

## 5

TAKING ACTION TO  
CHANGE STORIES

There are upper division writing courses in all disciplines at [my institution]. A lot of faculty don't want to teach them because they don't have enough assistance and they don't know how to teach the courses. For the courses this semester, I decided to offer peer tutors to these courses to help with the writing aspects of the course. So I'm going to have a class for the peer tutors—they'll get 4 credits for taking this class and tutoring in the writing intensive (WI) courses. I'm trying to figure out: How can I find students to do it? How can I work with their schedules? How can I hook them up with the right WI course? What would be most helpful to have in the peer tutoring course? How can I work with the peer tutors and the faculty whose courses the tutors are placed in?

This anecdote from Larissa, the writing director at a large private university, illustrates a point made by the Bay Area Organizing Coalition (BAOC) organizer Eleanor Milroy: "There's a gazillion problems and a gazillion issues" (Milroy 2006). Issues here might include lack of support for WI courses, reliance on one faculty member to provide support for these courses, the perception of writing instruction by "content" faculty, and so on. Using any of the approaches to organizing described in chapter 4, it's easy to imagine how these issues might come to the fore in discussions with writing program staff, in Larissa's (or the WPA's) own thinking, or in some combination of both. If Larissa wanted to tackle one of these issues and work to change it, a next step would be to develop another frame around the issue and work to communicate that frame to relevant audiences. To identify this as something separate from organizing is something of a misnomer, though. The process of shaping

messages helps to identify issues and values, and identifying those issues and values also contributes to the message. As the Opportunity Agenda and Project Strategic Press Information Network (SPIN) put it, "The organizing should drive the [communication] strategy, but communications should always have a place at the planning and decision-making table to help guide the strategic choices of the effort" (Toolkit 2). This chapter will focus on the second part of this equation, developing a communication strategy, as a part of organizing work.

Although it's easy to leap to the assumption that communication begins with developing and broadcasting a message, there are a few steps that are important to take even before that one. First, WPAs and writing instructors need to consider how we are positioned with regard to the issues we want to affect. As discussed in chapter 1, communication theorists make the case that dominant cultural values are reflected in dominant frames and that the narratives extending from these frames reflect and perpetuate those dominant values; as a result, other values linked to other frames are marginalized from the picture. In the case of writing instruction, this means that narratives like the one from the *Chicago Daily Herald* described in chapter 1 are common: students are arriving in college "underprepared"; this underpreparedness is contributing to a general decline in the workforce (and, therefore, the economy); colleges are enrolling students in "remedial" courses that do not constitute real college work; writing is something students learn to do and then do not need additional education on; and so on. Charlotte Ryan suggests that this frame dominance is a form of "sponsorship" (Ryan 1991, 176) that is akin to the literacy sponsorship described by Deborah Brandt. Just as Brandt argued that literacy sponsorship ultimately perpetuates the interests of the sponsors while simultaneously augmenting their ability to shape conceptions of literacy (Brandt 1998, 171–73), frame sponsorship reflects the interests of "multiple social actors" who try to adjust their positions to accommodate challenges and the dominance of their frame (Ryan 1991, 176–77).

What this means for WPAs and writing instructors is that, in many instances, we are up against it—we're trying to reshape frames that have powerful sponsors. Additionally, the analysis in chapters 2 and 3 illustrates that the narratives underscoring these frames are complicated and have the potential to accommodate our own values as well. The analysis in chapter 3 also suggests that WPAs and writing instructors whose perspectives are represented in best practices defined and shaped by professional organizations like the NCTE and WPA are not often in the position of being frame sponsors. However, the analysis of coverage of the SAT writing exam also illustrates that it is possible to move into this position through concerted and strategic effort; another piece of good news is that just as there are parallels between some of the strategies for cultivating a base and developing alliances and our own teaching practices, so there are connections between what we do well and the process of shifting frames (and stories) through communication strategies.

Borrowing from WA, SPIN, and others, this chapter offers strategies that writing instructors and WPAs can use to try to affect the frames that surround discussions of writing and writers. These strategies are geared entirely toward affecting frames at the local campus level, because that is where WPAs and writing instructors are likely to have the greatest effect. This focus is consistent with the experiences of MoveOn.org, the IAF, and WA—all of whom stress that frame-shifting is most effective when it is linked with local stories, local examples, and local people. As IAF West Coast Director Larry McNeil puts it, change comes when story is linked with interpretation—without either side of the equation, neither are as powerful (Gustafson 2000, 97).

#### THE BIG PICTURE

Media and grassroots activists alike agree that there are seven steps involved with (re)framing stories:

- Identifying an issue and a goal for change

- Identifying what we know, and what we need to know, to achieve the goal
- Developing a message
- Identifying audiences for that message
- Crafting specific messages for specific purposes/audiences
- Creating an overall plan to circulate our messages among those audiences
- Assessing our work (Bray 19; Sen 2003, 148–63; Wellstone Action 68–82; Milroy 2006)

#### Step One: Identifying an Issue and a Goal for Change

As chapter 4 suggests, story-changing work proceeds incrementally. The first step is to identify an issue (not a problem) while simultaneously cultivating a base of supporters and allies with whom to work. What issue we choose to start with also depends on the organizing approach that we use, which in turn also might affect who is included in our base and what allies we make for what purposes. Returning to Larissa's story can illustrate: in an interest-based model, Larissa might not even get as far as identifying any of the items in this list as issues because her work on WI courses might begin with relational conversations, and through those conversations she might hear issues that she hadn't previously considered. Here her focus would be identifying issues important to others, bringing together groups to work on these issues, and developing leadership from the groups to continue the organizing effort. Implied here is a connection between addressing issues and long-term change, but long-term change is not an explicit goal.

In a values-based approach, Larissa might have again engaged in organizing conversations, but in and through them identified the values central to her work and the work of the WI faculty in order to identify issues that would advance those values (for instance, the values of writing to learn and the use of

writing as a discovery strategy in WI courses). Here, long-term change would always be front and center and the values that any change advanced would be prominently featured in discussions and action. Issues to address through story-changing work, then, would stem from the values at the center of the organizing effort.

In an issue-based approach, Larissa might start from one of the issues listed here—say, lack of support for WI courses—and she might have engaged with organizing conversations with WI faculty to gather information about their perspectives. In those discussions she might have heard that faculty were specifically concerned with class size, for instance, and decided to take on that issue in partnership with the WI faculty as a first step. Each of these models, then, would take Larissa's work as a WPA in a slightly different direction, and each would serve as an important first step in a story-changing process.

