stakeholders together and keep them discussing, thinking and reading about labor issues on a regular basis, the greater the potential for trenchant activism. In his *APSCUF-KU Xchange* blog, Mahoney calls this the work of “assembling the choir,” his retort to those who consider activist writing aimed in part or in whole at laborers themselves “preaching to the choir.” He views the writing we share with each other as “absolutely critical” to making unions sustainable and effective.



I finally saw my dad's union work in this light. Jim Lynch had not founded a union, negotiated contracts or walked a picket line—a *collective* of high school teachers had. Not every member of the union acted; not every teacher joined the union. Still, any personal risks my father took were mitigated by each other person moved to act in some small way for the good of labor, in solidarity. My manifesto was a very small act, but not a failure for being diminutive.

This may seem obvious, but it is not always apparent to the junior faculty harboring employment anxiety and protecting departmental collegiality. It's easy to forget labor history and revert to safeguarding oneself in the turbulent employment market of higher education. Easier to shut the office door and work on documenting those publications and committees for the tenure file. Easier to believe that some Single Strong Leader can tackle the responsibilities of defending the contract for us all. I didn't see grand results from my actions, so I assumed they were futile.

In contrast, I now see that by reading, commenting and signing the manifesto, my colleagues had nurtured the power of collective action. The document invited discussion about our needs and priorities that continued among our faculty in emails, hallway chatter and private conversations. Not everyone agreed with the content of my manifesto, but we were all talking about class size, pedagogy and budget cuts, at least briefly, with a renewed sense of urgency. We were thinking about our relationships with administrators and among tenured, tenure-track and temporary employees. I did not radically change our reality, but I shook it up a bit. And a good shaking now and then reminds us (reminded me, at least) that a little risk is a good thing. It can, in fact, unite us: in the days following the ruckus, I had policy conversations with colleagues with whom I'd only shared polite small talk in the past.

The students who read the manifesto online were not immediately moved to paint placards and march on the administration building. Most were not even moved to hit "like" on Facebook. But they may



have paused to consider the relationship between labor and education, to wonder whether the professor in the next day's class was an adjunct or a tenured employee. They may have reflected on their 100-seat lecture classes as a challenge for the instructors as much as an annoyance to them. They may have come a step closer to joining the choir. Or maybe I'm being idealistic again. Still, students did ask me for more "No Cuts!" stickers (made in protest of retrenchments) in the weeks following the publication of the manifesto.

Summer break came, and the energy dissipated, but I like to think that I've learned a lot from my first steps into public activism. First, I do not think I will fret so much about my job the next time I pen a protest. While the dangers of administrative retaliation are real (although less so at a school with union protection), I now think the greater danger is in not being noticed at all. Certainly I will continue to work to affect change, but I have a clearer sense of my small role in that constant, collective struggle. I will, however, consider framing any future documents individually for each recipient and venue, having realized my individual capacity to affect *a person*, if not *an administration*, as well as the need to revise for online audiences. Next, I have come to see my failure to garner an online response in Shirky's terms: "Failure is free, high quality research, offering direct evidence of what works and what doesn't" (236). I'll do better next time. I've also gotten over myself a bit; the issues that we addressed were more important than whether any colleague likes me or not. I have come to value the small victories. My colleagues' flurry of interest and support lessened my fears and increased my belief that together, we can protest "even when whistle-blowers take a beating and our best efforts seem ludicrous and pretentious" (Sledd "See and Say" 145). Mostly, I have come to hope that each day I will become more my father's daughter.



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