What we don’t talk about much, and what leads to some of the fatigue that we feel, is the fact that during . . . period[s] of basic change, we have to learn how to challenge and change some of our background assumptions, some of the stories, some of the deeply ingrained ways in which we see the world. . . . We have to find ways to surface some of our assumptions and narratives, and reflect on them, often in communities and groups, in order to figure out how we can productively work with them and constructively challenge what everyone “knows” to be true.

John Seeley Brown (2005, 55)

Stories serve a variety of purposes. Most compelling for the immediate purposes of this book, they shape our own and others’ understandings of the work of writing instruction, especially concerning three questions that are central to that work:

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?

In chapter 1, I suggested that actions taken based on responses to these questions reflect 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, emphasis in original). The range of these tropes—their representations of “what things are” and the manner of their extension to other
representations of what things are—are delimited by frames, “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese 11). The staying power of these tropes and frames come from their abilities to tap into and work through code concepts—words and ideas—that carry particular meanings (interpretations) and are linked to issues that also extend from and are related to the frame (Reese; Hertog and McLeod 2001). The more stable the association between a concept and a meaning and the tighter the link to the frame, the more the concept is seen as “natural,” “taken for granted,” and “common sense.”

If writing instructors or WPAs want to affect stories—to have some voice in the frames that surround our work and the tropes that emanate from those frames regarding our classes and students—we must develop strategies situated in and reflecting our ideals to shape those frames and tropes. But before we can affect that change, as the quote from John Seeley Brown in the epigraph to this chapter illustrates, we first need to dig into those common sense ideas, the “assumptions and narratives [that] everyone ‘knows’ to be true.” As I discussed in chapter 1, I believe that some of these assumptions and narratives come from the personal principles from which we work, principles that both fuel that work and shape the ways in which we understand it.

These assumptions and narratives also come from the systems in which we work. Regardless of the degree of overlap we see between personal and institutional narratives, the fact is that as educators, WPAs, and writing instructors are always also part of larger bureaucracies, as Richard Miller has persuasively argued (Miller 1998, *passim* 4–9, 193–216). That bureaucracy is underscored by long-entrenched assumptions and approaches, what David Tyack and Larry Cuban call “the basic grammar of schooling” (quoted in Miller 1998, 22) that forms the conceptual underpinnings of school and forms the roots of every decision from how a schedule is made to what subjects are taught to what counts as “learning” (22–23).
This is especially true of the “grammar” of American education, a version of the American jeremiad formulated during the Progressive Era, the period between 1898 and 1920. As it has been explicated by historian Sacvan Bercovitch, the American jeremiad posits that America—as a nation of chosen people endowed (by God) with a mission of exceptionalism—is always progressing toward the achievement of a virtuous democracy. This is the nation’s errand. However, the wilderness into which that errand is pursued is rife with potential for declension—individuals or groups who do not embrace the values of the virtuous democracy, or impediments like disease and poverty. But rather than see these elements as detractions, they are incorporated as “affirmations” and “exultations” of the jeremiad, because they are seen as “corrective” obstacles to be overcome (Bercovitch 1978, ix–9). The American jeremiad, says Bercovitch, “was the ritual of a culture on an errand—which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. . . . Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture” (23).

The Progressive Era version of this jeremiad has served as an enduring frame surrounding stories about the purpose of education in the United States. Through it, education is seen as an essential training ground for preparing students for participation in the democracy. But because of the porous and flexible nature of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, it supports multiple, conflicting stories about how that purpose should be accomplished. Some versions have invested teachers (including WPAs and writing instructors) with authority to develop curriculum and instruction intended to prepare students for participation in a democracy. But others support charges that teachers are failing in this responsibility and should have their authority—their agency—removed because they neither understand the nature of the democracy, nor have the correct methods for preparing students as participants. If WPAs or writing instructors want to change stories about writers and writing, it is vital
for us to understand how this jeremiad has been developed and used by those espousing seemingly contradictory positions.

**OUR GRAMMAR: THE PRAGMATIC/PROGRESSIVE JEREMIAD**

The central principles of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad that forms some of the “grammar” of American schooling stem from what Cornel West refers to as “the American religion” of pragmatism (1989, 17), especially as it was enacted during the Progressive Era. Historians pointed to progressivism and the Progressive Era as central foundations for the development of (then) contemporary culture. Historian Douglas Tallack notes that the Progressive Era saw “a broad reorientation of thought away from the chaos and inequities of 19th century laissez-faire liberalism to toward modern, progressive liberalism” (Tallack 1991, 147). Similarly, historian John Chambers writes that “modern America was born” in this period, and “we are heirs to many of the institutions, attitudes, and problems of the Progressive Era” (Chambers vii). Historians of education have also noted the profound influence that progressive approaches to education have had on contemporary schooling.

