We all know this story: “I was chatting with someone in/on <insert location here—airplane, airport, grocery store line, child’s school, etc.>, and the conversation turned to what we did for a living. When I said that I taught writing, the person said <insert negative comment about writers or writing here—‘Oh! I’d better watch my grammar around you!’; ‘Don’t you find today that kids can’t write?’; ‘Don’t you find that kids watch too much TV/play too many video games/interact with media I don’t know to the detriment of their writing skills?’>.”

We’ve heard this tale (at conferences, in professional publications, perhaps at our own institutions), and perhaps we’ve even participated in conversations that extend from it. Here’s one example. For the last three years, I’ve worked as a writing tutor at an organization whose mission is to provide writing workshops and tutoring for students in southeastern Michigan. I also help to train other writing tutors; every other month or so, they come to talk about their expectations and learn about working with the kids who come in daily after school. Sometimes in these conversations a tutor trainee will make a disparaging remark about “student writing”—not, typically, the writing of a particular student, but student writing generally. Of course, we discuss the comment in the context of our work, focusing especially on the fact that students are coming for help with their work (including writing), and that a key point of providing that help is being encouraging, supportive, and optimistic. Once we move beyond this general lament to specific instances, the issue becomes more complicated yet less prominent among future tutors’ concerns.
This story about students and writing—that students can’t write, that communications media are interfering with language development—extend from the progressive pragmatic jeremiad discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this book. Underscoring this story is the idea that the purpose of schooling is to impart in students (via the stewardly and technocratic approach) the critical intelligence that they need to develop methods to overcome the obstacles facing the nation. Language use is inexorably bound up with the development and demonstration of these methods, and evidence that language is being used “correctly,” in a way that demonstrates achievement, is understood to be manifested in things like “proper grammar.”

At the same time, here in the dawn of the twenty-first century we Americans are experiencing the same kind of communications revolution that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth; a dizzying array of communications (from video games to the Internet to the ever-increasing capacity of cell phones) are changing boundaries of space and time just as railroads and the development of the motion picture industry and radio did at the beginning of the last century. And just as dominant cultural groups reacted to the development of those media (by using them for the purpose of spreading their own messages, or by protesting against them, or by removing themselves from the arenas where those media were widely used), so the same is happening today, as is demonstrated in comments about how these media must interfere in negative ways with the development of students’ critical intelligences.

Contrast this story with another. For the last two years, I’ve been involved with making a film Who Is a Writer?: What Writers Tell Us. This film is part of a larger WPA Network for Media Action project called the National Conversation on Writing. For it, composition instructors, students, and anyone else who read the call for videographers interviewed virtually anyone we could find to interview. Rather than focusing on student writing, the questions for these interviews focused on the interviewee’s own writing. The first question was, “Are you a writer?”
Other questions asked interviewees to talk about their most and least positive writing experiences, about what helped them and didn’t help them write, and so on. And not surprisingly, the stories in this film are quite different than the ones told by the people who come for tutor training. People say things like, “I’m a good writer when I’m working on things I like to write, but I’m not a good writer when I’m not working on things I like.” Students talk about writing poetry and putting together raps. One of my favorite clips comes from a teenager who says that he doesn’t think of himself as an especially good writer, but that he likes to write things with “simple sentences—kind of like Hemingway” (Vandenberg).

This film captures very different stories about writers than the ones described at the beginning of this chapter. The methodologies used to elicit these different tales also speak to the implications of some of the strategies for changing stories discussed in this book. In the first instance, the narratives focus on “students” and “writing,” casting these ideas within a dominant narrative about writers and writing that is currently circulating outside of our profession. It is reflected in news stories like the one from the Chicago Daily Herald that I cited in chapter 1; it is located in A Test of Leadership, the report from the Spellings Commission on Higher Education, as well as in Ready or Not (from the American Diploma Project) and in policy documents and studies (like those produced by ACT) discussed in chapter 3. In this narrative, students are failing. They don’t know, they can’t do, and things aren’t good. It also suggests that teachers, by extension, are struggling; they aren’t teaching students what they need to know. As a result, students are not developing the critical intelligence necessary to contribute to the nation’s progress toward achievement of the virtuous democracy, a belief that is encompassed in statements about how America is not educating workers for the twenty-first century (and, as a result, is losing its competitive edge). The frame surrounding this narrative is very tight and brooks few challenges, as the discussion framing in chapter 1 suggests. Linguistic researchers and frame analysts
like Anat Shenker-Osorio and Real Reason note that this frame also can be reinforced when discussions focus on abstract categories, like “writers” or “students,” because these do not refer to specific individuals (Shenker-Osorio 2006). The result, then, are stories about *writers, teachers, education*—but not any specific writer, teacher, or school.

