

Writing and Working Conditions

Interview with Dr. Mark Blaauw-Hara, Assistant Teaching Professor, Institute for the Study of University Pedagogy (ISUP) (UT-M); Dr. Julia Lane, Writing Services Coordinator (SFU)

Facilitated by Dr. Jason Collins (UVic)

Editorial note: there were two other interviews conducted but both participants asked that their transcripts not be published, and their names be redacted. Any contributions from those interviewees have been anonymized for their protection.

Interview Questions

- What do you see as the biggest impact of precarious working conditions on teaching writing studies?
- Writing is primarily taught by precarious academic workers. How can writing programs and administrators create working conditions that build community, safety, and security?
- Most institutions in what is now called Canada are unionized. How can writing programs and centres work with unions to better support staff and instructors?
- What steps might administrators take to secure the resources necessary to operate underfunded and undervalued writing programs?
- Writing centre staff often lack academic freedom. How might that lack be an issue and how can associations, unions and other support mechanisms assist writing staff in this regard?
- Does writing studies in what is now called Canada suffer from lack of academic identity exacerbated by precarious working conditions and even deprofessionalization? If so, what thoughts do you have on a solution?

Transcript

Facilitator (Dr. Jason Collins): Okay. So, the first question on post-secondary writing and working conditions, we'd like to know what do you see as the biggest impact of precarious working conditions on teaching writing studies? So, what are some of those main impacts on our work that we do teaching writing in this often precarious position?

Dr. Mark Blaauw-Hara: Yeah, I'm happy to start things off. And I do look forward to hearing what Julia has to say, though, because I did want to mention that we come from some just different roles within our respective universities, and so our perspectives might be a little bit different. And so, I look forward to learning from her as well as just participating in this awesome series.

So just briefly about my own perspective, this is my fourth year in Canada at the University of Toronto-Mississauga, and what we're trying to do at UTM, as we call it, is to have one of... not the only, but one of Canada's few required first year writing courses for all incoming students that everybody who comes to UTM would take prior to graduation. So that's a new thing for us, for sure. It is... As some of the introductory materials in the packet mentioned, it's pretty common in the United States, which is where I'm from, but it's rare in Canada. And so, this is my fourth year. During most of that time I have been the coordinator for that first-year writing course, which currently is required of about 50% of the incoming students at UTM.

Prior to that, in the States, I worked for 20 years at a smaller college, where I was the writing program coordinator for our writing program, which included first year writing as well as what we call developmental or basic writing, which would be, quote unquote, pre-college writing. And then I also served as the Vice President, President, and immediate Past President of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, which technically is an international organization for writing program administrators, but in practice is overwhelmingly an American organization. Again, partially because it... writing programs of the type that are kind of addressed like first-year writing professional writing type programs are more common in the US. So anyway, that's the perspective that I'm coming from.

And with both of those professional contexts as well as my position as the former president of that organization, this issue of contingent workers and, you know, precarity was really front of mind for all of us, and it continues to be in my current position. It's absolutely true, as was said in the in the blurb, that these programs and the courses they're in, are really overwhelmingly staffed by folks who are hired on a course by course basis. And that has a really big impact on what you can do with those programs as well as the students as well as, of course, the faculty who are teaching those courses. And so, I do have some initial thoughts. I know Julia and I both, kind of... because we're nerds, we pre-wrote all kinds of ideas that we want to be sure to talk about. I do, Julia, want to be sure not to talk for too much of this hour and be able to pass it on to you.

But just to start things off, some of the impacts that these precarious working conditions have on the teaching of the writing studies, one of the big things is, and this is not going to be a surprise to I don't think any of you, but learning to teach writing well is an iterative process that is, of course, informed by scholarship. But it's also informed by practice, and it's informed by the lore that you would pick up from working within a vibrant community of other people who are teaching writing. And so, for those folks who are hired on a, you know, a contingent term by term or course by course contract or even a little bit longer, like a two year contract where they don't know if it's going to be renewed, it makes it more challenging for them to teach a good writing course, especially because what it means to do a good job teaching a writing course is like... it's place dependent, you know? Every writing program is going to have its own philosophy, its own way of approaching, you know, how to teach students, how to function within the particular university that they're in. And that university or college that the students are going to come into has its own particular

demographics, its own pressures, its own courses. UTM is very different from even the, you know, downtown St. George campus of the University of Toronto. And those are very different from, you know, Winnipeg or what not, you know, like, these are all just very different locations. And so, if you're a faculty member who's trying to piece together a living by teaching course at a lot of different areas in a lot of different colleges, then you're having to shift your teaching philosophy, sometimes fairly radically, as you move from institution to institution. And it becomes difficult to get really good at addressing the needs of the student population in that institution. I'm... I noticed here... [referring to the Zoom chat] the context. Yes, BC is, for sure, ahead of Ontario in terms of first year writing courses. And so, I did want to acknowledge that. So thank you for the correction. One of the things... I'm going to talk about a community of practice in response to the next question. So, I'm going to elide that a little bit right here, but if you are moving in and out of these different teaching locations and different universities, different colleges, it becomes difficult to join that community of practice as well as contribute meaningfully to that community of practice. And so, that precarity impacts the instructors there.

And then, from a writing program administrator, a writing program coordinator's perspective, as I have been for close to 24 years at this point, I find myself asking myself how much work is reasonable to ask of contingent instructors. And how much support is necessary for those contingent instructors. They require a different level of support than somebody who has been teaching in the program for five years or 10 years. And so, as you are, you know, coordinating a writing program and thinking about, let's say, a mid-semester professional development workshop, it becomes very challenging to plan that and make, like, just one workshop that is going to be genuinely useful to everybody across that program when people have such, such different levels of experience and such different needs. And then on that question of like... that I ask myself: how much work is reasonable? You know, I ask myself, like, how much benchmarking can I ask people to do if they think that they are... or if they anticipate that they're only going to be teaching one course for us, you know? If we are doing a... Like, we have a writing about writing pedagogy. that draws heavily from teaching for transfer curriculum. That's really different from, like, a first-year writing course that is really rhetoric based, let's say, you know? And so how much pre-reading can I ask new faculty members to do, you know of, like, kind of the fundamental scholarship in that area? These are things that I don't have easy answers for. And I find myself changing all the time, you know, what I ask instructors to do.

