

WPAs in Dialogue

Response to Keith Rhodes's "You Are What You Sell: Branding the Way to Composition's Better Future"

Linda Adler-Kassner

Having recently moved from the familiar environment of the Midwest to the far less familiar west coast, I've thought a lot lately about the ways in which things with similar names can be so entirely different. The Canyon Live Oaks that I see when I hike in the Santa Ynez Mountains, for instance, share a root with White Oaks growing in the Midwest, but they're very, very different trees—small leaves, dense branches, lower to the ground than those to which I am accustomed.

This difference between things that seem the same at the top—in the name "oak," for instance—but which are actually quite different also is an appropriate metaphor for the differences between Keith Rhodes's argument in favor of branding and the community organizing-based strategies that I outline for building connections with others and promoting messages about writing in my book, *The Activist WPA*. Branding, Rhodes claims in "You are What You Sell," holds promising strategies for composition instructors (and the Council of Writing Program Administrators) to advance a particular vision of composition instruction, a way of selling and acting upon understandings of what writing instruction means. Rhodes says that his argument in favor of branding "augments *The Activist WPA* in interesting ways" (69). Like the similarities among the oaks I see here in California and those in the Midwest, there are similarities between Rhodes's case and the one I make in *The Activist WPA*. Both of us want to affect the ways that people understand writing and writers in order to make a change for the good; we both think that this can be done, in part, by listening to others' ideas and working with them.

There are many elements of Rhodes's argument, then, that I find compelling. I am also aware of the complex reactions I have to the idea of

branding to begin with. That said, I don't think that we *are* saying the same things. Like the common oak and the live oak, our analyses share certain elements, such as the idea that changing and promoting stories about writing and writers is important. But also like those two different oaks, they have very, very different trunks and roots.

The first chapter of *The Activist WPA* is called "Working from a Point of Principle." It's at this point, identifying and working with the fundamental principles that underscore the work that we do to create stories (our own, the ones we create with colleagues, those we build with others outside of our programs and/or institutions), that Rhodes's argument and mine take different shapes. Personal principles, I argue, must form the basis of any efforts we undertake as administrators or teachers, and this identification of one's fundamental values is at the core of what we do. In making this point, I draw from a number of sources, from Parker Palmer to Mary Rose O'Reilly, from Robert Coles to Saul Alinsky. Later, in the last chapter of the book, I discuss the principles that underscore *my own* approach—not ones that I claim others should adopt, as Rhodes intimates (69), but ones that inform my own practice. I am careful to note, too, that I am presenting these:

not because I feel that these are representative or more virtuous than other principles, but to both share and model the kind of thinking that I have done about the ... process [of beginning with personal principles and extending out to more social activities] that is at the heart of the change-making processes [described in the book]. (169-170)

While I do not make the case that *tikkun olam* or prophetic pragmatism (the principles at the core of my own work) should be extended to *all* of composition (as Rhodes suggests [69]), I *do* argue that writing instructors and program directors always work from a point of principle and that part of the challenge of changing stories (if that is something that we want to do) is identifying those principles and beginning to consider how and whether they intersect with principles held by others.

In chapter two of *The Activist WPA*, I make the case (as I have throughout my research, a vestige from my previous life as an historian) that we must understand the historical roots that contribute to the frames surrounding our work—the soil from which our proverbial trees grow. In the case of writing instructors, this means understanding the ways in which education writ large and writing instruction specifically have developed through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We must understand this background (this cultivating medium, as it were) because we need to con-

sider where, whether, and how we want to put our own tap roots down into it—that is, we must be conscious of how and whether we would like to draw on, replicate, or diverge from the various elements present in it.