The vignette about *Who Is a Writer?* tells a different story. It is about how people—actual students, teachers, others—feel about their own writing. They talk about when they feel competent as writers and when they do not, about how they know when they have done a good job with writing and when they have not; about when writing has mattered or not mattered, and what difference that investment has made to them. The frame here is less tight, in part because it is more complicated. It suggests that qualities of good writing are context- and situation-specific—sometimes people write some things well, and others not as well. The job of teachers, then, is different. It might be to help writers identify their strengths, examine what they already know to do those things better, and consider how they can build on and transfer those things they do well to new writing situations and challenges. The questions used to elicit this narrative are a bit different as well, because they focus on specifics—on real individuals (the interviewees, actual people whom they know) and on real writing situations.

Just as these examples capture two different stories about writers, this book has examined a number of stories that run through and influence the work of writing instruction and writing program administration. These stories are centered in three questions: what literacies students have when they enter the academy; what they should learn in writing classes (and who should determine what they learn); and how their literacies should be assessed once those classes are completed. In the dominant frame surrounding these stories, contemporary education does not come out looking particularly effective. These stories say that students do not know what they need to know coming out of high school, and that once they enter college, instructors
don’t understand what students need to know and do to participate in twenty-first-century democracy, so other experts (ADP, ACT, or others) must step in both to develop curriculum and design assessments to make sure that students are learning what they should. These stories are told in policy reports and in news stories (that are themselves often influenced by those same policy reports). They are also repeated in the kinds of everyday dialogues that people have about writing.

**COLLAPSING THE TELESCOPE: FROM SOCIAL PRACTICES TO PERSONAL PRINCIPLES**

The quote from Karl Llewellyn that I invoked in chapter 1, “strategies without ideals is a menace, but ideals without strategies is a mess [sic],” summarizes the challenge faced by WPAs and writing instructors who want to change this dominant frame and the stories extending from it. In that chapter I also discussed the telescoping process described by Robert Coles, organizers associated with the IAF, and others who discuss the extension from personal principles and passions to broader social concerns. These personal stories are always with us. They are at the core of the “undivided self” mentioned by Palmer; the “present” teacher that O’Reilley writes about; the “lived experience” and its connection to classroom work described by Ronald and Roskelley; and the broader extensions of “personal faith” that Elizabeth Vander Lei discusses (2005, 6–8). These are our personal “effective ideals” and “moral compass[es]” (Rodgers 52). And just as they are motivational for us, so they are for others. Working from our own stories, learning about and connecting with the personal stories of others—this is the beginning point for building the kinds of alliances that are at the core of the story-changing work described by the community organizers and activists cited in chapters 4 and 5, the kind of story-changing work that might be represented by projects like *Who Is a Writer?*

As part of the discussion of personal principles in chapter 1, I also mentioned some of the my own personal stories about
experiences as a middle and high school student, stories that I locate at the core of my ideals. Because of the way I understood my (often terrible) performance, I didn’t feel like I was good enough. In college, my self-perception began to shift, and after a surprising (to me) return to graduate school after a few years I began to connect experiences like mine to broader issues and to systematically study definitions of literacies and the ideologies and contexts that they reflected and perpetuated. Through this process, and as I’ve continued to teach and administer writing programs, these lived experiences have continued to contribute to ideas at the center of my work and life. These are the mantras by which I live as a teacher. Value students, their ideas, and their writing. Never, never, never make someone feel as if they can’t do something. Treat everyone enthusiastically and in open and welcoming ways; work from what writers bring, not what they do not bring, to a class or a writing program. Care about people. Listen, and listen some more, to hear what they have to say and not what you think about what they have to say. Advocate for writers and writing, and also help writers and teachers develop strategies to do the same thing for themselves. Be smart and try to understand things from as many perspectives as possible. At the same time, form alliances and try to use those as a basis from which to develop shared values that then extend to messages through which we communicate our ideas to others. These experiences serve as the starting point for my own telescope, the small end of “personal stories.”