But it would be a lot easier for everybody involved if we had writing programs that were overwhelmingly staffed by faculty with continuing contracts. You know? It would be a different program. And I think it would be better for the students, it would be better for me – it would decrease my workload. And then also I think it would be a lot better for the faculty members. That's what UTM's program was originally designed to be. When it was proposed, it was supposed to be taught almost entirely by faculty with continuing contracts. When I applied for the job and got this position that was still the intention – was to increase those continuing contracts dramatically year by year. And then the university decided with some changeovers in leadership that that was not a priority for them

anymore. So, at this point, we find that we are staffing more and more courses with contingent labor. So, I don't mean... Julia and I traded emails and she said that when she wrote out her answers, she got very sad and depressed. So don't worry. There's going to be some positive things, I think, that both of us are going to be talking about but. But it's, at least for my first answer, the biggest impact of precarious working conditions, I think it's bad for everybody. So, all right. Moving on to Julia. What do you have to say?

Facilitator: Yeah. Thanks, Mark.

Dr. Julia Lane: Thanks Mark. Yeah... I'll start by introducing myself. My name is Julia. I use she/her pronouns. I am... My background is Irish and English and Scottish, and I'm doing a lot of work right now to learn about that because I don't really have a lot of sense of where my people come from. I liked how Danica introduced her parents. So, my mom is Dawn. She grew up in the US. In Clearwater, Florida and in Alabama. And my dad is Steve. And he grew up in Ontario, which is where I was born as well. And then I moved out here. I now work at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, and I struggle with all those names because this place is not British or Colombian and Simon Fraser didn't create this university, and it's not his land. So, I am here in shared territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-waututh and Coquitlam First Nations. I want to shout out my earrings. These earrings were made by Alysha Collie, and I'm going to throw a link in the chat to her linktree in case folks want to check out her work. She's a storyteller and filmmaker and beader. So I'm just going to put that in there. Thanks, Heather [responding to the Zoom chat]. They are amazing. I got them this summer. My parents got them for me. So that, just to give you a little bit of sense of me and where I'm coming from.

So, I work in the... we call it here a Student Learning Commons. And so, it's a writing centre... Because I'm writing, am involved in the writing centre, I call us the "writing centre plus" because I'm very, like, writing-centric. I'm sure my colleagues think of us as like a Learning Centre plus writing, but... So we all situate each other as the add-ons. But yeah, so we do writing support and English as additional language support and learning strategy support for the university. And I started working here when I was a graduate student finishing a PhD in arts education on semester-by-semester contracts. And then I graduated and came back to work in a three-year term contract as a writing services associate. And right after I finished being in that associate position, they decided – the powers that be decided – that, actually, I had been doing coordinator level work which is like the next step up in the hierarchy. I had done it for about two-and-a-half years, almost the full three-year contract. And so, they posted the position as a coordinator level position. And they posted it at that time as a continuing. So, it had been a three-year contract, and then it became a continuing and one, sort of, step-up position, which was in some ways kind of validating but also, like, materially incredibly invalidating because I had done the job not in those conditions.

And it was a wild time. So that position was... When it was posted, I had actually interviewed for and gotten a coordinator-level position from a colleague that some folks

may remember: Amanda Goldrick-Jones. I don't know. Maybe other people don't remember. To me, she was like a big deal because she was my teacher and my mentor, and she retired in December 2020. So, I took up this role in January 2020. And some of us may remember what happened in March 2020. And some of us may still be in a blur from that time. And so it was, yeah... Really wild. Yay! [referring to the Zoom chat] Katja, you remember Amanda? So, I frequently say I lost a mentor and gained a global pandemic. So it was really exciting for me to be taking on that role. And I kid not when I say that the closing date for the that coordinator position that they had created was the day the university shut down and went remote. And so, as it turned out, they were like, oh, we can't... Everything's too "ahhhh" – there was a lot of handwringing, and so we just didn't. We just didn't. It just went on pause. And so, then I had two jobs. And for most of the time that I've been in this role, I've kind of been doing two jobs. And that... It turns out that's not great. I feel quite tired.

But... So, we went on hold from March 2020 until September 2020, and then we did ultimately hire. But, again, in a precarious... So, it had it had been intended to be continuing. We're not... Ah. So many details. But at that time, we were in the "APSA," which is the Administrative and Professional Staff Association in the university. So, this is why we use – we *don't* use the language of like tenure or anything like that because we were not in faculty lines at all. We were staff lines/positions. So "continuing" meaning, like, stable: stable employment. And then it was changed to be contract. I believe it was only a one-year contract initially. Possibly two.

And so, we did hire for that role, and we had someone in the position, and we did extend the contract a number of times. And every time the conversation came up about extending the contract, I tried to say we actually need to talk about this being continuing. Because that was the like the... We don't need an extended contract. We need a continuing role. But I didn't. I wasn't successful in that work of trying to make the conversation be about it being continuing. And so, in the more recent rounds of budget crisis and shenanigans, we have lost that position. So we are now from three down back to two positions in our centre focused on writing, and my colleague who is in the other role, the other continuing role, has been on leave for over a year.

So... Speaking from "I statements," I feel tired, and things are hard. And so, back to the question – that was just all introduction, everybody: who I am and where I'm coming from. And I will also introduce... I mentioned that we had been in the Administrative and Professional Staff Association [APSA], and we have recently moved from there into SFUFA. So, SFU Faculty Association. Confusingly, they're both called associations. APSA is an Administrative and Professional Staff Association. It is not a union. The Faculty Association is a union. So just to make it extra hard, we call them both associations, but one is a union. And that's why – in some ways that's why we were able to make the move. It's much more challenging if you're in an actual union to move to another actual union. So, I am going to talk a bit about that move and how that's impacted us and not impacted us. But I do want to say some of the things I wrote down.