The progressive jeremiad was firmly situated in the context of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century culture, a period in which the United States was changing dramatically. Most of these changes can be traced back to seismic shifts that facilitated communication. The invention of the telegraph, the completion of the transcontinental railroad, developments in large-scale printing and circulation, the spread of movies and of radio, the arrival of millions of immigrants—all led the generation of Americans who had come of age during the mid- and late-nineteenth century to understand that dramatic changes were occurring (e.g., Hofstadter 1955; Susman 1984; Czitrom 1983). In the context of these rapid social changes, the group of writers and thinkers known as progressives and pragmatists emerged as leading intellectual lights.

The jeremiad embraced by the social, political, and intellectual activists of this period comes out of this context of rapid
social and political change. It is rooted in what West refers to as the “Emersonian theodicy” of optimistic faith in the power of the right kind of individuals to affect the right kind of change through the right kinds of processes (West 1989, 15). Progressive pragmatists, especially John Dewey, injected into the pragmatic/progressive jeremiad three crucial tenets. First was a belief in the power of individuals to enact critical intelligence that would enhance their circumstances (and, therefore, the collective circumstances of the nation). Critical intelligence involved engaging in informed reflection; demystifying the components of knowledge-making processes so that they could be accessed (and employed) by the largest numbers of people possible; and applying these processes and intelligences to overcome obstacles standing in the way of the achievement of the virtuous democracy (see West 1989, 70–76; Carey 1989, 23–35). Second was the belief that, through the application of critical intelligence, individuals could collectively determine the best methods through which to achieve the betterment of individual (and therefore collective) circumstances. Third was a profound confidence in community, defined as entities formed by individuals of like minds, to attend to the concerns of one another.

On its face, progressive pragmatism reflected the optimism and faith in individuals that was at the core of the pragmatic jeremiad. It added to that narrative the idea that individually rooted work, applied through scientifically sound methods developed and guided by experts, could overcome obstacles that stood in the way of the nation’s progress. For progressive pragmatists, two obstacles were especially problematic. First was the search for capital “T” truth. This misdirection of human energies would pull toward an unusable, destructive past (a past that sought perfection, rather than emphasizing the questlike nature of the jeremiad that, as Bercovitch has identified, is a central feature of the American jeremiad). Dewey noted that

the chief characteristic trait of the pragmatic notion of reality is precisely that no theory of Reality in general . . . is possible or
needed . . . it finds that “reality” is a denotative term, a word used to designate indifferently everything that happens. . . . Speaking summarily, I find that the retention by philosophy of a notion of a Reality feudally superior to the events of everyday occurrence is the chief source of the increasing isolation of philosophy from common sense and science. (quoted in West 1989, 94)

Rather, Dewey asserted, “truth [was] a species of the good . . . the procedures that produce warranted assertions are themselves value-laden and exemplary of human beings working in solidarity for the common good” (quoted in West 1989, 100).

A second element of declension in the progressive pragmatic jeremiad took the form of social and cultural elements that could detract from individuals’ innate desires to contribute to the formation of a public sphere. That is, while pragmatic progressives believed that there was a “public, . . . [a] large body of persons having an interest in the consequences of social transactions,” (quoted in West 1989, 104) they also believed that any number of social, cultural, political, and economic forces could assert unwanted influence on the individuals that comprised this public, thus ultimately affecting the actions that they would take regarding its shape. As West notes, progressive pragmatists identified these challenges in the very communication technologies that propelled the Progressive Era:

The major obstacles to creating a public sphere—a discursive and dialogical social space where in the various “publics” can find common ground—are the proliferations of popular cultural diversions from political concern such as sports, movies, radio, cars; the bureaucratization of politics; the geographical mobility of persons; and most important, the cultural lag in ideas, ideals, and symbols that prohibits genuine communication. (West 1989, 105)