#### Step Two: Conducting a Knowledge Assessment

Once we have identified an issue to tackle, the next step in the story-changing process is to find out what we know about the issue already, and what we need to know. BAOOC organizer Eleanor Milroy describes this as a "research action" and notes that these actions both help actors understand "what's going on" and build alliances. If Larissa and her allies identified "class size" as the first issue they wanted to tackle stemming from their concerns about WI courses, for instance, Larissa might address these questions to herself and her colleagues. She might look to institutional research about student performance in WI classes with high enrollments; look to data gathered by her institution (such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Plan [CIRP] or the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE]) to find out how entering students feel about their past writing experiences and what they expect to encounter in college and perhaps compare that to national profiles of similar institutions; and talk to WI faculty for specific anecdotes about their experiences teaching WI courses with large numbers of students. Next,

Larissa might look to research in the field on class size, from articles in research journals to position statements such as those on the NCTE Web site (which includes a position on class size) to material on CompFAQ. Then she would need to consider who else was invested in the issue of class size (in changing it, maintaining it, or something else) and why. Along the way, Larissa also might consider how the data she was gathering might be useful, for whom, and why, along with what else she might like to know. All of this research would play a part in the message that Larissa ultimately developed, ideally with her base and her allies, about class size in WI courses.

Activist Rinku Sen summarizes three reasons why conducting this kind of research is so valuable for organizing. First, organizers need solid data to document both the experiences they are representing and the effects of those experiences. Second, data helps to "counteract the opposition's misinformation campaigns." And third, research can serve as the basis for a story-changing publicity campaign (Sen 2003, 116). What is the effect on student success of one placement method over another? How *does* using computers in writing classrooms affect students' abilities to, say, achieve the rhetorical analysis outcomes for the course? What effect does one pedagogical approach or another have on students' learning in the course (and how is "learning" being defined)? These are questions that Richard Haswell defines as RAD: "replicable, aggregable, and data supported" (Haswell 2005, 201). During the last year I taught at University of Minnesota General College (GC), I witnessed the power of effective research firsthand. Early in the 1996–97 academic year, then-university President Nils Hasselmo announced that he intended to close GC. Instructional costs were too high, he said; he also pointed to problematic achievement as a motivating factor. But several years earlier, GC had made a strategic decision to give up a tenure line and, instead, hire its own assessment coordinator. During the 1996–97 struggle, the assessment generated by GC was better—more accurate, more thorough, and more rigorously documented—than that provided by the

university. GC was able to draw on its own data to refute the university's assertions regarding students. Ultimately, because of these data (and a coordinated effort by the GC to generate lots of what Alinsky called "heat"—protest actions, media coverage, and community gatherings), GC survived. (Unfortunately, although GC thrived between this closure attempt and the early 2000s, it did not make it through the university's next run—it was closed after the 2005–6 academic year.)

#### STEPS TO HELP IDENTIFY ISSUES AND CONNECT TO VALUES

As a first step toward identifying issues (through a base and working within one of the models described in the previous chapter, or blending elements of all of those models), WPAs or writing instructors might want to consider looking at short-term and long-term goals and then considering connections (or lack thereof) between them:

*Short term issues/goals* *Long term goals/problems*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Once these lists are created it becomes possible to draw lines between them to identify their connections (or lack thereof) to each other. For instance, some sample short-term goals might be to convert the grading scale for a first-year writing class to ABC/no credit and reduce class sizes; a long-term goal might be to change the perception of faculty outside of writing regarding the professionalism and qualifications of writing instructors. While those three goals are connected, they probably aren't directly related and thus might become part of *different* issue campaigns.

#### KNOWLEDGE ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

As writing instructors, we work with students to conduct knowledge assessments all the time. In the EMU First Year Writing Program, for instance, students in our first semester

class begin their writing for the term by analyzing what genres (of reading, writing, viewing, listening, etc.) they encounter regularly, and what they need to know to participate in those genres. In our second semester research writing class, students reflect on what they know and need to know to pursue their research. We can also adapt the questions that we use to help students assess their knowledge for our purposes. We might ask:

What issue have you identified for story-changing work?

What is your goal regarding this issue?

What do you know about the issue, and from what sources?

At the local level? (e.g., programmatic, institutional, or other research (such as the CIRP Freshman Survey, the NSSE, or other institutional surveys)

At the national level? (e.g., research in the field; CompFAQ; listserv discussions)

How might each of the items that you've identified as "knowing" be useful for your goal?

What else do you need to know?

What's interesting, provocative, or otherwise related to your goal or issue?

Who else is invested in this issue?

What is their goal for the issue, and why is it their goal?

What information do they have access to that might be useful for you, and why might it be useful?

#### Step Three: Identifying Audiences/Shaping Messages

As we conduct research to learn what we already know about the issues we want to affect, we also need to identify the audiences that we want to target for that change-making work. On the surface, this sounds like a commonsensical assertion—we help students think about audiences, conventions, and genres

all the time, after all. But as Mike Rose notes, most graduate programs in composition/rhetoric do not offer courses that prepare them for writing or speaking to audiences outside of the field (Rose 2006b, 408).

And there are additional complications to this analysis and development. As discussed in chapter 3, the role of the "public intellectual" that academics have sometimes occupied in communication with audiences outside of academe stems from an analysis of audience that is neither nuanced, flattering, nor accurate. Extending from the technocratic implementation of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, it implies that the academic is an expert communicating to masses who are unaware of the particulars of the work or situation that we are describing, and thus have little to say about that work. The one-way process of communication (expert→audience) that underscores this approach also contradicts the idea of base development and alliance building that is implicit in all of the organizing models described in chapter 4, and which are essential to changing stories about writing and writers with audiences outside of the field. As one step in this process, then, we need to think about how we position ourselves with regard to audience and message; the approach here suggests that it is crucial that we enact the role of an activist, not a public intellectual, because that role facilitates the kinds of dialogue through which bases are built and alliances developed.

A second challenge associated with identifying audiences and shaping messages stems from the position of the WPA/faculty member in their academic institution. As Richard Miller has pointed out in a variety of articles and books, we exist within a series of large bureaucracies upon which we depend for our livelihoods (e.g., Miller 1998). Our status within these institutions—which itself is influenced by our campus administrators (department heads, deans, provos)—has profound influences on the kinds of risks that we can take in identifying potential audiences for story changing, and in developing messages to communicate with those audiences. Untenured WPAs, for instance, already

have enough at stake. If the audience is an unsympathetic administrator, if the work is not well-received, if the institution does not believe that this kind of work should be rewarded . . . the horror stories that could be played out here are readily apparent. Thus the starting point for discovering those shared values, again, can be the relational conversations described by the IAF that are also at the core of activist intellectualism).

