

There seems to be a mystification of the publishing process that gives publishers immense power. You get what you ask for—you make progress in increments, you alter your paradigm slowly.

—*Amelia, Atlantis Publishing*

[I'd like to address] the misconception that we really drive what's in the book. We don't feel we drive what's in the book, we feel like we respond to what people ask for. . . . We go to the directors of composition for the most part. They are the real decision-makers for us.

—*Adele, Babco Publishing*

Anyone who doubts the power of the WPA to create change in the dissemination of commercially-available instructional materials should heed these interview responses.<sup>1</sup> Amelia tells us we get what we ask for; Adele implicates directors of composition specifically.<sup>2</sup> In their words, I hear a resounding call to action for WPAs that is too strong to ignore.

Having been interested (and implicated) in the intersection between composition teaching and composition textbooks since the mid-1980s, I conducted a study of three publishing companies. My goal was to examine the economies at play in this teaching/textbook intersection. That there is a problem with textbooks was clear (see below), so my contribution to the conversation was to interrogate the conditions of and constraints on composition textbook publishing processes. To that end, I interviewed workers throughout the hierarchy at three very different composition publishers (and, yes, composition publishers can be quite different from one another; for a full discussion, see Miles "Building"). Questions centered on *processes*: I asked publishers to walk me through a few projects,

# *Constructing Composition: Reproduction and WPA Agency in Textbook Publishing*

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Libby Miles

to explain their key decision-making moments, and to share with me the evidence they use to construct this fragmented and multi-varied market known as "composition." I also gave each participant the chance to "set the record straight"—to clear up any misconceptions they felt academics had about publishers. The two responses above (and several others like them) grew from that final question of the interview. Later, I shared relevant portions of the interview transcripts with participants to allow them to revise any statements I was planning to reproduce in my research. Uniformly, unequivocally, responses like those above remained unretouched, unrevised, unrelenting.

Following Amelia and Adele's lead, I argue here that we need to interrogate our own complicity in composition textbook publishing processes, and that there is considerable revision we can enact by inserting ourselves—as WPAs—into the process at appropriate points.

But first, some background. In Gale and Gale's recent collection, *(Re)Visioning Composition Textbooks: Conflicts of Culture, Ideology, and Pedagogy*, Gary Olson commends the editors for "striking out on an important path in composition scholarship" (xi), and the editors themselves claim that textbooks' "theoretical, pedagogical, cultural, and ideological implications are seldom explored either in print or at important academic conferences such as [CCCC]" (4). Their project, they say, "serves as a start toward a more systematic and sustained inquiry" into composition textbooks (12). Contrary to these claims, however, there is a strong scholarly tradition of inquiry into composition textbooks—the Gales just didn't find it; much of the conversation has taken place outside the pages of CCC, one of the only journals they cite. (For a more thorough critique, see Miles "Disturbing.")

In fact, much excellent scholarship on composition textbooks emphasizes the normative and reproductive functions circulating through both the books themselves and the pedagogical practices emanating from textbooks. In the interest of giving exposure to the scholarship the Gales seem to have overlooked, I have integrated such works into my discussion here. I do, however, have a problem with the existing scholarship on textbooks; it too often examines the textbook as a static *product* only—an odd contradiction in a field of inquiry built on the privileging of *processes*. While such analyses make for good reading (including some essays in the Gale and Gale collection), they do little to identify what the field might do to improve textbook production processes. Instead, as Kurt Spellmeyer suggested at the 1999 CCCC, scholars analyze the books and "jump all over

their dead carcasses." The entertainment value is high, but the opportunity for agency, for social action, is nil. In short, the result has been a persistent "rhetoric of deproduction" (to use a term from John Trimbur) in which texts are removed from the material conditions of their production, free floating in effect—decontextualized, dematerialized, dehistoricized.

The first step in breaking through the prevailing rhetoric of deproduction, I argue, is to look at underlying economies of textbook production processes. In doing so, I hope to build a rhetoric of production which identifies moments in the process that are open to intervention and change. I fear that compositionists (including WPAs at the forefront) have been enacting a "rhetoric of reproduction" not only through their scholarship after the fact (as the Gale and Gale collection ably demonstrates), but also in their practices as adopters, as formative textbook reviewers, and as consultants. As you will see, there are moments in such processes in which WPAs have considerable agency for enacting lasting change.

### **Reproduction and Composition Textbook Publishing**

To put it bluntly, many many textbooks go forth and multiply. Unfortunately, it often seems that the most insidious textbooks are also those spawning the most progeny. What happens when the textbook is in the hands (and minds) of teachers and students? What messages do those teachers and students take from the practices espoused by the textbook? And what practices are the books themselves reproducing by their very existence? Furthermore, what other projects, copycats, and revisions might a single textbook initiate? These are matters of reproduction that scholars have considered—both cultural and physical. For WPAs, both types of reproduction matter.