**PERSONAL PRINCIPLES: TIKKUN OLAM AND PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM**

As I consider connections between my personal stories and these mantras, I see them reflected in two principles that guide my work as a teacher and a WPA: the idea of *tikkun olam* as I enact it through the practice of secular humanistic Judaism, and the notion of prophetic pragmatism. While I hardly would suggest that these principles should underscore others’ work, I will explain them and their connections to my own practices. I
do so not because I feel that these are representative or more virtuous than other principles, but to both share and model the kind of thinking that I have done about this telescoping process from personal to social that is at the heart of the change-making processes described here.

*Tikkun Olam: Transforming the World*

Within Judaic literature, there are a number of definitions of *tikkun olam*, each of which invests the term with slightly different meanings. The idea of *tikkun olam* originates from Kabbalah, a mystical Jewish tradition. In that version, God consists of (and is contained in) a series of vessels. According to Rabbi Irwin Kula, one account of this story says that:

> When God contracted, the vessels shattered from the incredible energy and force, and shards were scattered throughout the universe. Each of these fragments contained a spark of light, a grain of God. . . . [Luria] taught that humankind could heal the Divine, restore God through contemplative practice such as study, prayer, and meditation, and through acts of loving kindness. If humankind can gather the shards of good and evil, love and hate, destruction and creativity, we can release the sacred sparks within them, dissolve all dualities, and repair all that is. We can make God whole again. This Kaballistic call to repair the world by making it whole is called tikkun olam. (Kula 2006, 295–96)

Having laid out this version, it’s important to note that discussion (and debate) about the interpretation and application of germinal texts, experiences, and laws (such as this description of tikkun olam) is a central part of Jewish cultural practice. Thus, extending from this definition (which I am confident that some Jews would argue is not the most influential conception of the term), tikkun olam has been variously defined as “repairing the world,” “restoring the world,” or “healing and transforming the world.”

As a humanistic Jew, I prefer (and work from) definitions that tend toward “transforming” because they reflect an epistemology
that is consistent with my beliefs. In this conception, these actions are directed toward the benefits of those on earth and necessitate negotiating the messiness of difference, of diversity, in the here and now (rather than trying to smooth out that diversity). Engaging in *tikkun olam* will help elucidate what Kula calls the “magnificent kaleidoscope of our many selves. . . . There is no cohesive self awaiting our discovery; no world waiting to be redeemed. There is no unity behind the curtain. The mystical realization that awaits us is not a leap into Oneness but a soaring into solidarity with and empathy for the world’s multiplicities” (297, 300). This interpretation resonates with me and reflects the ways in which I work to enact *tikkun olam*.

Just as there are multiple definitions of *tikkun olam*, there are also different ideas about how to enact the principle within Jewish culture. But the discussion and debate around this enactment is a central part of Jewish culture and, in its way, its own act of *tikkun olam*. The value of debate and discussion is represented in a story about Rabbi Hillel, one of the foundational philosophers of Judaism. A non-Jew approaches Hillel and challenges him to define Judaism’s essence while standing on one foot. “What is hateful unto you do not do unto your neighbor,” Hillel says. “The rest is commentary—now go and study” (Telushkin 1991, 112). Most forms of Judaism don’t provide interpretations; they provide opportunities for meditation and discussion. The value of study and discussion is also represented in the Talmud (which literally means “study”), a document used by observant Jews as a basis for their discussions of Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Accumulated over centuries of rabbinic interpretation, Talmudic historian Robert Goldenberg explains that the Talmud represents a series of conversations, rather than a set of answers. “Talmudic conversation,” he writes, is like “a gathering where everyone is talking at once” (Goldenberg 156). The primary purpose of the text (each page of which is so packed with discussion that it looks like a Hebrew version of a nineteenth-century newspaper) is to preserve the thinking of earlier generations and provide a structure for ongoing discussion.
My own conception of *tikkun olam*, tinged with secular overtones and an emphasis on dialogue, reflects Kula’s conception that the principle concerns “mend[ing] the disharmonies of the world through the pursuit of social justice” (Kula 2006, 296). This instantiation of the principle also resonates with the concept of prophetic pragmatism outlined by Cornel West. Pragmatism, especially as it has been enacted through progressive ideologies, has provided a rich and diverse culture through which efforts to educate American citizens have developed. Prophetic pragmatism, the twentieth- and twenty-first-century manifestation of this philosophy, is predicated on three elements: profound faith in and advocacy for the power of individuals to make a difference and improve democracy, balanced with acknowledgement that both these efforts and the democracy is situated in and shot through with differences in power (West 1989, 227); the importance of processes intended to forward the possibility of “human progress” that acknowledge and attempt to address profound differences in power among citizens, coupled with “the human impossibility of paradise” (229); and an acknowledgement that process is predicated on the adaptation of old and new traditions to “promote innovation and resistance for the aims of enhancing individuality and promoting democracy” (230).