Through these conversations, we might try to learn about the interests and concerns of our potential audiences and link our interests with theirs inasmuch as this is possible, while simultaneously connecting those interests with concerns that those audiences may not have articulated. Redefining Progress (RP) Director Michel Gelobter calls these "big fights" and says that establishing connections between RP's interests and those larger interests is essential.

[RP takes] what we know a lot about—our expertise area, which in this case is smart economics, the intersection between the economy, social justice issues, and the environment—and make it in service to what I call the "big fights," or the big values issues that are at play in the economy. So—climate change. We know a lot about climate change. That's not a big fight. It seems like everyone cares about it more than anything else, but . . . ask the average person on the street corner [about it, and] . . . it's probably a lot lower than ten other things like their school, their family, the war, the price of gas, stuff like that. So the first step is to see that our issue frame—the way we see the world—is not [everyone's]. The struggle is not to attract more people to us and the way we see the world, but to be of greater service to more people. . . . Take what you know a lot about and put it in service to the big fights where there are lots of bodies and people in motion. (Gelobter 2006)

RP has linked their issue—smart economics—to questions of race and class, for example, arguing that "if the environmental movement is ever going to revive, it must first confront the many ways in which the U.S. has reserved open space for the exclusive use of whites" (Gelobter et al 2005).



Here too is where WPAs and writing instructors can draw on our strengths. The three questions that stand at the center of current discussions about composition, especially in public venues—how should students' literacies be defined; what literacies should composition classes develop, how, and for what purpose; and how should students' literacies be assessed at the end of the class—all extend to larger issues. These include access to education; class, race, and gender issues that are reflected in questions about the value or validity of literacy experiences and manners of expression; and so on (e.g., Heath 1983; Fox 1999; Soliday 2002; Mutnick 1996). In the class size hypothetical that might extend as an issue from Larissa's story, for instance, it would certainly be possible to link the case for smaller class size to student persistence articulated by the hypothetical department head and dean (which in turn links to the need for tuition revenue, addressing the concerns of the vice president for finance). But it might also be possible to extend to another "big fight" not mentioned by these audiences about the "achievement gap" on the campus (if, in fact, there is such a gap and it is of concern to administrators), making the case that smaller classes with more focused instructor attention enables students to form the kinds of mentoring connections cited as one of the single most important factors in student persistence by retention experts (e.g., Tinto 1993).

#### QUESTIONS TO FACILITATE CONNECTING TO "BIG POINTS"

WPAs and writing instructors can also turn to strategies that we use on a regular basis to think about audiences for the messages that we develop around issues we want to change, and how our concerns and theirs might coalesce at local and "big" points. ("Rhetorical analysis," after all, is the first category included in the *WPA Outcomes Statement*.) Adapting heuristics for rhetorical analysis to the story-changing process described here, we might begin by reiterating things we already know:

Step one:

What is the issue that you have identified for change?

What is your goal?

Who is included in the base of supporters for this issue?

What are their interests?

What do you know about the issue, and from what sources?

What else do you need to know?

Then we might ask questions about the audience for this campaign, their interests, what they believe, and what they know and need to know.

Step two:

Who is the audience for your issue campaign? Who has the power to affect the change you want to see, and what are their interests?

What are the potential "big fights" that your issue might be linked to?

Who is invested in those fights, why are they invested, and what are their positions?

#### Shaping Messages

While audience analysis can contribute to a story-changing process, we also need to constantly check ourselves as we undertake this analysis and, especially, as we develop messages extending from it. Connecting to big fights may be our strength, but these connections can also lead us quickly into the public intellectual role (and its implication that we know more than others); perhaps more importantly, "connecting the dots" between seemingly distinct ideas is part and parcel of the conventions of academic discourse, but academic discourse is *not* useful for developing or communicating clear messages. It leads straight back to Harris's lament: we are unable to "explain ourselves" to those who do

not share our positions, and part of this inability has to do with the language we use. We need to keep in mind SPIN's reminder: "Condense your issues into key messages . . . you do not have to cover every policy nuance or expound on your social history in your messages" (Bray 2000, 26).

As a part of the WPA's Network for Media Action (WPA-NMA), I have both observed and experienced the challenge of message development. At the NMA workshop held at the 2004 WPA conference, for instance, political consultant Leo Jennings was facilitating a discussion among 20 or so participants. After a morning spent learning about media strategies, we were trying to craft a message that we could use as a central point for a media campaign about writing and writers. The group was engaged in a lively and loud discussion about possibilities; Jennings was writing them on the board. Participants offered slogans consisting of a two dependent clauses joined by a colon (typical of many titles, including the title of this book), like "Good writing makes good writers: writing intensive classes contribute to student persistence." Jennings quickly said, "NO colons!" The workshop also made it clear that we weren't ready. We had problems, not issues; we couldn't identify or articulate a position that would communicate in a clear and coherent way what we were arguing *for*, and we didn't have the language to convey the position we couldn't clearly identify. We also were thinking about operating at a "national" level (whatever that meant), rather than focusing on campaigns emerging from local issues.

Jennings and John McDonald, who facilitated the next WPA-NMA workshop at the 2005 CCCC in San Francisco, conveyed the same characteristic of an effective message as those identified by WA, with the addition of one characteristic. These messages are:

- clear and concise;
- connect with interests and values of the audience; and
- communicate *our* values and ideas. (Wellstone Action 37)

I would add one characteristic, too: they are conceivable. In other words, people have to "know what we mean." This is the point that Anat Shenker-Orsorio makes when she says that progressives need to work out a model of "what [their values] mean or look like" (2006). The idea of conceivable reflects Nunberg's point about narratives, which itself echoes Alinsky's about self-interest—what we want has to become part of the story through which people understand their lives. Media activist Robert Bray recommends using "the brother-in-law test" for our messages—picking someone who isn't "associated with your cause or organization [like a brother-in-law], and see if they understand your issue" (Bray 2000, 16).

Because the work of WPAs and writing instructors is local (tied to our students, on our campuses, in our programs) it is also probably important that our messages are generally locally focused, a point those of us in Jennings's early WPA-NMA workshop hadn't yet understood. While we may want to identify campaigns that we can undertake nationally, it is crucial to recognize that our influence is most powerful on the local level; when we do join together with WPAs across the country we can be most effective if we can bring our experience, base, and allies from the local level to those national conversations so that there is always a clear ebb-and-flow, a dialogue, around how the national concern is of local relevance.

