

Friday Plenary Address

Towards an Ecology of Sustainable Labor in Writing Programs (and Other Places)

Seth Kahn

Almost every time I write anything about labor issues that takes more than a few days to draft, I struggle to figure out how not to sound like I sound on Facebook. Just when I think I've got the voice under control, I cross paths with something like this story, and it all blows up. . . .

About two weeks ago in early July 2015, an adjunct activist comrade posted an article from a small newspaper in Ottawa, Illinois, which seems maybe rural or maybe exurban Chicago. The article, called "Pay is modest, but rewards large for IVCC faculty," highlights an Illinois Valley Community College Electrical Systems instructor named Karl Kusek, who fits a profile I'm often rejoined to remember in public discussions of contingency—somebody with a full-time job, who teaches for the love of teaching, and who doesn't really much care about the fact that the compensation is poor. In fact, Kusek says, "When IVCC asked me to teach I was really excited. . . . I think I even told them I would do it before I knew I would be getting paid." We also know that Mr. Kusek's sum total prior teaching experience was "one semester as a last-minute replacement vocational instructor" at a local high school (Stanley).

I don't blame Mr. Kusek for taking the job or for enjoying it. If he likes it and does it well, good for him. His willingness to publicly trumpet that he doesn't care how much (little) he gets paid is troublesome for us labor activists and for people who do care how much they get paid, but I imagine it simply didn't occur to him that saying so out loud might undercut other people's efforts to win better.

A more troublesome character than Mr. Kusek in this story is the college president Jerry Corcoran. I'll just show you what President Corcoran

says about his adjunct faculty in the article, and we'll see if it gets as deep under your skin as it does mine:

'Nobody ever got rich doing it, but from my standpoint they have so much that they know, so much to share and such a willingness to share that it just speaks volumes about their character.'

'But more than that, I think they contribute mightily to the reputation for quality at this institution, and I just have nothing but the highest regard for them.'

'I think part of their motivation is probably that feeling they get when they realize they have enhanced somebody else's life,' he said. 'It's those "ah ha!" moments when you watch your student's eyes light up, because they've just learned something as a result of your sharing your knowledge with them.'

Corcoran described joining the adjunct faculty as 'an incredible opportunity for people who want to work with others and benefit society as a whole.'

'You very well could be a strong candidate to represent our college proudly to the entire community and make a difference in our students' lives.' (Stanley)

Can anybody see what's so frustrating here? Or is it just me who finds it that way? It's not that he claims to respect his faculty so much as that he equates their willingness to work for low pay with their moral character—a move we see constantly applied to teachers at all levels, ranks, and statuses. It's a more accusatory version of the emotional wages argument that Eileen Schell and many others have made, which says that teachers are expected to find the internal payoff of teaching so high that the financial payoff isn't relevant. Nowadays, the argument seems to be that anybody who doesn't find the emotional payoff sufficient is morally bankrupt.

Nationally, and certainly in fields far beyond Writing Studies, any conversation about labor equity probably has to contend with propaganda like this story. Such stories pop up in newspapers all over the country more often than you'd think, and they're almost always full of the same basic ideas: "*We're so grateful to our adjuncts for performing such a vital service to our campuses and communities that we hope our expressions of gratitude override the fact that we're not paying them beans for their work as professionals!*" In this particular case, as one Facebook friend pointed out, the fact that the article profiles not one but two adjunct faculty with little teaching experience reinforces the notion that college level teaching doesn't require

training—a claim that’s sadly trickling up from the public discourse on K-12 education.