First, cultural reproduction. Some fine work has examined textbooks as a primary force in constructing and normalizing a particularly white, upper-middle-class subjectivity for our students (see particularly Clifford; Faigley; Fraizer; McCormick; Ohmann; Rose; Slevin; Trimbur; Welch). This body of work emphasizes that textbooks re-present composition—and composition students—in a pre-packaged and easily-digested form. A number of stinging Althusserian critiques have circulated in composition scholarship, most notably John Clifford's essay, "The Subject of Discourse" and the chapter titled "Coherent Contradictions" in Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality*. These pieces (and others) discuss the ways in

which textbooks position (or interpellate or construct or subjugate) writing students in and out of the classroom. In addition, Fraizer notes that textbooks tend to "reinforce the student as consumer rather than creator, a role the textbook has a vested interest in maintaining" (139). In his reading, the ultimate goal of many textbooks is to create "the arguer as articulate consumer" (139). McCormick echoes this theme, arguing that "textbooks that encourage readers to regard certain texts as objective unwittingly prevent students from adopting a critical stance toward those texts, from analyzing the ways in which the texts' arguments are necessarily positioned within the larger cultural beliefs and struggles" (40).

In her *WPA* analysis of instructor's manuals, Nedra Reynolds demonstrates that textbooks are not the only culprits in the construction of student docility. She notes that the materials included with textbooks for the use of writing instructors "reflect decisions about how writing should be represented to new or adjunct teachers, who need to be 'disciplined' as subjects right along with the students" (7). Whereas these instructor's manuals (surveyed for different kinds of books, over the course of several decades) "flatten teacher subjectivity" (7) in order to discipline new and experienced writing teachers alike, their positioning of students is far worse. As Reynolds describes, instructor's manuals "construct students in extremely predictable, unvarying ways, shrink-wrapped like a packet of ancillaries. Students are, above all, assumed to be trouble for the new teaching assistant—resistant, recalcitrant, negative" (19). It appears that critical users of textbooks need to watch not only the ways in which their students' subjectivity is constructed by the pages of the text, but also how they as teachers have their relations with students further codified.

Others have noted that the textbooks we choose and recommend can be seen as a reflection of either an individual teacher (e.g., Libby Miles, instructor of WRT 101 section 13), an institutionally-situated program (e.g., the College Writing Program at the University of Rhode Island), or the collectivity of a "field" (e.g., Rhetoric and Composition). For example, Alred and Thelan show the complications involved by offering the following scenario in which a colleague in literature asks a WPA to suggest a writing textbook for him to use in a newly-assigned section of composition. The director

knows that [the colleague's] primary guide during the semester will be the textbook he uses in the classroom. As she reviews the textbooks on her shelves, she admits that she is concerned

about the image of the program that he will take from a textbook she might recommend. [. . .] Indeed, this textbook will influence his success in the classroom as well as his perception of his students' success. Correspondingly, this textbook will influence the students' perceptions of his professional credibility and the authority of the enterprise. (469-70)

Further, Faigley writes "[t]hat the choice of a textbook is also considered significant within the field is evident when teachers answer with the name of a textbook when asked how they teach writing" (133). The effect here is one of cultural reproduction in which textbooks appear to have a one-to-one relationship with the reality of classroom and programmatic practices.

Not surprisingly, assumptions based on viewing the textbook as representative of actual classroom practices can cause problems. As Segal observes, "[W]e run the risk of giving our students messages about writing we do not mean to give—messages we only seem, by our assignment of a particular text, to endorse" (114). This is cultural reproduction writ large, in which a tangible commodity can stand in for a series of actions and interactions. If Faigley is correct (and, based on casual and overheard conversations with writing instructors through the years, I fear he is), I would argue that this is more a problem with composition instructors who define themselves *through* their textbooks than a problem with the textbooks themselves. Another way to frame the issue is as one of cause and effect: do these textbooks reproduce what composition teachers do, or do the teachers reproduce what the textbooks do? The answer, of course, is both. That is how cultural reproduction works.

There is also the matter of physical reproduction. In their histories, Brereton, Connors, Crowley (*Methodical*), Hawhee, Kynell, and Winterowd trace particular textbooks that evolve (or not) over time. Despite the twelve-year span of their research, all six find that only minor changes mark revisions of the most successful textbooks, and that those frameworks most antithetical to current composition theories are those that persist through editions, reproduced over and over through decades of revisions. As Faigley remarks in his analysis of McKrimmon's *Writing With a Purpose*,

This notion of the student writer as a rational, coherent, and unitary individual follows from the first sentence in the first edition, '*all effective writing is controlled by the writer's*

*purpose.* It is not an exaggeration to say that this sentence set the direction for college writing instruction in the second half of the twentieth century. (153)

The implication here is that not only do individual textbooks reproduce themselves over time, but they also create a paradigm that is then enacted in competing books. This becomes a matter of physical reproduction (and the biological metaphor is particularly effective here). In other words, reproduction is why so many of the books are so depressingly similar. As Crowley explains, in early twentieth-century textbooks, "current-traditional rhetoric become a self-generating textbook tradition that drew on similar earlier or contemporary works for inspiration" (*Methodical* 144) until "[s]ubsequent textbooks painted an increasingly neater and tidier picture of the ideal discourse" (145). Bloom, speaking from a contemporary textbook author's perspective, describes the commercial pressure "to clone texts that already have a following rather than to invent works *de novo*" ("Making" 138). Or as Alred and Thelan write, such projects enacting "inconsistent or outdated models of writing will not lack theory, but rather will endorse, and thus contribute, willy-nilly, a theory of writing that is similarly inconsistent and outdated" (472).