#### *Message Development: Conscious Choice*

With these concepts in mind, then, the next step in developing a message is considering the frame for the message. As the analysis in chapters 2 and 3 and the discussion of tactics and framing in chapter 4 suggests, this is a tricky business. On the one hand, the progressive pragmatic narrative that propelled education from the late-nineteenth through the late-twentieth century is quite permeable and has been used by the left and the right. The potential exists, then, for arguments we advance using this frame to undermine some of our individual principles and the collective principles of English instructors/

WPAs as represented by NCTE and WPA. This is what Kent Williamson alluded to when he said that educators have played a role in perpetuating this dominant frame by formulating their concerns within the frame in order to "win" federal and state funding (Williamson 2006). On the other hand, as the interest-based, values-based, and issue-based approaches to organizing described in the previous chapter illustrate, the progressive pragmatic jeremiad also has made possible the kinds of organizing activities that can potentially change the frame around discussions of education. The key, then, is to find a place within this jeremiad that reflects a narrative representing what educators want (and not what they do not want) without incurring strategic losses. Positioning arguments that employ different frames means that we run the risk of remaining marginalized from these discussions.

One lesson here is about the importance of conscious choice. Many times, WPAs and writing instructors frame our messages without thinking carefully about how we are doing so, for what purposes, and with what implications. Marguerite Helmers noted a pervasive narrative about what students "lacked" in her analysis of "staffroom interchanges" published in *College Composition and Communication*, for example (Helmers 1994). I would argue that the same narrative is invoked when WPAs justify requests for support for student writing by citing what students cannot do, a strategy not infrequently employed in posts to the WPA-L list.

What's important, then, is to think consciously about developing messages, from the texts themselves to the frames in which they are situated. The four steps described in this chapter and chapter 4 precede this work: 1) identifying an issue (not a problem); 2) assessing what we already know and need to know about this issue; 3) identifying who else is invested in the issue, what are their interests, and what they know about the issue; and 4) identifying the audiences for the message and their interests.

Then, for a moment, we need to put the information we've gathered by working through these four steps aside (but not

away) to think about *what we want to say* about the issue. What is the position that we want to advance? This position might represent an agenda developed via relational conversations (in an interest-based approach), one that emerges from our values (in a values-based one), or one that extends from the interests that we have brought to conversations and developed along with others (in an issue-based approach). Note, too, that this step is presented as an affirmative: what we do *not* want to do is articulate what we *don't* want—make clear what we *do* want. One common activity to facilitate this kind of brainstorming is to imagine a campaign with a clear timeline that ends in a headline or a bumper sticker. What would it say? The hypothetical campaign around reducing class size in WI courses extending from Larissa's example might end with a headline like "Writing Intensive Class Sizes Reduced: Students' Grades Rise" or "Faculty Report Better Writing across the Curriculum," for instance. Using this headline as an endpoint, Larissa and her base and allies might then use the backward planning process described in chapter 4, considering what they would need to do, when, and for what purposes to make that headline a reality.

#### *Message Development: Context and Audience*

While imagining a headline is a useful strategy for beginning to distill a message, it is only a beginning—really, it's useful primarily as a heuristic for helping us to clarify our goals in one sentence or phrase. The fact is that for WPAs and writing instructors, mainstream media generally aren't the audiences that we'll target for our messages: as much as we might want to affect discussions of writing and writers in those media, our influence is considerably more powerful if we stick to local situations and contexts. In the early days of the WPA-NMA, one participant—a former reporter and editorial board member for one of the nation's largest daily papers—had to remind us that issuing press releases about "our" writing positions would have absolutely no effect other than to add to a journalist's daily collection of trash. On the other hand, local newspapers (campus



and community) have op-ed pages; opinion pieces and letters to the editor on specific issues certainly can be effective communication pieces. But so, too, can be focused conversations with audience members; newsletters circulating within our own programs; articles for other internal newsletters; or events sponsored by our programs.

The next step in shaping messages, then, is returning to the audience analysis and identifying specific audiences for our messages. Note the possible plural here. It's important to be able to tailor our messages for different audiences, but we want to make clear that the heart of the message—what Rockridge Institute Director Bruce Budner calls the “core values”—remains consistent (Budner 2006). Of course, this too is familiar to writing instructors—we work with students to adapt their communication for different audiences all the time when we talk with them about analyzing their audience's expectations and making choices about the form, content, style, and mechanics they will use to meet those expectations.

Another useful tool for helping to craft messages for specific audiences and take their possible responses into consideration is a message box. This is a box divided into four quadrants, as in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

Our message	Their message
Our response to them	Their response to us

*Adapted from Wellesley Action. Used by permission.*

To illustrate a message box in action, I'll use an example from our program at EMU, the shift to guided self-placement (GSP). While we didn't explicitly rely on the “box” structure, we developed and anticipated several messages around our core issues while shifting to GSP. These messages were targeted initially toward the admissions officers and EMU advisors whom we knew would be instrumental in making the GSP process work; in creating them, we tried to take into account our rationale for GSP and the possible obstacles they might see to the process.

FIGURE 4  
Admissions/Advising Directors

<b>EMU First Year Writing Program (FYWP) message</b> Students will be more satisfied with their writing course if they make the choice about which course to take themselves.	<b>Administrator/Advising Director message</b> We have little time with students, and need to do things as quickly and efficiently as possible.
<b>Our response to them</b> GSP will take only slightly more time than the previous assessment method, and will result in greater student satisfaction.	<b>Their response to us</b> Writing instructors have little understanding of the realities of student advising.
<b>EMU FYWP message</b> When students feel more in control of their educations, they perform better and are more likely to persist.	<b>Adm./Adv. Director message</b> Standardized test scores are valid representations of students' abilities.
<b>Our response to them</b> Research has demonstrated that there is no correlation between standardized test scores and college success. Students are equally, if not more, successful in writing courses when they make their own choices (e.g., Adams 1993).	<b>Their response to us</b> Writing instructors have little authority to determine valid placement instruments.
<b>EMU FYWP message</b> GSP is a fairer and more effective placement method than what is currently in place (ACT scores).	<b>Adm./Adv. Director message</b> We have little time with students, and need to do things as quickly and efficiently as possible.
<b>Our response to them</b> GSP will take only slightly more time than the previous assessment method, and will result in greater student satisfaction.	<b>Their response to us</b> Writing instructors have little understanding of the realities of student advising.

Developing message boxes like these can be extremely useful. It forces us to create credible, clear and concise, conceivable messages that reflect our values, and also to connect those messages with the interests and values of others. Advisors at my institution, for instance, are invested in student satisfaction for a variety of reasons—for the purposes of retention, for instance,

but also because it means that students do not come to them with complaints as often. Similarly, writing instructors in our program wanted to move to GSP because it was more fair, but also because we suspected (rightfully so) that students would be less angry about taking our first semester, elective credit course if they chose to do so, rather than being placed in the course based on a standardized test score. These motivations speak to a range of values—some more idealistic and strategic, some more practical and pragmatic.

