

Review

The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers by Linda Adler-Kassner, Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2008.

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Compositionists have long been calling for scholarship aimed at productively reshaping various institutional and public discourses of writing instruction. Jeanne Gunner, for instance, has called for more scholarship that can help Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) to formulate “critical questions” about their “historical practices and modes of self-representation” (275) in order to address how “writing program administrators and writing programs have historically been implicated in social structures that divide, direct, give access, deny access, replicate inequities, and use language in ways that construct ideologies which have material consequences” (275). Similarly, Peter Mortensen has called for more work enabling us as composition scholars to “go public” with our progressive understandings of writing programs and students so that we might avoid “consign[ing] ourselves to mere spectatorship in national, regional—and, most importantly, local—struggles over what counts as literacy and who should have opportunities to attain it” (183). Linda Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers* answers such calls successfully through its historically grounded, theoretically informed, and decidedly practical discussion of philosophies and strategies that WPAs might employ for asking such “critical questions” and for “going public” with answers to them.

Adler-Kassner is fundamentally concerned with two issues. First, she seeks to understand how and why discourses regarding writing instruction and students of writing are framed (in Goffman’s sense of the term) in ways that circumscribe rather than enable possibilities for egalitarian change. Second, she articulates a range of philosophical orientations and practical strategies designed to help WPAs reframe such discussions to promote reform.

Chapter One (“Working from a Point of Principle”) explains three key questions around which discussions of writing instruction and students typically revolve: “1) How should students’ literacies be defined when they come into composition classes?; 2) What literacies should composition classes develop, how, and for what purpose?; 3) How should the development of students’ literacies be assessed at the end of these classes?” (14). Chapters Two (“Looking Backward”) and Three (“Framing the Public Imagination”) discuss ways that these questions have typically been framed. These chapters focus especially on the influence of the “progressive pragmatic jeremiad,” a longstanding educational narrative that stresses the need to begin “creating social conditions conducive to educational development” (43) such that the nation might harness “the profound power of individual creative intelligence to come together and collectively form a virtuous democracy” (44). As Adler-Kassner usefully notes, the framing enabled by this jeremiad has proven quite porous over time—that is, equally capable of supporting problematic and egalitarian notions of writing instruction and students. However, as she also insists, such porosity also holds the potential for productive egalitarian reframing of the three questions and answers to them.

Chapters Four (“Changing Conversations About Writing and Writers: Working Through a Process”) and Five (“Taking Action to Change Stories”) together articulate a range of specific philosophies and strategies designed to help interested WPAs reframe the dominant cultural narrative that emphasizes students’ deficits and inabilities as



a more progressive narrative that recognizes and cultivates students' strengths in ways that could lead to a "just democracy" (124). Specifically, Chapter Four outlines three fundamental approaches to activism: interest-based, values-based, and issue-based. In turn, Chapter Five explores four key strategies for engaging each of these types of activism: identifying specific goals for change, assessing knowledge, identifying and addressing various audiences, and developing long-term action plans. Chapter Six outlines two philosophical principles: *tikkun olam*, as enacted within the Jewish religious tradition; and prophetic pragmatism, as described by Cornel West. Such philosophical traditions, Adler-Kassner argues, can serve as crucial motivation for WPAs to continue their activist work even in the face of resistance.

Adler-Kassner's discussion of the historical and contemporary influence of the "progressive pragmatic jeremiad" upon composition is especially noteworthy. She highlights the roots of this jeremiad in theorists ranging from Dewey to Thorndike, and traces its powerful influence on contemporary literacy sponsors ranging from the NCTE to the Spellings Commission. To my knowledge, detailed discussion of this jeremiad has not been offered either within older canonical composition histories (e.g. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*; Miller, *Textual Carnivals*) or more recent ones (e.g. L'Eplattenier and Mastrangelo, *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration*; Moon and Donahue, *Local Histories*; Henze, Selzer, and Sharer, 1977: *A Cultural Moment in Composition*). I would not be surprised to see Adler-Kassner's discussion of this jeremiad cited routinely in future historical and critical work.

I also find Adler-Kassner's how-to advice useful for thinking through specific reform initiatives. For example, her numerous case studies illustrate how interest-based, values-based, and issue-based frameworks can operate in actual practice to reform thinking about writing instruction. At the same time, her detailed discussion of four key strategies for activism delivers practical advice, including tips



for writing successful op-ed pieces and for reframing problematic interview questions from journalists.

Finally, I appreciate Adler-Kassner's emphasis on one's personal connection to the work of activism as both a motivator and a tool for critical reflection. She argues that philosophies such as *tikkun olam* and prophetic pragmatism serve as the basis for understanding the importance of individual emotion—including passion and even anger—as an engine of WPA activism; at the same time, such philosophies can prompt WPAs to "continually ask questions about this work" (179) such that their activism does not become dogmatic or stagnant. For all of these reasons, then, Adler-Kassner's *The Activist WPA* stands as a useful and necessary contribution to the administrative literature within composition studies.

Works Cited

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Review

Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone by Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, Albany: State University of New York Press. 2008.

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Last week, as I was packing up my books after my Women's Literature class, a female student stayed behind to visit. She is a particularly bright, engaged student who makes thoughtful comments in class and often stays behind to ask questions and talk about her many writing and research projects. As we stood in the hallway, she mentioned that she enjoys the class because she can learn about the "feminist" perspective from students in the class. I admit that I was taken aback by her comments—I hadn't heard anything overtly feminist from any student, and I had (wrongly) assumed that this accomplished young student would naturally assume the label of feminist. This rupture—one that many of us recognize as "I'm not a feminist, but" — is one that Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau addresses coherently in her text *Girls, Feminism and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone*. Using as the basis for her analysis GirlZone, a local feminist organization in Urbana-Champaign, Sheridan-Rabideau examines the variety of ways that second wave feminism often conflicts with Third Wave feminism, and ultimately how both discourses sometimes fail to convince resistant stakeholders to create and sustain enriching opportunities for girls and young women.

Sheridan-Rabideau foregrounds Anne Ruggles Gere's call to compositionists to pay more attention to literate activities outside