This may not be the healthiest response to the president of IVCC, but it sure is fun:¹

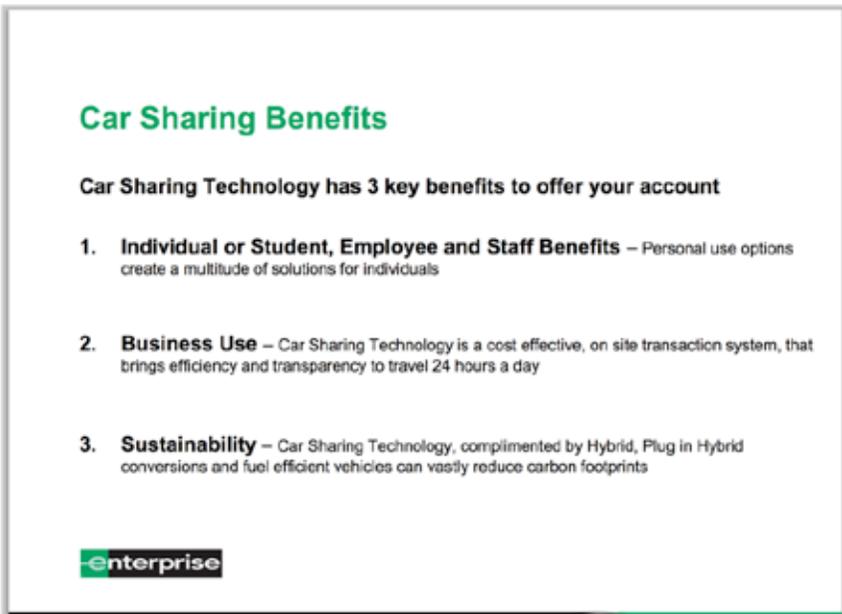


So what does any of this have to do with a talk about sustainability? At IVCC, hiring adjuncts in this way is business as usual: according to Vice President for Academic Affairs Deborah Anderson,

Our needs are always changing. . . . We never know from semester to semester what we're going to have to sell. . . . For our applicant pool we always need people in English and we always need people in math, those are pretty much the two standbys. (Stanley)

Upper management at IVCC doesn't see hiring faculty contingently via Job Fairs, filling needs that are constant with employees who aren't, and paying poorly for it, as problematic; in fact, as we've seen, the president believes his adjunct faculty are heroic. He and the vice president don't invoke the rhetoric of sustainability, but a look at their website shows that, like most college campuses these days, the word is all over it. At the very least they don't reject or even resist sustainability, even though they seem to treat their faculty pretty disposably.

Maybe I'm turning this otherwise all too common campus into a straw-man, but I can't help making this one other observation. While I was looking around their website, I found a PowerPoint presentation that included the slide below, but I have to tell you two things about it first: 1) it's a pitch from a corporation you'll recognize and likely be surprised that they're talking about sustainability at all; and 2) it's on slide 17 of 24 that we see the word *sustainability* or anything I could even construe as a reference to it for the first time.



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enterprise

I wish this kind of slide show were rare, but it's not. That's one of the reasons I'm often skeptical of the sustainability trope, which at its worst sets

itself in opposition to changes that are necessary to redress serious problems. There are two common versions of this critique that register most clearly for me.

First, it sets the status quo as a limiting value, so it's inherently defensive if not regressive. Austin Williams, in "The Enemies of Progress," lays out this argument in terms more provocative, maybe even strident, than even I would. In short, he argues that the entire paradigm of sustainability is an exercise in neoliberal hegemony, which allows its proponents to claim environmentalism without doing anything to subvert genuine threats to the environment. If you're familiar with Marxist critiques of labor unions, the logic is much the same: palliating crises, instead of letting them reach Hegelian dialectical synthesis, short-circuits the revolution. Or more concisely, any activism that actually improves conditions is regressive.

