

Dr. Doug Hesse Interview Transcript

➔How did you get into the field?

It's interesting. I got my BA in '78 at Iowa and, like a lot of people getting English degrees at that time, hadn't thought about life thereafter. At the last minute I applied to the Masters' program there, and by fortunate circumstances, they had a Master's in Expository Writing. Since then it has been recast as an MFA in non-fiction. I was interested in taking a lot of creative writing and writing classes. But as it turned out at that time there were some key figures in rhetoric and composition studies, which I didn't know about at the time, but Richard Lloyd Jones, for example, was the Chair of the department and was also the chair of 4Cs, an organization I had no clue what it was about. I had a kind of practical sense, a real working class background, and I figured I could get a job teaching writing, and maybe this was a good angle, so I took a lot of courses in rhetorical history and theory and finished that degree in 1980. Having written piece of creative non-fiction for my Master's thesis, so there was that parallel interest between rhetoric and the teaching of writing.

I had been offered a job and accepted it as an editor for the ACT—the ACT test—but my heart wasn't in it, and at the last minute I got offered a teaching job at Finley College in Finley, Ohio. So, I quit at ACT, moved to Ohio, and I taught five-five writing course for what turned out to be three years.

But, the interesting part about that was the department chair at Finley was a guy named Rick Gebart who happened to be the secretary of 3Cs. So Rick kind of got hooked in some things. He took me to my first 3Cs. My wife was fed up with Finley, Ohio for all sorts of reasons, so I applied for jobs back in Iowa and Minnesota, and as an afterthought, applied for my PhD. The narrative here is stumbling through things. I never had a grand design. I worked on my PhD from '83-'86. I applied for lots of jobs and opportunities, and I ended up at Illinois State with the perfect understanding that I was going to be teaching undergraduate writing courses. And that was what I thought I wanted to do, so that was fine. The third year I was there they asked me if I wanted to direct the writing program, and they were collaborating on first year comp and Writing Across the Curriculum, and asked if I wanted to teach some graduate courses. "Sure." It was all fine. It wasn't like some great design. Only later did people tell me things like, "You should never, at a research university, take an administrative job before you're tenured." It made sense for me at that time. I was the Writing Center Director for a dozen years. Become the grad director for three years. I got tired of that and stepped out of administrative stuff for a very happy year. I took a one-year position as a visiting professor at Miami University in Ohio.

When I came back to Illinois State, I became the campus's director for the Center of Teaching Excellence and the Honor's Program Director, but still my heart was in rhetoric and composition and teaching writing. It was really anomalous that the year I

was the program chair and the chair of 4Cs that I was directing the honors program and teaching a section of freshman writing every semester—or at least every year. This program got set up at Denver. I was asked to apply and hem and haw, and I ended up there and got to start a new program. I'm very happy.

➔ Was it a program you were starting from the ground up?

There was actually a blueprint that I would love to take credit for, but I can't. The university had gotten a ten million dollar grant from somebody to improve undergraduate education—this was in 2004. So they had campus faculty groups set up to devise various plans. One plan that eventually won out was to create a brand new writing program. The 10 million was not enough to endow the program—my budget alone in a \$1.8 million. One of the plans was to have the FYC taught entirely by professional writing faculty. Let's start a new writing center. Let's do writing-intensive courses across the curriculum. As a result of that, they created my position, 19 lectureships, a Writing Center Director position, hired 20 tenure-line faculty across arts and sciences to build room for WAC. That was all in place, so when they hired me and said, "These are the resources. This is the configuration. Make it work." I got to hire everyone from the writing center director through the lecturers. Then it was just weird kind of stuff. You've got a couple of placeholders in the first-year program—what kind of curriculum. They told me what they'd like.