These communication developments also contributed to economic circumstances that presented the threat of declension, the growth of big business. Progressives believed that factories,
railroads, oil companies, and other industries whose growth was in part facilitated by increased mobility ran amuck, amassing enormous wealth for a few individuals on the backs of the labor of many. The explosion in industrial manufacturing that had led to the development of such businesses was propelled by and perpetuated enormous inequality—poor working conditions, deplorable living conditions, lack of attention to social issues such as poverty and health care (e.g., Noble, 1985, 27–40; Carey, 1997, 70–75). Within the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, the only possibility for overcoming the declensions represented by these threats lay in the application of individual creative intelligence to the development of systems designed to regulate what Chambers refers to as the perception of “unrestricted individualism, the unregulated marketplace, and the self-regulated society” (Chambers 1992, 276). Through this intelligence, individuals could study these problems scientifically and develop systematic processes through which they could be addressed. In fact, it was these processes (even more than their results) that were essential for moving the democracy forward.

Evidence of these efforts during the Progressive Era abound. Journalist Lincoln Steffens took on corruption in local government; Upton Sinclair, journalist and later politician, tackled issues of workers’ rights and workplace safety; photographer Lewis Hine turned his lens on child welfare and living conditions of the poor; academics associated with pragmatism, the intellectual wing of progressivism, developed methods that would enable the “scientific” study of social phenomena that would provide a basis for reformers’ efforts. Agencies and governmental offices charged with overseeing the development of data and processes for advancing democracy flourished during this period. The Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Trade Commission were among the federal offices founded during this period; numerous laws such as the Keating-Owen Act, which forbade the sale of products manufactured by children from interstate commerce, and the Workman’s Compensation Act, which provided protection for workplace injuries, were
also passed at the federal level. Individual states also continued to pass laws requiring mandatory school attendance, a movement initiated in the mid-nineteenth century. The assumption was that, through the development and execution of properly developed and managed processes (of education, regulation, research, and so on) individuals could—and would—come together to address larger social inequities, regardless of the cultures and interests that they brought to their efforts. Educational historian Douglas McKnight cites a speaker from the 1889 National Education Association conference whose presentation reflected this sense of mission:

The school life, brief as it is, may reasonably be asked to furnish to the Republic loyal and obedient citizens; to the business world, men with a courage and a grip that will not too easily let go in the pushing affairs of trade; to the social life, an ease and grace of manners, a strength of self-reliance, which shall put each in possession of his full powers for his own building and for the advancement for his associates. (quoted in McKnight 2003, 89, emphasis added)

**PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND THE PROGRESSIVE PRAGMATIC JEREMIAD**

Within this context, progressive educational theory emphasized creating social conditions conducive to educational development rather than providing what we now might refer to as direct instruction. As Dewey explained, education was intended to provide “direction, control, or guidance,” but the last word—guidance—“conveys the idea of assisting through cooperation the natural capacities of the individuals guided; control conveys rather the notion of an energy brought to bear from without and meeting some resistance from the one controlled. . . . Control . . . denotes a process by which [the individual] is brought to subordinate his own natural impulses to public or common ends” (Dewey 1916, 23).

Instead, Dewey wrote, education should provide stimulus to direct activity. “[Stimulus] does not simply excite [activity]
or stir it up, but directs it toward an object. . . . There is an adaptation of the stimulus and response to each other” (24). Education, Dewey said, provided direction for this stimulus so that it was not “wasted, going aside from the point,” or would “go against the successful performance of an act. . . . Direction is both simultaneous and successive,” ultimately contributing to the development of critical intelligence that would guarantee the appropriate application of and response to various stimuli (25–29). Education should enable students to become better individuals by cultivating their individual creative intelligence so that they might apply this intelligence to the development of methods designed to overcome potential declensions, obstacles to the nation’s progress toward the virtuous democracy.

The problem, as later critics have noted, is that while progressive pragmatists emphasized the profound power of individual creative intelligence to come together and collectively form a virtuous democracy, they also (often explicitly) avoided situating that potential in any specific context. Historian Warren Susman characterizes this as a desire to be “in the world but not of the world” (1984, 95). Cornel West describes this epistemology in more detail, noting that Dewey’s “central concern” was to extend the experimental method . . . rather than to discern the social forces and historical agents capable of acting on and actualizing . . . creative democracy. . . . [Dewey’s] distrust of resolute ideological positioning, as in political parties and social movements from below, led him to elevate the dissemination of critical intelligence at the expense of collective insurgency. . . . His gradualism is principally pedagogical in content, and his reformism is primary dialogic in character. He shuns confrontational politics and agitational struggle. The major means by which creative democracy is furthered is through education and discussion. (1989, 102)

The “evasion” of content—that is, the frequent evasion of the specific material (economic) conditions in which the progressive pragmatic jeremiad was developed that is located in pragmatic thinking by West, C. Wright Mills, and others—has
left the narrative embedded in this jeremiad open to a variety of applications. Even during the Progressive Era, this porous quality resulted in two primary approaches—one emphasizing the cultivation of critical intelligence by means of inductive, nurturing education, the other making the case that critical intelligence was best imposed from above.