In addition, Perrin notes that physical reproduction is easy to do. And successful. And too often expected by publishers and their audiences. He describes the process, saying that

nothing is easier than including in an essay-reader works successfully incorporated in already established book. It is simply a matter of requesting permission from an author or publisher to reprint a selection, writing a sizeable check (once a work becomes popular, the permission fee naturally goes up), and sending a printed version to the compositor—often photocopied from the competing book. (71)

This endless photocopying cycle eventually results in what Otte has called a "pseudo-canon of pseudo-literature" (138). Bloom ("Essay") has more recently dignified the practice by demonstrating that the essay canon has, in fact, grown out of (and is maintained by) the first-year writing class.

The critiques by Crowley, Faigley, Welch and other scholars deriding the sameness of the textbook market (throughout the last hundred years!) sting. They implicate publishers who make normative demands, authors

who comply, and adopters who support the endless reproduction of uninformed pedagogical practice. Everyone shares the blame, but it is not clear who can *stop* the endless cycles of de- and re-production. Some, like Welch, point fingers at the publishers; she writes that "[b]oth sides must change, but the change must begin with the publishers" ("Ideology" 279). Others, like Byrnes and Turner, argue that "[s]urely part of the responsibility lies with writing teachers who influence, if not determine, what publishers think the market wants" (132-33). One productive step is to examine publishing processes rather than products; another productive step is to find out from composition publishers how they decide what they think the market wants. How do they construct this market called "composition"? And how do WPAs share the blame in aiding such an unhelpful construction? I turn to these questions next.

### **Publishers Construct Composition**

In breaking down the cycles of scholarly deproduction and reproduction, my goal has been to learn more about the conditions of textbook production, and then to situate those conditions within the context of the publishing industry's own material constraints. To this end, my interviews included questions about how resources were allocated to the composition list (for a fuller discussion, see Miles "Building"). Without exception, editors and editors-in-chief mentioned their "place" in the overall scheme of their houses and corporations. Participants at Babco, part of a multi-national media conglomerate, stressed how their composition lists would be replaced by "another movie company" if profits fell; on the other hand, participants at Atlantis, a small independent house, spent a good deal of their time justifying to their superiors their continued presence in such a fragmented (albeit large) market. Convex's composition list was the most secure within its corporate context, but the company itself was undergoing a restructuring at the time of my interviews, and the uncertainty was palpable. Interviewees at all three companies, however, underscored the importance of constructing a clear sense of "composition as a market" in order to be able to make decisions that would allow them to keep their lists vital in the face of the need to compete for corporate resources.

This led me to ask how they construct their vision of "composition as a market." In other words, what evidence do they use for making decisions about what will and won't be published, or how (if) a particular

project gets revised? Their interview responses say much about the function of reproduction in composition textbook publishing—and about the role of the WPA in promulgating that function.

In my own four years as a college "traveler" (one company's unintentionally humorous term for "book rep") before I re-entered academia, it seemed that many academics thought that publishers had highly sophisticated research, development, and marketing mechanisms. The truth was (and to a great extent still is) that publishers cobble together a sense of each disciplinary market from a variety of data sources, most of which are highly subjective, impressionistic, and much more qualitative than quantitative. "Composition" as a market is a discursive construction, pieced together from a range of narratives.

As you might imagine, "composition" is a particularly difficult market to construct in comparison with other fields, for several reasons. One is the ongoing shaping of the field itself through sometimes heated pedagogical and epistemological debates that encourage one conception or another of what "composition" is, or should be. Second, there is a clear bifurcation in the field between those who choose to self-identify as compositionists and those who have been conscripted, as it were, into our ranks (consider the large numbers of people teaching sections of college writing who would rather not). As many on the WPA-L listserv have noted, upper administrators appear to have no problem with last-minute hires from other fields to teach sections of first-year writing, whereas they might balk at putting an untrained and tangentially related graduate student at the helm of an introductory biology, psychology, or mathematics class. Third, is the place of composition within the university curriculum, ably problematized by Crowley (*Composition*) and others. Even in institutions not requiring first-year writing, student perception continues the practice of a universal writing requirement; this perception of a universal requirement keeps potential adoption numbers large enough to warrant serious attention from publishers, while exacerbating the most normative and service-driven aspects of the course (it has been suggested that a general first-year mathematics requirement is the closest analogy to the situation in composition). The complications continue apace, particularly in light of the material conditions governing much of the teaching of writing in this country (see Schell); such constraints often engender the decision to choose a "safe" book for the "lowest common denominator" of the "teachers in the trenches." All in all, composition is a special case—and vexing one to those

few publishers who still bother with it (for a fuller discussion of additional complications, and the attrition of publisher involvement in composition textbooks, see Miles "Building").