So, in terms of biggest impacts of precarious working conditions... Like Mark was saying, I think there's so many biggest impacts that it's really hard to, like, even know what they all are because this is the water that we all swim in, and it's really hard to name the water that you're in. But I think that for me, and maybe this makes sense having just said everything I said about what we've experienced, the biggest thing that comes to my mind is just the perpetual losses that we endure. That I – and when I say we, I mean writing studies, I mean the profession, because I think the question kind of asks for that rather than just speaking about myself as an individual. So, we are losing people from our centres, we're losing colleagues who we have connections with and relationships with, and, along with them, of course, their knowledge and skills and experiences when they leave or are pushed out, right? When their contracts no longer exist, it's not even a choice to leave. And sometimes there is a choice to leave to look for more stable and supportive work. Who can blame anyone for that? And I think it's also important for me to name that even when folks stay, if they're staying in a precarious role and this, like, kind of perpetual contract renewal, there's what I came up with myself is this idea of a "slow leak effect" because of the precarious nature of the work. We/I/people in those positions, I don't think can invest as much of themselves into positions that are temporary because we're always on shifting ground, and so we don't feel the investment back to us, and thus it is vulnerable on an emotional and a practical level to actually invest of ourselves back into that role.

And then on a practical level, we might actually be like in the hustle, looking for other jobs. That means we've got other work going on, and so we can't just be 100% available – and not that anybody should ever have to be 100% available for your job. But even though the, like, whatever percent is for your job, there's a reduction in the percent that's available. And yeah, and then emotionally and psychologically, like we may also just be protecting our vulnerable selves from getting too attached to a job that... From everybody that I have connected with who's been in this kind of work, we love the work, we love being... the privilege of getting to work with writing and getting to work with each other. But then there's this feeling that, like, I might get too attached, and I might get edged out. This work might not exist for me, and that feels really hard emotionally.

And so, in addition to those like practical and emotional psychological "biggest impacts," I think that there's also structural and systemic biggest impacts that we have to think about. Recognizing that post-secondary institutions like so many institutions, maybe all institutions, are very hierarchical places. And I suspect that that may also be true where writing centres and writing studies exist outside of post secondaries – like community centres and in secondary schools and in public libraries – but I don't really know about those because I don't work there, so I will not speak to them. But if others have that perspective, I'd love to hear it. And so, there's like our individual precarity as people in positions that may not be adequately resourced, but then there's also the precarity of the actual writing studies department or writing centre within the larger institution. And those things can be correlated. So, the precarity of our spaces within the larger institutional ecosystem. But it can also be... So, like, we might be in a precarious space, with precarious positions as a result of the precarity of the space and the under resourcing of it

within the larger context. But sometimes we might have what feel like more stable positions as individuals – we have continuing roles or we're on the tenure-track line, or something like that – but that ground can still be really shifting because the actual space of our work within the institution is unstable, is under-resourced, is undervalued. And so, the whole bottom can drop out. And then we can be back into experiencing that precarity.

So yeah. And then the one last thing I want to say in answer to this question is, like, within that context of being sort of precarious structurally or systemically within an institution, even when we are able ourselves as individuals to invest more professionally in our work and our knowledge and our experience, that work and acknowledge and experience and credentials are often not situated in impactful ways within the university, which then decreases our ability to have a wider impact.

And so that's really very much on my mind right now with this transition that we've been making into the Faculty Association. And particularly because – and I'm not really sure if I'm allowed to talk about this, I don't think I've been told that I can't. But it's interesting how universities and... which make us feel like we should be silent. So, I'm not silent, but like, maybe don't go tell everyone. But at the bargaining table, the university has insisted on referring to us as "quasi faculty." And saying "yes, you can move into the Faculty Association, but you are not faculty. You are basically staff that we have moved into this union, and we will continue to treat you like that." And that's not been great for a lot of reasons. And, anyway, I don't want to get into all the weeds of that, but I'm happy to answer questions about it. But one of the really, really... One of the parts of that that has me really concerned is that in situating us like that, they are basically saying we will have no pathways to sit on Senate or the Board of Governors because we will not be occupying faculty roles – which have seats on those governing bodies and decision making bodies – but we no longer will have the pathway of sitting on seats that are for administrative and professional staff either. And so, we basically just don't exist in those structures of decision making and representation. And so clearly that's... It's concerning for us as individuals, but it's also, I think, the kind of pattern that we need to be on the lookout for in terms of losses in our field. Where are our perspectives and our credentials and our expertise being undermined or lost in the larger representation and decision making of these institutions that we work for. And, as a result of that, where are the students that we work with, their concerns and perspectives that we get first-hand knowledge of very often, *not* then also being brought forward. So, yeah. Without stable and respected roles within the university, we can't advocate for ourselves, we can't advocate for our field, and we also can't advocate for and with students. So, I think that's, for me, the biggest impact – although I think there are so many. So that is... Yeah, that's my answer to the first question. Thank you.

Facilitator: Thanks, Julia, and thanks, Mark. Thanks for getting us situated both in what you do and in some of these impacts: systemic, personal workplace or working condition-related impacts. So, our next question is about what can we do, right? What are some things we can do. So whether it's a writing program administrator or writing centre director,

what are some things we could do to create working conditions that build community safety and security? So, to Mark's point, some of the "upbeat" stuff, hopefully.

Blaauw-Hara: I think we can. I think, that most faculty members who are in precarious positions, I think, know that that's not my choice, you know, or anybody else in the... my – it's called the Institute for the Study of University Pedagogy – that this is not our doing. And I wanted to mention as well [*referring to the Zoom chat*], just about, like, silliness at the university: Sarah posted that teaching faculty were not allowed to be chairs or directors. Yeah, I'm a teaching-stream faculty member and, like, we have in our whole department, we only have 3 tenure-stream faculty members or research-stream faculty members and the rest of us are teaching stream, which is pretty appropriate because we are supposed to be studying and publishing about pedagogy, and then also teaching. And we're in this situation where we are not, by university policies, allowed to evaluate tenure-stream faculty members for things like promotion or tenure. And so, they have to bring in – for chairs of our department – they have to bring in people external to the department because we have so few people who are tenure stream in our department, which is just... We've had the good fortune of having some really great people, but it has been kind of a mess in terms of a process, and it's pretty nutty.

But anyway, back to the question here. So, I think transparency is the big thing. A precariously employed faculty member has just so much stress and insecurity that is just built into their situation that anything that we can do to make sure that what we have control over is as transparent as possible, I think is much appreciated and can hopefully reduce some stress and then hopefully help them feel... just good about their role. I have been experiencing something recently, because I'm cross-appointed to another department – and the individuals of that department are really wonderful to work with – but I have found it has – I only teach one course for that department – and I have found, like, just the questions of how do I get scheduled to teach it again for the following year? and when do I turn my syllabi in? and all that kind of stuff to be absolutely mystifying as somebody who is kind of only tangentially associated with that department. And that's been difficult for me as a human, but also really good for me as somebody who's a writing coordinator because it's helped me... It's just reminded me what it feels like to be called in, you know, to teach a course and just not understand a lot about how the department works or when you get this in or that in.