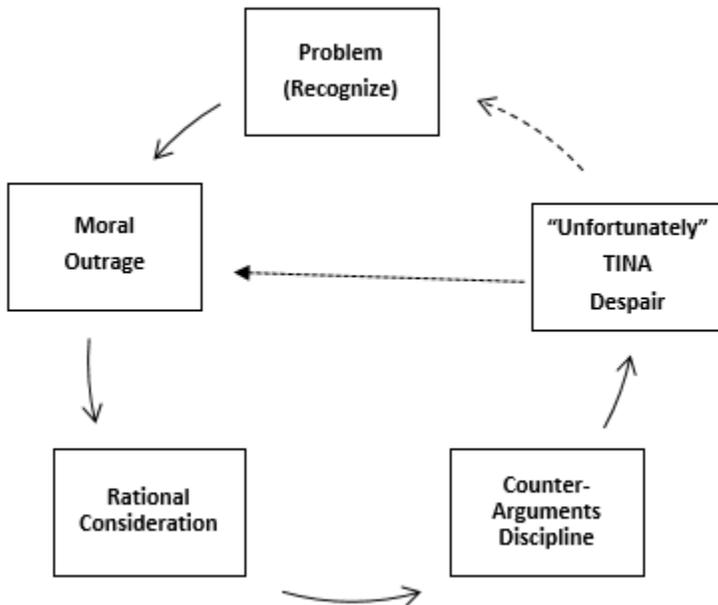
Second, sustainability is highly amenable to greenwashing (Munshi and Kurian). The Enterprise pitch I just showed you is an obvious example. What's relevant about that argument for us is that sustainability sounds so reasonable that it's difficult to contest, and, as a result, is easy for the powerful to deploy for their own not-always-good reasons.

And a third, for that matter, based on my longtime experience as an environmental activist. From my perspective, the sustainability movement appears to have been impelled, at least in part, as a corrective to the tree-hugger/granola/hippy and tree-spiker/enviro-radical images that had come to signify environmentalism in the public eye by the late 1980s. I spent the summer of 1989 canvassing door-to-door for Greenpeace and often heard one or the other of those accusations from people annoyed that I'd interrupted their dinner: you're all a bunch of starry-eyed dreamers, but I've got reality to think about, or, you're the people that tried to torpedo a French battleship! All of this is to say that the same instrumentalism from which critics conclude that sustainability is a greenwashing ploy may actually have been a perfectly reasonable ingredient in an environmentalism that didn't sound too Romantic or too dangerous for most people to accept. Sustainability sounds more reasonable, more technocratic, than environmentalism and is, therefore, both more palatable and more vulnerable to cooptation.

If I'm right, or we can at least posit for now, that the sustainability trope has corrected for the environmental movement's tendencies towards tree-hugger romanticism and tree-spiking radicalism, then I would also assert that there's a place in our thinking about workers and labor in writing programs based on the same kind of respect for all a program's inhabitants and resources that the sustainability movement calls for. But—and this is one of my key points—because we're academics, we have a collective tendency to contextualize ourselves to death. I hate the phrase *paralysis by analysis*, but

we're very good at expanding and complicating the contexts in which we see ourselves until we find a layer that makes positive change hard. That's one of the risks we take by importing the sustainability trope, with all its attendant ecological intricacy, into our thinking. It's a risk worth taking but a risk that requires noting.

Let me elaborate. Co-authors Anicca Cox, Tim Dougherty, Michelle LaFrance, Amy Lynch-Binieck and I contend in an essay we're hoping will be in the *CCC* special issue on political economies that all too often progress on labor equity gets derailed by what Rachel Riedner and Kevin Mahoney call the *cycle of despair*, which they show thus:



Something happens that draws a reaction of moral outrage. In the wake of that moral outrage are calls to be “reasonable” or “rational.” Those calls invite “counter-arguments” or assertions that we don’t know enough and need to do more research and end up not only defusing the moral outrage but also convincing us that nothing can really change. In the end, we get to feel okay about ourselves because we were and still are morally outraged, and that mitigates the frustration we feel at not changing anything while at the same time reinforcing our sense that we can’t change anything.