In any case, my interviewees made it clear that WPAs hold the most sway in constructing the market of "composition" for publishers—and therefore WPAs have the most power for shifting the construction of "composition as a market" in more informed and productive directions. If we aren't happy with the instructional materials commercially available, then, WPAs need to act together to make significant changes in how that market is discursively constructed within the walls of the publishing house. There are a number of data sources in which WPAs participate (and are therefore implicated): developmental reviews, consultancies, adoption decisions, campus visit reports, and author feedback. In these data sources we can locate some WPA agency in composition textbook publishing—and that is the call to act in this article.

### **Sales Records and the MIR**

Some scholars have written that we do have power inherent in our adoption decisions, and that those decisions send messages to the publishers (e.g., Perrin). The publishers in my study concurred; strong previous sales are seen as strong indicators for future success. In fact, one editor cited past sales records as the most "significant piece of evidence" in her view of where composition is. As she said, "we publish maybe sixteen, seventeen comp books a year, and so you see what's selling and what's not selling. There are significant patterns with what sells and what doesn't sell." Unfortunately, the message publishers are reading is in the direction of overwhelmingly current-traditional pedagogies. For example, the leading sellers in the "reader" market are overwhelmingly modes- and models-based; when publishers see that their most traditional war-horses are the books on their lists that sell the most copies year in and year out, they have all the evidence they need to assess just how progressive the market seems to be. As de Certeau has argued, consumption is itself a productive practice; my publisher responses bear this out.

Until recently, however, reports of sales patterns have been very difficult to track, so companies have had accurate records only of the new books sold from their own company. In the past few years, many publishers have subscribed to the Monument Information Resource (MIR), which touts itself as providing "critical market information for the college publishing

industry" ("MIR FacultyOnline"). The MIR service tracks both new and used copies sold by bookstores and therefore provides a more accurate picture of which books are in the most students' hands. Several editors have noted that the MIR numbers do not always match their records, but that the MIR rankings of the most popular titles in each category seem to be right on target.

For publishers, data like that in the MIR point to several forms of reproduction. First, editors may target the top-seller in a particular category, as they try to acquire and develop a competitor for it. Thus, editors will also build their reviewer lists around those books figured to be the leading competitors, as in the call for reviewers printed below. The result is a look-alike book that makes minor adjustments in apparatus, design, or other features, while replicating the tried-and-true successfully conservative pedagogical approach. The lowest common denominator survives.

I have to admit that when I first read statements like the one that follows, I saw the arguments as somewhat naïve. Perrin, for example, urges that

[t]hrough our book orders, we college teachers can create change. [. . .] When we continue to order the same books, however, we create stability within the market. [. . .] Our choices of textbooks, consequently, empower us [. . .] [c]ollectively, we are in a position of considerable power, and textbook writers and textbook publishers must, of necessity, follow our lead. (73)

After my publisher interviews, however, I have revisited my earlier reactions, deciding that Perrin's approach is necessary within the constellation of micro-bureaucratic actions that may eventuate institutional change. Too many publishers said that the sales figures of the current-traditional textbooks are too important to overlook. And too many textbook adoption decisions seem to be made to please the lowest common denominator rather than to disseminate and support theoretically-informed pedagogical practices. Our consuming practices, however, are not enough. To identify other avenues of agency, we need to examine our reproductive practices as well.

## **Consultants**

Perhaps the best kept secret in textbook publishing is the existence of

academic consultants who help develop discipline-specific lists for a particular company. Most textbook publishers do have a composition consultant—"one of us." The consultant is often the first line of response, and usually shapes the list in a particular discipline. For example, the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric house the papers from the late Richard Beal, former director of composition at Northeastern University and consultant for Little, Brown publishers. The Beal papers include his assessments of individual projects under consideration, his reviews of textbooks that underwent development, and other reports he crafted for the publisher. His papers are of great historical significance in the field because his input was sought in almost every textbook published over two decades. Simply put, one person really *did* have that much power. Although the Beal papers span the middle decades of the twentieth century, engaging academic consultants is still a common practice today; although one single person may not wield the power Richard Beal did, a few well-placed consultants direct lists equally as potent. All three of the companies in my study engage a consultant's services; at least two other companies use them as well—and there are only about seven composition publishers left after the merging and purging of the 1980s and 1990s (depending on what month you do the counting).