The first year I was there, in broad strokes, during their freshman year, students take a writing-intensive seminar in the disciplines during the fall. Then they take a writing course in the winter and spring. Each of these is capped at 15 students; they're very small. Another part of general education, in their junior year they take an interdisciplinary course that is writing intensive. The question was, "What counts as writing intensive?" I remember saying, "We need to start this process." And they said, "No you just need to tell us what it should be." On one hand, it's great; on the other hand, if it tanks. I drafted something for the core committee and had it approved by them. It went from in ten weeks to having no writing intensive course to having a couple of dozen approved writing courses. Part of it is the nature of a private school that acts sometimes more quickly than it should. Part of it was they were ready to get things moving. I didn't have to do a lot of really hard getting faculty acquainted with the philosophy or the need for more things with writing. I give a lot of credit to the folks who were at Denver.

They had a couple of good folks in the English Department. The department chair is a woman named Anne Dobbins who does medieval rhetoric, and other kinds of rhetoric. She was involved. They were really smart, I thought. They had Nancy Sommers and Andrea Lunsford come a couple of times and consult. The original impetus came for the whole thing from the desire to improve the writing center, which was literally an 8x8 cubicle in the library where graduate students who wanted to make \$8 an hour would signed up—it was not professional in any sense. So it

started with we need a real writing center. So the chancellor and the provost said to think more ambitiously than that. They caught on interestingly to the idea that having all these resources dumped into the first year without any meaningful thought of writing beyond that wouldn't be the best. So we got the writing-intensive courses going pretty strongly now. This year I've started working more with individual departments to develop more writing-intense programs than across the curriculum.

➔To set up a good writing across the curriculum program you need significant financial backing?

It sure helps [to have financial backing]. There was a day and time when I was doing WAC at Illinois State that you could kind of make appeals to faculty that in the name of good teaching and active learning and all of those kinds of things you ought to incorporate writing into your classes and, oh, by the way, here's what that means and what that doesn't mean. Those were the tricks of WAC. There're probably still places where that argument can be made, but I don't think in a lot of schools, that that was true. One of the things that having the amount of money that was invested in it, well two things happened. One, in order to create create more small experiences—a first-year seminar capped at 15, and a junior-level seminar capped at 15—you need more faculty bodies. They could say if your department gives “x” number of sections of this, you can have a new faculty line. You can hire the best grant-getting whipper snapper you can, who will probably never teach a writing-intensive course, but that's how you get the line and then you've got a solid, mid-career person to develop a course; that was one part.

The other part was that I had a pretty good budget, so if I do workshops I can pay stipends for people to come. I have these lecturers whose teaching arrangements are 0-3-3: they don't teach from June to January. They have the fall off. But the expectation is that they are campus resources to do a lot of assessment and lots of research projects. Or I can set up projects like I did last fall: I put out a call, and I choose five departments and the notion was let's do some study of the kinds of writing that your students are doing, what you're assigning, what they expect, and what you expect, and we'll have a quick-and-dirty research. I'll pay two of your faculty, two of your undergraduate, give you two of your lecturers, and, with a six-person team, you're going to find out all of this stuff in six weeks and the lecturers will write a ten-page report. Well that creates a kind of energy there, and it sure is nice to have resources where you can put 4 or 5 thousand dollars into a situation and get these tremendous payoffs in the end. It's pretty hard because right now on campuses, if it's important it will get an investment, and if doesn't get an investment, it's not important. This cues faculty that this matters because we've reallocated all this money into this area.

➔Are all the lecturers from rhet/comp and English backgrounds, or various backgrounds?

All the lecturers are from English Studies backgrounds. When I was advertising these, what I wanted was a minimal requirement of a terminal degree, I have had a couple of MFAs, but mostly PhDs with some “real” graduate coursework in rhetoric and composition, by which I meant, not only that you were in a teaching symposium or colloquium once a week where you had to write a big paper, but that you had successful teaching experience. I could imagine people at a number of programs with those credentials, but, as it turns out, they’re all in English Studies. I was really surprised—these are pretty good jobs, but the teaching—during the winter and spring you teach three courses capped at 15, so you never have more than 45 students. There is a generous \$1,500 worth of travel or professional support, great benefits that are open term with salaries of \$45,000 a year. But, even with that, I didn’t really expect to hire people with PhDs in Rhet/Comp. But, surprisingly, I was able to hire six people. I think it’s a really good mix. There are a bunch of good teachers, and certainly, good colleagues.