Let’s stop to think about this. Think about moments when you’ve felt outrage that you couldn’t act on because you had to “be reasonable.” Consider the possibility that you got rational-ized out of acting, got talked out

of doing something good. As I pose this for you, understand that in no way am I blaming anybody for not doing something heroic. All I really want is at least a momentary recognition that sometimes “Hey, slow down! Let’s be reasonable here” is not the right answer. Or maybe even more precisely, that being reasonable and being overly cautious are easy to conflate.

Or put even another way: There are better and worse ways to account for context. Contextualizing labor activism in ways that make it harder is worse.

A concept of sustainability that focuses on life-sustaining inter-relations among all the members of an ecosystem is better. A concept of sustainability that isn’t framed as defending the status quo from imminent destruction, or heaven forbid as resource management, is better. Ecology in our field is often another metaphor for *system*, one that evokes nature and dynamism and adaptability, but I want to push that one step further. Not only are the people who work with us in our programs and on our campuses part of complex systems (and understand I mean that very inclusively: students, administrators, staff, all of us), but they’re people (and so are we) whose lives and livelihoods often depend on the health of the environment. And it’s really easy to lose sight of how connected we are within that environment.

Let’s turn back to the story I began with. If we think about Illinois Valley Community College as an ecosystem, do we react to their practices and discourses surrounding them any differently? I do! Here’s what we know about the local environment, about the ecosystem (as it were). We know adjuncts teach about one-third of the courses (President Corcoran says this in the article). We know two of their adjuncts love teaching so much that they’re thrilled to be doing it and willing to talk to the press about it. We know they’re continuously hiring in English and math, among others, which suggests to me that maybe adjuncts in those departments aren’t so thrilled. I don’t know Illinois geography well, but the town is about 60 miles west of Chicago, maybe about the same north of Normal, maybe 30–40 miles of backroads from DeKalb, about half an hour from Peoria. So I doubt they have a huge pool to draw from among the local population of about 18,000; conducting Job Fairs to find people seems inconsistent with the message of the article. It seems an awful lot like most community colleges in small towns. Working conditions for adjuncts are poor, but many of them have their reasons for taking and keeping the jobs anyway, and others cycle out when they decide it’s not worth it. It’s not the kind of place that’s ripe for a unionizing effort or other large-scale labor activism. From outside, it seems infuriatingly toxic because structurally it’s just like lots of places that are, in fact, toxic.

Granted, I have no evidence from which to make concrete claims about conditions there. I say that to make the point that an ecological conception of context can also help avoid expanding the scope too widely. For example—earlier, I made the point that the story from IVCC is similar to other stories that glorify what my New Faculty Majority comrade Char Mollison calls the Happy Adjunct. I’m already locating the story in a wide context without trying to distinguish it from what may or may not be similar examples. Likewise, I first saw this article among a small group of adjunct activist friends, and the person who posted it framed it as “See! Here they go again! Just like all the other bad managers!” Both of those contexts may be relevant, but neither is especially obvious, and I’d like to think that thinking ecologically and sustainably can help us decide at moments like this what layers of context are how important and to whom.

A carefully developed ecological frame can help show us what we miss when we think too big. We already know that everything is interconnected. We already know about the Butterfly Effect. We already know that systems are complex. When our scope is too wide, we lose the details that comprise complexity. I really wanted to write a letter to President Corcoran at IVCC, castigating him for equating crappy labor conditions and moral superiority. I still do. In this case, there’s simply no evidence that anybody associated with the college feels like the environment is bad. If nobody is suffering, which it’s not clear anybody is, then assuming the environment is toxic is just an assumption. Am I wrong, as an activist and advocate, to be angry at an upper administrator who says something that I believe is not just tone-deaf but potentially harmful to adjunct faculty everywhere? I don’t think so, but an angry intervention into that local environment certainly isn’t likely to accomplish anything.