So, what I've tried to do... That experience inspired me to really put a ton of work into... it's called "Quercus," but it's just a variety of Canvas at the University of Toronto, to put a lot of work into our departmental Quercus shell. Lots of model assignments and syllabi and readings. And anytime we do a benchmarking workshop, I post those essays and the benchmarking materials up there and make videos about "here is how to set up your gradebook," and here is how to do this and just try to be as, like, forthcoming as I possibly can and not to guard materials in the ways that some faculty... You know, sometimes we think of our assignments as our intellectual property and we're reluctant to share those things. I just try not to do that and to encourage other people not to do that. And then to try,

again, to be as transparent as possible about, like, when hiring happens and how scheduling happens and how to request courses. Which... Those particular things are not done entirely by me. They're done by other folks who work within my department, but just trying to make sure that it's really, really clear. I put together an FAQ document about, like, how do you do all of that kind of stuff and posted it up on the Quercus site and let people know about that. How to turn your grades in, things like that.

And that ties into my next point about... I think it's good for us to ask ourselves how can we build,, like a really expansive resource system? Because, for sure we want to do onboarding. But you can't always... You know, like a three-hour onboarding session is just not going to address every question that somebody's going to have. And some of those questions come up at, you know, 9:00 at night, right after they get a question from a student. And so, how can we get together a really understandable asynchronous collection of resources as well as making sure that they know that I'm available to ask specific questions of.

Another thing that I think about, I noticed in the packet of materials that everybody got there were several citations of Louise Wetherby Phelps, who is just a luminary in terms of a scholar about writing programs. I had the good fortune – she's done cross-border, you know, scholarship with Canadian and American writing programs, along with Jennifer Clary-Lemon, who's also cited in your materials. But anyway, Louise was my dissertation supervisor, and I had the good fortune of taking several courses from her too, and including one on writing program administration. And she introduced me to the work of Karl... I don't.... I would pronounce his name Weick: W-E-I-C-K. I have some resources that I'm going to share with everybody at the end of this. But Karl Weick talked about organizational improvisation in this reading that Louise shared with us, and that really struck me. And it's something that I've carried with me for years, as I think about how to support people who work in the writing programs that I coordinate.

So, he was – or *is* – an organizational theorist, and he had this analogy that maybe really struck me because I'm a musician. And he said that good organizations should be able to function like basically a group of jazz musicians who are jamming. And so, he said that in a jazz ensemble, everybody knows – like when they're playing a song – everybody knows the basic structure of that song. So everybody knows what key the song is in; everybody has probably heard that song before, and just has just a sense of, like, on a macro level, what that song needs to do. And yet, very rarely, are people's individual parts dictated within that song. Instead, there's this ebb and flow that happens. This give and take. This communication that is happening between the different musicians. And they're building something new every time that they play that song. That song is not played the same each time, even with the same musicians. And that's one of the most exciting things about jazz music. And I would expand that beyond his... beyond jazz and say that as a musician, I've experienced that in rock formats or other sorts of improvisational music, you know. And it's super fun and super gratifying as a musician to be in a situation like that where you know that your quote unquote “voice” is going to be respected. It's nerve wracking to try to think

of what you're going to play in a given moment, but it's also fascinating and fun, and, I hope, when it works well, it's great for people who are listening to it too. And Karl Weick said that we should think about organizations in that way.

And I try to think of writing programs in that way. So I try to think, like, what is the structure of the song that we're trying to perform in a writing course, let's say. What are, kind of, the key elements of it? I personally have found threshold concepts to be really useful as I think about that because threshold concepts, by their nature, are these gigantic, you know, big ideas. And so, you know, what are some of the threshold concepts that we want our students to engage with over the course of a term? What are some of the key readings or the key ideas – discourse communities, rhetoric, genre analysis, things like that – that we want our students to engage with in that semester? And then trying to help all the instructors, including those who are contingently employed, understand, like, this is kind of the song that we are trying to play, but that there is room within that song for people to improvise and for people to bring in their own perspectives – the readings that they love teaching methods that they love, that maybe have worked well in an entirely different program that was at an entirely different institution, or that maybe are developed in response to questions in the moment that students have or something that they notice on an essay, you know? So how can they improvise within their courses, and how can I as the coordinator let them know that those improvisations are not just respected, but that they're welcome?

And so, I think that some concrete ways that we can do that – in addition to just talking about those metaphors and making sure that appropriate materials are accessible to faculty within that program about, like, you know, rhetorical genre analysis. What is that? How can you read some scholarship on it? And if you have time, how can..., you know, what are we trying to get at?

Well, some concrete ways to do that that I think work all right is to... When we just revised our curriculum to... We were trying to make it more actively antiracist about a year ago, when we revised that curriculum. And so, we got away from a textbook, and we brought in some readings that we had found. But then one thing that we also did was we created – this smaller team that I worked with – we created rationales and explanations for all of our major essays. So rather than saying “faculty, you must have these readings that are in every essay and there's no flexibility for you” or “you must have these assignments and there's no flexibility,” we tried to really pare down the readings that people had to require. So, we said, you know, here's three readings that we want you to pick two out of that are required for this particular essay. We've also put together kind of a grab bag of about six other readings that we think would work well for this essay, and you can pick from those, or you can bring in other readings that you have found that work well. But we want you to keep in mind this larger rationale for what we're trying to get at for the essay. And so, we wrote up, you know, they're about a page and half, really instructor-facing rationales for just theoretically and then practically here's what we're trying to get the students to engage with. And here's what we're trying to get the students to think about as they write this

essay. How might you do that? You know? And so, the idea behind those materials again is to help the faculty who have just joined the program, as well as continuing faculty, help them understand what the song is that that particular essay is. And then like, what are the areas that they can improvise with their teaching, and how can they bring their own expertise and their own knowledge in?