There is a little bit of a tension that has kind of emerged—not quite insiders and outsiders. For instance, we started a longitudinal research project last year, and I described it in great length asking who would like to be involved in this. I made that invitation a couple of times. There were some people who wanted to do it and some people who didn’t. Last week we went to present at the research conference in Santa Barbara, some people complained, “Why do they get to go to Santa Barbara?” Well, because. I had an interesting conversation with one of my colleagues, “I didn’t know what was going to be valued or not.” I said, “That’s the reason there will be other projects like this that will come up.” You can decide to do things because it will have some kind of value, or you can decide to do things because you really want to. So even though people had that core of backgrounds that I describe, it doesn’t mean everybody is equally invested in, especially, some of the research traditions. We had a really interesting experience in the fall. We had gathered—at the end of their freshmen year students turn in a portfolio. I pulled a random sample of 200 portfolios to score them in various ways. We were meeting twice a week for two hours at a time. There was a two-week period when we were just trying to agree on scoring criteria and analysis, and you know, my heart was actually with them, but there were a quarter of the folks who said, “This is anathema and so reductive to turn all of this writing into numbers.” I hear ya; I’m not an empiricist. But here’s the strategic value of doing this. For the most part it’s a really healthy kind of tension, but you do see those phishers between those different alignments people have.

➔ Do many PhDs sign up for your research projects?

Oh yeah. A couple of the [Rhet/Comp PhD]—there is a gentleman from Wisconsin who is really more of a rhetorical theorist, he is not by any means a qualitative or a quantitative researcher—this is not the kind of thing I think he ever thought he’d be doing. But he said, “This is part of the field, this is kind of interesting to learn

something and to learn how something works.” Another colleague, her PhD is from Texas in modern-American poetry, has published terrific stuff on William Carlos Williams is one of my best colleagues. She looked at this and said, “I’m just not going to go there. It’s so far away from the tradition that I value.” The nice thing is, when you’ve got 19 colleagues who, in other ways, are really working together, it’s perfectly fine if half of them don’t want to do a certain kind of project. The bottom line in terms of the portfolio rating thing is that everybody needs to do something like this. Some of you can elect to do more of it, but I’m not going to then have a group come in and say, “Here are the results from the assessment” without your having generated what some of those results were and understanding them from the inside. They’re good-hearted enough that, sure, that makes sense, but if it means giving up a weekend to code 865 interviews, no. Not going to go there.

➔ You said you’re not an empiricist. How does that work out?

I understand the rhetorical value of empirical research. There are certain arguments that are going to be made on a campus, or in a culture, that come down to numbers and ratings. There’s a good heuristic value, I think too, sometimes in saying, “82% of the students do this.” Which is to my mind, that’s the start of the inquiry, not, “I’m glad we know that.” Though that’s not what I’ve chosen to focus my scholarship on, I do understand its value. One of my colleagues, Richard, he actually knows statistics, and is an Excel whiz. We say, “Okay, we’ve generated all this stuff,” and Richard can present us with Pearson Correlation Coefficients. I’m glad we have them; I don’t know what they mean, but we can chart them out. For the most part we have a kind of appreciate for what kinds of arguments we can make with certain kinds of statistics, and an equally healthy suspicion of what things have been reduced to. I think we’re getting along fine. For me, part of it’s been fascinating to practice what I’ve taught in research methods classes by actually getting my hands dirty. Let’s critique and take pot shots at this research study we’ve constructed.

➔ What opportunities are there for lecturers to become tenure track?

There are all sorts of manifestations of these positions cropping up. I certainly understand and value the critique of these positions almost as much as anybody. Hal Miller—the voice crying in the wilderness against me to eliminate hegemony—might complain about my perpetuating non-tenure track lines. My position is that this is better for these faculty, and certainly better for students than the ad hoc-ed-ness of other situations. These are indefinitely renewable, but they don’t have three-year-rolling contracts or other features that make them longer in duration, and the advancement at a certain point that they can become senior lecturers and get merit raises. In many respects they behave a lot like tenure track lecturers with two important differences: it’s a steady diet of teaching writing; it’s not a major. One of the challenges is if, as I did, you aspire to hire these people who will be my colleagues as long out as I can see, what keeps someone invested and energized in that situation?