While the principles of *tikkun olam* and prophetic pragmatism may seem divergent, in fact they are closely aligned. There are three core elements that are shared among both. First is that this work is grounded in action in the here and now. Menachem Mark Kellner notes that Judaism generally “emphasizes human behavior over general claims of theology and faith” (Kellner 1995, 13). In this sense, its detractors refer to it as “a religion of pots and pans” because its central concerns have to do with day-to-day living, what Harold Schuweis calls “this worldly” behavior (as opposed to “otherworldly” action) (Schuweis 29). Jewish activist and economist Bernardo Kliksberg notes that this emphasis on action is a “unique feature” of the culture (Kliksberg 2003, xii). As Kula puts it, “Jewish wisdom teaches
Working From My Own Points of Principle

that nothing is more important than what we do. Being paralyzed by indecision is not an option. It’s incumbent upon every human being to contribute to the world, to make a difference. That’s why our decisions are so important, why as many angles or paths as possible should be considered” (Kula 2006, 94). Rabbi Richard J. Israel also reflects on the call to act when he says that he must “live a life of commitment plagued by great doubts. I must act without hesitancy out of information that is questionable” (Israel 1995, 124). The focus is always on action in the present moment.

The principle of present action is also deeply embedded in prophetic pragmatism. As Cornel West explains, this approach affirms the “strenuous mood” that is embedded in pragmatism, especially its proclivity for action in the here and now. This principle was initially articulated by William James in his ger- minal essay “What Pragmatism Is.” In that piece, James uses a story about a squirrel circling a tree as a metaphor for the kind of present-moment thinking essential for pragmatic action. James explains that, returning from a hike during a camping trip, he found his companions in a “ferocious metaphysical dispute. . . . The corpus of the discussion was . . . a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand” (James 1910b, 43). The human tries to see the squirrel, the squirrel avoids being seen by circling the tree. The question: does the man go around the squirrel, or the squirrel around the man? James’s response, ultimately, was that it didn’t much matter which animal went around which; that, in fact, the only debates of consequence were ones that had consequence for actions in the here and now. As James later explains,

There can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere—no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference of concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen. The whole function of philosophy ought to be to
find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one. (James 50)

While James was not especially concerned with here and now action directed toward broader social change, the idea of focusing on present action as it is articulated in his work has been infused, in prophetic pragmatism, with concerns about material and social realities. As West explains, prophetic pragmatism “never giv[es] up on new possibilities for human agency—both individual and collective—in the present” (West 1989, 228).

In addition to a focus on action in the here and now, both tikkun olam and prophetic pragmatism reflect a compulsion to combine action and reflection. Rabbi Richard Israel explains that the Bible is not a “rule book,” not a “source of values [but] a decoration to give apparent substance to the values we already have” (Israel 1995, 124, 119). It’s what Jews do with this information, with the interpretations that stem from the Bible, that have more influence. But even that tradition does not dictate action, Israel says. It is “a check on and a source of social values . . . a goad, a guide, and a goal: a goad, in that it prods us into caring; a guide, in that it presents us with some limitations and suggested lines of action; a goal, in that it gives us a vision of [an] ideal future” (124). Jewish tradition and culture provides Jews with texts and traditions that can be used for reflection; that reflection, in turn, is a central part of the process of discovery that is the core of the practice. This is the point of Kula’s definition of tikkun olam, in fact. He’s making the case that acts in the name of tikkun olam are represented in ongoing processes—they are gerunds (“ings,” verbal nouns), not static nouns. The act is in the doing, not in the having done. “The truth can set us free,” Kula writes, “but only if we’re always in the process of discovering it” (Kula 2006, 3, emphasis in original). This discovery is predicated on intentional action—the kind of action that we might call reflexive.
In the same way, prophetic pragmatism places a high premium on self-awareness and situated action. Raymond Williams describes this element of reflexivity:

We have to see the evil and the suffering, in the factual disorder that makes revolution necessary, and in the disordered struggle against the disorder. We have to recognize this suffering in a close and immediate experience, and not cover it with names. But we follow the whole action: not only the evil, but the men who have fought against evil; not only the crisis, but the energy released by it, the spirit learned in it. We make the connections . . . and what we learn in suffering is again revolution, because we acknowledge others as [human]. (quoted in West 1989, 229)

The final element at the core of this thought is the notion of communal dialogue, since it is this dialogue that fuels the kind of reflective and reflexive examination described above. Given the fact that Jews were largely segregated from mainstream cultures (in shtetls, ghettos, and other communities) until the late eighteenth century, often through legal and political strategies that systematically robbed Jews of economic and human rights, it is perhaps not surprising that Jews found (and continue to find) strength in community. Extending from this position, Daniel J. Elazar argues that Jews engage in a politics that is “multifaceted and dialectic, . . . a continuing dialogue based upon a shared set of fundamental questions” (Elazar 1997, xix). This tradition is rooted in the Bible, but it is “filtered through the Talmud” and has found expression throughout Jewish history (xx). Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman, a Jewish ethicist, makes the case that “the way to the truth of an action” in Jewish decision making is through this dialogue and the “shared narrative” that develops from it. “If we are to develop new language beyond individual entitlements,” she argues, “it must be language rooted in story and community that draws from a method that is itself dialogic and communal” (Zoloth-Dorfman 220). Marshall J. Breger, too, emphasizes the importance of communal dialogue. “The quest for spiritual meaning [in Judaism] has never been primarily a
persona confession for the lonely man of faith. . . . The Judaic conception of a meaningful spiritual life is communal in orientation” (Breger 2003, 2). In other words, work through dialogue to develop processes, methods, and strategies is used to discuss, refine, defend, and advance ideals that are central to the community (e.g., Elazar 1997).

Again, this notion of dialogue and dialectical action also is embedded in prophetic pragmatism. It stems in part from pragmatism’s evolution from America’s foundational narrative discussed in chapter 2. In that narrative, America is always progressing toward the achievement of a virtuous democracy. Along the way, though, obstacles crop up that impede this progress. They are overcome when like-minded individuals have the liberty to come together and, in and through dialogue, develop processes and methods by which to overcome them. The dialogue that is generated toward these solutions and the solutions themselves, in fact, are also important elements of advancing the nation’s progress; without them, the “natural” evolution of American ideals would not occur.

Participatory dialogue directed toward the development of processes and methods for overcoming obstacles is also a central part of pragmatism. This emphasis on dialogue—on communication—runs throughout John Dewey’s work, for instance. Communication theorist James Carey locates in that work a “ritual” perspective where communication “comprises the ambiance of human existence [and where] . . . reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication—by . . . the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms” (Carey 1989, 24–25). One of the primary concerns of Dewey’s work was focusing Americans’ prodigious inclinations for dialogue toward “democratic” ends; that is, toward the development of a culture that embodies “the best of American democracy” and perpetuates the “march” of that democracy toward a more fully developed achievement of it (West 1989, 71).

Connection between larger principles and everyday actions, enacted through reflective and reflexive practice, formulated in
dialogue among community—these are central to the practices of *tikkun olam* and prophetic pragmatism as I understand and try to enact them. The “ground rules for action” formulated by Rabbi Richard J. Israel—ground rules that almost directly echo principles framing the work of organizers whose work is discussed in chapters 4 and 5—make sense to me in this regard: “Fight for things that matter; choose areas in which you can be effective— reduce problems to a size that you can comprehend and do something about; occasionally, pick areas where you have a choice for success; [and] understand your opponents” (Israel 1995, 127).