The former approach, labeled by historian Warren Susman as “stewardly” (Susman 1984, 90) and by educational historian David Tyack as “humanitarian” (Tyack 2003, 75), was based on the premise that, guided correctly, everyone’s intelligence could be shaped so as to contribute to the achievement of the American democracy. Educators embracing this approach focused on cultivating community through the development of environments where individuals would come to participate in the values seen as essential for the perpetuation of the progressive narrative. This principle was at the core of Dewey’s thinking, as he explained in *Democracy and Education*:

We have seen that the community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal, and . . . this renewal takes place by means of the educational growth of the immature members of the group. By various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals. Education is thus a fostering, a nurturing, a cultivating process. . . . We speak of education as shaping, forming, molding activity—that is, a shaping into the standard form of social activity. . . . What is required is a transformation of the quality of experience till it partakes in the interests, purpose, and ideas current in the social group. . . . Beliefs and aspirations cannot be physically extracted and inserted. How then are they communicated? . . . The answer, in general formulation, is: By means of the action of the environment in calling out certain responses. The required beliefs cannot be hammered in; the needed attitudes cannot be plastered on. But the particular medium in which an individual exists leads him to see and feel one thing rather than another; it leads him to have certain plans in order that he may act successfully with others; it strengthens some beliefs and weakens
others as a condition of winning the approval of others. Thus it gradually produces in him a system of behavior, a certain disposition of action. (10–11)

For Dewey, education was the communicative medium where students would come, through conditioning, to understand how to bring their interests into alignment with others’. Not “hammered in,” not “plastered on”—the key was developing “behaviors” and “dispositions” that led to assimilation and participation in dominant values and cultures.

While Dewey’s work laid out the theoretical principles of the stewardly approach, writers whose style was less obtuse grounded it more fully in practical experience. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Jane Addams (a close friend of Dewey’s) described the work of her settlement house through the metaphor of the *Messiah*. Like Dewey, Addams advocated cultivating neighborhood residents toward participation in a common purpose, rather than imposing purpose upon them:

In a thousand voices singing the Hallelujah Chorus . . . it is possible to distinguish the leading voices, but the differences of training and cultivation between them and the voices in the chorus, are lost in the unity of purpose and in the fact that they are all human voices lifted by a high motive. This is a weak illustration of what a Settlement attempts to do. It aims, in a measure, to develop whatever of social life its neighborhood may afford, to focus and give form to that life, to bring to bear upon it the results of cultivation and training; but it receives in exchange for the music of isolated voices the volume and strength of the chorus. (125)

Addams’s vision was one where, no matter their backgrounds, any individual could participate in the “scientific” work through which strategies and solutions that would enable individuals to cope with the challenges and opportunities of everyday life would be developed. She explained that

the Settlement . . . must be hospitable and ready for experiment. It should demand from its residents a scientific patience in the
accumulation of facts and the steady holding of their sympathies as one of the best instruments for that accumulation. It must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race, a philosophy which will not waver when the race happens to be represented by a drunken woman or an idiot boy. (126)

Books like Frank Thompson’s *The Schooling of the Immigrant* (1920) also advanced the argument that schooling should help students come to partake in American cultural values. In 400 pages—and referencing numerous charts, graphs, and diagrams that reflect the progressive emphasis on “scientific study”—Thompson made the case that “persuasion,” not “compulsion,” should underscore the education of the “foreign born” (16). J. Stanley Brown, superintendent of a Joliet, Illinois high school, also invoked this stewardly, humanitarian approach when he described the “ideal secondary teacher.” “The way of approach to the teacher ought to be made easy by him in leading the youth, step to step, to see that his highest interests are served,” Brown wrote. “The door to such an approach ought always to be ajar, and the way should grow more and more familiar by use. By this means can the indispensable personal relations between the ideal teacher and the student be preserved” (Brown 1905, 29–30).

