

Contingent Labor and the Impact on Teaching: Thoughts about the Indianapolis Resolution

Alice Horning Oakland University

I signed the Indianapolis Resolution, of course. In my ten years as a WPA, I was keenly aware every day of the exploitation of the forty or so part-timers in my program. I did what I could to improve their lives by trying to give them their preferred schedules and by lowering class size across the board in my program to, in effect, reduce their workloads. I wrote about class size in a way meant to give other WPAs a resource to use in discussions with administrators about contingent faculty, class size, and workload. So I have been raising my voice in support of contingent faculty for a while and support the Indianapolis proposal. But from a pedagogical standpoint, the problem with the abuse of contingent faculty hinges to some degree on their lack of time to engage in professional development, an issue that the Resolution does not specifically address. In section B on pedagogy, I would add a #2A with phrasing something like this: “Develop standards for paid professional development to include training in key areas related to literacy development, such as working with English Language Learners, improving student reading, creating appropriate classroom environments, and similar matters.” In support of the resolution, I propose this supplement to address the need for paid professional development for contingent teachers for five specific reasons.

First, professional development should be paid work for everyone, but especially for contingent faculty. They are poorly paid for the most part and always pressed for time. The life of part-timers is difficult, to say the least: trying to make enough money for food, shelter, and clothing, never mind supporting a family, often teaching two or three or more sections of writing at two or three different places. To do a decent job, be prepared for class, keep up with grading, and so on, there are just not enough hours in the week. And while we might want to think professionals can do all the work, they are surely not going to attend professional development sessions without compensation because there simply is not enough time. All workers are stretched these days, but contingent writing teachers especially so. And while a case can be made for professional development as a reasonable expectation for full-time faculty members, these faculty should be paid, also, for professional development sessions.

A second reason for my proposed supplement to the Resolution is the need for contingent faculty to be better prepared to work with the students coming to post-secondary education of all kinds (community colleges, four-year colleges, universities, certificate programs, online programs, and others). Additional paid professional development should address a variety of needs that contingent faculty might have: dealing with students with disabilities, supporting English Language Learners, constructing effective syllabi, managing the classroom, and, as I have argued elsewhere repeatedly, improving students’ reading. On this last issue, the latest data from NAEP for twelfth graders, from

2013 (the most recent data available on high school seniors), for example, shows that 38% of high school seniors are proficient in reading. Those students are coming to our first-year writing classes this fall. Will the Common Core State Standards make a difference to this number? One can only hope that might be true. Meanwhile, as the saying goes, we have to deal with the students in front of us, and the majority of them are poor readers. There is ample “big” data and qualitative data about the reading problem. It is not getting better and this problem will not go away any time soon. The impact on students’ writing is abundantly clear. And while reading is decidedly NOT “sexy” or slick because there’s no easy hi-tech solution to the problem, it is an issue that can and should be addressed in writing classes. All instructors need to be able to integrate intensive and extensive reading work into their classes to address students’ reading difficulties.

However, a third reason why there should be paid professional development for contingent faculty (and everyone else, as I have already said) is that even those with PhDs and MAs in Rhetoric and Composition or Writing Studies do not have much, if any, training in English as a second language, in disability support, in reading pedagogy and these other issues. They can use help knowing how to tap into campus resources such as an extant common book program, or how to team up with librarians to help students read more efficiently and effectively, or the ways that disabilities might affect student success. And sure, centers for teaching excellence are meant to offer this kind of help, but the time commitment may not be doable without compensation. Can writing programs bring in experts who know something about these matters to do workshops and provide this background and strategies that instructors can take into the classroom? Sure! Do they? Not as much as is needed. So the Indianapolis Resolution opens the door to improved professional development that really can help students succeed.

