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## Review: *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writers and Writing*

Linda Adler-Kassner  
Utah State UP, 2008

by Linda S. Bergmann

### About the Author

Linda S. Bergmann, Professor of English at Purdue University and Director of the Purdue Writing Lab, has started WAC programs and directed writing centers at three other universities. Her teaching experience includes undergraduate courses in composition, literature, pedagogy, and literacy, and graduate seminars in writing center administration and WAC. She has published over twenty articles and chapters, co-edited *Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education* (NCTE 2006), and authored the textbook *Academic Research and Writing: Inquiry and Argument in College* (Pearson-Longman, 2010).

*The Activist WPA*, by Linda Adler-Kassner, is a much-needed contribution to the field of composition studies. Drawing on experiences and research of several years, Adler-Kassner offers a compelling argument for WPAs to conceive of themselves as activists for social change and provides usable approaches to applying this argument and this sense of our work to specific writing programs. She focuses on the frames or stories we tell about ourselves and allow our programs to be placed in—bringing together work from a generation of WPAs and researchers in composition with the precedent-setting community action work of social/political activists like Saul Alinsky and the political/linguistic work of George Lakoff.

The book begins and ends with chapters that draw on Adler-Kassner's personal principles:

... which I try to enact in my work as a teacher, a WPA, and a human being:

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*tikkun olam*, or working to make the world a better place (a principle that stems from my experiences as a Jew), and the concept of prophetic pragmatism. . . . [which] share three common factors: a commitment to changing things for the better here and now through consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes that take into consideration the material contexts and concerns of all involved; a compulsion to be reflexive and self-questioning about this work so as to consider how all involved are taking into account those material conditions; and a constant commitment to ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue among all participants in change-making work that ensures that everyone is heard and, hopefully, represented. (32-33)

I quote Adler-Kassner at such length here not because her thinking is difficult to summarize, but because this excerpt constitutes such a revealing and representative example of the voice that pervades the book: an intellectual attitude of commitment to change, practical and idealistic, that draws on the best of the American intellectual tradition to shape a better future than we have envisioned for some time.

From the pragmatists of the 1890s, through the progressive educators and social activists of the early- to mid-twentieth century, and through the (innocent and non-so-innocent) belief in American exceptionalism culminating in the 1960s and 1970s (the decades in which I was educated), the dominant story was that any student who worked hard had a wealth of educational opportunities. This frame of a wealth of opportunity offered the material for a stable democracy as well as individual social mobility and opportunity. The story was changed, Adler-Kassner argues, into a story of the failure of the American educational system to understand the meaning of democracy and its failure to properly understand and educate young Americans for the emerging political, social, and economic realities. While it would be hard to make a realistic case for the earlier frames and stories of American democracy and its educational system (which were fraught with corruption, inequality, and failures of their own), this new frame blames the teachers and administrators who constitute the “American educational system” for willful ignorance and self-serving sacrifice of their students’ needs to their own self-interest.

Drawing on the thinking of George Lakoff and contemporary social activist groups (like MoveOn.org and the groups founded as memorials to the late Minnesota senator Paul Wellstone), Linda Adler-Kassner continually insists that we must think about what we want education—particularly education in writing courses—to be and to do. We need to formulate and pursue our own vision, instead of trying to critique or refute the conservative story tellers, because critiquing and refuting involves accepting others' stories, rather than making and controlling our own. Progressive American educators in general and writing program administrators in particular must take back the "progressive pragmatic jeremiad" from those who have hijacked it to insist on the failure and dysfunction of our educational system. We need to bring back the story (or create a new one) of the individual potential for achievement which this jeremiad first promoted. Moreover, she asserts, the essential, larger social changes start at the local level, with local issues, personal conversations, and local assessments of how well changes in programs, practices, and values work for local populations of students, teachers, and others involved in the process of educating students from kindergarten through college.

Adler-Kassner provides charts that model interest-based, values-based, and issues-based organization, questions for organizers to think and talk through, and examples of how at least two (pseudonymous) WPAs might have used these processes. She also demonstrates how she used them herself in helping initiate a Directed Self-Placement program at Eastern Michigan University. The book brings together, then, attributes of an argument, a handbook, and a workbook. She makes her case for taking action successfully by reframing the way teaching writing is viewed in the contemporary United States; she provides tables and lists to demonstrate how the concepts of organizing relate to each other; and she provides pointed lists of questions for readers to use to put these concepts into practice locally. Some parts of this book can and should be used by WPAs for workshops in using community organizing strategies to reclaim our educational system in our own institutions. My single complaint about this book—perhaps it is more a plea for a sequel or addenda—is to more clearly designate the handbook and workbook elements,

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so that the principles and values Adler-Kassner calls for can more easily be put into practice. I suggest this supplementary material with hesitation because there is a danger in separating theory/principles from practice, and the possibility of losing the emphasis on local issues and face-to-face conversations on which the process she outlines is based. However, although many WPAs will (or should) read this book cover to cover, more than once, we will use particular parts of it for training tutors, instructors, and other WPAs. I would be grateful to be able to rely on Linda Adler-Kassner's help in making those choices, and I would like to develop in my own work more of her vigor as a leader as well as a thinker.

The question that should be in the minds of most *Writing Center Journal* readers is this: So what does a book on WPA work as social change have to do with working one-to-one with students and carrying on the other work of the writing center? It has, in my opinion, a great deal to do with our work and our thinking about our work.

First, as several other writing center administrators and I have contended, both in a series of conference meetings and roundtables and in a “polylog” compiled by Melissa Ianetta and published in *Composition Studies*, writing center administrators are often—if not always—WPAs. We share administrative structures with other writing programs (such as first year composition, Writing Across the Curriculum, graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition) and other university programs (such as first year experience programs and learning commons). While we often pride ourselves for being in opposition to the mainstream values of the university, English departments, and course-based writing programs, the values and principles Linda Adler-Kassner advocates for WPAs seem potentially compatible with writing center administrators' belief in the primacy of the individual, focus on abilities and achievements rather than failure, and vision of development rather than remediation. Writing center administrators may at times have different interests than other WPAs, and, when budgets are cut, these interests may conflict. We may take opposing positions on some issues. However, we share enough values to participate mindfully and meaningfully in the organizational processes Adler-Kassner advocates. These processes

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offer opportunities for writing centers to tell their own stories and help re-frame the public perception of writing instruction. Her calls for conversation, for listening carefully, for finding allies and understanding opposition, and for making our own stories rather than trying to refute frames imposed by those who would cut our resources and diminish our influence—these are calls we should heed and projects we should join.

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## WORK CITED

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