



PROJECT MUSE®

Activist WPA, The

Linda Adler-Kassner

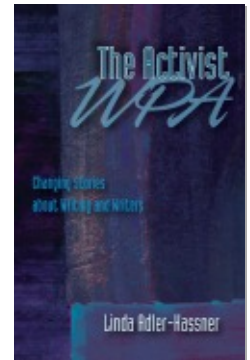
Published by Utah State University Press

Adler-Kassner, Linda.

Activist WPA, The: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9844>

1

WORKING FROM A POINT OF PRINCIPLE

STORIES TOLD ABOUT SCHOOL: WRITERS AND WRITING

Alarmist stories about student writers or college-level writing that run counter to the ones that circulate among writing teachers on disciplinary listservs or in discussions in professional research are easy to find. Using the search terms “writing skills and college students” in a database like Lexis Nexis Academic reveals news items headed by such titles as “Grammar Is Making a Comeback; Poor Writing Skills Among Teens and a New Section of SAT Fuel Return to Language Basics” (DeVise 2006) and “Students Fall Short on ‘Information Literacy,’ Educational Testing Service’s Study Finds” (Foster 2006). Ask people on the street about student writing, and one typically hears a dazzling array of stories attesting to problems with (college) students’ writing as well.

What don’t come up as often in news media or in conversation are stories suggesting something else—that everyone can write; that students are astoundingly knowledgeable about composing in contexts that some teachers know relatively little about; that schools are being put in virtually untenable situations with regard to literacy instruction; or that it might be worth questioning the criteria by which “quality” is being determined. That’s because these stories do not fall within the rather tight frame currently surrounding discussions of education more generally. Instead, typical are stories like those that follow the headlines above, or one from the December 3, 2006, suburban *Chicago Daily Herald* that begins, “The majority of freshmen attending area community colleges left high school unprepared to take college-level classes, statistics from local community colleges show.” The next paragraph continues: “More than half of

recent high school graduates attending these two-year colleges required remedial help—in courses that don't count toward a degree—because they lacked fundamental skills in math, reading, or writing” (Krone 2006).

For as long as I have taught composition—going on 20 years—I have listened to some people outside of the field (faculty colleagues, professionals outside of the field, people I meet on airplanes, administrators on the campuses where I have worked) tell stories like the one in the *Chicago Daily Herald*. Students can't write; they read the wrong things or not at all; they aren't prepared or they have to take “remedial” courses; teachers (college, high school, middle school, grade school, presumably preschool) aren't teaching them “what they need to know.” I would venture to guess that nearly anyone teaching writing (or English) has heard this lament. These claims form the core of a story about writers and writing classes that seem to resonate particularly strongly now.

I have also long thought about how to tell other tales about students, writing, and the work of teaching writing. This desire to work from different stories—in fact to change the dominant story about the work of writing instruction—comes out of my own experience as a student, a person living and working in the community, and as a composition instructor and program administrator. As a field, composition and rhetoric seems to be turning its attention to thinking strategically about how to shape stories about students and writing. As I listened to and talked with colleagues about going about this work I realized that it might be useful—certainly for me, but perhaps for others as well—to think about it as systematically and strategically as we do, say, the research that we conduct or the courses that we design. To pursue this interest, I've immersed myself in textual research about how we might go about this work of telling other stories, and I've spent time with and listened to community organizers and media activists who engage in this work on a daily basis. The result is this book, *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*.

The key word here is *story*. Robert Coles, the psychiatrist and student of documentary production, provides an especially useful way to think about stories. Coles explains that as a child, he found the stories that his parents read to him helped them put his experiences in a broader perspective. When Coles began to think about relationships, for example, his mother suggested he read *War and Peace*. In college, Coles took a course with noted literary scholar Perry Miller; reading William Carlos Williams's poetry during that course, he decided to contact the physician and poet. Williams invited Coles to shadow him as he worked with patients in Patterson, New Jersey. Following Williams and hearing his stories, Coles implies, led him to choose a career in medicine rather than teaching English. Coles goes on, in the early stages of *The Call of Stories*, to describe other *personal* stories that shaped his experiences as a professional.

Coles' discussion of his own stories telescopes out from *personal significance* to broader, *social* significance. During psychiatric training, for instance, Coles heard patients differently if he asked them for and listened to *their* stories. They became not lists of symptoms to be addressed or behaviors to be modified, but whole people whose existences were comprised of these tales. As a result, Coles became interested in "the many stories we have and the different ways we can find to give those stories expression" (Coles 1989, 15). Coles also realized that he understood patients' experiences through his own, that his personal story extended to the ways in which he used others' stories to construct a broader experience. And studying school desegregation in the south during the early 1960s, he realized that the ways in which these stories were constructed had consequences far beyond himself or his patients. Coles writes that:

[The children whom he was observing in southern schools] were going through an enormous ordeal—mobs, threats, ostracism—and I wanted to know how they managed emotionally. It did not take me long to examine their psychological "defenses." It also did not take me long to see how hard it was for many of those children

to spend time with me. . . . I attributed their reserve to social and racial factors—to the inevitable barriers that would set a white Yankee physician apart from black children and (mostly) working-class white children who lived deep in the segregationist Dixie of the early 1960s. That explanation was not incorrect, but perhaps it was irrelevant. Those Southern children were in trouble, but they were not patients in search of a doctor; rather, their pain was part of a nation's historical crisis, in which they had become combatants. Maybe a talk or two with me might turn out to be beneficial. But the issue for me was not only whether a doctor trained in pediatrics and child psychiatry might help a child going through a great deal of social and racial stress, but what the nature of my attention ought to be. (25)

The power of this portion of Coles's book, which for me culminates in this excerpt, is the ways in which he moves between explanations of the power of personally grounded stories for individuals (himself, his patients) and the ways in which those stories, when seen as a collective body, testified and gave witness to a larger one that had gone relatively unexplored.

Using the concept of framing—that is, the idea that stories are always set within and reinforce particular boundaries (described more thoroughly later in this chapter)—it is possible both to examine how the same telescoping phenomenon of storytelling is occurring around writers and writing instruction today. That is, there are *different* stories circulating about writing and writers that build cumulatively to form larger narratives, all with “messages omitted, yarns gone untold, details brushed aside altogether . . .” (Coles 1989, 21). In this book, I am especially concerned with the stories that are perpetuated through news items like the ones quoted at the beginning of this chapter, because I do not believe that they reflect what we know, as a field, about writers' abilities or about the best ways to help students develop their writing abilities. However, the concept of framing also is useful for considering strategies to create other kinds of stories. This book, then, addresses these three issues: examining some of the stories currently surrounding writing

instruction (chapters 1, 2, and 3); considering what frame surrounds those stories (chapters 2 and 3); and considering how we might use strategies developed by community organizers and media strategists to shift those frames (chapters 4 and 5). This chapter introduces this work by discussing concepts of stories, frame, and ideals and strategies.

