

Discord and Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator, edited by Sharon James McGee and Carolyn Handa. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Letizia Guglielmo, Kennesaw State University

The dream of administration is that it is always possible to plan in advance; the reality of lived administration is that improvisation—of making do with what is at hand—is always at the heart of this work

—Miller and Cripps

Suggested immediately by the title of this text, *Discord and Direction*, the ongoing conflict and change experienced by many writing program administrators (WPAs) is illustrated in each essay within this collection. Together, the essays offer current WPAs, future WPAs, and graduate students considering writing program administration for the first time a comprehensive and realistic view of the issues facing these administrators with practical advice grounded in lived experience. In organizing the collection within a postmodern understanding of writing program administration, Sharon James McGee and Carolyn Handa assure readers that among the competing voices and interests of individual programs and institutions, the WPA, as a careful rhetorician, illustrated by the many arrows emerging from a mouth on the text's cover, can move programs successfully toward change.

In their introduction, McGee and Handa immediately clarify their use of postmodern throughout the collection, making the term easily accessible for readers. They cite Lester Faigley's belief that modern composition studies sides more often with modernism yet argue, "Postmodernism, furthermore, offers a useful lens through which to view the work of WPAs and to examine those various cultural and institutional issues that shape their work" (2). In other words, and in light of Ihab Hassan's articulation of postmodernism, the nature of writing program administration fits the postmodern, and throughout the text, the authors attempt to illustrate that "postmodern theory can move us from discord to direction, if (and always) only momentarily" (4). Drawing from Hassan's list of postmodern qualities in crafting their working definition for the text, McGee and Handa note a writing program's open structure, potential for resistance to program decisions, process, participation, rhetoric, and antinarative. Addressing one or many of these characteristics, "each chapter in this collection tackles a problem local to its author's writing program or experience as a WPA, and each responds to existing discord in creative ways that move toward rebuilding and redirection" (12). Although the essays themselves are

not organized by section, suggesting that each responds to more than one of Hassan's characteristics, some patterns do emerge within the text.

Providing foundational understanding of writing program administration through an unconventional comparison—writing program administration and the pastoral—Jeanne Gunner, in chapter 2, emphasizes the importance of understanding local conditions, reminding readers that what works well in one situation—one writing program—may not fit others and in doing so very clearly identifies the purpose of collections such as this one, an identifiable ability to provide readers with practical advice based upon the experiences of the author. Unfortunately, as Gunner's piece illustrates, it is precisely this kind of rooted experience within a program that underscores her comparison throughout the chapter. "The [pastoral] form supports any dominant ideology that grounds its authority in a fictional, idealized past," and it is generally this looking back that results in resistance to change seemingly "imposed" by the WPA (31).

With a specific focus on the Consultant Evaluator (C-E) visits provided by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Deborah Holdstein, in "Where Discord Meets Direction: The Role of Consultant Evaluation in Writing Program Administration," addresses precisely the dangers noted by Gunner and attempts to help WPAs learn to deal with power. Holdstein's piece provides a detailed background on the evaluator program and serves new, seasoned, and future WPAs not familiar with the C-E procedure. She notes the benefit of the C-E program not only to improve writing programs through collaboration among faculty and students but also to validate the work of the program and specifically of the WPA within both departmental and institutional contexts. Also explaining the benefits of these evaluations, in "The Place of Assessment and Reflection in Writing Program Administration," Susanmarie Harrington claims that "assessment done well can be perhaps the most important route to crafting an understanding of our programs," especially when combined with careful reflection (141). Although Harrington offers a local example of a C-E experience, her review of the C-E program mirrors much of what is provided in the Holdstein piece, and while the editors are successful in reiterating the importance of the Consultant-Evaluator program as a tool for change, the placement of these essays within the larger text—nearly at separate ends—gives readers the impression that the repetition is not intentional. Explaining a similar strategy for success, Sharon McGee's "Overcoming Disappointment: Constructing Writing Program Identity Through Postmodern Mapping" provides readers with one of the most practical strategies both for deconstructing and articulating the work of a WPA within institutional contexts. Citing her own experiences as essential to this understanding, McGee's personal maps serve as useful visual examples for readers who also may initiate program change and will come to understand that "mapping makes WPAs active as planners; the

maps themselves become powerful rhetorical tools,” a characteristic of post-modernism noted by the editors in the introduction.

