

Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers.* Utah State University Press 2008. (ISBN: 9780874216998)

Reviewed by Patricia Freitag Ericsson

In late June, I stopped at the airport bookstore looking for Louise Erdrich's newest book, but was disappointed that it wasn't on the shelves. Reading it was my plan for the three-hour trip from Spokane to Minneapolis. Disappointed, I wondered how I would pass the time, but then remembered that I'd put Linda Alder-Kassner's new book, *The Activist WPA*, in my backpack. That would have to do.

Two hours and two chapters later, I stopped reading to eat my self-packed veggies and trail mix lunch and realized I was thoroughly happy that the Erdrich book had not been in the bookstore. *The Activist WPA* was proving to be a great read. Lunch finished, I was eager to jump back into Chapter 3 and learn more.

By the time I reached Minneapolis, I'd been on somewhat of a roller-coaster ride despite the smooth flight. Chapter 3 provides an overview of several recent government reports on the state of education in the US and the power of corporate testing giants like ACT and ETS. This reading revived an old, sinking feeling—one that started when I was a WPA at a small university in South Dakota and started learning about the power of such reports, about the influence of corporate testing firms, and tried (with limited success) to work within the constraints those influences created. By the end of Chapter 3, I was feeling hopeful again as Adler-Kassner laid out the role of the "activist intellectual." This version of intellectualism, according to Adler-Kassner, "requires engaging in the dialectical, dialogic process that is a central component of progressive pragmatism, updated to the twenty-first century." Her discussion of this kind of intellectualism as a response to "technocratic, interventionist instantiations of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad" (83) made sense to me.

But I'm getting the cart before the horse here by discussing Chapter 3 before providing an overview of the book and details about the first two chapters. Adler-Kassner has written an exceptionally smart, theoretically sound, eminently readable, in-the-trenches-practical book about how to be a good WPA. Most WPA's realize that to be a good WPA is to be an activist, but many of us need guidance on how better to play that role. Adler-Kassner's book is an excellent guide to becoming an "activist WPA" as well as a good academic administrator. The examples in the book are all from the WPA world, but the advice she gives could be used in any discipline. The book's title could be "The Activist Academic Administrator." At present, I'm not a WPA, but I direct a program in Digital Technology and Culture. Every strategy that Adler-Kassner articulates could be easily used in my work. Although Adler-Kassner provides examples of work at her home university, Eastern Michigan, none of her models is directive or narrow. Broad applicability is one of the strong points of this book.

In Chapter 1 Adler-Kassner introduces her readers to the themes that will guide the book—those of "story making" and "framing." According to Adler-Kassner, story making is about our ideals—ideals, found in our stories, guide our strategic work (9). She contends that the pragmatism that is a "foundational principle for American approaches to education" and the stories that support it must be understood by those who want to change the stories (10). Adler-Kassner uses Erwin Goffman, Antonio Gramsci, and a host of other theorists to situate her ideas on framing. Frames, she says, are triggered by particular "code words" that call upon other words or phrases and link to other issues. These issues are "linked to narratives and myths" (12). Her example of the media's reaction to terms like "underprepared" and "remedial" is one that all WPAs can relate to.

In the middle of Chapter 1, Adler-Kassner outlines her project clearly:

We have the brains, the know-how, the tools. By changing stories at the local level and then working outward to our communities with our colleagues, we can make a difference. *The Activist WPA* attempts to meet the challenge of changing stories—of reframing discussion—head-on by developing strategies for WPAs and writing instructors to engage in this work. (22)

Beginning in Chapter 1 and throughout the entire book, Adler-Kassner weaves personal experiences with her discussion of the academic. In Chapter 1's section on "principles," she discusses the discomfort she and other academics have in mixing the personal and the academic. She argues, however, that the principles upon which we act and build our theory are "linked closely to emotional and personal lived experience" (26). Theory, she claims, "must stand on a foundation of principle, of emotion—without it, the argument is literally 'academic'" (27).

Concluding Chapter 1, Adler-Kassner points out that "We need strategies that are connected to our ideals and ideals that are enacted in strategies" (34). Before we can sort through all of that, however, she claims that we need to understand pragmatism and the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, which is what Chapter 2 is all about.

In Chapter 2, Adler-Kassner calls upon John Seeley Brown, Richard Miller, David Tyack and Larry Cuban, Sacvan Bercovitch and others as she works to uncover the "assumptions and narratives" that are rooted in the "systems in which we work" (37). The educational "grammar" in which we work, according to Adler-Kassner's analysis, is that of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, which she spends a hearty chunk of the chapter analyzing (39-51). The last part of Chapter 2 situates this jeremiad in the contemporary scene. In the final sentence of the chapter she issues a warning:

If we want to change frames and stories about our work and about the subject that we teach by invoking elements of this

jeremiad . . . 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. (58)

Readers who are unacquainted with this jeremiad will find the chapter an excellent introduction to it; those who are familiar will appreciate Adler-Kassner's concise, scholarly review of it. I found the chapter comfortable home ground since much of my background is informed by the same scholars she invokes. But I also found myself uncomfortable with Adler-Kassner's analysis of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad—uncomfortable because I disagreed not with her presentation of it, but with her keen analysis of what this jeremiad can support. While it can be used to bolster our goals, it can also be used to support many other stories—the stories about teaching writing that WPAs and writing teachers consistently struggle to rewrite.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this review, Chapter 3 is a bit of a roller-coaster ride. The two policy reports that the author analyzes are dispiriting. Adler-Kassner points out that the “primary argument” in the reports’ charges against schools and teachers is that “schools (and teachers) do not understand the nature of twenty-first century democracy” (61). In her analysis of these two reports (*A Test of Leadership* and *Ready or Not*), Adler-Kassner shows how frames from the progressive pragmatic jeremiad are used to show how education has and continues to fail American democracy.