Certainly, those more knowledgeable about Jewish culture, history, ethics, and values might frame *tikkun olam* differently; to be sure, given the propensity for debate and discussion in Judaism, there are arguments to be raised around my framing of this work. And I am not entirely comfortable with this explanation of the practice because, as a reflective and reflexive thinker, I know I’ve missed a lot. But then again, not knowing, questioning, reflecting, debating—these are all central characteristic of Judaism and the principle of *tikkun olam*. As Kula notes, “The yearning for Truth and Enlightenment is one of our defining human qualities. We can seek with passion and commitment while knowing we’ll never get there. . . . Jewish wisdom sanctions the yearning, even ennobles it, at the same time teaching that there is no meaning; only a kind of dance between meaning and ambiguity; understanding and misunderstanding; faith and doubt; essence and no-essence” (Kula 2006, 14, 42). The challenges that I face—as a person, a parent, a spouse, a WPA—is to figure out, in new ways every day, not just how to enact principles that inform my practice (like *tikkun olam*), but what those principles mean as I enact them and how that meaning changes.

**TIKKUN OLAM, PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM, AND CHANGING STORIES**

The idea for this book came to me in a flash as I was sitting in a restaurant after a day at the 2004 NCTE conference. Two
friends and I were bemoaning the left’s seeming inability to make a dent in the powerful frames that were being advanced by the right around everything from the Iraq war to education. I said, “I’m going to learn what they do, and I’m going to figure out how we can use those strategies, too.”

If that need seemed compelling in 2004, it seems even more so in 2007. As noted earlier, the stories that circulate about students and teachers repeatedly are not often echoed in research from the field, in statements and studies from professional organizations, or by individuals telling stories about themselves as writers. But frustratingly, educators sometimes seem unable to combine strategies and ideals to change these stories by shifting the frames from which they extend. Throughout this book I have cited examples of this conundrum and its possible consequences, but I must invoke one more. This comes from opening remarks delivered by Sarah Martinez Tucker, undersecretary for higher education, at a regional hearing on the Education Department’s (ED’s) Spellings Commission Report, A Test of Leadership, in June 2007, a hearing intended (in Tucker’s words) to help attendees develop “local ownership” of the ED’s “national agenda . . . so that more Americans have access to opportunity” (Tucker 2007). Tucker went on to say that in her position as undersecretary, “it’s almost like I’m sitting in this position and responsible to ensure that all Americans have access—but I feel like I’m watching a train wreck. . . . We debate whether we’re broken, but as a system we’re not producing enough Americans with post-secondary credentials. We will put ourselves in a position where the country is not economically viable” (Tucker 2007). Not surprisingly (given that she was a Spellings Commission member, and now a Bush administration official), Tucker’s remarks provided additional support for the frame surrounding and narrative advanced in A Test of Leadership: higher education isn’t doing a good enough job maintaining the progressive pragmatic jeremiad discussed in chapter 2; teachers are not developing students’ critical intelligences in ways that prepare them for participation in twenty-
first-century democracy; and the country will surely falter if something is not done.

As a writing instructor and a WPA, I’ve long thought about how we can take action to change stories like the one that is reflected in Tucker’s remarks. This is a long-dominant narrative, and one that many other compositionists (and literacy educators) have attempted to shift as well. Here I’ve tried to adapt strategies from organizers and activists from outside of our field for this purpose, thinking about how we can use ideas about building relationships, developing and disseminating messages, and engaging in other positively based work to change frames around writers and writing instruction. But in and through the principles of *tikkun olam* and prophetic pragmatism, I also continually ask questions about this work. One that I ask myself—and which has been raised by others (e.g., Hesse 2001)—has to do with the fact that in it, I am advocating for particular ideas, stances, and approaches. In this book, in fact, I am both telling stories and invoking the idea of stories, tropes, and frames to advance different kinds of stories. Clearly I have some strong beliefs about the ways that writing instruction and the work of writing instructors and WPAs *should* and *should not* be framed. I think that many WPAs and writing instructors *do* understand how to prepare students for participation in the democracy; at the same time, I don’t always agree with the definition of that democracy as it is shaped in documents like *Ready or Not*. That is, I believe—like Saul Alinksy, Ernesto Cortes, Rinku Sen, MoveOn.org, Wellstone Action, the SPIN Project, Norman Solomon, the other activists and organizers cited here and many others—that citizens are prepared to participate in the democracy when they have the critical intelligences to assess the social and material conditions that currently exist and make conscious decisions about how to improve those social and material conditions for the greatest number of people. In education, this can be cultivated through the development of what Jay Robinson calls “civic literacy,” a process enacted when students (with their teachers) are invited to consider the contexts and implications
of their actions, especially as they are enacted through language (Robinson 1998).