IDEALS WITH STRATEGIES

The “arguments” in this book, such as they are, are closely related to a quote (from Karl Llewellyn, the leading “legal realist” of the twentieth century) that I’ll invoke throughout: “Strategies without ideals is a menace, but ideals without strategies is a mess [*sic*].” I discovered this mantra on the back chalkboard in a classroom at the University of Michigan Law School where I was attending a talk by Bill Lofy, author of a biography of Paul Wellstone. Wellstone, a two-term Democratic Farmer-Labor (DFL) senator from Minnesota from 1990–2002, was killed in a plane crash during the 2002 campaign season. As a former Minnesotan, I had volunteered for several of Wellstone’s campaigns and knew that I wanted to use Wellstone Action, the organization founded after his death, as a research site for this project because of the smart and successful ways that the organization was training activists and political candidates around the country. But while Wellstone Action is now well-known for this kind of strategy training, when Wellstone himself arrived in the Senate he positively oozed ideals, but he sorely lacked strategy. Lofy (and others) point to many moments where Wellstone was abrupt with or alienated Republican congressional leaders (and members of the executive branch) to illustrate this lack of “strategic” thinking. But as Wellstone developed into a smart and savvy politician, he developed strategies that enabled him to make alliances across the aisle and, as a result, to both take principled stands and achieve bipartisan support for his goals.

The first argument here extends from the second part of the Llewellyn quote. If we take Wellstone’s experiences as a model, WPAs and writing instructors have been all over the map: filled

with ideals but without any kind of core or shared strategies. In her 1986 study of writing programs, Carol Hartzog noted that she did not find “any unanimity about the form and ultimate value of work in this field” (1986, 68). She went on to ask a question about how to connect ideals (such as belief in the value of writing for “critical inquiry” at the core of “academic processes and structures”) with strategies: “Who holds and can exercise authority in this field” (69)? The power, she explained, “still resides in English—and other—departments. . . . As long as there is uncertainty about what composition is, the question of what place it holds on campus—and in the academy—will remain central” (70). Without a clear sense of institutional or disciplinary identity, the implication here is that writing programs have no clear base from which to work strategically. Instead, writing “disappear[s]”—“it absorbs the strategies, wisdom, and language of other departments, and it serves them in turn” (70).

What Hartzog identified as a vexing issue related to positioning becomes, 16 years later, a sense of frustration for Peggy O’Neill, Ellen Schendel, and Brian Huot. Writing about what they saw as a need for WPAs to acknowledge “writing assessment [as] a form of social action,” they noted, for example, that missing from discussions of assessment (e.g., on the WPA-L listserv) was an understanding of assessment (as a strategy) that must be situated in the complex contexts of our field and our institutions. “Although we may help each other satisfying our immediate needs in responding to calls for help [when providing information about systems and/or prompts that “work,” for instance]” they write, “we are also promoting an uncomplicated, practical approach to the assessment of writing that cannot only belie the complexity of assessment but also make ourselves, our programs, and our field vulnerable to the whims of administrators and politics because issue of power, values, and knowledge-making converge on assessment sites, with very real consequences to all stakeholders” (O’Neill, Schendel, and Huot 2002, 13). This sense of disconnection between strategy and ideals can still be heard regularly on the WPA list when, for

instance, subscribers send (regular and necessary) pleas for fast solutions to immediate problems.

At the same time, there is a growing body of WPA research that attests to WPAs' desires to blend ideals and strategies, to engage in WPA work as strategic action. In his preface to Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen's *Resituating Writing*, Charles Schuster (quoting Susan McLeod) identified WPAs as "change agents," stressing "the importance of WPAs possessing the vision, knowledge, and ethos to alter institutional philosophies and practices" (Schuster 1995, x). Other essays in that collection address questions of how to balance ideals and strategies in WPA work, from the construction of writing programs (Janangelo) to the role of computers in composition instruction (Romano and Faigley 1995) to writing across the curriculum (WAC) work (McLeod 1995). Two specific areas of WPA research, especially, have provoked the subfield toward more focused attention on the balance between strategies and ideals: assessment and labor issues. This is perhaps because both deal explicitly with questions of ethics, specifically the treatment of human beings. A few examples of scholarship focusing on each subject illustrate the ways that authors have blended strategies and ideals as they address these questions. Kristine Hansen asks, "How can [the WPA] in good conscience lead a program that is built on exploitation" (24)? Eileen Schell argues that "as we hasten to professionalize writing instruction and make broad claims for its importance as a democratizing force, we must make parallel efforts to address one of the most pressing political problems in composition studies. . . . the gendered politics of contingent labor" (Schell 4). In what are less response-focused pieces, essays in the co-edited *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers* assert and address a pointed argument leveled in Marc Bosquet's essay: "The lower-managerial lifeway of fighting for personal 'control' [by the WPA] over instructional 'resources' [including program instructors] and disciplinary status recognition is very different from the ethos of struggle usually associated with social and workplace transformation:

the raising of consciousness, the formation of solidarities, coalition building, and so on” (Bosquet 2004, 15). Joseph Harris has called for a “new class consciousness” in composition that is rooted in shared commitment: to first of all address to improve working conditions for instructors (including part-time and graduate instructors); to have instructors at all ranks teach first-year writing; and to improve the working conditions of instructors, including the salaries and benefits that they receive (Harris 2000, 58–64).

Assessment researchers like O’Neill, Schendel, and Huot, have challenged WPAs and writing instructors to use notions of validity developed by assessment researcher Pamela Moss and others that necessarily engage questions of ideals (goals, aims, ultimate objectives—as well as whose interests are represented in those ends) and strategies (the means by which those objectives are measured and achieved). As Peggy O’Neill explains,

Validity research involves a dynamic process that requires an examination of procedures and results, use of this information to revise and improve assessment practices, and an examination of revised practices in a never-ending feedback loop. In short, validity inquiry should be embedded in the process itself, ongoing and useful, responsive to local needs, contexts or changes, something that is never really completed. (2003, 51)

Brian Huot’s *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* develops this conception of validity in even greater detail. Huot argues that “including theoretical input about the complexity and context necessary to adequately represent written communication as part of the validity process gives writing teachers and writing program administrators a real say about not only the ways in which student writing is assessed, but also in the ways it is defined and valued” (Huot 2002, 52). This conception of validity is also represented in the notions of “meaningfulness” and “ethics” that Patricia Lynne places at the center of assessment work. She writes that

“meaningfulness” draws attention specifically to the purposes for and substance of any given assessment practice. Meaningful assessment, then, should be conducted for specific and articulated reasons, and its content should be intelligible to those affected by the procedure. ‘Ethics’ draws attention to assessment as it is practiced and specifically to the relationships among those involved in the process. (Lynne 2004, 15)

It is also embedded in Bob Broad’s notion of dynamic criteria mapping, a process that, Broad argues, allows for examination of the intersections between writing and both local (classroom, programmatic, institutional) and disciplinary contexts (Broad 2003, 119–120).