This section left me depressed, but I also believe that the author left a gap in her analysis here. There is no mention in this section (or in the entire book) of the report that many believe was the beginning of serious change in US education policy. That report is the 1983 *Nation at Risk* Report. Many scholars agree that this report changed the basis of the argument on educational reform. Instead of the traditional view of education as “a means of social and political equalization” (McIntush 421) and a “public good” (Tyack and Cuban 141), *The Nation at Risk* Report recasts

education as an economic good. In response to this report, “the states promulgated more educational laws and regulations than they had generated in the previous twenty years” (Tyack and Cuban 78). These authors go on to comment that the legislative answer to calls for educational excellence were aimed at “lazy students and incompetent teachers” (78), and that the answers consistently called for more—particularly “more discriminating standards” and “more standardized testing” (79). Including even a brief overview of *The Nation at Risk Report* and an analysis of how the progressive pragmatic jeremiad was used in it would have provided more depth to the Adler-Kassner’s study.

The author continues Chapter 3 on a positive note with an example of how the frame and story can be successfully changed. Her example is NCTE’s successful campaign to change the story about the SAT writing exam. In this example, she illustrates how NCTE used information it had collected in long-term efforts and newly gathered data (particularly from Les Perlman’s work) to reframe press coverage of the exam. She ends Chapter 3 by positing that a “crucial” role for WPAs and writing teachers is that of “activist intellectual.” This role is necessary “if educators . . . are to shift the frames surrounding documents like *A Test of Leadership, Ready or Not*, and others that assert the authority of ‘experts’ over educators” (82).

Chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of this academic activist’s guidebook. In Chapter 4 Adler-Kassner presents three approaches to changing frameworks and stories: 1) interest-based organizing, 2) values-based organizing, and 3) issue-based organizing. For each approach she has an “informant” who has used the approach in activist work. The author follows a well-organized format to present each approach:

- a brief definition of the approach followed by its social/academic history;
- a summary of the “key elements” of the approach;

- application to the WPA case study that begins the chapter;
- practical questions that an activist can use to facilitate the approach.

In closing Chapter 4, Adler-Kassner does an excellent job (as she does throughout the book) of linking activism to the scholarly backgrounds of Compositionists. This linking is never awkward or patronizing; she is sure-footed in her approach, which makes the reader feel comfortable and “at home” in new territory.

Chapter 5 begins with another WPA case study, which Adler-Kassner uses to illustrate how a WPA might work to change the local frame and story. Throughout the book, the author is adamant that change must come from the local and move upward and outward. The example in Chapter 5 illustrates that movement pattern. Here she uses examples from her home institution, Eastern Michigan University. Although she’s taking a chance that readers may not appreciate specifically local examples, the only way to illustrate her adamant focus on the local is to use her own school and experience. For me, this approach worked well. For others, however, it may not.

Adler-Kassner becomes even more local in her concluding chapter. Chapter 6 is the most “local” in the book; in fact, it’s personal. In Chapter 1, the author states that “Ideals are our personal stories and motivating factors—the things most important to us” (9). Given that position, it’s consistent that Adler-Kassner would articulate her own ideals. While reading this Chapter, I couldn’t help but think about the similarities and differences between the author’s stories and mine. Her ideals are much influenced by a Jewish tradition of *tikkun olam* which, as a “humanistic Jew,” she believes involves actions that “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)” (170-171).

In addition to encouraging me to compare and contrast her stories and mine, Adler-Kassner’s explication of personal beliefs

and how they relate to pragmatism and WPA work inspired me to write something similar so that I have a better sense of my own ideals, principles, and actions. This chapter also provided me with a new assignment for the graduate methods classes I teach. Using this chapter as an example, I will encourage each graduate student to write something similar—a different kind of teaching philosophy. Adler-Kassner’s personal chapter strongly endorses the importance of the personal and the integration of the whole person in considering how to be an activist WPA or writing teacher. She says that the challenges she faces in all parts of her life (parent, spouse, WPA) are “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” (177).

Perhaps because research and blending ideas is what I do for a living, when I eventually found an Erdrich book (not the latest, but one I hadn’t read) in another airport bookstore, I noticed links to Adler-Kassner’s. In *The Master Bucher’s Singing Club*, Erdrich focuses on her German (rather than her Ojibwi) heritage. In her own words, “I felt I had neglected my grandfather’s story, and the stories my father told me about him. I guess this novel is a kind of homage to him” (9). In our academic work, many of us are encouraged to neglect our personal stories and the ideals embedded in them. Both Adler-Kassner and Erdrich promote just the opposite. Although most of us won’t be like Erdrich – writing 300+ page works of fiction to explore our stories and ideals – most of us can write a few pages about the personal stories and ideals that motivate our lives. Doing so may help us better understand the principles from which we act. Building upon that foundation, we may be better able to follow Adler-Kassner’s activist guidebook. We may, in the end, be able to do what the author leaves as a final challenge: “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” (185).

Works Cited

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