Here, too, Rhodes's argument and mine might seem similar (in the ways that "oak" and "live oak" might seem), they seem to me to grow (from my perspective) from two very different trunks and differ considerably. Where my work extends from community organizing theory, itself an outgrowth of small "r" republicanism rooted in America's development as a nation, the branding theory that Rhodes builds upon is rooted in the rapidly expanding global economy of the 1950s. Branding began, in fact, with the convergence of an explosion of communication technologies in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the arrival of television in many American homes, and the explosion in the availability of consumer goods as the nation righted itself from the economic impact of World War II (e.g., Scholz and Friends). With this explosion of availability came a need to distinguish one kind of something from another, similar, kind of something—and thus, branding was born. It is absolutely the case that branding has evolved into a sophisticated practice that uses some of the same strategies as the community organizers I observed (and from whom I draw extensively) in *The Activist WPA*, including careful research into history; careful listening and identification with values and goals; collaboration; commitment to quality (and, ideally, ethical practices); and consistent practice within the brand. But the roots of branding and of community organizing are quite different – in fact, they are in many ways in opposition to one another.

This idea of "marketing" is another, more subtle point around which Rhodes and I have fundamental differences. Because of its origins, branding will always be about creating a market, as Rhodes contends. This means that it will be about selling a brand—what Rhodes suggests might be Brand CWPA. To be sure, there is a great appeal (especially in the kinds of conversations that we hear so often about what writers can't do, or what we should do when we teach them) in being able to fall back on something like Brand CWPA. To this end, as Rhodes notes, I have long worked with colleagues in the WPA Network for Media Action to create resources that writing instructors can use to make cases about particular elements of writing instruction on their campuses, and to compile communication strategies (drawn from many more expert than I) that might be useful to them as they make these cases.

That said, in *The Activist WPA* I contend that once writing instructors or program directors have identified the principles at the core of their practice, they might draw on several models to build alliances with others through a process that always involves making connections, identifying

issues, and connecting back to principles or values. Two of these models, interest- and issue-based organizing, involve a combination of identifying issues upon which to take shared action with allies, and then seeking consensus around values. The other, values-based organizing, involves seeking consensus around values *first*, and then taking action on issues once shared values are achieved. While this last model might be most appealing because it means we always work from what we believe and hold to be true, it also holds the least potential for building alliances because it leaves virtually no room for questioning, reconsidering, or compromise. While Rhodes suggests that Scott Bedbury's principles of branding take into consideration input from or the values of others, they seem to focus on pitching a product to the most receptive audience, and developing the brand from there. This approach is certainly one possible way to promote a story about writing and writers; however, it seems to me quite different than the strategies involved with either interest- or issue-based alliance building. Also, as noted earlier, it also does not build upon the same foundation of principle as any of the three approaches discussed in *The Activist WPA* do.

In an article that also draws on the points of *my own* principles discussed in the last chapter of *The Activist WPA*, my co-author Susanmarie Harrington (who also shares these principles) and I invoke the work of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber as a broad frame for the work of composition. While the focus of this article is on using the idea of responsibility (rather than accountability) to shape assessment work, Buber's ideas also speak to the differences I am identifying here between the metaphor outlined in Rhodes's article and the concepts upon which I draw. In conceptualizing responsibility, Harrington and I suggest that it is rooted in the development of

an I-you relationship [that involves] understanding and some degree of sacrifice of one's own hard-held values in order to genuinely engage in dialogue with another, you, to understand your identity and principles. Together, I and you forge a new, shared sense of being, at which point they can become "subject to coordination," the basis for shared understanding and action.... Buber explains that in order for humans to understand ideas in themselves as well as in relation to other ideas, we must understand them "through relation," in connection with ourselves and others. (87)

This sense of responsibility, I contend in *The Activist WPA* (as well as in this article and, I hope, all other aspects of my life as a person and a professional) holds considerable promise as we consider how to approach critical

questions associated with writing instruction, including how to represent our work and build alliances with others. This perspective is rooted not in the desire to sell a “brand” of composition (no matter how collaboratively it is shaped), but in the need to work collaboratively, across perceived boundaries and barriers, to make a difference in the lives of those with whom we interact every day (students, other instructors, administrators, so-called stakeholders, and everyone else). While it may be construed to sound like “marketing,” the idea of principle-based responsibility is as different from it as the Canyon Live Oak is from the White Oak in the Midwest.