Editors at all three companies I interviewed rely heavily on their consultants. Although Atlantis has used one with only limited success, Convex has made great strides with theirs. In fact, the recommendation of their consultant is so strong that editors at Convex might offer a contract to an author recruited by the consultant—without conducting external reviews. One Babco editor's tactic has been to "forge strong links" with "a couple of people [in the field] I trust incredibly." Thus, if you are a textbook author, chances are your project involved feedback from a consultant you never knew about, who eventually received a percentage of the royalties from your book. This isn't inherently a bad thing, but composition studies has yet to make the most out of the consultant-function. The reasons for this are various.

Consultants serve different functions at different companies. Although they review prospective projects, they also do much more. They may actively recruit for their publisher, and help them build a list that is (ostensibly) more in touch with the pulse of the composition market. They establish good working relations with particular editors, so their voice is heard in decisions throughout the development and production process. For

their efforts, their advice, their expertise, their ethos, and their loyalty, they often receive an "editorial override" on projects developed under their care—usually between 1-3% of the royalties. Authors often are not aware of the presence of an academic consultant, and they often do not know how much power the consultant might wield. Not surprisingly, most consultants are (or have been) WPAs. Again, this is not a bad thing, but rather an opportunity lost. If consultants are so powerful, one might ask, why are the books still coming out largely the same? Are consultants adequately supporting theoretically-grounded and pedagogically-informed provocative projects? Are they referring their editors to the appropriate reviewers for each project, or are they helping their editors cater to the lowest common denominator? Are they reading proposals and manuscripts with their gate-keeping function first and foremost, thereby imposing an unduly normative stance? Or are they encouraging their editors to push the envelope when it makes sense to do so? The consultant-function, it seems to me, can go either way; in practice, it seems it has been moving in the direction of continual reproduction.

The theory behind consultancies is a good one, and it has worked well in several other fields to build a theoretically-informed, pedagogically sound list (psychology and biology, for instance). It is not clear that the system works as well in a field as fragmented as composition, however. First, the "camps" in composition are far from being homogenized (which many, including myself, see as a virtue); however, any particular consultant will probably have a vested interest in promoting some theories and pedagogies over others. Again, this might work to the advantage of more cutting-edge and provocative pedagogies, but this has not appeared to be the case (witness the stultifying sameness of many of the books currently available on the market).

If one company has one consultant in composition, it probably follows that it will be publishing textbooks consonant with that consultant's background and position in the field. For example, a consultant heavily steeped in literary training will probably have a difficult time recognizing the validity of approaches that do not integrate a heavy emphasis on reading and models. In fact, if you look at the textbooks on the market, only a few outliers are non-reading-based approaches. The incredible proliferation of thematic, rhetorical, single-theme, models-based, multi-genre, and/or cultural studies readers attests to the comfort level with which consultants, reviewers, and adopters support readings-based approaches almost to the

exclusion of other theoretically-informed pedagogies.

Frankly, to my mind the consultancy is the position vested with the most potential power for altering the paradigm of textbook (re-)production cycles. Consultants can be more than just a reviewer with a stronger voice; rather, they can be more proactive, more willing to push the envelope, more willing to encourage difference. To this end, there are a number of specific actions they might take. Consultants might stop their publishers from over-reviewing (a chronic problem at Babco), or they may help editors make sense of contradictory reviews (a practice at Atlantis). In addition to building more appropriately situated reviewer lists, consultants might also help in the crafting of the questions asked of reviewers. Given their connections in the field, they might be useful match-makers, pairing author teams strong in theories with those who are most in touch with the needs of the classroom (after all, despite embracing a "praxis" orientation, many of us do not have the luxury of traveling freely between theory and practice). Regardless, the voice of the consultant is the loudest and strongest in the textbook production process, and those of us who can should make more of that position of agency for the benefit of all. Consultants can and should rethink their own positions, to see what other contributions they might be able to make to the field.

## **Reviewers**

Not everyone reading this article has the opportunity to control an adoption decision, or to become one in the handful of publishers' consultants. However, I suspect that every WPA has been approached by a composition publisher to review a textbook project under consideration, development, or revision. Reviews are something we all do, or at least something we all have the opportunity to do. Reviews are perhaps the most important step in the developmental process of textbook creation—and as professionals in composition studies we can theoretically applaud the mechanism that allows for ample committed, focused, formative peer reviewing. It is both good pedagogy and good practice in writing theory. Unfortunately, too many reviewers do not make most of the opportunity when it presents itself. In other words, we don't always practice what we preach. Let me explain.

Without exception, employees at each of the three companies in my study stressed the role of developmental reviewers in helping them assess

and construct "the market." Many felt that developmental reviews present the best opportunity for speaking directly to the segments of the market they are hoping to attract, and they take reviewers' responses seriously. A relatively new editor for Atlantis explained his necessary reliance on developmental reviewers. He said, in fact, that "I admit I have to rely on the expertise of others; I get [reviewer] suggestions from our marketer." Even seasoned editors use reviewers extensively, as Charlotte, a long-time editor with Convex explained,

No matter how many years I've been doing this, I tend to not take a major step without reviews. And I do the reviewing so carefully. What I like to do is find the people who are the ideal audience for the book—it does no good to send out a rhetoric-reader to someone who would never use one—and ask them what needs to be done to make the book one they would adopt.