The argument here and in all these examples repeats an implicit or explicit case that I see in this text that echoes Llewellyn’s quote. There are clearly WPAs and writing instructors who are interested in telling stories about writing instruction and writers that represent our values and ideals—who want, in fact, to construct narratives that are akin to historiographer Hayden White’s conception of tropes, “movement[s] *from* one notion of the way things are related *to* another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise” (White 1978, 2). But to engage in this process of story construction or story changing we must also constantly find what Darsie Bowden called this “chi,” (Bowden 2007) this balance between *ideals* and *strategies*.

STORY MAKING

The first part of *The Activist WPA* addresses this concept of identifying ideals. Ideals are our personal stories and motivating factors—the things most important to us. They extend from what we hold in ourselves, what we see through our emotions and experiences, what Coles calls “compelling part[s] of our psychological and ideological makeup” (Coles 1989, 24). Whatever strategic work we do must take these into account and extend from them, in much the same way that Coles’s story of his own

experiences telescopes from the individual to the more social and general. In other words, the strategies that we use and the stories that we tell ourselves and others about why those strategies (and their hoped-for outcomes) are important are rooted in other stories, ones that we tell about *why* we do the work that we do and motivate us to persist in it. In this chapter I'll refer to these things primarily as "principles," a term also used by Nell Noddings (2005), but others have used different terms to refer to them: "core principles" (Elbow 2000d); "foundations" (Miller and Santos 2005). As I'll discuss below, these principles extend from "lived experience" (Ronald and Roskelley) and sometimes require us to undertake the potentially uncomfortable process of self-examination.

In this chapter, I'll describe stories from my own experience that I find motivational and which have propelled me to the work that I do. These stories both reflect and have led me to two important principles which I will also discuss in the concluding chapter: the concept of *tikkun olam*, which stems from my (cultural) practice as a Jew, and the idea of prophetic pragmatism which is rooted in my experience as a teacher and a researcher. In addition to serving as a personally important theory, pragmatism has also provided a number of foundational principles for American approaches to education. But because of the particular nature of pragmatism and the stories which underscore it, the principles embedded in pragmatism have become available to individuals and groups holding very different perspectives regarding the purposes of education—that is, the *ideals* that education should strive to achieve—and the *strategies* through which they should be accomplished. Educators—compositionists and/or WPAs—who want to change stories must understand this historical back story, lest we invoke versions of it that ultimately undermine the very points that we are trying to advance. This back story, the narrative emanating from the progressive pragmatic jeremiad and its relevance for education, is the subject of chapter 2. Chapter 3 then examines how, in contemporary education, this narrative has also become the backbone for stories about education

that ultimately undermine the authority of teachers. Following this analysis, chapters 4 and 5 borrow from work developed by community organizers and media strategists to offer potentially useful strategies for WPAs and writing instructors to construct connected, historically mindful, stories about writing and writers on their campuses and, perhaps, beyond. Chapter 6, finally, returns to the exigencies facing WPAs and writing instructors in these complicated times and raises a call to action.

FRAMING

The beginning of this chapter draws on a number of news items that reflect (and tell) a story about writing or, in White's terms, repeat a trope. As I indicated, I have worked in my career to tell other stories (as have many others in the field); I have also experienced frustration that I think is shared by other WPAs and writing instructors regarding the difficulty of changing that dominant narrative. (When I was drafting this chapter, in fact, there was a discussion on the Conference on Basic Writing Listserv [CBW-L] about a relatively recent report condemning student writing and the work of writing instruction, making the case that "postmodern theorists" have led to a shift in composition courses away from "traditional" instruction and toward something else. As one respondent said [in a post typical of the discussion], "this small minded and dishonest 'analysis' of what happens in writing classrooms—and what applications of theory to pedagogy actually mean—gets my blood boiling" [Lalicker 2007]). My own frustration indicates a difference in the frames surrounding stories about writing and writers—one that is dominant (and used to frame stories like the ones cited above), and others that are less often featured.

Framing is a concept initially advanced by sociologist Erwin Goffman, who suggested that frames helped individuals "rely on expectations to make sense of everyday experiences" (Reese 7). Early conceptions of framing drew on the culturally oriented critique of Antonio Gramsci's conception of "commonsense," especially as was elaborated by Raymond Williams, to suggest

that frames define stories that both reflect and perpetuate dominant cultural values and interests rather than “stimulating the development of alternative conceptions and values” that are “critical” of those values and interests (Deacon et al. 1999, 153). According to communication theorist Stephen Reese,

Framing is concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understand the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources. . . . Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. (Reese 11)

Frames extend from symbols—words, phrases—to signifiers. The more often the signifiers are invoked in association with the word (by producers, consumers, and interactions between them), the tighter the association between symbol and signified, and the less likely that the signifier (around the word, image, or subject matter) will permit “alternative” interpretations. Communication scholars James Hertog and Douglas McLeod refer to the symbols at the core of the frame as “code words,” words that trigger “excess meanings” that are included in (and therefore reinforce and strengthen) existing stories already extending from the code word. In Hertog and McLeod’s conceptualization, a frame might look like a concept map. At the center of the frame is a symbol (a word, a phrase) that is tightly linked to closely related issues that emanate from and refer back to the frame. From each issue are links that extend from (and refer back to) the central node in the frame; extending from those are other issues, and so on. The farther from the central node issues become, the more closely they are linked to other issues and other nodes; thus, they “act as bridges” to those other nodes (Hertog and McLeod 2001, 140). Issues and nodes are triggered through the use of words or structures which, in turn, are linked to narratives and myths. Activating a narrative will in turn trigger connections to others, and the “meaning” comes from the “pattern of relations” among the nodes and issues (140).

Most of the code words included in the first two paragraphs of the news item from the *Chicago Daily Herald* cited at the beginning of this chapter—“underprepared,” “remedial help,” “count toward a degree,” and “fundamental skills”—are linked to a story that says, “The educational system is failing in its mission to prepare students for higher education. As a result, colleges are being forced to offer courses that are neither real college courses, nor deserving of real college credit. Because students are lacking skills when they arrive, instructors are being required to waste their time—and taxpayer dollars—on providing these courses.” Another code word, “statistics,” is used to signal that the research supporting this narrative is absolutely true and unbiased.