There have obviously been ecosystems that were toxified without any of their inhabitants knowing, and doing nothing doesn’t help anyone. Thus, adopting this kind of ecological frame can help in a second way by reminding us that lots of people suffer in genuinely toxic environments, even the people that it is easy to construe as beneficiaries of labor inequity. Or maybe even a better way of putting it—we certainly see individuals who benefit individually from toxic environments: presidents who collect high six—sometimes even seven—digit salaries while casualizing and shrinking the faculty and staff cohorts; individual faculty members whose success comes on the backs of other faculty; and so on. Even though I cautioned earlier about being too reliant on Butterfly Effect logic, it’s important to remember that what often seem to be quintessentially local problems aren’t—or aren’t just. Maybe everybody at Illinois Valley Community College is happy, and as an outsider activist, I wouldn’t know that. And as a result of not know-

ing, it's wise for me not to try to intervene in their local conditions (efficacy aside). But in order to minimize the risk that a dangerous idea seeps from IVCC into our metaphorical water table, it's entirely appropriate to notice it publicly, to analyze it for warning signals and ripple effects, and to talk about it.

My last two points I'm going to make and discuss together. The ecological frame also helps to make concrete the interconnections that we otherwise often simply assume or assert. In other words, declaring that everything is interrelated is one thing; articulating *how* and *why that matters* is another entirely. And, finally, the frame I'm imagining here makes room for an activist impulse that more technocratic versions of sustainability tend to discourage, as I contended earlier. I'm going to end with an example that should crystallize both of these points and, ideally, segue into what I hope is a healthy discussion of the handout you all got at your tables (see Appendix A).

The Indianapolis Resolution is the product of about sixteen months of collaboration among a group representing a broad range of job statuses and institution types. The Resolution will recall the provisions of the Wyoming Resolution for those of you who remember them, but updates to them will account for changes in both the field of Composition/Rhetoric and the profession writ larger. Addressing three different domains of action, we propose a mechanism by which professional organizations can both reward and demand institutional compliance with disciplinary standards, and do so without violating bylaws or causing themselves legal problems; we call on graduate programs and disciplinary organizations to be both proactive and candid with graduate students and new members to the field about labor issues, job prospects, and extant professional documents they can use to support their efforts; and we call for professional organizations and institutions and departments to support labor research more explicitly and materially.

The text doesn't invoke any kind of ecological or environmental metaphors (except *the field*, which is sort of natural-sounding but not much more than that), but I hope it's evident that what we're trying to do is to support healthy labor practices and conditions—which sometimes involves aggressively expunging toxic elements, sometimes (we hope much more regularly) nurturing and growing carefully. A sustainable ecology can't survive without addressing threats to its health and can sustain itself positively and healthily with care, trust, and good faith. More directly—unethical labor practices are threats. Refusing to be honest with new members of the field about the current conditions of the academy and the field is a threat. Discouraging research that exposes and helps to address labor exploitation?

Not good. Conversely—and I hope the single most tautological thing you ever hear me say—doing the right things is healthy, and we should encourage ourselves and everybody else to do more of them in every way we can. I'd much rather spread optimism and humaneness than despair, frustration, and toxic sludge.

Or, in the simplest possible terms: As long as we sound a little more articulate than this, we're doing just fine.



NOTES

1. Image courtesy of David Wilder.

APPENDIX A: THE INDIANAPOLIS RESOLUTION

To sign and share the resolution electronically, visit <http://www.compositionist.net/indianapolis-resolution.html>

Indianapolis Resolution

(Updated May 30, 2015)

WHEREAS, most post-secondary teachers with primary responsibility for teaching writing are contingent, as are increasing numbers of Writing Program Administrators and Writing Center directors;

WHEREAS, a caste system has emerged in the discipline in which the salaries and working conditions of most post-secondary teachers with primary responsibility for teaching writing remain (and have remained so since the Wyoming Resolution in 1987) fundamentally unfair as judged by any reasonable professional standards (e.g., unfair in excessive teaching loads; unreasonably large class sizes; salary inequities; lack of benefits and professional status; barriers to professional status; and barriers to professional advancement);