What both full-time and part-time teachers need are strategies they can use in the classroom, so this is a fourth reason for adding my supplemental language to the Resolution. Monday morning approaches that integrate reading and/or these other issues with writing instruction can make a real difference to student outcomes. For example, if you consider that according to the US Department of Education, half of those who start any kind of post-secondary education never finish, and if you put that statistic next to the weak reading skills of high school seniors, it’s easy to see that reading might be contributing to our poor levels of post-secondary degree completion. So what is needed is not just any professional development, but really focused professional development, paid and mandatory, for the legions of contingent faculty who teach writing. The workshops or programs should provide Monday morning approaches that teachers can use immediately. Such programs would allow faculty develop the skills to deal with the array of issues in their daily work. In particular, teachers should be taught how to recognize students with disabilities, language disorders, or Generation 1.5 English Language Learners (whose spoken language might be quite proficient but who have serious difficulties when writing) who could benefit from tutorials or other interventions. Contingent faculty do not need to be experts, but they do need the kind of training that paid professional development can provide, to identify these kinds of problems and direct students to resources on or off campus.

Some instructors, both full- and part-time, will raise objections to a professional development focus on reading and other issues, saying they don’t have time to attend to any of these problems

when there is so much to do with students' writing. In my various recent books and articles, I have tried to show that the best way to improve students' writing IS to work specifically on their reading because it is a high priority problem for more than half of the students in the average classroom. I'm not the only one who thinks this way, as a range of recent publications makes clear (Carillo; Keller; Jolliffe and Goering; Salvatori and Donahue; Sullivan et al.). One particularly clear example appears in a 2012 piece by Chris Anson and Robert Schwegler on reading in peer review. Their findings show that there is a need for better reading to enhance what happens during peer exchanges. This commonly used classroom practice is hardly the only one where focused instruction on reading could really enhance students' writing performance and their success in writing classes, in college, and in their lives as professionals and citizens, so this is a fifth reason why I support the Resolution but think specific supplemental language on professional development is needed.

It should be clear that the Indianapolis Resolution opens the door to helping improve the lives of contingent faculty. But to help them work more effectively, be paid fairly, and be treated professionally, we need to address their ability to work with all students, whether they need help with reading or on some other issue that interferes with developing their writing abilities. Contingent faculty should be compensated appropriately for professional development work that would provide useful background in areas such as reading, among other topics not part of the usual grad school preparation, like working with students with disabilities. But in addition to background, faculty members should be equipped with specific strategies they can take directly into their classrooms. Understanding useful strategies for the classroom will allow them to provide writing instruction that yields a stronger curriculum across the board.

I signed the Indianapolis Resolution, and I really hope it becomes a working document in our field. It should be widely distributed and supported by all of our major professional organizations. It should be presented to administrators, accrediting bodies, and other professional organizations, including the AAUP and other national groups. It needs to advocate specific steps that should be taken to improve the working conditions and the work of contingent faculty. As all faculty face students with a broad array of needs and challenges, including widespread reading difficulties, paid professional development can improve faculty efficacy in the classroom. As part of this effort, I hope the Resolution can be supplemented in the way I have suggested here so it can serve as a tool for improving the teaching and learning of writing to help every student succeed.

WORKS CITED

- Anson, Chris M., and Robert A. Schwegler. "Tracking the Mind's Eye: A New Technology for Researching Twenty-First-Century Writing and Reading Processes." *College Composition and Communication* 64.1 (2012): 151-71. Print.
- "Are the Nation's Twelfth-Graders Making Progress in Mathematics and Reading?" *The Nation's Report Card*. National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2013. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. Print.
- "College Affordability and Completion: Ensuring a Pathway to Opportunity." U.S. Department of Education, n.d. Web. 14 Jan. 2016.
- Horning, Alice S., Deborah-Lee Gollnitz, and Cynthia Haller. *What Is College Reading?* ATD Books, forthcoming. Print.
- Jolliffe, David A., and Christian Z. Goering, eds. *A Call for Revolution in High School to College Reading Instruction*. Spec. issue of *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* 67 (2014). Print.
- Keller, Daniel. *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2014. Print.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi, and Patricia Donahue, eds. *Reading*. Spec. issue of *Pedagogy*. *Pedagogy* 16.1 (2016). Web.
- Sullivan, Patrick, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau, eds. *Writing Teachers Teaching Reading*. Urbana: NCTE, forthcoming. Print.