But WPAs and writing instructors might interpret this story—and these code words—quite differently. (In fact, the CBW-L post from Bill Lalicker, quoted above, signals his different interpretation of the report to which he is referring; the authoring body sees it as legitimate, while he sees it as “small minded and dishonest.”) Drawing on best practices, position statements from National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) or from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), or from research in composition and basic writing, an alternative narrative might say: “Definitions of ‘good writing’ are context dependent. What is seen as ‘good writing’ in one context might not be seen as such in another (e.g., Bartholomae 1985; Royster; Bawarshi 2003). That’s why, in composition classes, we should focus on what students can do when they arrive, rather than working from what a potentially arbitrary placement exam says they cannot do, then build on that knowledge and help students develop strategies to analyze and meet new expectations (e.g., WPA 2007; NCTE 2004; Haswell 1988; Royer and Gilles 1998; Huot 2002). Students bring a wide array of literacy skills to college (e.g., NCTE 2004; Gee 1996; Chiseri-Strater 1991); in writing classes they can identify how to use those skills and develop new ones. All college classes are worthy of college credit if they are asking students to do challenging, college-level work” (e.g., Adams 1993; Fox 1999; Grego and Thompson 1996).

Consider the range of other issues (in the field) that are related to the code words in this story. They include placement (How are students are placed in writing courses? Through what measures? Why? What is the criteria by which their literacies are measured?); course and program assessment (How are grades in writing courses determined? Why? How are courses within a program achieving the outcomes set for the program? What are the criteria for assessment? How are they determined? Why?); hiring (Who should teach writing courses? How should they be trained? Compensated? Why?); and course and program structure (Who should support the work of the writing course/program? Why?). In fact, using the concept mapping strategy, it is possible to construct a map from this story that would extend to three central questions encompassing nearly every question or issue addressed in the field's professional literature:

- 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?

From here, it is possible to draw speedy connections to other issues that are nearly ubiquitous in discussions among WPAs and writing instructors: How should students be assessed when they come into college? By whom? Through what measures? What should the curriculum of composition classes be? Who should teach them? What should we do with nonstandardized forms of language in the writing class? What is the best way to foster students' development as writers? (Brian Huot would likely make the case that these—and all else in composition—boil down to questions about assessment, which I think is also accurate [Huot 4–7].)

One need look no farther than some of the resources in the field to establish the dominance of these issues. CompFAQ, for

instance, is a Web site started by Richard Haswell and Glenn Blalock in response to the kinds of frequently posted questions to the WPA listserv mentioned earlier, those pleas for fast solutions to vexing questions. But rather than provide responses situated only in local contexts, it attempts to provide a space where respondents can build evidence around disciplinary consensus by compiling composition research that is “in such general agreement that one would think that it would constitute a point of received general knowledge in the field of comp, like the principle of DNA in biology” (Williams 2005). Some of the issues included there include responses to questions like: “What is the content of composition courses?” “How are writing programs being assessed?” “What is the empirical evidence demonstrating that Comp 101 is working?” “What are the minimum competencies students need to be prepared for/successful in [the first semester course]?” NCTE’s Web site, similarly, has over 100 position statements that reflect best practices in the fields of English language arts and composition and rhetoric; among them are statements on class size, writing (and reading) instruction, timed writing, the ACT and SAT writing exams, and other issues that affect the working lives of writing instructors and WPAs on a daily basis. These questions come up repeatedly because they are central to what it is that writing programs *do*. The ways they are framed—in both question and response—shape every aspect of our working lives. If we want to have a voice in the discussion about those lives, then we need to think about frames and the stories that emerge from them.

WPAs and writing instructors are hardly alone in objecting to the ways that writing instruction is discussed in mainstream media—our K-12 colleagues (in a variety of fields) are way ahead of us. Susan Ohanian, Denny Taylor, Nell Noddings, Alfie Kohn, and Herb Kohl are but a few of the luminaries who have written loudly and long about the ways that control over education—including control over the way that education is framed—have been systematically taken away from teachers. A hypothetical frame that Nell Noddings includes in her book *The Challenge to*

Care in Schools illustrates the degree to which “what is possible” has been constricted:

If we suppose that we know exactly what schools should accomplish, we can analyze more effectively the current debate over accountability in higher education. However, advocates of accountability may disagree substantially on what it is that schools should accomplish. . . . Many critics object to the narrow emphasis on test scores, and a few even suggest that schools should now be held accountable for widespread fear among students, a possible drop in graduation rates, the demoralization of teachers, and the growing corruption of administrators who are using questionable strategies to keep schools off the failing list. It does seem reasonable to hold schools responsible for the direct effects of enacted policies, whether those effects are intended or not. (Noddings 2005, xvi)

Just as questioning the meanings associated with code words like “underprepared” or “remedial” in the Chicago Daily Herald story might seem preposterous to the everyday reader, so the idea of holding schools accountable for dropping graduation rates, teacher morale, and administrator corruption also might seem unreasonable or unrealistic. But testing for these factors is in fact just as “real” an option as assessing students’ “achievement” on standardized assessments—it’s just that the frame that has been constructed around these assessments makes this alternative possibility seem silly or uncommonsensical.

Whether or not there is some degree of consensus regarding the three questions linked to the code words and issues that extend from stories about student writing and writers inside of the field of composition and rhetoric is an intriguing question, though it is not one I will dwell on here. As I’ll discuss in chapters 4 and 5, this is because one of the central tenets of the strategies for story-changing here is that it is most effectively accomplished at the local level, and the strategies described in chapters 4 and 5 offer several possibilities for how to develop and cultivate consensus among campus and community colleagues.

To be sure, it is useful—and important—to marshal the support of “national” voices in this work, especially when we are trying to establish a basis for it that extends beyond our programs or campuses. But there *are* position statements, “best practices,” and research journals circulating in the field that reflect our field’s best attempt at consensus positions on issues. As I mentioned above, the NCTE (at 60,000 members) has developed an array of position statements on issues ranging from class size to reading pedagogy; the process used by the NCTE for this work, from identifying topics to crafting a final statement, has brought in the voices of members from a wide range of institutions. WPA (at 500 members) has developed a set of outcomes for first-year composition that serves as the basis for over 250 writing programs; the WPA also has official statements on the intellectual work of WPAs, on plagiarism, and a range of position statements for members through its Network for Media Action. The collective research and teaching experiences represented in these documents are vast, and can be understood to represent a consensus around some of the most vexing issues facing WPAs and writing instructors.

