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Echoing Narratives, or Chris Anson at Work and Play

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Echoing Narratives: Chris Anson at Work and Play

By Beth Burmester, Tanya Cochran and Beth Godbee, Georgia State University

Most of us know him well—many personally, many more professionally. A prolific writer, avid teacher, and noted leader in the fields of rhetoric and composition, Chris M. Anson is currently Professor of English and Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program at North Carolina State University as well as President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA).

Both as president of the WPA and as a regular contributor to its listserv, Anson works to build a sense of community among compositionists. He will be bringing this sense of community to the 2005 SWCA conference in Charleston. Anson explains how he sees writing centers as linked to all other writing programs, and he argues for more collaboration among them:

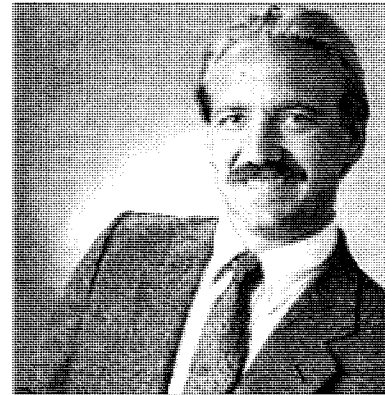
I think we can and should make stronger relationships between first-year composition, various cross-curricular efforts, writing centers, advanced composition courses, and, of course, ancillary units on our campuses such as teaching and learning centers, first year studies programs, and so on. Coordination among these different efforts can forestall problems that arise when each unit innovates alone and then affects other units who are unprepared for change. For example, a healthy WAC program may create so much new energy for writing in different disciplines that demand in the writing center—if it's separate from the WAC program—can increase without commensurate support. So communication and collaborative planning are crucial.

By regularly communicating and collaborating with professionals in our field, Anson gives articulation to his proposal, one that has, in fact, led to a number of significant grants and publications.

The recipient of over a million dollars in grant money, Anson encourages WPAs to seek sources of outside funding and observes that they “are in a good position to secure funding because writing crosses so many boundaries.” For those without experience writing grants, Anson suggests taking advantage of courses or profes-

sional grant writers, who may already be employed by our institutions. Grant opportunities are well worth exploring as part of collaborative planning and communication across and beyond our campuses.

Following his own suggestion that WPAs collaborate on grant applications, Anson also frequently collaborates on his publications, conference presentations, and workshops.



By extension, Anson believes administration should be a team effort. Based on his WPA experience, administration means sharing, or as Chris relates, “the best kind of leadership comes from what my friend and colleague Robin Brown at the University of Minnesota calls ‘consensus-based management.’” In this model, generally one person directs the program and is ultimately accountable, but all those involved share the responsibility of making decisions and implementing goals.

Chris Anson will be the Keynote Speaker at the 2005 SWCA Conference, February 10-12, 2005

Just how does someone juggle all these professional commitments and still spend time attending the musical, academic, and sports activities of his thirteen-and sixteen-year-old sons as well as enjoy time with his wife? Chris concedes that he takes work with him to these family events. In fact, “each activity probably has a different effect on the genre of my marginal comments,” he muses.

Additionally, Chris has discovered the work of University of Chicago psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, whose work on “flow” studies “intrinsically rewarding behavior in work and play settings.” Or, as Chris explains how he applies it, flow occurs on “those few occasions when we’re so immersed in our work that we don’t feel either the labor it takes or the time that passes.” This kind of work is not stressful; instead, it brings us great happiness and helps us find balance.

Another significant way Anson works and plays is by traveling. It should come as no surprise that Anson has presented workshops, papers, and keynote addresses in over thirty-eight states and ten foreign countries, since his family “traveled whenever we could.” He spent his childhood in France and admits he is “crazy about international travel,” yet some of his most memorable moments have occurred on college campuses.

Near the location for the film *Dances with Wolves*, on the Redbud Reservation in rural South Dakota, Anson participated in a workshop at Sinte Gleska University that began with one of the elders reciting a blessing in Lakota. Anson recounts, “It was even though I couldn’t understand the language, absolutely captivating.” On the Sinte Gleska website, in the Message from the President, Lionel Bordeaux writes how their central concept is “wolakota,” or peace, which “means to act and behave with ultimate respect, harmony, peace, and friendship.”

Another time, Chris was visiting Hampton University, a historically black college founded in 1868 in the state of Virginia. Its original mission for students was “to go out to teach and lead their people.” Coincidentally, this institution also offered one of the first “formal education” programs for Native Americans, from 1878 to 1923. While Anson was visiting, his host took him to the edge of campus, to the enormous “Emancipation Oak.” Anson writes of this experience:

The very first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation took place under the huge protective boughs of this tree. After that, classes were held on the site for freed slaves and Native Americans who paddled down from upriver. I stood there for quite some time, and soon it was as if I could hear whispering voices coming from the tangled limbs in the upper reaches of the tree.