All of these educators’ work reflects the belief that education, as a communicative medium, could cultivate students’ development. Dewey referred to this as cultivating students’ “qualities of experience,” and *cultivation* of these experiences, rather than *imposition* of them, is one of the central features of the stewardly or humanitarian approach. Within composition and rhetoric education, this approach is also reflected in what James Berlin called the “rhetoric of public discourse” evident in the work of rhetoricians like Fred Newton Scott, Joseph Denney, and Gertrude Buck (who was Scott’s student) (Berlin 25–36, 46–50). Within this paradigm the presumption was that language was an interrelationship of “the experience of the external world and what the perceiver brings to this experience” (Berlin 47).
Language instruction, then, was to simultaneously push students to examine their own understandings and to analyze and take into account context, purpose, and audience (Berlin 49–50).¹

But where stewards emphasized that the virtuous democracy would be achieved through the cultivation of individuals’ critical intelligence, a mission that they believed could be accomplished through education, others believed that it was necessary to develop systems and structures to direct that intelligence for individuals. Susman refers to this group as “technocrats” (Susman 1984, 90), Tyack as “interventionists” (Tyack 2003, 75). Rather than cultivating a state where individuals who had come to partake in the values of the culture acted upon those values, technocrats wanted to “make the system work to the profit of the whole nation and its citizens, . . . [a state] directed by an elite of . . . trained and efficient . . . experts” (Susman 1984, 92). The technocratic version of progressivism is most famously represented in the work of journalist Walter Lippmann, who took the stance that only experts could steer the nation and that the individual citizen should have little role in this work. Lippman believed that individual action was based on “pictures in [individual’s] heads” that were formed by symbols (Lippmann 1922, 12–29); the ever-increasing array of mass media made available during the first part of the twentieth century offered too many symbols and too wide a range of interpretations. If interpretations differed, then the actions that individuals take might also differ. If that were to be the case chaos would ensue, because the “moral code” of the culture, from which rules governing the culture stem, would not be consistently understood and acted upon by citizens (120–21).

Ensuring that symbols were consistently cultivated and individual action based on those symbols was directed toward the betterment of society and the achievement of progress, Lippman argued, was the work of managing public opinion. Public opinion was to be executed by a group of experts—“some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled” (378)—who
worked from scientific data. But where proponents of the more humanitarian, stewardo approach made the case that individuals should cultivate habits and dispositions that would incline them to participation in progressive values and culture, those working from this more technocratic, interventionist stance believed that individuals would choose to turn their attention elsewhere. The common person, he said, “has neither time, nor attention, nor interest, nor the equipment of specific judgment. It is on [experts], working under conditions that are sound, that the daily administrations of society must rest” (400).

Thus the key was for experts to manage those interpretations for individuals. Through communication (including education) experts could propagate responses and cultivate stereotypes which would call out correct interpretations, which would then serve as the basis for correct responses (in journalism Lippmann referred to this [in a positive sense] as “propaganda”). When individuals circulated among groups who shared the same prejudices and acted in those prejudices in similar ways, consensus would be achieved (175). The role of the individual citizen would be only to ensure that the mechanisms by which her public opinion is gathered and acted upon were “sound”:

The private citizen . . . will soon see . . . that [appeals for the “loan of his Public Opinion”] are not a compliment to his intelligence, but an imposition on his good nature and an insult to his sense of evidence . . . he will concern himself about the equity and sanity of the procedure, and even this he will in most cases expect his elected representative to watch for him. He will refuse himself to accept the burden of these decisions. . . . Only by insisting that problems shall not come up to him until they have passed through a procedure, can the busy citizen of a modern state hope to deal with them in a form that is intelligible. (400–401)

In education, this approach is most visible in efforts to tailor educational practices and procedures, as in E. L. Thorndike’s work. All response, Thorndike suggested, was the result of conditioning; extending this premise to education, schooling could
be seen as a situation for conditioning and it was important that this conditioning be guided by experts. Simple training by repetition would not be adequate—as Thorndike explained, “the repetition of a situation in and of itself has no selective power. . . . The repetition of a situation may change a man as little as the repetition of a message over a wire changes the wire. In and of itself, it may teach him as little as the message teaches the switchboard” (Thorndike 14). But at the same time experts needed to help direct the conditioning occurring in learning response so that what was “true” was legitimized and what was false was not. Additionally, not everyone needed to know the same things, or the same number of things. As Thorndike explained, science had helped sort out “truth and error,” “myth and fact” in what people learned (Thorndike 196). At the same time, “the evolution of learning” had led to the capacity to teach (and learn) “equally different things more quickly and pleasantly” (than before). As a result, more people were able to learn more things; for that learning to be useful and productive, a sorting system was necessary.

