

*Review*

## Stone Walls Do Not a Prison Make

Irvin Peckham

Malenczyk, Rita, ed. *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators*. Anderson: Parlor P, 2013. Print. 462 pages.

I have been a writing program administrator at three different kinds of universities: a mid-western university; a comprehensive university; a southern, liberal arts research university; and an eastern, technology, and professional-oriented private university. I have survived.

But more than survive, I have enjoyed and learned from each experience, so much in fact that I have often wondered about the angst I have heard expressed in conferences or read about in rhetoric and composition journals about the difficulties of WPAing. I have had my bad moments, but the overall experience has been rewarding, a source of deep friendships at both the local and national levels, and a gold mine of information for research, scholarship, and publication.

So it almost seems as if I know what I am doing and would have little to learn from a book aimed at novice WPAs. But after reading *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators (RWPA)*, I have realized, perhaps a bit late in the game, how much I had/have yet to learn. Developed in response to a novice WPA's query on the WPA listserv, *RWPA* may have been conceptualized as a rhetoric for early career WPAs, but the collection of chapters from practiced WPAs is also a source of information and advice for mid- and late-career WPAs, even those like me, who thought they knew it all.

I have been reading this book for several weeks now, frequently while on the train traveling to and from my current position at Drexel University. More often than not, I have looked up from my reading to see I once again missed my stop. The travel time has disappeared while I have been reading, underlining, and writing back in the book to the various authors, most of whom I have long known as friends. The book is now filled with notes that I will, over the next several days, type into one of my favorite note-taking programs for later retrieval, knowing that the time will come—and proba-

bly soon—when I’ll want to get quickly at what Irwin Weiser told me about budgets or Charles Paine, Robert M. Gonyea, Chris M. Anson, and Paul V. Anderson told me about the various uses of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or Mary R. Boland’s concise history and implications of the academic freedom conversation.

*RWPA* should be required reading in any PhD Rhetoric and Composition program, regardless of whether the program has a course in writing program administration or not, given the likelihood that rhetoric and composition specialists will, at some time in their careers, find themselves directing required writing programs, writing centers, or WAC/WID programs.<sup>1</sup> The collection of articles covers the range of situations WPAs will unavoidably confront, beginning with who is required to take the first and/or second semester courses (Dan Royer and Roger Gilles’s “What Is Placement?”) and ending with how *not* to let their work become their lives (Doug Hesse’s “What Is a Personal Life?”).

The collection is aptly named because, as most of the authors make clear, directing writing programs is a rhetorical act requiring an acute perception of how WPAs’ situations are framed by a web of relationships, competing positions, and “structuring structures” as Bourdieu (168–70) calls them, those invisible structures that program our minds and are, in varying degrees, restructured by actors such as Eli Goldblatt (“What Is Community Literacy?”) who have imagined different ways of seeing.

While resisting the uniform titling of each chapter (I hate themes), I appreciated the organization that first aligns with the situations WPAs will face when they first sit in their WPA chair and then moves toward the increasingly complex. The first section, “Initial Questions,” covers what students we serve and the generally accepted conceptions of basic writing, required writing courses, ESL, WAC, and WID. The second section, “Complicating Questions,” addresses links with general education, institutional missions, and the more complicated questions about who is required to take these courses—including knotty questions about transfer and articulation agreements—and the fundamentals of assessment, or what are our ways of determining the degree to which we are teaching what we claim to teach.

The third section, “Personal Questions,” moves from the group to the individual: the status of our teachers, how they are trained, who might speak for them (unions), and the frequently ignored link between writing programs and writing centers. The fourth section, “Helpful Questions,” lives up to its name, offering in-depth information on researching a program’s history (without which the present may seem like a dark comedy),

relationships with administrators and their *raison d'être*: the budgets, the functions of NSSE, the National Writing Project, and community literacy.

The following section, “Vexed Questions,” is indeed about vexed and often oversimplified questions: about class size, institutional politics, academic freedom, educational standards, and policy. The final section, “Eternal Questions,” moves outside the day-to-day work of the WPA, taking up concerns of survival—how the WPA can turn what may have seemed like a sideshow into an opportunity for research, publication, and professional advancement. This section and the book ends with Doug Hesse’s personal essay on how to get a life.

