

Review

Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2008. 208 pages.

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Another day, another news story on poor writing skills among college graduates or declining literacy among high-schoolers. As WPAs and writing instructors, we are used to the steady drip-drip of stories painting students as struggling writers, teachers as incompetent at instruction in “the basics” of writing, and generations stumbling on the streets of grammatical ignorance. Since long before Johnny couldn’t write, the never-were-news stories of his ancestors’ similar ineptitudes have powerfully shaped writing instruction. When we weary of these stories, our instinct has almost always been stubborn resistance, shouting down—amongst ourselves—these arguments.

With *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, Linda Adler-Kassner offers an unexpected approach to publicizing *our* stories of writing and writers. Rather than confrontational tactics which reinforce stories we disagree with by retelling them, Adler-Kassner proposes that our best move is much less direct. “The first step to story-changing work,” she suggests, “is not addressing the stories that we want to change, but building a base and developing alliances” (184). She equates this with community organization: taking account of and working from our values and principles, and finding those who share them through dialogue and conversation. Then, working with this base to develop a positive message that is delivered and enacted locally and strategically, *making* stories instead of *reacting* to them, and stating what we want, rather than what we do not want. Adler-Kassner would have us reframe the role of WPA, imagining us as organizers who transform our world through action, reflection, and dialogue, with an ethic of care for people. This approach to re-framing narratives about writers and writing instruction is not without its difficulties,

and it is no public-relations manual, which might *feel* more immediately useful—but the path it recommends seems far more powerful.

The Activist WPA begins with an extended description of Johnny-can't-write stories that commonly frame public discourse on writing and writing instruction. Adler-Kassner dramatizes the consequences of this framework of lack, inadequacy, and incompetence through reference to the Spellings Commission and its influence on our work. What is at issue, she argues, are these points:

- How should students' literacies be defined when they come into composition classes?
- What literacies should composition classes develop, how, and for what purpose?
- How should the development of students' literacies be assessed at the end of these classes? (14)

She presents us with a choice: ignore the dominant framing of these issues and hope it goes away, or recognize “we have the brains, the know-how, and the tools. By changing stories at the local level and then working outward to our communities and with our colleagues, we can make a difference” (22).

That gauntlet thrown, Adler-Kassner starts with the historical root of narratives of student and teachers' lack and the need for outside expertise in literacy instruction. She traces these to a particular current framing of the *progressive pragmatic jeremiad*, a form of pragmatism that views America as being on a mission (from God) to establish a virtuous democracy. The jeremiad is a foundational narrative that identifies a central purpose for education: to develop critical intelligence which individuals can collectively apply to better their circumstances. But the current dominant approach to education is a “technocratic interventionist” one in which students are told what to believe by outside “experts” who, unlike the students' teachers, understand what is needed to bring about a virtuous democracy (48–49). Adler-Kassner welds the current chorus of stories surrounding the inadequacy of writers and writing instruction, and their cost, to this technocratic interventionist account through case studies of high-profile “interventions” in higher-ed literacy instruction. She begins with the Spellings Commission's report *A Test of Leadership*, whose assertion of the failure of higher education is a key script in the interventionist frame. Next, the American Diploma Project's *Ready or Not* report embodies an “experts waiting in the wings” script: if teachers can't fix the problem, outside experts will. Adler-Kassner offers as an example the ACT and its National Curriculum Survey, which

“knows” what students need, what they are actually getting, the resulting gap, and what curricula would close that gap (which, naturally, ACT has written). At this point, we are convinced of Adler-Kassner’s argument that this interventionist frame is not only present but difficult to refute.

But Adler-Kassner then turns to a fourth case, the SAT Writing Exam and NCTE’s success in changing the story about it from the standard “combating failure in the schools” narrative to framing *the test* itself as the failure. Analyzing NCTE’s work, Adler-Kassner derives four principles that the second half of the book examines:

1. Reframing is a long-term process that involves rewriting a story *before* it’s news, through analysis of a community’s principles.
2. It demands not response to threats but organizational examination involving large numbers of people asking, what is it we *do* here?
3. It demands forming alliances with lots of others with related concerns based on those clarified principles.
4. It demands focus: a very specific message, careful training of spokespeople, and managing multiple news outlets. (79–80)

What Adler-Kassner takes up next, then, is an explanation of the first three points above: how changing stories is first a problem of organization. She interviews leaders of nine progressive community action organizations including MoveOn, the RockRidge Institute, Wellstone Action, and the Strategic Press Information Network, in order to walk readers through three approaches to community organizing: interest-based, value-based, and issue-based. Her analysis demonstrates that all involve discovering principles, clarifying goals, identifying allies and connecting people in and through self-interest, developing a base (through dialogue, conversation, and listening), and developing leaders. Smart WPAs, Adler-Kassner concludes, will “mix and phase elements of all three models,” the key being balance: “Techniques without ideals, tactics without strategies, actions without principles—a menace. But ideals without techniques, values without tactics, principles without compromise and reality-checking—a mess” (127).