At present, the distribution of learning in schools is largely indiscriminate, the active ideal being to have as many children as possible learn as much as possible, with very little regard to who learns what. . . . The benevolent forces work in too great disregard of what people really want. . . . So there is now considerable danger that many individuals will learn much that they cannot enjoy or use for the common good, and that some individuals will fail to learn what they need to make them happy and useful. The scientific study of human nature by the idealists and reformers and the development of finer standards of success in business will, it may be hoped and believed, produce a much better distribution of learning. (Thorndike 196–98)

Here, the function of educators was in part to sort through “fact” and “folly,” in part to more efficiently condition learners, and in part to determine who should learn what, for what purposes, and why. In composition and rhetoric, this approach to
education is evident in what Berlin refers to as “the efficiency movement,” an effort to quantify objectives and learning and apply those to the teaching (and assessment) of writing. This push for quantification also underscores behavioralist models like the ones Mike Rose describes in “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University,” models that are “atomistic, focusing on isolated bits of discourse, [are] error centered, and [are] linguistically reductive” (Rose 1985, 343).

But while this approach, especially as it was developed through Thorndike’s work, seems distant from the more stewardly, humanitarian one, both approaches are actually rooted in the same progressive pragmatic jeremiad. Both incorporate the notions that the nation is progressing toward the achievement of a virtuous democracy, but that there are threats to the achievement of that goal that can be overcome only with systematic cultivation of critical intelligence through proven methods. The difference—and it is an important difference—lay in the question of method, not substance. Stewards suggested that this nurturing could be cultivated within the individual; technocrats made the case that expert managers should instead sort and manage the process for individuals.

MOVING ON: THE PROGRESSIVE PRAGMATIC JEREMIAD AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

The importance of the progressive movement in education, itself rooted in this progressive pragmatic jeremiad, is taken as one of the foundational periods in American education. Educational histories routinely cite the importance of the period: Howard Ozmon and Samuel Craver’s *Philosophical Foundations of Education* note that “the impact of pragmatism on American education has been considerable. Many schools have implemented elements of pragmatic ideas in one way or another, but this influence is not always consciously connected with the philosophy” (Ozmon and Craver 1995, 149), while John Pulliam and J. J. Van Patten’s *History of Education in America* notes that the influence of pragmatism and progressivism,
especially as it was interpreted by Dewey, remain a profound
influence shaping American education (Pulliam and Van Patten
2007, 48–49). In our own field, the idea that writing instruction
contributes to the development of students’ “critical intelli-
gence” is a mainstay of the field. “Critical thinking, reading, and
writing” is one of the four primary areas of focus in the WPA
Outcomes Statement (Writing Program Administrators 2000); a
search for research on critical thinking (defined as the ability to
engage in reflection, to demystify knowledge to make its acquisi-
tion visible, and to apply concepts in a range of contexts) in the
CompPile bibliography yields over 200 entries.

But the “evasion of philosophy” in this narrative—that is,
pragmatism’s emphasis on generalizable methods, solutions,
and applications rather than its focus on particular challenges
stemming from particular temporal and spatial contexts—
makes it available for a variety of purposes. This porous nature
of this jeremiad is evident in Geoffrey Nunberg’s study of shifts
in meaning around words typically associated with progressive
politics. Studying the language used to justify progressive
programs during the Nixon administration, Nunberg points
to what historian Gene Wise has called a “pivotal moment” in
the application of this jeremiad, that is, a moment indicating
“a threshold of change—a fault-line” (Wise 140). Rather than
referencing programs developed through the application of
the progressive pragmatic jeremiad as closing gaps in American
society and cultivating the critical intelligence necessary to
achieve a virtuous democracy that represented the interests of
individuals, in the late 1960s and early 1970s Republicans began
to argue that these progressive programs were the property of
“liberals” and favored their interests against the interests of the
“common man.” According to Nunberg:

Republicans re[wrote] the old language of [progressivism] in ways
that diverted the traditional conflicts between “the people” and
“the powerful” into “cultural” resentments over differences in life-
style and social values. . . . In the course of things, [Republicans]
managed to redefine the distinction between conservatives and liberals, so as to depict liberals as the enemies of the values of “ordinary Americans.” (Nunberg 2006, 51)