With few exceptions, the chapters provide readers with important information and resources. Several of the chapters were noticeably partial, coloring information to promote a position with which the writers were strongly identified, but even these historicized the questions and offered insights into their complications. I have in mind, for example, one of the initial chapters, “What Is Placement?” by Dan Royer and Roger Gilles. I doubt that anyone would argue that Royer and Gilles’s conception of directed self placement wasn’t a significant development in placement practices, complementing Sharon Crowley’s denunciation of the freshman English requirement. Royer and Gilles’s placement strategy restored student authenticity to a system that for dubious purposes limits students’ choices.<sup>2</sup> They begin, however, from what they take to be an unquestioned assumption—that “faculty benefit from teaching to a student group that is reasonably homogeneous in its background and abilities” (23). Given that assumption, the question of assessing student writing abilities is paramount, but that assumption is predicated on a delivery mode of instruction, the necessity of standards, and well-defined criteria for grading student writing. One might imagine—as Chris W. Gallagher does in “What Is Policy?”—an alternative educational structure in which diversity is an asset, in which

we [move] away from our policy of teaching and accepting from students only “standard” edited American English and toward a policy of helping student writers achieve their goals in the dialects and forms that best suit the rhetorical situations they wish to enter. (347)

Gallagher’s alternative structure is a refreshing break, an echo of the 1996 Oakland, California school board’s resolution recognizing the legitimacy of Ebonics (“Original”) and the 1974 CCCC’s Students’ Right to Their Own Language (see Peckham “Acting Justly”; Parks).

From within their unexamined assumption, Royer and Gilles historicize and outline the problems associated with generalizing about student writing ability from limited writing samples and underrepresented writing

constructs (see White, Elliot, and Peckham). Their chapter will be a useful guide to any WPA who has to evaluate an in-place assessment procedure and develop a more ethical practice that carefully aligns the construct of the writing being assessed with the construct of the assessment.

Royer and Gilles usefully deconstruct notions of “correct” placement. The question has to be termed differently, they argue, localized in pedagogical and structural imperatives; it’s “more of a rhetorical than an empirical matter,” they say, pointing out that the consequences “are not limited to grades earned” (32). In short, the consequences of what students learn are shaped by the pedagogical and structural assumptions of the local institution of which the placement method is a part.

Writing programs rely on placement protocols to determine who has to be assigned to “basic writing,” but in the chapter following Royer and Gilles’s on placement, Hannah Ashley opens up the class- and race-based assumptions that arguably underwrite the history and practice of basic writing. These classes are common in public colleges and universities, so most WPAs will be greeted with the problem of how to structure the courses, how to oversee them, and who should teach them. Like the placement practice on which basic writing assignments depend, one can argue, as Ashley does, that class- and race-based assumptions may be driving their existence. After reviewing the class- and race-based issues that characterize the question of basic writing, Ashley notes that basic writers are, in significant ways, being “schooled to know less” (35; see also Clark; Shor). This is not to deny the strong ethical stances and practices of many who have devoted themselves to basic writing (see Greenberg), but WPAs who have to address these questions should at least know the terms of the debate and the history of deficit theory and basic writing practices that substitute templates for thinking (see Bloom; Trimbur).

In line with the coherent progression of *RWPA*, we move from basic writing (the students who didn’t make it) to Doug Downs’s answer to “What Is First-Year Composition?” Downs historicizes the game of first-year composition. I would have preferred in Downs’s chapter more attention to the kind of analysis done in Ashley’s chapter that is grounded in class, race, gender, and notions of a privileged discourse determined by the ruling classes. Nevertheless, WPAs should read Downs’s overview of the problematic history of required writing courses that may be doing as much damage as good. Downs proceeds, however, to a troubling assumption that our concerns (rhetoric/argument) should be our students’ concerns (59). Further, he employs the struggle theory of writing—“that writing is *supposed* to be difficult, and that to have difficulty is to be a *writer*” (59; emphasis in original). As a writer and teacher who has predicated his

practice and pedagogy on notions of writing as pleasure, I simply have to wonder how Downs and I can have such opposing attitudes toward writing—and how our attitudes affect how we teach and what our students learn about writing.