It is through organization that WPAs will find firm ground for the more obvious activity in changing stories: writing new ones, and getting them out. Drawing from her interviews, particularly with Wellstone Action and SPIN, Adler-Kassner summarizes and analyzes seven steps these organizations all use in reframing stories:

- Identifying an issue and a goal for change
- Identifying what we know, and what we need to know, to achieve the goal

- Developing a message
- Identifying audiences for that message
- Crafting specific messages for specific purposes/audiences
- Creating an overall plan to circulate our messages among those audiences
- Assessing our work (130–31)

In explaining these steps, Adler-Kassner is at her most directive, which is welcome: readers can feel like they really are receiving a primer on message development and media strategies.

At the same time, Adler-Kassner chooses not to examine message development specifically from a perspective of frame theory, something of a disappointment in a study that premises itself on a problem of framing to begin with. An extensive tradition of research on how frames actually work, beginning in brain science and working outward to issues of social organization and enculturation, is entirely skipped. For Adler-Kassner's purposes, this work is not important, but attending to actual mechanisms of framing might well influence those purposes to begin with. Thus, more sustained attention to message development as itself a problem of framing, along the lines of work by van Dijk, Snow and Benford, Donati, and Fisher, would have been welcome.

Still, Adler-Kassner finds a more crucial point in her ultimate argument: that one must know one's values clearly in order to be most effective in changing stories, because the new stories must derive from those principles. In the final chapter, Adler-Kassner examines her own principles, explaining how the ideals espoused throughout the book both derive from and dovetail with them. For example, she finds parallels between the cultural frame of *prophetic pragmatism* (a current version of pragmatism centered in pursuit of social justice) and the ethic of *tikkun olam*, as enacted through her own secular humanistic Judaism. Prophetic pragmatism sees the power of individuals to make a difference and improve democracy even while enmeshed in differences in power; the importance of forwarding human progress by addressing profound differences in power; and adapting old and new traditions to promote innovation and resistance in order to enhance individuality and promote democracy (172). As such, it shares with the ethic of *tikkun olam* an emphasis on *present action, combined action and reflection, and communal dialogue*.

It is clear in such examples how Adler-Kassner “telescopes,” in her words (168), between these principles as an individual personal ethic and as a zoomed-out, field-wide set of strategies for changing stories about writers and writing. In fact, one of the most impressive aspects of Adler-Kassner's

work is the book's consistency in enacting the very principles it propounds. Adler-Kassner lists a number of these:

Value students, their ideas, and their writing. Never, never, never make someone feel as if they can't do something. Treat everyone enthusiastically and in open and welcoming ways; work from what writers *bring*, not what they *do not bring*, to a class or a writing program. Care about people. Listen, and listen some more, to hear what they have to say and not what you think about what they have to say. Advocate for writers and writing. (169)

But how do we reconcile a desire to listen, converse, negotiate, and reach decisions communally and democratically, to be indeterminate and non-judgmental, with an ultimate need to *do* something, to make a decision, to arrive at a judgment on which action can be based? How does a listener advocate, or an advocate listen? Adler-Kassner writes, "I *am* advocating for particular ideas, stances, and approaches. . . . Clearly I have some strong beliefs about the ways that writing instruction and the work of writing instructors and WPAs *should* and *should not* be framed," promoting a civic literacy that can assess social conditions and find ways of improving them (179). Recognizing such values as pre-existing and shaping the dialogue she advocates, Adler-Kassner asks, "But does this perspective jibe with the notion of engaging in dialogue, of listening, of making alliances between my own ideas and those of others?" (180). This is a moment where the book lives its principles, as Adler-Kassner *recognizes* this difficulty and gives an honest, felt answer: that there *is* no good answer, but instead only a perpetual wrestling match in which one must "try—try—to be respectful of divergent positions" through ongoing negotiation and listening even while honoring one's own principles (180).

Adler-Kassner's proposed solutions are no neat and pat method. Rather, they present difficult thinking problems that will be worked out differently, and locally, with every story to be changed. Significantly, the book's own statement of these principles is an enactment of them. Very few scholars pull that off; how often do we in this field hear yet another statement claiming that "writing is messy business" made in the precisest and most self-assured way? Adler-Kassner is not afraid to say that neither the issue nor her discussion of it has a neat resolution. Her book is *not* an easy walk-through or a clear how-to manual. Rather, the book demands and supports reflection; it is written from the personal; it refuses to replace vexed dialogue with easy and quick decisions; and it finally clarifies a set of values that, if readers agree with them, provide a thoughtful basis for *action*. (And if they don't

agree with them, nevertheless provide hope for listening, dialogue, and conversation to find common ground.) It's a new idea—the *activist* WPA—and Adler-Kassner articulates it well.

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