The shift identified by Nunberg has persisted into the twenty-first century, where this dual purposing of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad persists. As in the 1970s, essential elements of it are today wielded against the traditional allies of progressivism, who are charged with “denying opportunity” or “standing in the way of progress” when they try to argue against the repurposing of the progressive frame. Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian, for instance, connect the dots from the Republicans’ invocation of (language and) values associated with progressivism to “school reform” as it has been enacted in the last 20 years, for instance. First, they point to language that (former Republican Speaker of the House) Newt Gingrich told Republicans to use when describing themselves, words that reflect the values associated with the stewardship tradition described earlier: “active, activist, building, . . . care, children, . . . citizen, . . . common sense . . . liberty . . . opportunity, . . . reform” (Emery and Ohanian 2004, 5). They then locate this language squarely in NCLB. “In the hands of the U.S. Department of Education,” they write,

the very title No Child Left Behind, hijacked from the Children’s Defense Fund, has become the moral equivalent of the Pentagon’s pacification. . . . [NCLB] means the opposite of what it says. It is a plan . . . to declare public schools failures and accelerate the use of vouchers, turning public education over to private, for-profit firms. It is also a plan to blame the victim: the government declares it’s leaving no child behind, so if a kid ends up on the streets after tenth grade, it must be his fault. (Emery and Ohanian 2004, 5–6)

A recent column by conservative columnist George Will also captures this shift. In it, Will takes a term at the center of the progressive narrative, “opportunity,” and uses it to flog opponents of school vouchers in Arizona. By denying poor children the “opportunity” to attend private schools with public funds,
Will argues, these opponents are denying them the opportunity to become educated citizens (Will 2007). Embedded in Will’s column are elements of the progressive counternarrative that is now being turned against educators through the lens of progressivism. It goes like this: the purpose of school is to prepare students for participation in the democracy, and teachers (and school systems) have long been granted the expertise, within the progressive frame, to tend to this preparation. However, in the last X years (the number of years depends on the argument being advanced), teachers and school systems have begun to fail in their appointed mission; they are not preparing students because they do not understand the nature of the new democracy. Educational historian Douglas McKnight observes the same phenomenon in his analysis of the current jeremiads around education:

Present-day America is perceived as immersed in a moral crisis because of certain cultural conditions. National identity has fractured, resulting in a pervading sense of uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Public schools, as institutions charged with preserving the symbols of national identity and a morality that is the concrete expression of those symbols, have failed and must be reformed. . . . Resolving the crisis is dependent upon schools remembering and transmitting middle-class cultural identity[, but schools are also] failing in this charge. . . . According to the modern jeremiads, schools, and specifically teachers, no longer direct children through the process of moral transcendence—a state in which each child comes to understand and accept his or her role in society and fulfills this prescribed destiny in a carefully measured manner. (2003, 122–23)

While McKnight notes that this antieducation jeremiad has occurred in cycles throughout American history, the current use of this story about education offers a new twist. As discussed in chapter 1, the Education Department (ED) is currently working through changes to the rule-making process that guide its work with accreditation agencies, who in turn set procedures by which
colleges and universities assess their effectiveness. The proposed changes—which seem virtually inevitable—would allow the ED to impose standards for what kinds of assessments are legitimate, what kinds of data must be submitted to demonstrate achievement regarding effectiveness, and how those data would be used to fuel comparisons across institutional categories (also set by the ED). As a respondent to a March 2007 *Inside Higher Education* story about this process wrote:

> In true “not in my backyard” fashion, the same liberals/authoritarians who generally want the government to regulate everything are now saying, “Hold on now” when the government wants to regulate, albeit indirectly, traditional higher education “outcomes”. . . . So to my friends in traditional higher education I say, welcome to my nightmare, and a dose of your own medicine. (Bogart 2007)

As this response suggests, the potential for this use of the progressive narrative has always been there, part and parcel of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad. Nunberg notes that “if nothing else, the right has demonstrated how versatile [the narrative associated with this jeremiad] can be connecting threads among programs and policies” (Nunberg 2006, 203). James Gee makes the same point when he notes that

> Literacy always comes with a perspective on interpretation that is ultimately political. . . . In the end, we might say that . . . nothing follows from literacy or schooling. Much follows, however, from what comes with literacy and schooling, what literacy and schooling come wrapped up in, namely the attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs (at once social, cultural and political) that always accompany literacy and schooling. (1996, 38–39)

Hence the problem. For over one hundred years, the left has relied on central elements of progressive pragmatic jeremiad to fuel its work: extending social services to those in need, creating programs and agencies to ensure that treatments and protections were extended equally; developing agencies whose purposes were to ensure that “opportunity”—economic, social,
political, and otherwise—was available to all. At the same time, the very porous nature of this jeremiad—its primary emphasis on the development and application of individual critical intelligence through method and process without explicit (or, sometimes, implicit) contextualizing in specific social and material conditions—has made it available for those holding other positions, as well.