THE STEADY SOUND OF DRUMBEATS

But despite efforts to advocate for the positions in (and frames surrounding) these professional documents and statements, Joseph Harris notes that we have not been particularly effective at affecting discussions about that work beyond the field. “Ask anyone *outside* the field (and this includes many writing instructors who are not active in CCCC) what they expect students to learn in a composition course,” Harris laments,

and you are likely to hear a good bit about issues of proper form and correctness. . . . What I find . . . distressing has been the ongoing inability of compositionists (including myself) to explain ourselves to [people outside the profession]. Instead we have too often retreated behind the walls of our professional consensus, admonishing not only our students and university colleagues but the more

general public when they fail to defer to our views on language and learning. (1997, 85–86)

The problem, as Harris explains it, is with framing the stories that are told about the work of writing instruction. More precisely, there are “frame conflicts” (Ryan 1991) around those three key issues that I’ve identified above: what students bring to college writing classes (how their knowledge should be assessed and valued); what they should learn in those classes (from curriculum to pedagogical style); and how their learning should be assessed (and, prior to assessment, defined and conceptualized). That is, these issues are framed differently by those inside the field than by those outside of it. These issues, as I suggest above, extend out to include virtually all of the work of writing instructors and WPAs. The stories (or narratives) that circulate among writing instructors and WPAs about these issues often emanate from different interpretations, different frames, than those circulating outside of the field.

Furthermore—and probably more importantly—these stories have consequences. They encompass every aspect of our work, from placement to curriculum design to classroom instruction to professional development. While we may not yet be feeling the full force of these consequences in college composition work, we need look no further than to our colleagues in K-12 instruction to find out what happens when others control the frame that determines, at least in part, how classroom work is carried out. I refer here in part to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and to Reading First, an Education Department program that, according to the Department’s Reading First Request For Proposals, “focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in the classroom” (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html>). Reading First has forced schools—particularly elementary schools—to virtually abandon whole language reading instruction. Consider Bess Altwerger’s essay, “Reading for Profit: A Corporate Coup in Context”:

Many of us have witnessed this cataclysmic change in education with both shock and awe—shock that we could have returned to a bygone pretheoretical era in reading instruction when children “read” meaningless texts and teachers taught letters and sounds with manual in hand; awe at the sources of power and influence that so swiftly and stealthily stole our nation’s schools and classrooms from us, their rightful guardians: teachers, parents, and communities. We stand in near paralysis as our school systems continue to loot our reading programs and curricula by order of state and federal law and then punish and demean us when their own mandates don’t meet their expectations for success. (2005a, 2)

As a result of NCLB penalties and Reading First restrictions, says Altwerger, “teachers are ‘trained’ to follow the scripts and directions in the teachers manuals [of commercial reading programs] as if they are unskilled workers. States are refused federal dollars when they stray from official prescribed components of reading instruction and assessment, and they must resort to hiring federally “approved” consultants [who often work for, or conduct research by, the companies producing the programs] to right their paths” (Altwerger 2005a, 3).

The endemic corruption of Reading First has been documented as thoroughly and rigorously as the “theory in practice” foundation Altwerger refers to. In 1998, Denny Taylor’s *Beginning to Read and the Spin Doctors of Science* documented the corrupt processes through which direct instruction programs like Open Court (published by McGraw-Hill) were developed and marketed, and the incestuous relationship between the companies publishing direct instruction reading programs and the panelists reviewing proposals submitted under what was then called the Reading Excellence Act. Since then, researchers like Taylor, Ohanian, Allington, Dudley-Marling, and many others have documented the continuing disastrous effects of Reading First. In late 2006, the Office of the Inspector General investigated the Reading First application process and discovered “a pattern of corruption and mismanagement that is an insult to everyone who takes literacy education seriously.” The

investigation, said the NCTE, “tells a story of how individuals in powerful positions manipulated the law to enforce a formulaic version of reading instruction skewed by their own view of scientifically based reading research” (NCTE 2006).

At the same time, however, the costs of not participating, as a 2007 *New York Times* story reports, are enormous. The Madison, Wisconsin, district’s decision to reject Reading First’s direct instruction mandates in favor of a balanced literacy approach to reading cost the district \$2 million in federal funds; the same story notes that the New York City Schools chose to adopt direct instruction because it could not afford to lose the \$34 million associated with the decision (Schemo 2007).

Certainly, yes, NCLB and Reading First do not apply to higher education. But in the Spellings Commission Report on the Future of Higher Education, a document called *A Test of Leadership* (analyzed in chapter 3), there is ample evidence of what NCTE higher education liaison Paul Bodmer calls a “beltway consensus” around a story about higher education: Universities aren’t accountable for what students learn, and they don’t make what they do know about their success (or lack thereof) with questions about learning transparent so that the broader public understands them (Bodmer 2007). Since the appointment of Undersecretary for Higher Education Sarah Martinez Tucker (also a member of the Spellings Commission) in January 2007, the Education Department (ED) has begun to speak publicly about changes to its relationship with accrediting agencies and post-secondary institutions.¹ Traditionally, these agencies have urged institutions to establish outcomes and assessment methodologies for assessing those outcomes that make sense for the institution. As another *Inside Higher Education* story noted, “accreditors have primarily focused their judgment of institutions’ quality on whether an individual college is showing progress” (Lederman 2007h), and have emphasized that long-term gains in the areas of process and professional development are as important (if not more important) than showing the agencies the results of any assessment.

But the Spellings Report noted that this focus on process, not product, was not producing reliable evidence attesting to institutional accountability.

In early January 2007, the ED official who oversaw accreditation agencies left his position. In mid-January 2007, the ED initiated a process to make changes to the rules governing the higher education accreditation process that would enable the ED to legally regulate that process through accreditation agencies. Initially, the ED outlined a desire to have institutions create norm-referenced assessments across similar colleges and universities (using criteria that were not determined)—in other words, “to judge how well individual colleges are educating their students by comparing them to similar institutions” (Lederman 2007c). They also wanted accrediting agencies to work with the institutions under their auspices to “agree to a core set of student achievement measures, both quantitative and qualitative, focused on those things the institutions have in common, and also on an acceptable level of performance for certain of those measures” (Lederman 2007c).

The ED has already taken steps of their own to initiate this kind of data collection. They are on their way to developing a system called “Huge IPEDS” (or Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System), an online system that would cull data about how colleges and universities gather data about “accountability” on their campuses (e.g., whether they use the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or other national surveys administered locally on college/university campuses), and then would potentially make that data nationally available. Between March and June 2007 the ED and accrediting agencies attempted to negotiate the rules by which they would discuss accreditation through the ED and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a separate accrediting body. In June 2007 these negotiations failed, likely leaving the ED free to write their own rules governing this process. As a February 2007 *Inside Higher Education* story noted, the ED has proceeded with this strategy

over the strenuous objections of the accrediting agencies and other higher education experts (Lederman 2007c); the ED's goal seems to be to get these regulations in place by July 2008, just six months before the Bush administration leaves office.