Although I enjoyed reading and writing against chapters like Royer and Gilles and Downs, I more fully appreciated the chapters that didn't seem to be promoting positions identified with the authors. I could go through the rest of the book noting those chapters that seemed particularly useful to me, but I will highlight only a few, using as my criterion things I wish I had known.

I am currently having to deal with WAC/WID issues at Drexel, discussions that have previously been on my peripheral vision, so I particularly appreciated Martha A. Townsend's overview of WAC/WID scholarship and her succinct distinction of the assumptions behind the two programs. Townsend's chapter gave me resources that I will immediately use in a report I am supposed to write for the University Committee on Writing at Drexel. Townsend, perhaps one of the more experienced WAC directors in the nation, gives readers a multitude of references and advice that will guide any new WAC director through the imagined quick fix of WAC to cure the myth of incompetent student writers.

Moving from WAC and WID to general education, Lauren Fitzgerald frames our required writing programs within the history of general education. I love this chapter. I have focused in my career on required writing courses with a vague awareness of their link to general education requirements and the historical link to post-World War II trauma. Fitzgerald's chapter gave me a greater appreciation of the broader role of required writing programs and how professors in other disciplines might view our program from within a theory of general education. Of particular importance for WPAs is the history of the misuse of adjuncts. Understanding the history, as always, helps us understand one of the fundamental ethical problems with required writing programs.

I can't possibly review all the highlights of what I learned from the chapters in *RWPA*—even from those chapters that I felt were skewing information to privilege their answers to vexed questions in our field. Chapters like Kristine Hansen's on pre-college credit, David E. Schwalm's on transfer articulation, Shirley K Rose's on writing program history, Irwin Weiser's on the administration and the budget, Charles Paine et al.'s on NSSE, Gregory R. Glau's on class size, and Mary R. Boland's on academic freedom lie in my mind toward the informative end of a persuasive/informative continuum.

Hansen's chapter on pre-college credit should be particularly informative to WPAs. Somewhere in the beginning stages of the WPA's careers, they will run like a Mack truck into the problem of pre-college and transfer credit. I caught whiffs of this issue in my first position, but at Louisiana State University, I landed in the middle of an overhaul of pre-existing pre-college and transfer credit policies. I was overwhelmed by the number of meetings and the intensity of arguments this overhaul generated. I could have saved untold hours and avoided heated exchanges if I had read Hansen's and Schwalm's chapters. Embedded within controversies of give-away credits are claims about the relative value of the granting institution's courses—and equally powerful arguments about money and recruitment. Needless to say, the granting institution tends to imagine its course as the ideal against which few others measure up. Hansen's and Schwalm's chapters help to situate these issues, disabusing us, for example, of the naïve notion that what's at stake is *only* what students know as a consequence of elsewhere instruction.

Of particular importance in Schwalm's chapter is a theme echoed in this book's title—the rhetorical situation of WPAs. WPAs might assume they have the inside track on the preferred role of writing instruction within their university. Schwalm, Weiser, Rose, and Glau remind us that we exist within an activity system, a web of positions—thirteen ways, if you will, of looking at writing instruction (Stevens). What if, for example, you occupied a position that conditioned you to see required writing courses as a cash cow? Or perhaps, more generously, what if, as Glau describes it, you were a dean who wants to know “What is the largest number of students we can put in a writing class and still have it be effective?” (307)—with *effective* meaning something different to the dean than it does to you? Or what if you are a chancellor and what you really care about is raising your university's National Research Council ranking within five years so that you might be able to move to a more prestigious university, and you see required writing courses as only a pawn in the game? Weiser and Schwalm—who have been WPAs, chairs, and deans—are able to give us three different perspectives, but we know there are more. To work rhetorically, the WPA should imagine these different positions.