Returning to the issue of story-changing, teachers generally and WPAs and writing instructors more specifically have a conundrum. As outlined above, the progressive pragmatic jeremiad is central to the work of American education; certainly, it is often located in some of composition’s fundamental tenets. One need look no further than a document like the NCTE “Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” a document compiled by the NCTE Executive Board (for which a wide range of input from NCTE’s members was solicited) as evidence. After its initial assertion that “everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers,” the document goes on to emphasize that writing is developed through processes guided by instructors and contributed to by individuals, and also shaped by exigencies (NCTE 2004). And while these may seem like commonsense principles, they only seem that way because they at least in part rooted in this narrative, so familiar it feels like an old (comfortable) sweatshirt.

Recall, too, that the staying power of tropes and frames comes from their abilities to tap into and work through code concepts that carry particular meanings. Nunberg’s analysis points to a moment where the meanings associated with particular words—“progressive,” “liberal,” and so on—were shifted to refer to a set of meanings that, while not traditionally associated, were available within the porous nature of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad. If WPAs and writing instructors want to affect the stories shaping what we do—that is, if we want to shape those stories so that we have some agency regarding the three issues that are central to that work (how should students’ literacies be defined
when they come into composition classes; what literacies should composition classes develop, how, and for what purpose; and how should the development of students’ literacies be assessed at the end of these classes), we must consider the frame that we use for that argument.

When we rely on the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, which encompasses both a purpose and methods that are ingrained in the “grammar” of American schooling (and which, as I described in chapter 1, is certainly linked to my own motivating principle of prophetic pragmatism), we must think carefully. This is a porous narrative. It can support a technocratic/behavioralist conception of education (which affects everything from definitions of what writing instruction is, to the authority that instructors have in developing curriculum and instruction) or a notion of education as servitude (which removes most agency from students); it also can support the case that education must support the development of individuals’ senses of critical intelligence, including a careful and considered exploration of the material contexts through which that development occurs.

The left’s failure to address this dilemma is precisely what has spurred the recent flurry of activity around the concept of framing which I’ll discuss in chapters 3 and 5. George Lakoff, perhaps the most prominent proponent of “reframing,” has argued that trying to recapture a previously left-serving frame that has been taken over by the right only serves to perpetuate the interests of the right, because it perpetuates the frame. At the same time, the left has been woefully terrible at coming up with new frames that represent what it does believe, not what it does not believe. Alan Jenkins, executive director of the Opportunity Agenda, one of many progressive groups attempting to generate a platform for this framing, summarized the problem in a presentation: “Martin Luther King never said ‘I have a critique.’” But when the Democratic party “crafted” the message, “Together, America can do better” for its 2006 platform, they hardly captured the American imagination with a vision of the possible. Nunberg quotes a blogger, Wonkette, whose response
gets to the heart of the problem: “Now we know where the Democrats stand. . . . They stand for betterness” (2006, 2).

As the analysis in the next chapter illustrates, this problem of language and ideology also forms the framework around the challenge currently faced by educators. A number of influential reports (and news stories like those quoted in chapter 1) invoke the progressive pragmatic jeremiad to make the case that the purpose of education is to prepare students for participation in the democracy, but that that the educational system (especially teachers) are faltering in this mission. Through this same narrative, the state has for the last century also been charged with some degree of responsibility to address failures; thus, these documents invoke solutions that remove agency from teachers and perpetuate stories about students (writers) and content (like writing) that run counter to narratives that are reflected in pedagogical research like that from our field of composition and rhetoric. If we want to change frames and stories about our work and about the subjects that we teach by invoking elements of this jeremiad— saying, for instance, that writing instruction helps prepare students for citizenship in a twenty-first-century democracy (WPA Assessment Statement)—we must do so consciously, understanding the porous nature of the narrative that we are invoking, and think carefully about how our arguments are positioned within it.