It is significant that even after many years—even decades—in the business, editors like Charlotte will not publish a book without confirmation from the market. Likewise, editors at Babco use more reviewers at even more points in the process than the other two companies I studied. They count on members of the field to help them assess the pedagogical viability of the project, and they are bound by their upper management to secure a final "confirming" round of reviews before any manuscript can be turned over for copyediting, designing, and printing. Clearly, the voice of the reviewer is strong and potentially has the power to support progressive pedagogies.

In their defense, the publishers with whom I spoke have tried to encourage good reviewer practices. They listen to reviewers, and eventually they learn from them. They understand that composition is a different ball game than the other fields in which their company may publish. For example, editors at Babco were recently able to convince upper management that an indication of "strong endorsement" or "I'll recommend this to the committee" is the strongest commitment they can expect to get from a reviewer in composition. Composition reviewers rarely say "yes, I'll adopt" for a number of reasons: they may not be allowed to choose their own texts, they may be holding out for a completely different approach, they may prefer to create their own materials, they may not know whether or not they'll still have the same job next year, or they may not have taught an undergraduate writing class in over a decade. All of these are viable

possibilities in the composition market, and editors have become increasingly sensitive to these conditions. In fact, attempting to address the problems created by the hierarchical organization of the field (what some have perceived as a theory/practice split), one company commissions reviews in the following way:

There are two types of desired reviewers, at least in-house [at Atlantis]. You want people in the trenches, people who are actually teaching a wide variety of courses. And then you want authority figures. You usually split up the job. If you have a questionnaire with twenty major concerns, you send them to the in-the-trenches people. And for the deep reviews, you send it to the experts. . . . If you look at the acknowledgments pages of other handbooks, you know that's what they've done.

Although this editor has created a mechanism allowing for feedback from a variety of backgrounds and levels of expertise, the editor nonetheless reinforces the theory/practice binary by asking for "shallow" readings from the practitioners and "deep" readings from the experts.

Most interestingly, several editors conveyed their disappointment with the tenor of the reviews they receive. Editors at Babco reiterated—several times—that reviewers often hold them back from doing more progressive books; Adele's first reaction when I asked her to characterize the field of composition was that it is "not as diverse as people would like to think it is; it's more traditional-slash-conservative than people like to think it is." She sighed, appearing to wish it were otherwise. Another editor at Babco registered her disappointment that "wherever the market is, I think that it's several times more conservative at any moment than what I'm imagining it is." Bill, the president of Atlantis's college department agrees:

I don't know if anyone can come along and really whack a home run in composition . . . there's a lack of interest on the part of the academy to do anything particularly different, so you have to make your distinctions at the margins. Which then plays into the sense that a lot of the books are the same.

Bill's evidence that the academy will not support a radically different pedagogical approach is twofold: first, the negative reviews that his editors receive for textbooks they feel will be cutting edge; and second, the

lackluster sales of those innovative books that make it past the review process with the persistence of a committed editor. The message to Bill is clear—conservative sells, successful change is cosmetic and marginal at best.

Thus, over time the focus and tone of the review questionnaires has shifted. Cathy, an editor with Babco, admitted to some disappointment with reviewers who are either trying to be too nice, or who presume to speak for "the market" as a whole. She noted that she had radically altered the types of questions she asked reviewers:

Now I get a sense that we are looking for reviewers within English as confirmation, and I don't find you can go to reviewers and ask them for ideas. Now we'll send revisions out with specific ideas, with a specific plan, and ask them to respond to that. I've not found we get very far with reviewers when we ask them to create.

This is a rather damning statement. It indicates that reviewers once had the opportunity to do creative work with the authors, but that they were not up to the task. Thus, reviewers have lost credibility—and quite a bit of power.

In many situations, then, the function of the review has strayed far from its supposed formative, developmental purpose. Of course, the sheer number of books currently under development may contribute to reviewers' disinclination to engage textbook manuscripts with little more than pro forma responses. However, Cathy's statement also indicates that the role of the reviewers might be more powerfully developmental than merely arbiters of a thumbs-up/thumbs-down decision. This lost opportunity is a shame, and one we might consider trying to recapture. Those of us commissioned to do reviews may need to make more of those opportunities to re-construct a more fruitful picture of "the market." It seems that we will not get better books until we do.

On the other hand, perfunctory reviews can be over-ridden by an editor with substantial experience and strong connections within the academic community, especially when a project has the support of the consultant. Charlotte, in particular, feels empowered to read her own market savvy into the reviews; the editorial instincts she has developed can lead her to pay attention to more than just the bottom line "yeas" and "nays" offered by reviewers. She says:

It can happen, too, that you can send out for six reviews, four of which are negative, but the two positive ones will be so persuasive because *those reviewers get it*. There's something about the project these people see—and I see it, too. I can help make it the book they see, and when it's published the other four will come around.