And then also to make sure that the faculty know that we are not just, you know, I don't know... doing that to feel good about ourselves, to have teaching showcases that happen where those contingent faculty members, as well as you know, continuing faculty members, are invited, if they want to, if they feel comfortable, to share activities that they have done in the class that that they think have worked well. So, for instance, we had a number of them that happened last year where faculty members were bringing in ways that they have taught the students about discourse communities, code meshing, ways that they have... One thing that we've been hitting really hard is linguistic equity. Nelesi Rodrigues was one of your guest speakers in the last session. She's one of my colleagues who has been a wonderful contributor to our understanding as a department with linguistic equity. We also have some other faculty members who are much more expert than me on this, but... So we had people coming in and talking about how they had drawn YouTube clips from Bollywood movies or, you know, how they taught their students rhetorical genre analysis with film... I can't even remember what they're called, but like on Netflix, where you're considering watching a movie, and they have the picture of the film, and then they have a description of it. You know, how can they tell what type of film, and, you know, stuff like that. And so, these are fascinating things that I wouldn't have thought of. And it's a way to just reinforce that contingent faculty, that their expertise is valued, that they don't have to move in lockstep with me, let's say, okay?

And I think that things like that lead to developing a robust community of practice within a writing program. And then I'm drawing, you know, from Lave and Wenger, you know, this concept of "communities of practice" where people are really sharing the ways that they approach, you know, getting something done. And that they are legitimately contributing, even if they're on the periphery of that community of practice, which I would say that somebody who's new to a program is more on the periphery of that community of practice. How can they legitimately contribute to that community?

Additionally, this might sound kind of funny, but any time that we have projects or committees, I try to make sure to let sessional faculty members know that they are welcome to serve on those committees and that they are... You know, sometimes I'll reach out if I know that somebody has expertise or interest in a particular area that I think would fit well. I'll reach out to them. For example, right now, again because of some leadership changeover, we've been experiencing some pressure to justify that our first-year writing course actually works. Like what's it doing? What are the students experiencing? Do they write better? Does the, quote unquote, "small class size," which I still think is too big, of 25 students, does that produce connections between students and help lead to increased student retention and stuff like that, or help their transition into the university? And so, it's

this very big, sprawling research project that we did all year last year and we're doing all year this year, and it has a lot of different areas, and I want to make sure that faculty members who are sessionals or on limited appointments, know that they're welcome to participate in these if they have the time and if they want to. And we have had a number of faculty members in those situations volunteer to be part of those. And I try to find ways, working with them, for them to participate, that just respects that they might not have a ton of time or they may not want to give us a ton of time. And then after they participate, I try to use my institutional cachet to write them really, really thoughtful letters of appreciation that they can use in their file, and I also reach out to them and let them know – in a way that I hope is very positive and appreciative – that I understand that probably they don't see themselves as being in this sessional job, teaching one or two courses for us, forever, and I let them know that I really appreciate their work, and if they ever need a letter of reference or, you know, they want me to be one of their references that I would say glowing things about them. And I have had faculty members, both sessional faculty members who have gone on to be LTAs and continuing status faculty members who just have not felt as though their skills have really been utilized by my department, who have gone on to get jobs at other institutions, and I have gladly served as their reference, and I'm really happy that they have gone on to get other positions.

I think that one of our... If we are in the happy circumstance of having any sort of institutional power, I think we have a huge responsibility to just recognize that contingent workers who work with us, we need to recognize that they... Even though we want to make the best possible working conditions for them that we can, it's still not a good working condition for them. They need to... They want to move on, okay? And so, what can we do to make it easier for them to move on and get the types of jobs that are going to respect them and help them have some security in their lives and help them feed their families. That, I think, is a responsibility that we have. So how can we help our contingent workers gain experience in ways that will help them get other jobs. I think that's something that we need to do. Okay. Yeah. Tapping Julia on the shoulder. How can you add in?

Facilitator: Yes, thanks Mark. Hi, Julia.

Lane: Yes. Thanks, Mark. I love that you talked about improv because I am an improviser – like *theatre* improv experience, not music improv. So, I was having that part of my brain tickled when you were talking about improvisation. And I just, I want to “yes and” something that you said – to bring in the improv. So, you said that we want... that the improvisational space is one where we can... we need to know that we have our voice respected and welcome. And that we're not just, you know, walking in lockstep, but we know enough about the song that we can kind of bring something in or the song or the scene or whatever, whatever, improvising. And what I added in my notes is “respected and welcome and protected,” I think is something that I... especially if I think the question being about what programs and administrators can do. And I've been thinking about this in the context that we are in, where, having been in staff roles and now being in this, like, no role situation that we're in, we don't have academic freedom, we don't have intellectual

property rights to our work – like you were talking about your course materials, Mark. We've never been in that position of being told that we have any kind of intellectual property rights over the things that we create. And that situation in this larger ecosystem feels very dangerous right now. It feels like the things that we're trying to do and say in our work – and you're talking about, you know, actively creating, trying to have your program come from a more anti racist stance – this is work that people... – I don't know about where you all are – but this is work that people are coming for right now at our institution, like quite actively.

So, I just on Friday – this is not part of my notes because it just happened – but on Friday afternoon I was teaching in a three-hour lecture – the lecture was a Health Sciences course on social determinants of health and the instructor is phenomenal – and one of the core learning objectives of the course is for students to learn about inclusive and anti-racist writing practices, and I created some inclusive and anti-racist writing guides in our institution – which are [*referring to W&P Teams repository*] shared with us in the collection of materials. And so, this instructor has always asked me to come in and do, for the last three years, to do a session on that for the students. So, I did. And I had this, just, in the lead up to it for the first time, had this sense that, like, maybe I'm not super protected when I do this work. And it definitely speaks to my high degree of privilege that it's the first time that that occurred to me. But it was occurring to me because of all... That is actually also interesting: in moving into the faculty association, we're on all kinds of different mail lists now that we didn't used to be on, and so we're seeing a lot more of the kinds of conversations that are happening at the university. And you can't unsee those things. And you then are like, wow, *this* is the water. I thought it was this, but it's actually, *this* is the water that I meant.