So we have a choice. We can sit and wait to see what happens, hoping that the stories that we want to advance (whatever those stories are) about writing and writers are heard, or at least that the stories that we tell (or want to) are ignored by those who have the potential to change them. Certainly that is an option. However, it is probably not the most prudent option, since the likelihood that the glaring light of accountability and assessment will be focused on colleges from the regional or national level seems quite likely. But through this threat—and others to which individual WPAs and writing instructors can doubtless point—is formidable, we need not see it necessarily as a cause for alarm, but as a moment of opportunity. As the introduction to a popular 1970s television show said each week, “We have the technology.” 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. *The Activist WPA* attempts to meet the challenge of changing stories—of reframing discussions—head-on by developing strategies for WPAs and writing instructors to engage in this work.

PERSONAL PRINCIPLES

As I suggested earlier, one of the lessons that I take away from the work of Robert Coles is the connection between personal stories, personal *principles*, and the actions that individuals take based on those principles. Regardless of the theories through which we work as WPAs or writing instructors, what we do is always rooted in *our* emotions, *our* ambitions, *our* goals. In fact, this understanding of individual motivation is also central to the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), one of the primary research sites for this book. As Ernesto Cortes, Edward Chambers, and other organizers with the IAF point out, *all*

change-making work starts from the individual. “For IAF leaders, the root of ‘personal being’ is not only understanding feelings in themselves and others, but in coming to terms with their own fundamental self-interest, and then learning to act on it,” writes Mary Beth Rodgers, who chronicled the work of IAF organizers in Texas. “IAF leaders . . . believe that involvement with major political events can help both the spiritual and psychological integration of self—through a connection with other people and a mastery of skills and knowledge. But in their view, people can’t do that until they come to terms with their own self-interest and their relationship with other people” (Rodgers 1990, 63–64). Change starts with individual principles—from an individual’s anger, passions, and (a concept uncomfortable to many academics, including me) *emotions*. It’s about understanding one’s self, and then connecting with others around one’s own interests; ultimately, these connections lead to change-making movements.

Principle Is to Theory as Foundations Are to Buildings

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer describes the difference between the divided and undivided teacher. “In the undivided self,” he says, “every major thread of one’s life experience is honored, creating a web of coherence and strength. . . . Such a self . . . is able to make the connections on which good teaching depends” (Palmer 1998, 15). This is one manifestation of the “spiritual and psychological integration of self”; in Parker’s view, it is absolutely essential to becoming a good teacher. The undivided self brings meaningful connection—to subject, to students, to the work (Palmer 1998, 15–18). The divided self, alternatively, distances herself from others because she harbors parts of herself *from* others.

What Palmer calls “the undivided self” is what I think of as a person working from principle. The undivided self is one who can traverse the connection between her own emotions, feelings, experiences and the work of the classroom—and who can elegantly and eloquently connect those things. Others

whose ideas are central to this book have written beautifully and extensively about it, too—for Paulo Freire, for instance, it is the process of conscientization, the awareness of the relationships between one’s self and the world, and the unfinished and constantly developing nature of that self. For bell hooks it is a pedagogy of the “whole person,” one that brings together life and classroom practices. Mary Rose O’Reilly, too, testifies to the importance of this whole person, drawing on Buddhist, Quaker, and Catholic teachings to argue for the importance of being “present”—aware of one’s state of being, fully alive and in the moment—for teachers (O’Reilly 2005a, 57–76). Dale Jacobs and Laura Micciche make the case that “the personal and the professional are always interconnected, making the commonplace idea that emotion is solely ‘personal’ an untenable and insufficient claim because it fails to consider the way emotion refuses to be contained in our ‘personal’ lives” (Jacobs and Micciche 2003, 6). Dawn Skorczewski, too, suggests that *all* teaching work is rooted in emotion, in the lived experience of the teacher. “We need to look no further than the places that most offend, frustrate, or annoy us . . . to find clues for how to read our personal ideology as it presents itself in our students’ work,” she writes (Skorczewski 2005, 7). Our identities—as teachers, as professionals, as people living and moving in the world—are constructed on top of our emotional experiencing of ourselves, and ourselves in relation to one another (130).

But as absolutely central as emotion is to our identities as teachers, our work with students, and the very identities that we have constructed for ourselves as professionals, the role of emotion in composition’s professional literature has long been a subject of somewhat uncomfortable discussion. Joseph Harris suggests that the discussion of emotion’s appropriateness might, in fact, be rooted in the split which became evident at the 1966 Dartmouth conference between a model that positioned English (and writing) as a subject focusing on “the experiences of students and how these are shaped by their uses of language,” and one that saw English “as an *academic discipline*,

a body of knowledge” (Harris 1997, 2–4, emphasis in original; see also Skorczewski 2005).

Long associated with work that is seen as “expressivist,” some have dismissed scholarship that explicitly invokes emotion as overly (and overtly) sentimental, personalized, and even antischolarly. Lad Tobin, whose (funny and engaging) writing blends his personal, emotional responses to the teaching situations he encounters, recounts some of the responses that he has received to his writing: “Several years ago I submitted a piece to a scholarly journal. . . . While one outside reader praised it for the clarity and honesty of the voice, the other rejected it saying, ‘I not only hate this article; I also hate this author’” (Tobin 2004, 2). As Tobin notes, there are “a significant number of readers out there who think that confessional writing and personal anecdotes have no place in academic writing” (2). Peter Elbow, too, has written about the struggles that he has encountered in writing about himself in his academic writing. In the early 1980s, Elbow says, his blend of the personal and the “academic” (that is, the subject of writing) “began to be labeled ‘expressivist,’ ‘romantic,’ and ‘individualist,’ and characterized not just as passé, but as deeply flawed from an intellectual and political point of view. . . . By the late ’80s, I was seen as a prime exemplar of a theory and philosophy of writing judged to be suspect or even wrong-headed by most of the dominant scholars in the important scholarly journals” (Elbow 2000a, xvi).

Others have explored suggestions that invoking the personal can pull attention away from research and focus it on the researcher (Brandt 2001); call the research into question because of its link to the personal (Cushman 2001; Villanueva 2001); focus an uncomfortable gaze on the researcher (Cushman 2001; Villanueva 2001), or invoke values that are have traditionally not been welcomed within the realm of scholarship (Gere 2001). Ellen Cushman summarized the squishy-feeling-in-the-stomach that is associated with “personal” work when she explained that

The politics of self-disclosure often undermine the good intentions of the personal-as-political movement. The politics of self-disclosure center around the social and cultural forces that press certain individuals to “bare all” and press other individuals to closet themselves, all because their stories are not valued as consumable “goods.” The politics of self-disclosure both facilitate and mitigate against particular types of agency in personal narratives by saturating these narratives with greater or lesser economic, moral, and cultural worth. (Cushman 2002, 57)

Parker Palmer and Mary Rose O’Reilley, among others, suggest that this dismissive attitude toward subjective, personal, and emotional experiences are deeply rooted in the nature of the contemporary academy, noting that one of its results is an artificial separation between personal experience and professional work (Palmer 1998, 50–56; O’Reilley 2005b, 84–88). Stemming from Enlightenment epistemologies, in this mode, “truth [is] something that we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know,” because if we get too close to it our knowledge of it—perhaps even our feelings about it—will contaminate our perceptions of the thing, and perhaps even the thing itself (Palmer 1998, 51–53). Intellectually and in terms of professional acculturation, this separation has made it more comfortable for many academics (me among them) to operate publicly in the realm of ideas or theoretical frameworks—where we discuss and question our theories or apply them to questions—than in world of principles, which are linked closely to emotion and personal lived experience.