Before ending this review, I want to highlight the chapters by Joseph Janangelo (“What Is the Intellectual Work of Writing?”) and Christiane Donahue (“What Is WPA Research?”). My remarks might ameliorate what could be interpreted as a negative perspective on the work of writing program administration. Janangelo and Donahue interpret our work as a site for research. Rhetoric and composition scholars who imagine themselves as WPAs on the side may have a difficult time negotiating the time demands

of running a program, teaching, and engaging in research disconnected from WPA activity. But directing writing programs takes up time that one can turn to one's professional advantage by making these very activities the subject of research. Janangelo and Donahue point toward this kind of engagement. One can find a multitude of interesting subjects within our work as writing program administrators. I have moved from studies in stratification theory to assessment to the use of personal writing in academic settings, all of which have been bound up in how and what we teach in required writing courses. My point here is the unsurprising claim that one's way of seeing shapes what one sees. Janangelo and Donahue help us see diamonds in what we do.

I began this review by challenging chapters written by contributors whose positions are different from mine. I then skimmed the surface of chapters written by contributors who seemed to be writing without any particular axe to grind. I want to end by referring to chapters written by contributors whose axes seem like mine.

Most of the chapters in this book seem to be operating within a naturalized frame that Gallagher ("What Is Policy?") and Goldblatt ("What Is Community Literacy?") challenge: the imperative of well-articulated standards of writing ability linked to the necessity of ranking students on the quality of what they write. Perhaps we have uncritically conceded to ranking when we should have been primarily concerned with student learning. I am suggesting that the structuring structures have conditioned us to naturalize counter-productive pedagogies that may in fact function primarily to reproduce the social structures into which we have been born.<sup>3</sup> If one reviews the craze of the five-paragraph essay and the current postsecondary obsession with articulating, mapping, and testing, my suggestion might not seem far-fetched. We can perhaps fantasize that within our rhetoric and composition community, we have risen above mis-educating students (Dewey), but it is quite possible that we have not seen how much damage we are doing by conceding to equally problematic assumptions about stratifying students on the basis of dominant social class linguistic standards.

Gallagher stands out because, in an extraordinarily rhetorical act, he has somehow convinced his institution to question the assumption of a monolithic notion of acceptable English (the myth of college-level writing). If you question the validity (by which I mean the consequences of use) of standards, you might follow Gallagher's guidelines for collaboratively developing counter-intuitive policies within a program (351-52). At Drexel, for example, it seems counter-intuitive to value the linguistic idiosyncrasies and cultural perspectives of international students (after all, our job is to teach them how to perform "college-level" writing). But Gallagher's perspective

seems like gold to me. His program's "Philosophy and Aims" statement alone is worth the price of this book (347).

Similarly, Goldblatt describes his strategy of teaching writing by taking writing out of the classroom, pleasantly reminding me of the sixties and *The Foxfire Book* (Wigginton). Like Gallagher's, Goldblatt's strategy is counter-intuitive. Writing teachers have been conditioned to give students writing tasks with hypothesized rhetorical situations, show them samples of exemplary writing in the imagined genre, provide criteria, structure peer-evaluation sessions, encourage several drafts, and require final revisions to be turned in for the instructor to grade (Glau 303). Goldblatt suggests we've got it all wrong.

One of my students wrote in her final portfolio this quarter about being imprisoned by history—hardly a new thought for postmodern Marxists, but it was for this lovely young writer. We may not feel or see the bars, but we might sense them whenever we put off grading our students' essays (I call it reader's block) or when we hire adjuncts for nickels.

The writers in this book have written on the walls. Freire has told us that the first step toward freedom lies in touching those walls and daring to risk the life that lies beyond the bars.

## NOTES

1. I will refer to first-year writing programs as required writing programs because an increasing number of these programs delay the second semester course to the second year or later. I appreciate that readers may question a naming strategy that turns what we think should be an opportunity into a requirement; I think, however, that we might want to name these programs as the students see them.

2. For a discussion of authenticity, see Freire (30). In short, he defines *authentic* as being wholly one's self. For our purposes, we might imagine *unauthentic* as writing oneself into a template; authentic as creatively writing ourselves.

3. For a summary of the hidden curriculum thesis, see my first chapter in *Going North, Thinking West: The Intersections of Social Class, Critical Thinking, and Politicized Writing Instruction*.

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