So, there's definitely a lot of faculty who are doing a lot of work to... progressive work and challenging, critical, anti racist work. And there's a lot of faculty who are not, and who are kind of actively working against that and working for institutional neutrality. And so being someone who does not... My work is not protected by academic freedom, so if I say things and my credentials and my expertise and my voice are not valued or protected in the institution, and someone decides that I shouldn't be saying those things, I don't know what will happen. But I think that that real sense that in order to... When I think about those words, "build community and safety and security," trust is a huge part of all of those, and recognizing that many, many people, especially people who are in precarious contingent positions, who are often also racialized people or people who have other forms of oppressed identities, have high degrees of very, very valid institutional mistrust. And so, we don't come in from a place of trusting that our voices are respected or welcomed. And then when we also sense that they're potentially not protected, I think that's a really hard place to start building community and safety and security from. And so, Jason, I know you said hopefully this is the more uplifting question, and I looked at my notes and I was like, oh sorry. But I mean, I really love all of the really positive things that Mark shared or that we can be doing on a really human personal level to connect with each other to share from a place of privilege, to share any institutional privilege we have and, sort of, think about what

resources we have access to and how are we actively reallocating those resources instead of hoarding. So, I love all of those things that you said, Mark, and I “yes and” them.

And I also think for me when I saw this question, what administrator... I mean, I am not an administrator. Our administrator, the head of our centre, is going on a six-month leave, and so we've been trying to figure out who's going to step up to it, and I was like, oh gosh, I hope it's not me. But... So, you know, this is me feeling into unknown space to think about this. But from my perspective, administrators can and need to think really strategically and big picture about this work and the place of this work within the institution, and honestly name what that is to the people that they work with, and then be really ready to advocate in the wider institutional ecosystem. So, being ready and excited, I guess, to speak about our skills and qualifications and the essential role that we play in the work of the institution. And I, what I wrote here is, I think this advocacy needs to be not only really bold, but it also needs to be persistent perhaps to the point of being like dogged. It needs to just be constant. And then... Because I think in the absence of seeing that kind of, like, “I will step up for you, I have your back” [attitude], what I have experienced is a kind of “talking the talk but not walking the walk” [attitude] around community and safety and security. And that feels like gaslighting to me. That is what I have felt, and I see some nodding [*referring to the video feed*], is that it feels like people are being like, and this is the quote I wrote, “I know your position is only a three-month contract, and I'm not going to do anything about that, but trust me, I want you to feel safe and secure as part of this community. And here we have a potluck lunch. Hooray, we're a community.” And that's what it feels like a lot of the time for me. So, I'm just naming that I don't think this is a strategy that works. So, yes. I think that the really strategic resource sharing that Mark was talking about is a huge part of it and really big picture. Persistent advocacy so that we feel and see that our administrators appreciate us and have our backs.

And then... Because beyond that, I actually don't know if community and safety and security are realistic or the goals that we should be approaching, like trying to approach, in the context of precarious labor. For my own self, when I have been in those roles, I've actually found it much more helpful to have administrators just acknowledge my precarity and insecurity and then help me, like Mark was saying, help me think strategically about how I might get out of, like, how this might be a next step – which is also really, like... It's like the snake eating its own tail a little bit, I think because it feels like – I saw Sarah [*referring to the Zoom chat*] saying what we need is a stable workforce, and so we're doing all these... we're all putting in all this work to, like, help all these people leave us. And so, we're back in that loss. When we have this structure and very often the best we can do is help people leverage a precarious role so that they can leave and go somewhere else, and then we lose our colleagues and our friends, and we lose their knowledge and expertise, and we're back into... that's where we're putting our labor is helping the next person leverage the role and leave us. So, I don't think that's a great long-term solution. I think it's where we are. But on a personal level, having that recognition – like this is a precarious contingent role, it is not secure, and I want to help you be strategic about that – feels more genuine and empowering than just being, like, you are a valued part of our community,

which I am clearly not. So, yeah. That's my not very uplifting answer, but it comes on the tail of all the uplifting, great things that Mark said. So, we'll just... Let's focus on those.

Facilitator: Thanks, Julia. And you know, maybe we could get to some more uplifting stuff here in a second. But... Or we could just be real about the situation we're in. Thanks so much both of you. And yeah, I agree, Mark: we go through this cycle of justifying our classes, our roles, why we teach, the way we teach, why writing classes need to be small. This work has been done. There's decades of research out there. And yet, constantly we're faced with this, because, you know... At our institution, it's 32 [seats] for first-year writing. And "does it need to be that small like?" That's a question we're posed with. And we have to try to... ah. So, with our next question, we're kind of... We're running low on time, but Sarah, can you correct me? Is there a time we need to stop the interview by?

Dr. Sara Humphreys (Principal Investigator): Yeah, we should stop at 11:30 because our wonderful, absolutely amazing, ASL folks and captionists have to go. But so, you know, yeah. But I want to say... Yeah. Okay. I'll be quiet. Here I go.

Facilitator: Yeah, 11:30 that... No, that's fine. That's perfect.

So, what I was thinking, with the next two questions – and if we get to the questions after that, great, if not, maybe we can bring some of that into the discussions that we'll have after the interviews – I was wondering... So, what are some steps that administrators can take – and maybe if you have anything to say about unions, you could work that in there as well – but to help support underfunded and undervalued writing programs, which, I would, you know, dare to say that that describes every writing program in North America. But maybe there's a few exceptions where the institution really values their writing programs and writing instructors, but I've yet to see it. So, yeah: what are some things that administrators might do to try and help secure resources or help make these larger issues... hopefully address these larger issues?

Blaauw-Hara: I would love to know because I think, exactly as you said, Jason, I... Yeah, I don't know. I have yet to meet a writing program where people are like "we have, you know, money falling out our ears." Yeah. So, Sarah mentioned this, right? I think that we have... A few of those last questions are intertwined. Like, with the professionalization of writing studies, you know, the academic identity of writing studies, and then, like, the resources as well, I think probably are connected. And I have some thoughts.

I think that... Alright. So I'll share a few ideas. So, I think one thing that that we can do – unfortunately, I don't have a slam dunk out of any of these – but one thing that we can do though is learn to speak the language of the university because we... I mean exactly, as Jason said, there's so much scholarship to do with, for example, class sizes or to do with, you know, contingent labour and how it's better to have, you know, continuing faculty that that, you know... So, there's so much research that's there. But I have found that to be... The higher up administrations you know, vice presidents, provosts, deans, stuff like that, it's not that they reject that scholarship. It's just in my experience they, you know, they

nod along with it and then they counter with things like finances and stuff like that. So, it's hard.