As Anson heard the echoes of political and social history that day under the great oak, so we can read echoes of pedagogical history through Anson’s stories and creative nonfiction.

While Anson boasts many scholarly achievements, possibly some of his richest work is his creative nonfiction writing. In “Beginnings,” an essay in Joseph F. Trimmer’s edited collection *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life*, Anson offers a dual-voiced essay with insights into the difficult process of responding to student writing and writers. He reminds us of the confusion and false confidence that accompany that first semester of graduate student teaching and gives us a glimpse of the challenges and mixed emotions we often embody in our own classrooms and during conferencing with writers:

I was unprepared, at best, to stand in the front of the classroom and pretend I knew everything there was to know about good writing. . . . Even the fear of designing an entire course and then explaining it, rationalizing it, to a class of eighteen-year-olds was nothing next to the thought of *me*, just a few years their senior, standing before them: the thought of my authority, my demeanor. My control of the class. (p. 61)

Anson hints that his start was misguided, spending much of the early part of the semester teaching grammar, nervously filling the chalkboard with copious notes that he would refer to toward the end of class only to look back over his shoulder and see he had already erased them. Nevermind. He would redeem himself by grading the first stack of essays with verve, a red felt-tipped pen, and an iron fist.

Grading was not as easy as he thought it would be. One essay was impeccably “clean”—and sterile. One was mechanically and grammatically disastrous—and engaging, even rapturous. Essays at the top of the stack received more attention and harsher grades, ones at the bottom fell prey to his exhaustion and shifting feelings. Had the grading become . . . subjective?! Should he grade the first papers again and be less harsh? Should he look over the later papers and be more harsh? Confusion. Frustration. Decision:

But no, the concentration had taxed me, I reasoned—drained me of sound judgment, made me soft. I would downgrade the later essays. Ripping open the desk drawer, I found a bottle of correction fluid and began painting over the little red grades I had assigned, neatly penning in new, harsher grades after the dollop of white had dried and cracked under the heat of the desk lamp. (p. 65)

Again, though, what seemed fairly uncomplicated when he was performing the task became somewhat painful when he had to place the white-out encrusted papers back into the hands of their fledging parent-writers.

After class, the student whose paper was moving and a disaster appeared at Anson’s office door. Stumbling through the encounter, Anson did what some of us—professors, TAs, and tutors alike—still do when we conference with student writers: hedge, defend, justify. Yet through his narrative of interwoven texts, Anson demonstrates reflective practice, encouraging us to complicate our work with student writers and our perceptions of ourselves.

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quoted material is punctuated and documented according to the style preferred by professors, and if the essay explains the significance of quotations.

Another problem addressed by Hayashi's Center is its location: it shares its facility with the library. Although being in the library happily means more "foot traffic," according to Hayashi, a writing center, as with all good neighbors, must develop ways to work harmoniously with the library. Hayashi's Center, for example, closes one-half hour before the library does, just to be sure all writing clients have exited the area. Her center also works with the library to promote the Writing Center; one side of a bookmark, for example, lists the Writing Center's services while the other promotes the Library's style manuals and its online resources. Hayashi has worked hard to establish a relationship that is beneficial to both the library and the Writing Center.



Karla Hayashi (Director, University of Hawaii-Hilo Writing Center) and Bonnie Devet (Director, College of Charleston Writing Center)

The cliché phrase known world-wide is that Hawaii has the *aloha* spirit. In fact, visitors may even become tired of hearing *aloha* on so many occasions. But after visiting the University of Hawaii-Hilo Writing Center, I think I know better what this ubiquitous word means. From talking to Director Hayashi and her tutors, I would say *aloha* implies more than "hello" or "good-bye." It means that doing small things for others makes a big difference. No wonder one sees on many Hawaiian automobiles a bumper sticker proclaiming "Live Aloha." This writing center, located near volcanoes and prone to floods, definitely displays to its clients the *aloha* spirit.

Bonnie Devet is Director of the Writing Lab at the College of Charleston.

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As Anson shares his experience of one-on-one conferencing, his dialogic essay reminds us that we must continue to share stories with each other and use the stories to enact change. His essay also shows us how we can imagine new kinds of texts for our profession and our students.

One of the reasons Chris finds WAC faculty workshops so fulfilling is because with less pressure on formal assessment, "we can experiment so much more with creative genres, multi-modal and hybrid kinds of assignments," all of which lead to more engaged writers, instructors, tutors, classrooms and writing centers.

When we gather in Charleston, we anticipate that Chris Anson will show us how his experiences teaching, working with writing program administrators, and engaging in ongoing professional development offer all of us yet another fresh chance at beginnings.

To learn more about Anson, visit his online portfolio at <http://www.home.earthlink.net/~theansons/Portcover.html>.



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