But does this perspective jibe with the notion of engaging in dialogue, of listening, of making alliances between my own ideas and those of others? That’s a question that I wrestle with every day as I try to consider how best to enact ethical, meaningful, and valid work in the writing program that I administer and in my own classes. I hope that my principles also guide this wrestling, as through them I try—try—to be respectful of divergent positions. I will say this, too. I have found that the strategies I have learned about through this research extremely helpful. People with whom I work—administrators on my campus, students in our classes, colleagues in my department—share a deep and passionate commitment to student learning, and that passion is motivated from stories of their own. Finding these and listening to them, I have found that we share some common goals, and we can work from these goals in what I hope are meaningful and productive ways. This, then, is my individual response.

As a professional in the field, I’ll say this. If individual WPAs and writing instructors are comfortable with current responses to questions about what literacies students bring to our classes, about how those literacies should be developed, and about how they should be assessed, then we need not worry about the future of our writing programs and courses. However, if WPAs and writing instructors are not comfortable with the current direction that discussions about education (and writers and writing) are taking, it is important for us to be able to think and act strategically to change the frames around those discussions and the stories emanating from them. I’ve suggested here that these strategic actions should start with and proceed from principle, whatever that principle is for instructors and programs. To me, the central principles of Judaism that are bound up in tikkun olam and prophetic pragmatism—action and reflection that is grounded in the present moment enacted as a result of and through communal dialogue—suggest different ways of going about this reframing work. From the moment I entered
a classroom, I have been unwilling to frame my courses (or, in some cases, our writing program) as ones that are designed to address some perceived “need”—or, as is more often invoked, some “lack”—that students bring with them to college, a stance that doubtless comes from my own experience as a student who felt myself “lacking.” Instead it’s been important for me to think about what students have, what they bring, what they can do, and go from there. This is my passion, my anger, the thing that fuels me in my work as a writing instructor and a WPA.

**RECONCEIVING THE ROLE OF THE WPA**

Since 1995 or so, I’ve worked in positions that were either explicitly called “writing program administrator” (or some derivative thereof, such as my current title, director of first-year writing) or included administrative responsibilities (such as a three-year stint directing a writing center). During that time, part of my challenge has been to take my personal perspectives, angers, and passions and ask: is it possible to include this in WPA work? Is it possible to separate it from that work? The question of WPA identity—what a WPA should do, should know, and what this work is—is one that seems to periodically occupy the thoughts of many WPAs. In an essay providing advice for new WPAs, David Schwalm says that WPAs “cross the line” into administrative work, marking a space that is different from the one occupied by faculty (Schwalm 9). The definition (and status) of WPA work has its own mythology and its own central themes, many of which are connected with the quest for intellectual legitimacy. These include issues of mentoring and support for WPAs and recognition of WPA work as intellectual; the extent of the WPA’s responsibility; renumeration for WPA work; the role of women in WPA positions; and the role that WPAs play in relation to university-level policies (e.g., L’Eplatteneir and Mastrangelo, “Why?”; Rose and Weiser 1999, 2002). In “The Politics of Writing Promotion,” the analogy that Charles Schuster makes between WPAs and Boxer, the horse in *Animal Farm*, reflects the mythology surrounding these various issues. Just as Boxer works harder
and longer than the other animals (and ultimately collapses doing so), Schuster says that WPAs

are generally required to do more than their fair share of minding the farm. . . . The Puritans of English Departments, [WPAs] generally believe both in the ethos of work and, less fortunately, in the beneficence of authority. Their zeal to teach and serve smothers that other extremely useful instinct: self-survival through the salvation of publishing. Too often they lack the pragmatic, hard-edged, usually complicated, ironic intellectual footing of their colleagues who know that the system rewards a belief in self, not in community. Too often they believe that hard work, and hard work alone, will be their salvation. (Schuster 1991, 333)

Schuster’s analogy resonates strongly with me (and, likely, with other WPAs) because it captures the elements of the mythology surrounding WPA work as we have developed and enacted it. We work hard; we believe in others sometimes at the expense of ourselves. The title of Diana George’s collection, *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers and Troubadours*, also captures the conceptions that many WPAs have of ourselves as we juggle the many different aspects of the position: tending to our own tenure and promotion needs; working with others inside and outside of our writing programs to represent the interests of the program and students in it; and so on. In these conceptualizations, to some extent, we are both server (we develop things that help others; sometimes we “protect” others [students, instructors in our program] from incursions by others [other faculty, administrators, accrediting agencies, and so on]) and served (since we see ourselves, to a large extent legitimately, as existing at the mercy of a series of much larger [departmental, institutional, academic] cultures).