#### *Message Development: Media Choice*

Once WPAs and writing instructors have shaped messages, the next step is figuring out where and how to communicate them. If the story-changing work in which we are engaged is focused locally and internally, as our work with implementing GSP was, it also makes sense to focus on internal, rather than external, communications—that is, communication pieces that circulate among the audiences who are most affected by the change we want to make. Internal media include things like programmatic newsletters, local Web pages, workshops for relevant audiences, information sheets, and so on—pieces that are directed at specific audiences that do not circulate among broader publics.

Once our allies agreed to the shift to GSP, for instance, we worked with them to develop a communication plan that would facilitate this transition. We identified four communication vehicles to make our points.

Workshops with EMU advisors to help them understand the content of first-year writing classes and the First Year Writing Program (FYWP)'s conceptualization of writers and the work of writing

Articles for the advising center's newsletter explaining the shift to GSP

Handouts for advisors with frequently-asked questions and responses regarding standardized test scores and writing classes

#### A sheet of talking points for advisors about writing classes and the GSP process

We also worked with advisors and admissions staff to produce a brochure containing information about EMU's writing classes, a survey that students could use for their self-placement, and a Web site that contained additional information like annotated assignments and examples of student writing. After each session where advisors used the materials, we conducted quick assessments asking how the process had gone and whether more or different information would be useful. In the fall after the first round of GSP placement (in 2004–5), we held a more extensive workshop and a lengthy meeting with advisors to review the process; we also developed and distributed an assessment asking students about their experience and satisfaction with the process. One of the things we learned from this assessment work was that some students had not considered the GSP brochure as carefully as we (and the advisors) might have liked; as a result, we developed a letter that would be distributed to parents and guardians also containing the GSP brochure for the next year's registration process. The shift to GSP, then, reflected a blend of discussions with allies and use of strategic internal communications (such as the advising newsletter, memos, Web sites, and flyers).

#### *Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds*

In addition to creating internal communications like workshops, articles, and flyers like the ones that we developed around GSP, sometimes it can be effective (or just plain satisfying) to try to affect frames around writing and writers by sending editorial columns or letters to the editors of campus and local newspapers. This seems to be especially true after those media print a news item that reflects other frames about writing and writers like the *Chicago Daily Herald* story included in chapter 1. Among the letters I've written to the editor of my local paper, for instance, are ones reacting to stories about so-called "remedial" students, students who "cheat" by using the Internet,

and new graduation standards in the state of Michigan. In each of these—as is generally the case with letters to the editor—I was being reactive, not proactive, responding to something in print; among the op-eds I've written for our campus paper, the *Eastern Echo*, is one on why the campus shouldn't renew its subscription to TurnItIn.com. There is more opportunity to be proactive in op-eds, though they are more likely to be published if they are tied to an ongoing story (and thus are also semi-reactive). These letters and op-ed columns incorporated tips upon which media strategists and news organizations almost universally agree.

- Get to the point. News items are concise and direct, not long-winded and obtuse.
- Link your point to an ongoing story or trend. Media activists note that "three is a trend." As Robert Bray explains, "If you can find three examples of something . . . three examples of discrimination, three points of view that are similar on a particular story—you will position the story for better coverage" (Bray 2000, 17).
- Include specific examples. Community organizers like those included in chapter 4 and media activists alike agree: stories about real people encountering real situations are powerful. This is also another reason why we can be more effective at the local level: if you can localize a national story, you're more likely to get attention from local people (from administrators to journalists).
- Communicate what you *want* to happen, not what you don't want to happen. Remember Lakoff's maxim: when you negate a frame, you reinforce the frame.
- Once you develop your message (and use the "brother-in-law test" to check it), stick to that message. This may mean repeating it more times than you think is necessary, but remember: we're trying to change stories that are dominant in part because people hear them again and again. (Many examples of this kind of repetition can be found with the Bush administration, who are

masters of spin control. "Stay the course," "emboldening the terrorists," and "war on terror" are but a few examples of the messages that the administration has stuck to repeatedly to advance their cause.) Media activist Robert Bray says that "you will know you have mastered the rule [to repeat your messages] when you cannot stand hearing yourself repeat your messages anymore. . . . Every talk you give . . . every interview you give . . . every letter to the editor you write . . . must contain your key messages. (Bray 2000, 26)

Some commonsense tips are useful here, too. Whether you're writing a letter or an op-ed piece, check the news outlet's guidelines (which are typically included on the op-ed page). Both letters and op-eds have word limits, and both are subject to editorial discretion. If they are edited, you won't be consulted about what is cut or kept, so make sure that your piece says what you want it to. Use the inverted pyramid style for your piece—put the most important thing, the message that you want to convey (not the one you want to negate!) at the beginning, the most important evidence about that message next, and so on. Make sure that the least important information about your subject appears at the end of the piece. If you want to write an op-ed piece, try to contact the op-ed editor with a query about the piece before sending. Of course, in major news markets this is not always so easy; in smaller markets, however, the op-ed editor's address and phone number is often included in the newspaper. Introduce yourself, tell her or him what you would like to write about, and find out whether the paper would welcome such a contribution. If they would, ask about page limits and deadlines. Op-ed pieces can be sent to more than one paper; however, you do *not* want to send them to more than one outlet in the same market. As with all encounters with journalists, be prepared and polite. This could be the beginning of an ongoing relationship with this person, and you want to set the right tone.

### *Cultivating Additional Relationships*

In addition to thinking about developing pieces to be printed in media (like letters and op-eds), it is also important to think about how we might cultivate more proactive relationships with media that might allow us to contribute to frames that are used to shape narratives about writers and writing (and education more generally). As with developing alliances around issues that are important to us, this work involves cultivating relationships. In the late 1970s, communication scholar Gaye Tuchman authored an ethnographic study called *Making News: A Story in the Construction of Reality*. Her observations revealed that reporters create a “newsnet,” a group of sources to whom they return repeatedly, to construct their stories. A reporter quoted in *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists* makes the same point: “A lot of what gets covered depends on personal relationships at the paper” (quoted in Bray 2000, 39). As the analysis of framing in chapter 4 makes clear, the voices of the dominant culture—“official sources and those holding institutional power” (Ryan, Caragee, and Mainhofer 2001, 180)—are most often present in mainstream media. The perspectives of those (powerful voices) inside the “net” receive greater play; those outside do not. Bray, McDonald, and other media strategists note that “Cultivat[ing] personal relationships with reporters . . . is one of the most important tasks an activist can do when it comes to making news” (Bray 2000, 39; McDonald 2005).