Appropriately, the two essays that follow McGee’s optimism illustrate for readers the ways in which decisions often are made within institutions, overlooking completely the input of the WPA. Edgington et al. share their experience with mainstreaming writing courses at the University of Louisville and the ways in which situations interpreted by administration bring about change not always in step with the goals of a writing program. The authors here also shed light on the power of the WPA in affecting change yet note “that before one can utilize this power, the WPA must recognize it is there” and influenced by local situations (73, 80). The authors conclude with strategies, couched in their own experience, through which WPAs can ensure that their own writing programs continually address the needs of their students and faculty despite the changing political tide of the institutions in which they reside. Combining pragmatist philosophy with economics in the university, Keith Rhodes argues, “To become instead an active, evolutionary pragmatic administrator is necessarily to be troubled forever by unresolved matters of conscience and complicity. That often is the cost of getting things done” (89). Rhodes’s narrative on the Basic Writing program at Missouri Western and his careful compromises in negotiating change within that program offer readers a refreshing and even optimistic view of how unwelcome change can be envisioned as strategic maneuver.

With Gunner’s earlier description in mind, readers might expect that the remaining essays would describe local examples that resulted in morals, lessons, or new knowledge in writing program administration that is, in some way, applicable to other institutions. I would dare to argue, however, that although essays by Kemp, Miller and Cripps, and Billings et al. provide innovative approaches to a variety of issues facing their respective writing programs, the solutions themselves may not transfer as seamlessly as some of the others. Fred Kemp’s “Computers, Innovation, and Resistance in First-Year Composition Programs” suggests a novel, yet controversial, solution to the often wide-spread disconnect between professional training in composition and what happens in the classroom, and describes for readers the ICON (Interactive Composition Online) program at Texas Tech and its separation of the “classroom instructor” and “document instructor”—one who teaches and coaches in the classroom and the other who simply judges and evaluates the writing. In a similar response to local need, Richard E. Miller and Michael J. Cripps describe the ways in which Rutgers University’s growth and staffing difficulties were addressed by allowing all PhD candidates across disciplines to teach first-year writing and to receive funding, not as a way “to recruit future compositionists” but simply to respond to local needs (137). And finally, describing a timely approach to writing across the curriculum (WAC), Andrew Billings et al. introduce readers

to the Clemson University Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) program, one guided by a commitment to expanding communication (literacy) in all of its forms and funded most notably by a gift to the University. With these very local solutions at hand, the editors' framing of the text within a postmodern definition becomes most significant here, especially with an antinarrative understanding in mind—there is not one story, one solution that fits every institution.

Also notable, especially for WPAs working with new teachers just beginning to design writing courses, essays by Mike Palquist and Christy Desmet make insightful observations regarding the use of technology in writing courses and the struggle in meeting the needs of both individual teachers and the writing program at large. In the text's final essay, Carolyn Handa brings together both of these issues and one significant reality reiterated by many of the essays: despite a WPA's most deliberate efforts to consider all parties when effecting change, her position at the front of the writing program often inevitably leads to discord. Bringing together the essays as well as the comprehensive bibliography within this collection, McGee and Handa offer a number of useful resources for moving realistically from that discord to direction.

Kennesaw, GA

Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness, by Krista Ratcliffe. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Reviewed by Amy S. Gerald, Winthrop University

In this book, Krista Ratcliffe has a place to explore the intersection of rhetoric and composition, feminism, and whiteness studies, which seems to be the direction of her scholarship after the 1995 publication of *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich*. Challenged by Susan Jarratt "to consider how race informed gender in Woolf's, Daly's and Rich's feminist theories of rhetoric" and discomfited by her own decision to maintain the focus of that book and not add a chapter on Alice Walker, Ratcliffe sets up *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* as an answer of sorts (3). Not only does she perform the feminist act of recovering the neglected fourth literacy of listening, but also she takes a hard look at race in feminist rhetoric and posits rhetorical listening as a possible way for black and white women to work their way through, around, or past the impasse that has stalled productive dialogue between the two groups for decades. Pointing to the history of white