At the same time, this image of ourselves as WPAs also reflects elements of the progressive ideologies that are currently being used to frame discussions about education and educators. That is not surprising, of course—we exist within this system, so it is only logical that we should see ourselves and the work that we
do inside of this frame. But in the same way that this frame precludes alternative stories about school (as Noddings suggests, the students are not assessed for their anxiety levels or dropout rates, but for levels of achievement on state-mandated exams), it also to some extent prescribes the roles that we define for ourselves as WPAs (and faculty members). In her essay in George’s collection, Mara Holt chronicles the personal and professional tensions she experienced as she tried to bring her principles, such as a commitment to collaboration and transparency, into her own work. At the time the essay was written, Holt said that her struggle for voice remains. . . . I still get angry reactions from people for merely speaking my opinion. . . . The bottom line is this: The democratically-minded voices in my head most of the time outnumber the harsh voices of hierarchy-by-fiat trying to shut me up. . . . They have helped me fight for myself, to be on my own side. Further, when I am able to use my own power well, in the service of myself and others, I am energized. (Holt 1999, 39)

Holt’s narrative introduces an element of feistiness not found in the mythology represented in Schuster’s conceptualization of the WPA, a thread of passion and energy that may be the key for WPAs who want to change stories. Perhaps, then, this need to work strategically and from a point of principle raises a new component of the WPA identity not explicitly included in earlier conceptions like Schuster’s, Holt’s, or the others discussed here. Activist Rinku Sen reminds organizers that they are in many ways teachers; in the same way, we might begin to imagine what it would mean for our roles as WPAs and writing instructors if we began to think of ourselves as community organizers. I am deliberately using the word organizer, not activist, because organizing includes an explicit reference to deliberate, strategic planning and action that is sometimes not included in the notion of “activism.” To return to the Karl Llewellyn quote, we have ideals, and ideals are at the core of activism. It’s blending ideals and strategies that is the key to successful story-changing work.
As I’ve suggested here, the first step to story-changing work is not addressing the stories that we want to change, but building a base and developing alliances. Through interactions with community organizers, activists, and media strategists (and the literature that guides their work), I’ve come to understand that interest-, values-, and issue-based organizing provide three related approaches to this important initial work. While the primary focal points of these models differ, each shares a commitment to working from principle (even if the principle is that short-term victory is the most important goal, as in interest-based work), developing a broad base of support, cultivating leadership, and developing and acting on collaboratively developed messages. The process of developing these messages, too, must be strategic and systematic, regardless of the models that organizers—or WPAs—draw on for story-changing work.

Finally, I’ve suggested that story-changing work is most effectively enacted at the local level. It’s easy to become concerned about actions that have the potential to substantially affect WPA work at the national level, such as the ED’s moves to change assessment standards for accrediting bodies (discussed in chapter 1). But an individual WPA, or even a group of WPAs collaborating together, is but a fly on the windscreen of this approaching steamroller. On the other hand, working at the local level, we can develop assessment strategies within our own programs that reflect what we value, that ask questions and implement procedures that reflect what we know about best practices within our own courses and discipline. We can then use these assessments as bases for conversations beyond our programs—with our department chairs, our provosts, our university press officers, assessment coordinators, and presidents. Working bottom-up from our programs and top-down with our administrators, we can hope to provide alternative frames for these conversations that reflect our values and interests. We can also create events on our campuses, such as the Celebration of Student Writing at EMU, that provide alternative conceptions—and alternative frames—for discussions about writing and
writers. These events, too, are important for the work of story-changing. And always, always, we can work from principle. As the questions embedded in chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, the role of principle in story-changing work can vary, but it is always there. Our challenge is to blend ideals and strategies, so that we can shape the stories that are told about our programs, our work, and students every day.