It’s important, too, that WPAs and writing instructors be sensitive to the constraints that reporters face in their work if we are to become resources for them. Be aware of cycles and schedules, for instance. If the paper in your community is a morning paper and the story about which you are contacted is not a “breaking” news item, chances are that the reporter will need to have her story in by about four o’clock in the afternoon. If your local paper comes out in the afternoon, most copy is filed by nine o’clock in the morning. Beyond issues like scheduling, remember that the life of a news story is relatively

short. If you can link a story that you want to tell to something already going on—that is, if you can find a hook for your story (a national issue, a trend, a scheduled event like the African American Read In or a day devoted to writing, reading, or something else)—it is more likely that media will be interested in the story that you have to tell. And remember issues of simply courtesy: if a reporter calls, return their calls as soon as you can. If they ask you a question to which you do not know the answer, be honest—but tell them that you’ll try to learn the answer, or try to point them to someone who can give them the information that they want, as soon as you can. The idea is to become a resource for the reporter, to develop a relationship, not to get your name and ideas in print.

On the other hand, sometimes journalists ask questions designed to elicit particular responses or perpetuate particular frames—questions like, “How do you work with remedial students in your writing classes?” If you think that the label “remedial students” is inaccurate and has implications for education (and your writing classes), you need to think—fast, and on your feet—about how you can reframe that question. Media activist Norman Solomon says that “anyone who’s been interviewed very much encounters that problem of being so constrained by the question—I forget who it was that said that the best answer is [to] destroy the question. Given the quality of questions from [some journalists], that would be a pretty darned good idea if you can pull it off without seeming rude or evasive” (Solomon 2006). SPIN’s Robert Bray also stresses *responding to questions*, not necessarily *answering* them. He notes that often, in conjunction with his work as an advocate for the rights of gays and lesbians, he was often asked “How many homosexuals are there in America?” Rather than respond with his gut: “How the hell do I know?” Bray says, “I simply responded to the question with my own message, regardless of what the reporter might have wanted to hear: ‘No one really knows how many gay and lesbian people there are because we are an invisible minority. But we are found in every community. The real issue is that not one

of us should ever be discriminated against or be the victim of violence" (Bray 2000, 18)

But this is harder than it seems. In a workshop at the WPA summer conference, for instance, two colleagues and I were conducting a workshop on reframing writing through communication with outside audiences. We distributed three scenarios to attendees, all revolving around plagiarism; one group, writing a letter to the editor, began by writing something like, "Although some students do plagiarize, we think this can be stopped." Ouch. Readers need look no further than the first part of that sentence for a headline: "Writing Teachers Speak: Wily and Deceitful Students *Do* Plagiarize!" And the narratives that extend from that statement—about teachers' inability to stop their crafty, technology-savvy, insidious, and duplicitous students from undermining the educational system through the mad downloading of Internet sources—spill right out.

Situations like the ones referenced by Solomon and Bray, where the frame for the question does not reflect the frame that we might want to use, illustrate what media activist Charlotte Ryan calls a "frame contest," an instance when it is clear that the dominant frame is being used repeatedly to frame news about a particular issue. Rather than engage the media in their own game—a strategy which those without equal resources cannot win—Ryan and other activists (e.g., Sen 2003; Bray 2000) suggest shifting the playing field through the creation of news events and alternative vehicles like conferences, reports, or events. Ryan cites a story about Project RIGHT (Rebuild and Improve Grove Hall [a Boston neighborhood] Together), which was concerned that coverage of their neighborhood was framed as "a dangerous place to be avoided. Stories about children falling from windows or being lost, raped, or hit by buses were not inaccurate in isolation, but were inaccurate in their cumulative effects" (1994, 178). A reporter-by-reporter, issue-by-issue approach to shift this narrative wasn't working. So instead, working with Ryan and others at Boston's Media Research and Action Project and the

Boston Association of Black Journalists, Project RIGHT developed and cosponsored

an educational conference for reporters. . . . Rather than blame reporters for their lack of understanding of the community, a problem exacerbated by the reporters' peripatetic existence, Project RIGHT would provide information that reporters needed, including the community's history and an introduction to the critical issues facing it. . . . By abandoning a responsive approach that focused on criticisms of specific stories, Project RIGHT attempted to reframe itself and its community. (Ryan et al. 2001, 178–79)

NCTE's work around affecting coverage of the SAT writing exam is another example of a frame-shifting event. NCTE's report was carefully timed and strategically released to achieve maximum impact. Like Project RIGHT's conference it was designed to shift the frame—to change the story—about the SAT (and ACT) writing exams; this intention was reflected in everything from the language used to construct the report (accessible, direct, thoroughly researched but not overly academic, and persuasively argued) to the press release that preceded the report's release, to the Web site that was constructed to accompany the report.

Even at the campus level, WPAs and writing instructors can create events that are intended to change stories about writing and writers. The Celebration of Student Writing (CSW), an event held every semester at the conclusion of EMU's second-semester composition course (English 121), is an example of the kind of activity that is well within the purview of our roles as writing instructors and WPAs that can have a powerful effect. For the CSW, students create projects based on their research work in English 121. It begins during the first part of the term, when students identify research interests and questions that are important to them, then conduct observations, interviews, and library research to investigate those questions. Most of the 60–80 sections of English 121 per term incorporate multigenre work—a multigenre research essay, analysis and development of



artifacts, or other composition activity that involves more than just creating what my colleague Steve Krause calls "lines on a page." For the CSW, students draw from this work to produce incredible multimedia creations that represent what they have learned, typically accompanied by brief written statements that frame their projects. Every fall, about 700 students participate in the CSW; every winter, about 1,200 students take part. If a section of English 121 decides to participate—and all but a handful do—everyone participates (e.g., Adler-Kassner and Estrem 2003). (For a closer look at the event, visit our CSW Web page at <http://writing.emich.edu/fywp/csw> and view *Celebration of Student Writing: The Movie* produced by my colleagues Steve Krause and Steve Benninghoff.)