Charlotte, then, does not rest entirely on the advice of her reviewers, and she exercises her own editorial agency when she has a project she feels has promise (but the majority of reviewers she commissioned might not "get it" just yet). So far, she says she has been lucky that upper management at Convex responds to her ethos and her arguments in such situations. In this case, the voice of a visionary editor can over-ride the perpetually normative stance of the reviewers, but this move also signals an attrition of the power in a reviewer's voice.

I take all of these interview responses to indicate an overwhelmingly conservative stance on the part of the reviewers these editors are contacting. So why do the reviews come back so conservative? Several theories suggest themselves. It might be in the editor's selection of reviewers, it might be in the responses called for by the questions they ask. Every so often an editor posts a call for reviewers on the WPA-L listserv, and I would argue that the calls I have seen often assume—even demand—normative responses. For example, I recently received the following email (offlist):<sup>3</sup>

Dear Professor Miles,

I am contacting you to ask if you would be interested in reviewing a new cultural studies reader for [name withheld] publishers. We would like you to review the proposal, the table of contents, and one complete sample chapter. The materials are ready now, and we would need your response in approximately three weeks (July 4, 1999). To show our appreciation for your efforts, we are offering an honorarium of \$125.

We are specifically looking for reviewers who:

\* Regularly teach an introductory composition course (particularly, teachers of first-semester composition courses)

and are in a position to adopt a book if they want;

\* Are interested in a popular culture/cultural studies approach to teaching composition;

\* Use at least one of the following books:

"Signs of Life" by Maasik and Solomon

"Reading Culture" by George and Trimbur

"Rereading America" by Colombo, et al.

"Common Culture" by Petraca, et al.

I look forward to hearing from you and hope that you will be able to review for us. If you are unable to review at this time, I would greatly appreciate your recommendation of any colleagues who might be suitable reviewers. Please be sure to include your address and phone number, and don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions!

As you can see, this call for reviewers has already determined the nature of the response. Notice, for example, that it specifically requests a reviewer who teaches the course on a regular basis. This is a positive move, since many "expert" reviewers do not necessarily connect frequently with undergraduate writing students. Second, however, it needs reassurance that I control my own adoption decisions, thus potentially "seeding" an adoption of the textbook down the road. (Reviews often serve this "seeding" function.) Third, it ascertains whether I am a member of the potential market for the textbook (also a good move which recognizes the multiplicity of approaches in writing instruction). And fourth, it implements the reproductive function by requesting that I use one of the competing books (and can therefore do a comparison/contrast with the prospective book and help them replicate what seems to work well for me).

I have no problem with points one through three; it is the final one that troubles me. When new books are already defined *through* their competitors, we have a problem. And when our reviews are shaped primarily in response to the competition, we dig the hole ever deeper (see,

in particular, critiques offered by deBeaugrande; Otte; Perrin). These and other composition scholars have offered damning critiques of the reviewer function—particularly as it further instantiates cultural and physical reproduction. In fact, I responded to this reviewer request saying that although I had temporarily sworn off reviewing readers (because there were just too many on the market that were doing too much of the same marginally interesting stuff), I would be happy to fit this review into my summer schedule. The editorial assistant—presumably following the guidelines given to her by a development editor—replied to my response with the following message:

Dear Professor Miles,

Thank you for responding to my request so quickly! It is important for me to know, however, which text you are using in your first-semester intro to composition course.

Please email me and I hope that we can work together!

Oh, the drive to reproduce! As it turns out, I had not provided the editorial assistant information about *any* of her criteria, but the only one she *really* needed to follow up on was in regards to the competition. If I was not using one of the four listed readers, thanks but no thanks. I never did hear from her again after I admitted I was not currently using a competitor.

Beyond the question of *who* publishers commission to review, there is a problem in the *questions* reviewers are asked to respond to and a peculiar communication lag between question, response, and subsequent reaction. For example, in the Atlantis model, "in-the-trenches" respondents are asked "shallow," multiple-choice kinds of questions, while the substantive deep readings are done by "authority figures." Maybe this equation should be mixed up a bit, and a committed practitioner might do a deep response based on his or her own experiences teaching out of the book being revised (or even a competing one). Additionally, some questionnaires devote at least half of the space to standardized questions about adoption size, departmental philosophies and policies, and the like; digging into the manuscript itself seems to play a secondary role in the reviews I have received from some houses.

## Other Data Sources

In addition to the three main sources discussed so far—sales records, consultants, and reviewers—publishers have a few other reservoirs for constructing their sense of composition as a market. Any WPA knows that publishers visit our offices regularly; conversations with publisher's reps, editors, marketers, managers, and other itinerant visitors seem to be a basic requirement of the composition director's job. I submit that the time is not wasted: each visit is an opportunity to inform, to engage, to educate. In my years as a publisher's representative, I first learned about rhetoric and composition from the WPAs who were generous enough to spend a little extra time explaining the theories behind their pedagogies. I took those insights back to my employer, and over time it added up to a perceptual shift in-house.