WHEREAS, the November 2013 revision of the Statement of Principles and Standards for the Post-Secondary Teaching of Writing failed to address labor substantively, removing all specific recommendations for class size and workload, and locating ambiguous references to working conditions at the end of the statement; and while we acknowledge that the March 2015 revision includes specific workload recommendations but does not change working conditions' location on the Statement's priority list;

WHEREAS the disciplinary status of composition/rhetoric/writing studies has solidified since 1987, resulting in the proliferation of independent writing programs, graduate programs, departments, and all the accoutrements of disciplinarity including journals, conferences, and CIP Codes;

WHEREAS a long history of position statements and exhortations from CCCC, WPA, MLA, ADE, NCTE have not provided mechanisms that compel specific, concrete, demonstrable changes in working conditions;

WHEREAS, we contend that inquiry into the effects of insecure labor provides important data about teaching and learning;

WHEREAS, labor-focused research has the potential to improve both working conditions and teaching practices;

WHEREAS, currently, there exists a dearth of support for creation, publication, and dissemination of research into labor and its effects on teaching;

WHEREAS, in the spirit of both fulfilling the vision first announced in the 1987 Wyoming Resolution and preparing future writing studies professionals to be labor-responsible colleagues, advocates, and administrators, we call for reform and sustained action at the levels of institutional compliance, disciplinary pedagogy, and scholarly research.

THEREFORE, be it resolved that:

A. At the level of institutional compliance,

1. We call upon disciplinary and professional organizations such as NCTE/CCCC, ADE, MLA, RSA, and CWPA to consolidate and publicize the numerous extant professional standards documents on one user-friendly, accessible website; and where appropriate to revise or update those standards.
 2. We call upon these professional organizations to contribute at least one board-level member to an inter-organizational labor board.
 3. We call upon this board to develop a seal of approval that would be issued to departments/programs that fulfill current disciplinary standards for reasonable and equitable working conditions.
 4. We call upon this board to hear grievances from faculty who believe their departments/programs have violated the current standards as clearly outlined through the action of provision A.1.
 5. We call upon this inter-organizational labor board to establish and publicize clear protocols for investigating those grievances.
 6. We call upon this board to establish a process for announcing the results to the grievants and to the accused in such a way that would first allow non-compliant departments/programs to work internally to remedy the situation before results are made public.
 7. We further call upon this board to establish a process for making public a program/department's failure to remedy a violation of professional standards (A.1) for working conditions[1]
- B. At the level of pedagogy, we call upon our disciplinary and professional organizations to:
1. Draw explicit attention to the reality that material conditions are teaching and learning conditions—that current labor conditions undervalue the intellectual demand of teaching, restrict resources such as technology and space to contract faculty, withhold conditions for shared and fair governance, and perpetuate unethical hiring practices—as the central pedagogical and labor issue of our times.
 2. Recognize issues related to labor as central components of all pedagogy/training courses, professional development initiatives across the curriculum, and pedagogically-focused conversations at national conferences, asserting that these topics must be a part of graduate and undergraduate teacher training, as well as professional development for current faculty.

3. Create a clearinghouse of information about how disciplinary professional statements such as CCCC's "Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing," NCTE's "Position Statement on the Status and Working Conditions of Contingent Faculty" and CWPA's "Portland Resolution" have amply codified best practices for reasonable and equitable working conditions, and where appropriate are in need of updating; how innovative teachers and administrators have made compelling, forceful, and successful arguments to help their institutions improve working conditions for all faculty.

C. At the level of research, we call on our disciplinary and professional organizations to support efforts to:

1. Offer more material and professional support and opportunity for the creation, publication, and dissemination of quantitative and qualitative research into the impacts of the labor system on the teaching and learning of writing.

2. Consider research into labor and its effects on teaching and learning with the same intellectual weight and scholarly respect as other subjects in our field.

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