What I have found to be somewhat helpful – and I also had the good fortune and the honor of co-facilitating what's called the WPA Workshop for new and continuing WPAs as part of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, and I did want to put out a plug for that. It happens every year, and it's a multi-day workshop where you get to learn from several experienced facilitators about a lot of different things such as assessment, setting writing program goals, to hiring and mentoring faculty members, and all kinds of stuff. But, this is something that I learned from that workshop, from my colleagues at that workshop, was trying to figure out what's the strategic plan for the university? What are the goals that the university has that those upper administrators are being held accountable for? And then how can you tie that to the work that you're doing? And it does feel... Yeah, [referring to the *Zoom chat*] Sarah, I have to tell you, I just want you to contribute to everything, including like, if you can, my mental dialogue as well because I love everything that you're writing in our chat. So, please continue.

But anyway. So, I mentioned earlier that we're doing this big two-year assessment of the writing program. Before we even started that, we went back and we looked at what, like... So, our first-year writing program was started by a cross-disciplinary group of faculty and administration at UT-M, and they came up with, after they had a number of different meetings, they came up with a big written rationale – many pages – for why they thought that a first-year writing course was needed, what they hoped it would do, here are the things that they hoped it would achieve. And they had those bulleted out, okay? So, that seemed like a logical first step when we had new administration come in who didn't seem to have any awareness of any of that history and was kind of questioning the whole program. You know, it was like, well, let's see if we're following through on the things that this program was created to do. Let's think about how we can assess whether we are, you know, establishing a cohort of first-year students, that we're easing that university transition, how might we be able to assess that? Are the students writing any better than they did before the course? Let's see how we can assess that. And then we also found a document where the university – or, our campus of the university – had some external consultants who came in and dinged us on a number of things. Like one thing was EDI issues, another was student retention, you know, that our retention rates had not budged in years and years.

Well, those things tend to be connected to first-year writing. You know, first-year writing is connected to student retention and persistence, and there's some good scholarship that has been done at other institutions to demonstrate that. Let's see if we can see those types of patterns here at our institution. Let's try to come up with focus groups where we evaluate whether students from diverse backgrounds are feeling more comfortable with the university and are being introduced to university resources such as our Academic Skills Centre in our writing course. That will lead to them, you know, doing better in their other classes beyond our writing classes.

We also found through, you know, having students do basically a pre-test post-test type method, which has lots of limitations, but it's a good, like, blunt instrument, we found that students who wrote... we found that our first-year writing course narrows the gap between students who come in writing well and students who come in writing less well. And that is including students who are international students. It seems to produce measurable, pretty big measurable, improvements in their writing competencies. It helps students who come from surrounding areas feel more connected to the university.

And so these are things that we can then make that jump from saying these are good outcomes, that we can all agree are good outcomes, and it connects to these areas that the university got dinged on when they had some external evaluators come in. So, like, hey, Dean, hey, you know, Provost, you can point to our writing program as interventions that the university is doing to try to address some of those concerns that the university has at large. So, have these translated into huge amounts of money? I don't know. I mean, the Dean has said that we... He has said what do you need in terms of resources to do this assessment? So that's worked okay, that we haven't had to pay for our assessment programs and hiring people and paying students and stuff like that. We haven't had to pay for that out of our own finances. That's good. It hasn't translated into more, you know, continuing term faculty. I hope it does. Maybe it will. You know, we're going to definitely make that argument.

But yeah, learn to speak the language that people speak outside of your writing program and learn to come up with some numbers. I am less comfortable with numbers. I love qualitative interviewing and focus groups and stuff like that. But we had to speak quantitative data too, and so we found some faculty members outside of our department: educational developers. I know, Julia [*referring to the Zoom chat*]. I'm so sorry. I'm good at arithmetic, but when people talk about, like... I don't even know the terms. "Is this statistically significant?" Gosh, I don't know. Somebody told me it was, you know? So, find people who speak numbers, who are maybe outside of your department, who you can partner with on things too.

I do think that... I'm going to jump very briefly because, Julia, I think you're going to be better at speaking at the union thing than I am because I think you touched on that. I mean, we do have some of our contingent faculty members, you know, are in different situations with the Union, and we basically just try to follow the Union guidelines. There's lots and lots of sections for people to be scheduled in, and so it seems to work okay as far as that goes, but I don't have big secrets for that.

But I think that the characterization of Writing Studies as a service discipline is a problem. It leads to the staffing challenges that we've been talking about. You don't see Math or Biology or whatever doing this, you know. There's this idea that anybody can teach writing, and it's just not true. So, I agree – and I'm not saying anything negative about anybody else's program. I think that in Canada, as well as in the United States, we have a problem where we need to professionalize Writing Studies, and show that this is something that has

a disciplinary core. There is decades and decades of, if not millennia, if you go back to like Aristotle and stuff, scholarship that has to do with how people learn writing and why it's important. And it makes us... The precarious working conditions are an outgrowth of that, but they also they work in a feedback loop to make it harder for us to develop an academic identity because if you are worried about where your next job is going to be, you – and you're piecing together employment from a lot of different institutions – you don't have a lot of time to write, let's say. You don't have institutional funding to do a long-term research project. You're not going to be publishing. And so, what we need in Canada is home-grown scholarship, whether that's in terms of presentations or publications. And there are awesome organizations, one of which I'm a part of, CWCA, that is doing excellent work, as is CASDW, doing outstanding work. We need more of that. But it's hard. So, with an eye on the time: Julia, please feel free to talk for the entire end of our session.

Lane: Thank you, Mark. Sarah, Jason, Natalie, is it... I do have things to say about unions, but I'm wondering, Mark just talked about academic identity, so can I jump to the end?

Facilitator: Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

Lane: Okay. So I will... Later I can say some things about unions, but I just want to jump to the last two questions and try to talk about them a bit together, dovetailing off of what Mark was saying.

So, the last two questions are about writing centre staff lacking academic freedom. How might that lack be an issue and how can associations and unions and other support mechanisms assist writing staff in this? And then the last question is, does writing studies in what is now called Canada suffer from a lack of academic identity, exacerbated by precarious working conditions and de-professionalization? So, I wanna talk about those two things together. I want to say that I think... I already mentioned the experiences of lack of academic freedom, and I guess to tie it to the other question about being underfunded and undervalued, I just want to say that I think it's important to name that the underfunded is a symptom of the undervalued. And so... Mark was talking about the sort of, like, cyclical things that happen. And so, recognizing that I think we need to work at the undervalued piece. Often I think we work at the underfunded [piece]. We try to get funding for specific programs or initiatives, but it doesn't do anything to that larger context of how we are understood in the larger environment and institution. And Mark was just talking about those huge bodies of research. And so, I think figuring out how and who takes responsibility for continuing to have these conversations and putting the information consistently out there. Because I think what can often happen is that administrators are people who have moved out of precarious roles and into supported roles and often see those roles as being not rocking the boat. Like, they're... Administrators are very much rewarded for a “go along to get along” kind of approach to things and so we need to get out of that.