In addition, editors do attend panels at national conferences, participate in seminars, and read some of the journals. This strategy occasionally translates into a successful new book project, but not as often as the other strategies employed above. Rather, scholarly conversation is the white noise in the background, while the other data sources shout over the din. Babco's Adele noted that her editors spend some time "[l]ess successfully, looking at journal articles and . . . at what's being written now, so you can have some sense of anticipating where the market's going." At Atlantis, Bill encourages his editors to envision "the leadership of the CCCC as the top five departments in the country" rather than imposing a more elitist ranking paradigm that seems to work well for other fields.

Finally, publishers look to the successful authors they have already signed. An Atlantis editor, Amelia, acknowledged that her notions of composition had grown from the earliest reader on which she had worked, a book that

came out of the grand liberal arts reader tradition, and was then being edited by a team of people who were primarily literature scholars—not trained in rhetoric, not trained as teachers of writing, but themselves very fine writers and very good teachers. . . . There was an assumption on the part of the publisher that writing well was a skill that was taught through other kinds of reading, almost through the traditional study of belles-lettres. . . . I quickly learned that there was a growing number of people who considered [composition] their specialty.

For years, composition had been constructed by this type of author—the "fine writer" and "very good teacher" trained in literature. This legacy lives on, although Robert J. Connors optimistically pointed out in the mid-1980s that the numbers of doctorates in rhetoric and composition—and subsequently authors and textbooks imbued with developments in the field—should continue to increase. This is an important and promising move, but it needs to inform textbooks more aggressively.

## **Conclusion and WPA Agency**

What, then, is an administrator to do? Composition as a field is rife with internal contradictions and inconsistencies, and our writing instructors bring to the table a vast range of competing approaches, backgrounds, desires, and expertise. Given the sources of data that publishers say they use to construct their notions of composition as a market/field, WPAs can—and should—insert themselves into the process in appropriate, pragmatic, and effective ways. The messages we send are of crucial importance, but there is no single answer. Rather, I urge a constellation of actions that in their collectivity will shift the textbook publishing paradigm in more theoretically- and pedagogically-informed directions.

Perhaps another angle is to help publishers construct more useful operational definitions of market segments. One company described the market in terms of the genre of book they use ("rhetoric-readers" as opposed to "thematically-arranged readers" as opposed to "brief handbooks"), while another differentiated on the basis of labor status—"CCCC leadership" as opposed to "freeway-flyers." While all the companies agree that the composition market is more "fragmented" than any other discipline, they seem to draw the lines of fragmentation differently. Perhaps one solution might be to try to suggest alternative schema for making useful distinctions in the market (i.e. generational shifts, allegiances and common assumptions from different types of graduate programs, sub-disciplinary status, and so on).

Furthermore, there might be ways to involve students in the review process (when I was a college traveler, some science departments—particularly biology—included their undergraduates on the adoption committees). Or maybe WPAs might team up with, or mentor in the review process, those for whom they are supposed to speak—the graduate teaching assistants (or adjuncts) under their watch. In isolation, it is too easy to project universalized and normative assumptions on those teachers without

*really* knowing what is happening in the relative anonymity of particular classrooms—thus, WPA reviews too often are neither an indication of personal preferences, nor an accurate portrayal of what "underlings" would like to see and do. The resulting review is too many steps away from an "honest" response to the manuscript in question, with too much second-guessing about the practices of others. As textbook adopters and consultants, the messages we send are loudest of all; there, our thumbs-up and thumbs-down decisions are the most critical to publishers' and teachers' bottom lines.

Chances are, almost everyone who has read this article squirmed at some point; I certainly did as I wrote it. Nobody escapes without being implicated in the seemingly endless cycles of deproduction and reproduction. I remain hopeful, however, that collectivities such as the WPA can intervene to support productive and progressive social change. By examining the subject positions from which we interact with writing textbooks and their attendant processes, and by acting more responsibly to enrich those processes, I am confident the market can be constructed more to our liking—for the benefit of the teachers and students with whom we work. I am certainly not the first to argue for the benefits of inserting oneself (and one's interests) into bureaucratic processes. WPAs have traditionally done this quite well at their individual institutions (see particularly Miller). The project I support now, however, is a larger scale collectivity in which we look beyond the walls of our particular setting in the academy to the neighboring institutions that constrict and constrain us. Without question, textbook publishing is one of the most powerful neighboring institutions within our reach, and the stakes are high for inserting ourselves appropriately into the discursive construction of our field.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dennis Lynch, Susan McLeod, and the other WPA reviewer for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions. Jim Porter, Pat Sullivan, Patricia Harkin, and John Trimbur also offered advice on an earlier version of this work.

<sup>2</sup> All publishers and their companies have been assigned pseudonyms. The companies in this study are Atlantis, Babco, and Convex, while employees were assigned pseudonyms based on comparable rank in each company. Thus, Amelia and Adele are the equivalent of editors-in-chief.

<sup>3</sup> This message was reprinted with the permission of the writer.

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