In addition to focusing in the importance of considering emotion because of its role in the classroom, the arguments advanced in these books and articles also make a compelling case for why it is so important for WPAs to begin from principle, emotion, and experience. WPA work is often shaped by the answers of our institutions and colleagues to the three key questions I’ve outlined above: How are students’ literacies defined when they enter our classes? What literacies should

be developed in those classes? How should those literacies be assessed when students leave our classes? These questions (implicitly or explicitly) underscore situations that WPAs initiate and react to—decisions to implement everything from new placement methods to different class sizes, classroom or overall curriculum requirements, and hiring practices. Part of WPA work involves operating successfully within larger systems, as Richard Miller has suggested (1998). This means, of course, acting within the dominant frame around academic work—the one that separates emotion and experience. Imagine for an instant making an emotional appeal to reduce class sizes, or to hire more qualified instructors, or to change a placement method, and you’ll see what I mean. At the very best, such an appeal seems implausible; at worst, it seems disastrous. We know that we need to work from theory and research—theories about everything from writing development to student learning to structuring classes and curriculum.

But that theory must stand on a foundation of principle, of emotion—without it, the argument is literally “academic.” Principle is the foundation upon which theories are built, and theories “work”—they resonate with those who enact them—because they reflect the principals of those who are doing the enacting. This is the point made by Diana George in her introduction to *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours*:

Some storytelling is necessary if we are to pass on more than theory or pedagogical and administrative tactics to those who come after us. . . . [Writing program administration] is a job and we are workers whose lives are often not so very separate from the things that concern us in our home and intellectual lives. It may be equally important to understand that what we do in these jobs is as figured by our cultural and social histories as by the institutional and economic restraints we confront daily. (George 1999, xii–xiii)

Principles are political—they have meaning and consequence for the individual who holds them, and individuals form principled groups when they align themselves with others

who share those principles. Teacher Rebecca Akin writes about the process of enacting principles into practice when she discusses moving from learning about principled practice in her teacher education program at Mills College to a position as a classroom teacher:

The teaching [in the program] itself was guided by these principles, so that rather than simply being talked about in their teaching, the principles were lived. The impact of such modeling was extraordinarily powerful. The principles became mine because I was immersed in them, I had to grapple with them; they pushed my thinking and my way of understanding the world until finally I not only understood them, but I understood why they mattered. . . . [When I became a teacher], instead of a repertoire of formulaic responses or prescriptions for what to do, however, what I developed was a beginning yet firm foundation that itself would continue to grow and deepen over the years—a frame that helped guide my thinking, questions, dilemmas, uncertainties, emotions, doubts, beliefs, learning, decisions, and actions. (Akin 2005, xxi, emphasis added)

Akin is describing a way of bringing together her own principles with those of her program (through “grappling”) and then using those as a foundation for her theoretical work regarding the classroom. Like Akin, Keith Miller and Jennifer Santos argue that assignments where teachers fail to ask students to examine their own principles are akin to “prod[ding] students to explore the many floors in the multi-story dwellings that students call home without ever asking them to examine the foundations of the building. But if students don’t analyze the foundation, they may never understand how to design and furnish their own houses” (Miller and Santos 2005, 63). The same holds true for instructors and WPAs, as well: if we don’t understand the foundations (and the changes they can make over time) upon which our work is built and operate from those foundations, we will not bring the “undivided” attention that Palmer cites as the most essential element of good teaching.

PRINCIPLES AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

If the work of changing stories is rooted in principle, then the question that remains is how one *finds* one's principles. Certainly, there are compositionists and WPAs (like those cited above) who have both discovered and written about principles that shape their work. There are also others—like me—who are not as experienced in writing about the experiences that led us to develop our principles. And yet, articulating our principles begins with ourselves, our lived experiences. As Coles and others point out, these principles are rooted in stories that individuals tell, stories that come together to constitute that individual's reality. Finding principle, then, begins with considering experience—Cortes and Skorzcewski are among those who suggest considering *strong* experience, experience that affects us emotionally and makes us *feel* (and perhaps think) about things. These experiences constitute the roots of our passion, anger, fear, and beliefs—and from them extend our strongest beliefs, beliefs that must constitute the core of story-changing work. After all: if it doesn't *really* matter to us, why should we expect it to be important for others? “You don't just discuss what people do, or their ideology or the theology of their actions,” says IAF organizer Ernesto Cortes. “You must go deeper. Ultimately you must get to the level of how people *feel* about what they do. You want to understand the sources of their anger, or their love, or their interest in something beyond themselves” (Rodgers 1990, 60).

My own experiences of education certainly constitute a central core of the principles from which I operate. Until I arrived in college, I saw and felt myself largely as a school failure. My grades, especially in science and math courses, were terrible (low Cs and a fair number of Ds, with the occasional interim F that I always managed to bring up to a D). I struggled enormously in math, neither understanding core concepts of arithmetic (much less higher math, like algebra) nor being able to find teachers who were willing to believe that my struggles were anything but my own fault. I failed to score highly enough on

a variety of standardized tests to gain entrance to talented and gifted programs and schools. But although I was raised by a single-parent mother (like so many of my classmates in early 1970s Albuquerque), I hardly fit the definition of an “at risk” student. There was plenty of reading and writing in my house; we lived in a comfortable, middle-class neighborhood down the street from the University of New Mexico; and I ultimately attended a small, private high school (where I performed poorly in many classes, as above).

On the other hand, my perception of myself, my experience *as* a student, was inconsistent. In many ways I felt I was a failure, and some of my grades and test scores fueled that sense with empirical evidence. But through other factors—my bookshelf full of hard-boiled detective novels, stories that I wrote and filed away in that same bookshelf, and some of the schoolwork I did in classes I liked (history and English)—I think that I knew if I could get out of Albuquerque, I could reinvent myself and construct a new story about myself as a student and a person, one that didn’t feel like it had one foot firmly rooted in a sense of myself as a failure. When I left high school (a year early) for college I took advantage of this opportunity. I would say that I never looked back, but that’s not really true. I did become a more successful student in college—I had a wonderful experience majoring in history, political science, and extracurricular rabble-rousing, and got respectable if not outstanding grades in the process. But I never lost the sense of being a student with what Lad Tobin calls a “fake ID” (Tobin 2004, 95). That’s why, when I finished college, I wiped my hands of the experience of academic study and proceeded into a variety of jobs that I thought would make returning to formal education unnecessary: work as a bookseller and editor; as a teacher of neighborhood history in St. Paul elementary schools; as an arts administrator. After four years of toil in the nonprofit ghetto, though, I was told (by a respected arts administrator offering advice on how I could get a different, better, job) that I needed a master’s degree. And so, much to my surprise, I went back to

school—and back to confront that dormant sense of failure that wound through my personal story of studenthood.