When members of EMU's First Year Writing Program (FYWP) created the CSW, our first thought was that we wanted to put something together to showcase the incredible work students were doing in this course. But we quickly realized that this also would be a powerful way to frame students' writing work *positively*. We wanted the event to be big, loud, and upbeat. We wanted it to showcase what students *could* do, and to create an environment where the only acceptable response to the displays would be "Wow! This is fantastic!" And while there have been a few who have not exhibited this response, the regular assessments that we conduct at or after the CSW tell us that the majority of the roughly 2,500–3,000 participants and visitors yearly who attend one or both of the two CSWs held in the last eight years *have* had this response. Students have told us that they learned at the event that people *are* interested in what they write and, for that reason, feel more interested *in* writing; faculty and administrators who come through tell us that they saw evidence of what students could do.

While the CSW alone has not shifted attitudes about writing and writers on our campus, we know that it—along with our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, workshops that we conduct for faculty and administrators, efforts like the shift to GSP, and assessment projects that we have undertaken as a

WAC/FYWP group—have contributed to an overall change in the stories told about writers that circulate at EMU. The FYWP and the CSW are now mentioned as highlights of the undergraduate curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences *Bulletin*, for instance; and an assessment of English 121 was included as one of the pilot projects in EMU's institutional accreditation profile (as part of the Academic Quality Improvement Program [AQIP], a continuous assessment initiative of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association, our accrediting agency). This isn't to say that this shift is permanent, or that we don't hear plenty of discussions of student writing (or student writers) that invoke terms like "don't," "can't," or "won't." But when those discussions do happen, writing faculty are not the only ones in the room saying, "Students in my course have a slightly different experience" or "I think there's another way to think about these questions."

The other advantage of an event like the CSW is that it is within the boundaries of what we can do within institutional bureaucracies. As faculty working for academic institutions, WPAs and writing instructors face a more complicated situation than activists working for nonprofits. Typically, universities *have* spokespeople. They have titles like "director of communications," or "public relations coordinator," and they *also* are trying to affect the ways that stories are framed—especially stories about our institutions. Often, communications directors prefer that we work through them if we want to initiate contact with media beyond contributing an op-ed or a letter to the editor; for example, if you want to attract a reporter to your institution or program for a story, you probably at least want to let the communications director know that you are doing so. That said, you also can work with the communications director to develop hooks that might attract reporters to your institution and program. We can let them know about exciting events that might serve as news hooks like the CSW and share with them stories that might be appealing outside of the campus and help them frame those stories for media. They may not understand

our programs or courses, but if they are worth their salt—and most of them are—they understand our universities, and they have good contacts with local media that have been cultivated over a period of years.

### *Creating an Overall Communication Plan*

At the same time WPAs and writing instructors have developed a message (or set of messages) that we want to share with specific audiences, we also need to think about three other questions: Where should these messages be circulated (in internal or external communications? written pieces? spoken pieces?) By whom? When? When EMU shifted to GSP, for instance, the responses to these questions varied at different points in the process, as this chart illustrates.

FIGURE 5

Message	Where	By Whom	When	Audience
Students are more satisfied when they choose their courses	Meetings with admissions/advising directors	FYWP directors; English department head	Before GSP process initiated	Admissions/advising directors
Students feel in control if they choose their courses and are more likely to persist	Meetings with advisors	FYWP directors; Admissions/advising directors	As process is developed	Advising staff
GSP is a more effective and fair means of placement	Articles in advising newsletter	Admissions/advising directors; FYWP directors	As process is developed	Advising staff

These decisions can be conceptualized using a Ganu chart that lays out the timing of each piece. For instance, given the structure of our admissions and advising system, it would not have been effective to undertake the work in the last box before taking the steps listed before it. The keys to developing a communications plan are to consider several things: What messages

should be advanced? When? To whom? Through what means? And for what purposes?

While the example of the GSP messages focuses on a process advanced through a series of offices that are part of EMU's official bureaucracy (which therefore had to go through channels in that bureaucracy), it's also useful to remember that the story-changing process can work outside of official systems. In the teaching practicum for graduate instructors that I typically teach each fall, for instance, we incorporate Field Work Day. It falls near the end of the presemester part of the practicum—when we are meeting all day, every day—and the intent is for graduate instructors to begin hearing about *and formulating responses to* some of the ways that writing and writers are discussed in situations outside of our program. The night before, graduate instructors will read a sampling of some of the many discussions of writers and writing circulating in mainstream media, and a policy report that includes discussion of writers and writing—I have used *Ready or Not*, the report published by Project Achieve/ADP; *Writing and School Reform*, a report published by the National Commission on Writing (which is supported in part by the College Board); and *Crisis at the Core*, a report published by ACT, for instance.

When graduate instructors come in the next morning, we'll talk briefly about their reactions. Then I'll remind them of their charge (which we will have discussed the previous day). They are to go out in pairs for about 90 minutes and find people with whom to talk. They have to tell them that they are teaching first year writing, and then together we brainstorm questions that will give the graduate instructors a sense of how this nonscientific sample perceives college writers and the work of writing instruction. They return to the classroom after their discussions full of information, which they summarize on large sheets of paper and put on the walls of our classroom; then they present their "findings."

Afterward we talk about how we all could, should, and might respond to these statements. What about the associate dean

who says that freshman composition is like creative writing? What about the secretary who insists that good writing is writing that is correctly formatted and punctuated? What about the student center worker who says that students can't write? What about the student who said she hated writing until she had a great first year course? Working through these real scenarios and practicing how to respond to them (for good or for ill) helps graduate instructors begin to develop their own senses of how they might participate in this ongoing, larger conversation about writing. And again, there are many links between the activities involved here and the work that we undertake regularly as writing instructors. For instance, on Field Work Day we begin a word/phrase bank that we add to through the term. That is, we list words and phrases that we think are useful for describing what we do so that we can practice using these terms—just as we develop strategies with students regarding a specific writing project so that they can refer back to them later. We also practice talking about the work of teaching writing, just as we design opportunities for students to talk about writing during reader review.

Activities like those involved in Field Work Day also serve to cultivate spokespeople for the writing program *other* than the program directors. As the activists and organizers uniformly mentioned, spreading the work of spreading the word is absolutely crucial—a movement consists of *many* people, not just one. The activities involved in Field Work Day also can help instructors consider how they might involve *their* students in conversations about writing, and perhaps begin to cultivate those conversations. For instance, they also develop word banks in their classes, and sections of English 121 participating in the CSW discuss how they might talk with other students about writing. This kind of planned talking work, too, can be part of an overall communication plan.

In summary, then, a thoughtful communication plan has a series of actions.