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An Agreeable Response to Linda Adler-Kassner

Keith Rhodes

I am grateful to have Linda correct any misapprehension of her own work that might have been caused by my characterizations. I strongly wish to promote her work, and one of my own strong goals was to persuade even more people to read *The Activist WPA*.

In interesting ways, the discussion comes down mostly to the tricky matter of invoking “principle” in postmodern times. I base my own willingness to invoke principle in American pragmatism, a rational I have explained at other times, but not in this piece. I do not want to go deeply into that philosophy in this reply either, but it strikes me that Linda and I both act like philosophical pragmatists here. We share a provisional optimism that a community of inquiry can use a well-regulated rhetoric to arrive at better conclusions to guide practice, and that ideas can be evaluated by their consequences. Those are my terms (more accurately my condensed appropriation of C. S. Peirce’s terms), not Linda’s; but they apply congenially to

her work. Linda grounded her principles not only in a long ethical tradition but also in demonstrably helpful practices and their results. Her commitment to the very idea of principle has much to do with why I find *The Activist WPA* to be a thrilling work, and why I decided to propose ideas that I think are consistent with that work but that I think open up additional forms of action.

Thus, in my turn to branding I was particularly taken with Scott Bedbury's idea that highly successful marketing will most likely also be based in principles. Of course, the nature of the principles will differ because the very first principle in commercial marketing will be to earn a profit. Yet, as I point out in my article, Bedbury cautions strongly against trying to fool customers. Ultimately, it's entirely possible to earn strong profits by honestly selling valuable products that customers want; in his view, that approach to marketing turns out to be the most sustainable kind of branding. In composition, we have the luxury of being free to focus strongly on producing valuable courses that our students want, and that everyone else who funds our courses wants students to take. Thus, we can consider principles other than revenue to a very large degree. That is why I find value for us in a species of branding that already advises us to base our work in our history and principles.

What we cannot do, in any sort of principled way, is to pretend that we are not to any extent involved in commerce. Students pay money for our courses. We earn money by offering them. If we were to base our classes openly on principles that nobody except us valued, our discipline would soon cease to exist. If we were to compel students, parents, and taxpayers to continue to fund such an activity simply by hiding from them the principles that they do not value, we would certainly not be acting ethically. Fortunately, I contend, and I think Linda contends, that the most principled version of composition pedagogy has enormous value to offer to students, and by means of that transaction even further value to offer all the other sources that fund us. Indeed, I have contended that we have more value to offer than most audiences realize. It would literally be good for students and other "customers" to buy more of our "product" at higher prices, so long as we provide everything we can actually offer.

In that last part lies the problem. When students sign up for a composition class, they usually have no real way to know what they are getting. Responsible, principled academic branding and marketing efforts (like accreditation) would simply give our audiences/customers more ability to know that they are getting more of what our profession actually values. It would offer us the chance to go beyond simply having our values and allowing others to have theirs; it would let us open up the community of inquiry

and allow students and other funding sources to participate more fully in the entire transaction that informs our principles.

At bottom, we should also consider that the American preference for market solutions is itself a principle, even if one in need of constant checking. Markets, at their best, favor what you know over who you know. At their best, they are egalitarian meritocracies. Of course, it takes a lot of intelligent work and regulation to make them operate at their best. The mythical wisdom of the “invisible hand” has been vastly over-rated. Yet there are good arguments why it has happened that regulated markets tend to take the place of official edicts in the most free and egalitarian nations. Thus, I hope that we do not decide that marketing and branding, essentially branches of rhetoric specialized for interaction with commerce, are somehow inherently unprincipled. Ultimately, markets are themselves a kind of rhetoric, a way for audiences to evaluate messages. We would need to meld marketing ideas with our own principles and create a hybrid practice of composition branding, certainly. But above all, I hoped to show that doing so was entirely possible, entirely compatible with our best ideas, and entirely ethical if we simply keep to our own well-tended principles. As with all things commercial, we need intelligent regulation. We do not want to do only that which produces the most revenue. But revenue gained from offering better quality is not inherently an unprincipled thing.

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