During the spring of my first year in graduate school, I applied for a teaching position for the following year at General College (GC). As part of my interview, Terry Collins, then the WPA at GC, asked me a question that in some ways became an integral part of my story as a graduate student: “Tell me about a time that you failed.” And while the empirical reality of that story might not look like failure to others, it allowed me identify what failure felt like in my own experience—and perhaps more important, to understand how crummy the sense of feeling like a failure can be.

In graduate school I was able to take courses in communication studies, composition, and education that helped me to put my anger and self-interest into broader contexts. But these courses would have meant considerably less had they not been coupled with experience teaching in GC. Founded in the 1930s, GC was originally a college for working adults where classes were held at night and on the weekends so that they could pursue a college degree. By the time I arrived in 1990, GC was a nondegree granting unit, a college for students who had been labeled “underprepared” by the university where they would take smaller classes, receive the benefits of extensive academic advising, and fulfill many of their general education requirements. Nowhere was the college’s responsibility for “developmental” education taken more seriously than in composition. Learning to teach in GC’s two-course “basic writing” sequence, conceiving of students as anything but incredibly capable and intelligent wasn’t an option. Developing a course that was anything less than a serious space for students to do the real work of writing also wasn’t even on the radar. My own experiences before college had started me thinking about the nature of “literacy” and “numeracy”—about how they were defined, and how people were labeled “literate” or “illiterate” and why. In graduate courses, I was learning about how communication systems (especially language) reflected and perpetuated ideologies of

the cultures in which they were developed; those systems that emerged as dominant inevitably were linked to hegemonic interests in those cultures. While my graduate research was largely focused on historical questions, I was of course thinking about the students with whom I was working in GC. They were labeled “basic writers”—but wasn’t that label a manifestation of contemporary definitions of literacy and education (which themselves were forms of communication)? And didn’t that label spring from students’ previous educational experiences that might have felt to them as crummy and confusing as some of mine did to me?

GC was where I learned to pull these threads of my experience and my intellectual work together to use them as a foundation for my teaching, to draw on my own anger not to fuel outward acts of rage but as a source of empathy and, even more importantly, the starting point for action. In GC, I learned to combine intellectual knowledge developed in classes and conversation with personal experience and become what Palmer calls an “undivided self.” I started to understand (though I wouldn’t have used these terms at the time) that, for me, teaching was an activity that I could try to perform—consciously, reflectively, and reflexively—to do some good in the world. My experiences as a student and teacher also sit at the core of my passion and anger—the stuff that propels people forward mentioned by Cortes and others (e.g., Taylor 1998). But the explanation of these stories demonstrates another point; stories serve as connections between individual experiences and broader cultures and communities (e.g., White 1978; Brown et al. 2005). This is what Larry Prusack refers to as the “social bonding” function of stories (Prusack 2005, 25).

These experiences also lead to principles which I try to enact in my work as a teacher, a WPA, and a human being: *tikkun olam*, or working to make the world a better place (a principle that stems from my experiences as a Jew), and the concept of prophetic pragmatism. Discussed in chapter 6, both of these principles share three common factors: a commitment to changing

things for the better here and now through consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes that take into consideration the material contexts and concerns of all involved; a compulsion to be reflexive and self-questioning about this work so as to consider how all involved are taking into account those material conditions; and a constant commitment to ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue among all participants in change-making work that ensures that everyone is heard and, hopefully, represented. When I was asked to tell a story about a time that I failed I could repeat a story about my sense of myself as a frequently failing student that (theoretically at the time, and I hope in practice) allowed me to form connections to other students who sometimes had the same sense of themselves. In a sense, then, these stories (and the language used to represent them) serve as the “code words” mentioned by Hertog and McLeod, phrases (and explanations) that extend out to broader meanings and more extended tropes that reinforce existing frames.

Because of the particular nature of these frames that I enact through my understanding of these principles, I am also led back to the stories that opened this chapter. In particular, I am led back to stories about writing and writers that do not jibe with my own experiences as a writing instructor and WPA, stories that do not resonate with the optimistic, dialogical, reflexive, and change-making practices that are at the core of principles that I embrace. At the same time, as one who embraces these principles, I am intellectually and emotionally compelled by them to engage in the work represented in this book. I am compelled to try to do something to address what I see as a problem, that composition instructors and WPAs sometimes struggle to bring together what Llewellyn calls “strategies” and “ideals” that are essential for changing stories about our work as writing instructors and about the students who populate our classes. Because we sometimes are not able to bring together strategies and ideals effectively, we have also sometimes struggled to try to insert these stories into public discussions about writers and writing. In the best of situations these struggles are merely frustrating

(the colleagues who tell us, “My students can’t write . . . ”); in the worst, they have the potential to profoundly affect the authority that we are able to exercise in our programs (the institution whose administration dictates curriculum, placement, or assessment). We need strategies that are connected to our ideals and ideals that are enacted in strategies.

The first step in connecting ideals and strategies to change stories is to understand the roots of the struggles that compositionists and WPAs currently face. In chapter 2, I’ll dig into this back story through an examination of the American jeremiad, especially as it was enacted through American pragmatism. This story is foundational to America’s national identity and especially to education (including my own, as indicated in the principles of prophetic pragmatism). Pragmatism’s essential tenets—its fundamental optimism regarding human nature and human intelligence, its emphasis on method and strategy, and its belief that humans could work methodically to advance progress—have become so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness that Cornel West refers to them as central to “America[’s] religion” (West 1989, 17). They are part of the “commonsense” narrative about the way that things are and the way that they work. But because of the “commonsense” nature of pragmatism and the principles at its very core, this narrative is currently being used for a variety of purposes. Educators draw from tenets of pragmatism to make the case that our work is essential for preparing students for participation in the American democracy, and that we understand best how to enact this preparation. On the other hand, critics of education draw on those same tenets to frame another story, that educators (especially college educators) do not understand the nature of democracy and, as a result, do not know how to prepare students for participation in democracy. On the third hand, progressive social activists (like those whom I observed to develop the strategies described here) draw on and adapt pragmatism’s tenets for the strategies that they use to try to affect change. If we want to build different stories, to construct different tropes

and narratives and shift frames in ways that balance *strategies* and *ideals*, it is therefore essential to understand pragmatism and the progressive pragmatic jeremiad as foundational to the stories that we tell and create.