So much of our academic culture is oriented around working with majors, diversity of teaching experiences, and so on. One of the things that became important to me was that I wanted them to have an identity as something larger than first-year writing lecturer,” an identity as researcher and scholar, and a kind of expertise on campus. I thought if we could continue to develop some interesting research projects, and that would be a component that would be energizing. Next year I’ve already thought that I’ll take some of my budget and put out a call for research proposals internally. It’s important to me that people not stagnate, and that they keep energized. Because I don’t have the curricular levers to pull, there are other ones that I have to use.

➔ Do you see this lecture position as a career position for someone with a PhD in Rhet/Comp?

I would be really surprised if people who had degrees in Rhet/Comp stayed in the lectureships more than two or three or four years. I can imagine particular conditions where—Denver is a great place to live, so I’ve got that working for me—but I sort of imagined that roughly a third of the people that I hired would be in those positions for two or three years, and then move on. Part of my goal is to make it hard for them to leave in the sense that, “Look at this great stuff that I’m leaving behind.” The other side of that is, I want to make it easy for them to leave if they want to by making sure they maintain active identities as scholars and researchers. I don’t think if you were someone who is only teaching classes for four years—I don’t care what degree they had—and decided in their fifth year they wanted to get a tenure-track job, and if their CV says they’ve only been teaching classes. In an odd, and problematic way, I still look at them as graduate students, which is debilitating and bad, I still have that kind of notion of how do I develop them for them to move on? That’s one of the hardest things for me personally about that job—I don’t have any clear peers. It’s a freestanding department that reports to the provost. So, I don’t have a layer to go to, so it feels, sometimes, like a big vertical gap. That’s the thing I miss about being at a place like Illinois State where you had several other colleagues.

➔ What is the graduate program at DU?

The department wants to develop Rhetoric and Composition more. Graduate students were no longer going to be teaching freshman writing. In a fairly remarkable gesture, the university administration said I was allowed to keep all of the assistantship lines if I figured out what to do with them. One of the things I did was to have all of the first-year PhD students be consultants in the writing center, which they have grudgingly come to understand as pretty interesting and significant work. It was like, “Wait. You’re making us remedial tutors.” They had a very unsophisticated notion of what a writing center’s do. The deal is, that during their first year, they are consultants in the writing center, and so, by the way in the fall, a certain number of my lecturers can choose that. “Here’s a body of theory and research on writing

centers, I can't just blow this off." During their second and third years they have different kinds of assistantships in the English department including, they're teaching upper-level courses before they are "privileged" to teach first-year writing. Only in their fourth year have they earned the privilege of first-year writing. I insist that they take a graduate course before they do the teaching composition mentorship. That's how it's worked out with graduate students there—not entirely happily. "Why should I have to take a course before I teach something like first-year comp, which any damn fool can do?" Yeah, this is the problem. There is some of that tension. "Wait, I've taught undergraduate English majors—juniors in creative writing—but I'm not yet able to teach first-year composition." I've been asked to develop a graduate program, but I've done graduate programs before—I've directed 15 dissertations over the years—but my energies right now are in undergraduate writing and in faculty development. That's what the university hired me to do. There's more than enough pretty interesting work to do in the undergraduate program if you do recruit students and teach an undergraduate course every year and so on.

➔ If you were going to teach a Rhet/Comp course, what is the most important thing for students to know?