And I've been really interested and inspired recently by the idea of refusal. And so, I'm just sharing Sandy Grande's article “Refusing the University.” Like, where do we need to be

resistant and not just meeting the expectations and the always increasing expectations that we do more with less all the time? Where and when do we say “no. We actually will not or cannot do that” in the way that we've been structured, it's not possible? And then on the on the point of academic freedom: so, while the underfunded is a symptom of the undervalued, I also want to say that the denial of access to academic freedom is a way of ensuring that our expertise is always diminished and we can't make the kinds of contributions that are possible when writing centres are staffed by faculty members who do have academic freedom. So, it's another self-perpetuating cycle. And the university has actually said this to us: “If you want us to treat you like faculty, you have to act like faculty. You have to research and publish and attend conferences.” But we can't do that because the expectations of us on the day-to-day are to do things that are very administratively driven: to gather the kinds of data that Mark's talking about, where we already have that data, but we just have to do it again to prove that small class sizes are important in our context in this time period.

So, all of this inequity requires us to do collective organizing and advocacy and, I think, to work on a collective level because we will always be as vulnerable as our most vulnerable members. And in my notes here, I have a swear word, and I want to see what the ASL of it is. So, we will always be as vulnerable as our most vulnerable members and some of our members are really ***** vulnerable – Yeah! [Referring to the video] Oh, it's this? Okay! – structurally, and that vulnerability is held over them and it's used to threaten them and diminish them all the time. So, I want to just say that.

And I also want to say that for a long time I was not really aware of that. I had a lot of privilege, I said this in the class the other day, like I've always been a white woman. I've always walked through the world in that way. And I just sort of went along doing my work and not really thinking about the structure of my role. But I have been thinking about that a lot more in the last while. And so, just to jump down here to this question of do we lack an academic identity: I think my answer's kind of yes, but it's more complicated than a lack, and I am... The first thing that came to me when I started trying to answer this question was W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of double consciousness. And so, he wrote about this in *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903. And then I was really... I wrote all this answer, and then I recently reread Neisha-Anne Green's article “The Re-Education of Neisha-Anne Green,” and she talks about double consciousness as well in linguistic justice work. And she talks about having a triple consciousness, and I was. Whoa, wow. Okay. So, I feel like I should talk about this. Although I do it somewhat cautiously, I don't want to appropriate this idea of double consciousness, but I do want to share what Du Bois said, so he wrote: “It's a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness. This sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others. Of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels twoness: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

And so, I want to recognize unequivocally that what I'm talking about here and what we experience in writing studies and writing centres is not the same thing as what Du Bois writing about. And as a white woman I know I can't understand the depth of that, what he's articulating, in large part because my writing centre identity is one that I don't carry with me everywhere and doesn't mark me in every space that I enter. But despite the danger of possibly appropriating, I want to reference Du Bois' work because he's smarter than me. And he's articulated something that I think really gets at the core of what I have experienced and what I think I see other people experiencing as writing centre professionals and writing studies professionals, which is that we have a well developed academic identity as people: we are engaged with our work, we are engaged with each other, we are engaged in our community as scholars. We research, we research the literature, we do empirical and data-driven studies in our own centres, we write, we publish, we present at conferences, we offer each other formal and informal types of peer review. We have a well developed academic identity, but we don't see that academic identity reflected back to us in a wider system. And what we actually see reflected back to us is, I think, what Du Bois calls that amused contempt – the sort of patronising look in the eye that when someone says to us, oh, it's really cute that you did that research. It's so cute that you want to play scholarly dress-up, but you'll never be like us, like the real academics. We can only ever be “quasi-faculty,” which is what we're being called. So, that experience that I've been having of going through joining the Faculty Association but having everything we do be undermined has really laid bare for me an undercurrent that has always been there, I think, of disrespect and minimizing of our work – and it's being dragged out in the open through these bargaining conversations.

And I know we're at overtime, but as for solutions, you know, damned if I know Du Bois wrote the “dogged strength alone” holds things together. And I see that dogged strength in my colleagues. I see it in all of you who've come here and especially in the folks who have put this project together. And I also do want to say we are tired, and our colleagues of colour are absolutely exhausted, and there's no reason that they shouldn't be because the pressure on them to hold so many kinds of double consciousnesses together is exhausting.

So, I have a list of things that if it came up to me, that are definitely inadequate, but in order they are: **One**, we show up for our colleagues who are burning out. We listen to them, we validate them. We let them know that what they're experiencing is real and isn't their fault. We hold space for them. **[Two,]** We then do our best to hold the institutions around us to account for what they're doing to us and our colleagues. **Three**, we recognize our own limits. We really have to get out of the “doing more with less hustle.” I don't think anyone's going to do that for us. They will continue to expect us to do as much as we've done and then more. So, the real challenge is that we have to show up for each other and also maintain our academic identities – and none of that work is core to our job, so we're also then doing our jobs. So we keep getting pulled back into these cycles where we squeeze more and more in because what's important to us isn't always important to our bosses. So, **four**, my own attempted solution is to find strategic ways to say strategic “Nos” and to

refuse and to resist. And I also want to name that as a woman I haven't been socialized to do that, so it's hard. This often means finding ways to refocus, retool, and reallocate work so that it's more aligned with my own experience of what I feel is an academic identity. So, spending less time micromanaging time sheets and more time collaborating for example. **Five:** Advocate, advocate, advocate, never stop talking about writing: its role in the university and our role in shaping students experience of it. **Six:** Rest. Really leave work sometimes – not just with your body, but also with your mind and your heart. Don't put teams on your phone. And then **seven:** Repeat. So that's my list. And thank you – especially to the interpreters for going overtime.

Facilitator: Thank you so much to both you, Julia, and Mark. Yes. I think that list was amazing. Also, I would say don't put Outlook on your phone. I took it off, and it made a huge difference.