- Identify an issue that you want to affect (along with your base and allies)
- Identify what you know through research actions
- Develop a message
- Identify audiences and tailor your message
- Think about where, when, to whom, and for what purposes you will circulate your messages:
  - ♦ Internal communications (newsletters, flyers)
  - ♦ External communications (letters to the editors, op-ed pieces, press releases through your campus public relations person or directly to media)
  - ♦ Meetings
  - ♦ Class/pedagogical activities (e.g., Field Work Day, CSW preparations)
  - ♦ Events (CSW)

#### Step Four: Assessing Your Work and Taking the Next Steps

"Assessment" is a word that causes some academics to shake in their shoes. They see it as a Big Brother-like intrusion into their private worlds, a mandate from above that requires them to justify what they are doing for a high-stakes purpose that is usually identified by someone else. But as Brian Huot, Bob Broad, and Patricia Lynne have recently pointed out quite persuasively, assessment is central to our work as teachers. Assessment is also central to the work of the organizing models discussed in chapter 4 (e.g., Chambers and Cowan, Milroy, Gelobter, Wellstone Action; Peterson 2006). It is the process whereby we answer a question that can be deceptively simple: Did it work? Did the story change?

There are several challenges associated with this question, though. First, there's the issue of defining "change," and this has to do with whether we've identified a solvable issue or tackled a bigger picture problem. The example of the SAT writing

exam story illustrates this point well: the frame surrounding news stories about the SAT writing exam *did* change as a result of NCTE's organized efforts; however, the writing exam itself persists (and the College Board continues to argue its validity and reliability). In the same way, as a result of activities like the CSW, the shift to GSP, and work on other writing-focused issues on my campus the story that is told about writing and writers has shifted, but that's not to say that some faculty, administrators, students, and others don't still frame their discussions of writing in ways that aren't entirely comfortable for those of us who teach writing.

Thus, the first question that WPAs and writing instructors need to consider when they assess their work is what it will mean to be "successful." Success in the shape of change can be short term. Did the majority of people who attended event X respond in way Y to a question about the event? It can also be long-term. How does population A (students who participated in the CSW) work with subject B (their experience with the CSW and in English 121) over a period of years, and do they link their way of thinking to experience C?

As these questions illustrate, assessing whether a story-changing effort was successful also depends on identifying the audience and context in which "success" is defined. This also refers to the importance of identifying specific audiences and contexts for this story-changing work. The larger the audience—the campus community, the local community, or the public—the more impossible it will be to determine whether a story-changing effort has been successful. It's important to remember, too, that success is necessary for reasons beyond "winning" on an issue—unless people see some payoff for their efforts, they will not likely continue to be active in the cause. This is another reason to keep the focus local. If you identify a specific issue and a specific audience for story-changing work, it's a lot easier to see if and when that work is successful and point to discernable evidence of a "victory." True, there will be other stories to change—and people will be more excited to

engage in that work when they see that they can, in fact, have some effect.

These potentially complicating issues point to two things: the importance of developing a clear and straightforward plan to change stories (starting with identifying an issue and working through all of the steps described in this chapter), and considering the assessment of that plan as it is being developed. What will be the purpose of the assessment? The most straightforward response would be to figure out if the story-changing effort was successful. Who will be the audience? Again, the simplest response is "we are," the group who is trying to affect the change. Finally, how will you know if you have been successful? The headlining-brainstorm exercise described earlier can help with this—did you get the headline you wanted to? Did you achieve the result? If you did, what worked—what went right, what lessons can you learn, what can you take away from the experience to use again? If you didn't, what didn't work—what could you and others have done differently, what might have been more successful, what can you use to rethink your strategy?

## CONCLUSION: CHANGING STORIES

The steps outlined here, from identifying an issue through assessing work on that issue, overlap with the process of developing a base and forming alliances described in the previous chapter. The three organizing models there—interest-based organizing, values-based organizing, and issue-based organizing—provide structures through which WPAs and writing instructors can consider some of the questions that arise in the process of identifying issues and audiences, identifying and defining messages, formulating a communication plan, and assessing the work of the story-changing effort. Through an interest-based model, work is tactical. Issues arise from conversations with interested and invested individuals; alliances are formed that can result in victories on those issues; audiences and messages are shaped by the base and allies that reflect their



goals with regard to the identified issues. Success is achieved when the issue is won—when the job program is funded, when class sizes for WI courses are reduced. These issues are relatively easy to see; their solutions are easily observed. The alliances around them might be short-term or may result in longer relationships, but their endurance is not the primary concern; instead, the objective is to achieve victory on the issue and to identify leaders who might help to identify other issues and lead to the development of other alliances in the process.

Through a values-based model, work is strategic. A base forms around shared values, and alliances are developed with others who share those values. The base and allies identify issues that arise from their set of shared values, and the messages designed to change stories about those issues always have the values of the base and allies in mind. Successful story-changing work means that the frame is changed—the values of the base and allies are evidence in discussions about the issue. Stories about the SAT writing exam that lead with and are dominated by questions raised by the NCTE, coverage of the Iraq war dominated by strains on the troops and not successes in the field, discussions about WI courses that focus on how central administration can facilitate writing-to-learn—are all evidence of values-based victories. These issues are bigger-picture and longer term. While the base and alliances identified through them are likely to be more enduring, identifying whether a victory has been achieved or not is less clear than through an interest-based model because the conception of “winning” is less clear (what does it mean to shift the values around an issue?); because the assessment methodologies are more complicated (content analysis of news coverage of a specific issue, for instance); and because it can be challenging to point to specific evidence of gain in the short term.

An issue-based model blends elements of interest- and values-based organizing. It starts with individuals’ interests and works outward to their values, targeting long-term change through short-term projects. “Winning” through an issue-based model would include tactical gains—victories on specific issues, and

would then extend to the kind of longer-term values shifting that is the core of values-based organizing. This is the kind of shift, for instance, that seemed to be taking place around No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in March 2007. An increasing number of individuals (such as Democratic Senator Charles Schumer of New York) and organizations (such as NCTE) are critiquing the foundations of NCLB (including the funding appropriated for it and the research studies used to support it), and Congress is beginning to look closely at its design and operation. Tactical actions, like the focused critique of the work of the National Reading Panel and the reading research underscoring Reading First (discussed in chapter 1) seems to be leading to strategic shifts.

Ideals with strategies; strategies with ideals—these are the keys to changing the stories that shape the work that we do as WPAs and writing instructors. There will always be much that we want to change, of course, because there will always be people (and organizations) who decry students’ preparations, or what’s happening in classrooms, or other aspects of education that are important for us. But we can have some influence on how these discussions take place and how they are framed if we work strategically. We can think about where we have the most influence and the loudest voices—at our local levels. We can think about who we can reach out to, learn from, and enlist as allies. And with them, we can develop a communication plan that helps all of us shape and communicate messages about writers and writing to audiences who might just attend to those messages—and change the stories that they tell.