I think there are some really messy identity issues right now for the field. Some of this is related, well maybe this is on my mind because I was writing the talk for this afternoon, but what is the relationship between writing and composing? Between traditional media and new media? If the field was completely barren right now and you had the injunction to start some kind of required language experience in the first year, what would it be? Would you follow Todd Taylor's observations that the future of composing is video? I think these are profoundly interesting issues. I think the question of, in a composing life, what's the relationship between certain "traditional" kinds of writing—which I still think are important—and all the forms of new media, which I also think are important? How did that get sort of conceptualized and taught? It largely is a question of program design or course design. I think what we're doing right now, and it's plenty interesting and rewarding, is we're ad hoc-edly going along with, "Here's a new medium; here's a new tool; here's a new technology. What can we do with it? What does it look like to those who are doing it?" We have a sort of national composite curriculum, which has really cool and really interesting features, but no integrity in some ways. It could be that integrity is overrated. When I look at the WPA Outcomes statement, which to my mind is almost already too diffused to be useful, but it doesn't incorporate lots of other things. How do we explain ourselves to our colleagues and to the world? How do we justify certain practices versus others? Even when you look at the range of the completely good and respectful things diversely going on in first-year composition classes, not to mention the vertical curriculum in composition studies, it's wildly disparate. It's largely a theoretical problem. What's the relationship? It's got a qualitative dimension to it. I've been enamored by studies of communities of writers involved in certain technologies and certain kinds of text productions, and I think that somebody who came to me as

a completely blank slate who came to me for a dissertation topic, I would say let's think about some kinds of discursive communities that would be interesting to study and build some theory out of that stuff; curiously, at a time when the field is simultaneously maturing or has matured, things are all up for grabs again, and, what I worry about is, that we keep sedimenting this new thing on top of another without occasionally seriously and earnestly thinking, "How does this all integrate?"

➔What types of discursive communities?

Whether it's people who have done things on gamers, girls as bloggers, blogging communities. The academy is interesting too. Some of the things that we found in the research projects that I was talking about earlier at DU, where we go around talking to a bunch of political science students and about how they understand political science, it's hugely at odds with what their faculty value themselves and "think" they're telling students to do. I'm particularly interested in how the academy—the civic transaction—and the academy has not been worried about that. We have some blind faith that teaching MLA and APA style is useful, when in fact the student—we can guarantee that 90 out of 100 students will never have to do that the day they get their diploma; or this notion that in certain ways we represent writing, but it has no consonance with how writing appears in the world. We have a sort of faith that there is a "generic writing muscle" and we just have students do pushups or whatever exercises we imagine so that we've made the muscles stronger. By doing that students should be able to do the things we ask. That's why, I think, it's really particularizing what writing looks like in those circumstances.

➔Is what we're doing in the academy valuable to people outside of the academy?

I have faith in the liberal arts as a reasonable thing to do. My point is not to identify what is practical and then to teach to it, but rather to help students and learners understand the connections between these different spheres. When you run into students who have whatever universal truth told them about writing—never use the first person—it's like this act of betrayal. They feel betrayed—somebody's lying, either they are or you are. What I worry about is the way that we might do that to students if we don't say in the name of rhetorical situation, yes of course these kinds of texts are valued in the academy, and I'm not so sheltered, or stupid, or narrow-minded, as to imagine that this is the only way of valuing a text. In fact, yeah, you go into the workplace and you don't see the APA references. One of the things that means is development and work as a writer is you have to figure out how to negotiate these things, and here are some useful strategies. It's important to cast these as strategies not as bromides, or as rules, or narrow forms. Then you just make students cynical and that disjunction they perceive between academics and the real world just gets demonstrated to them when we look like we're completely—the other side of that is the popular sphere gets handled in 300 words or less, but that doesn't mean

there is not a value in the 2,000 word reflective. Deal with that. That to me is the kind of articulation that makes sense.

One of the things we've started at our center is the "co-curricular committee" is to sponsor poetry slams and creative writing workshops. Yeah our curriculum can't hold all these things, so what are some events workshops that we can do outside the curriculum? You would go nuts if you took every great idea that you took from 3Cs, computers and composition, and Kairos and say, "I'm going to make all that happen this semester," so what becomes your deciding factor for what you privilege or not. For the most part people are going to pursue their own interests and go their own ways. There are those other ill-informed sources that go beyond and interpret it as a field that is self interested.

WAC can go beyond disciplinary substantiation. And one of the things that I've tried to work on is privileging the academic forms and the kinds of writing your students will do as professionals in their field and as informed citizens. It does give more terrain. The thing to worry about is whether you're building tract houses in that space.