

Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser, eds. *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher: Inquiry in Action & Reflection*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1999. 188 pages. \$24.00.

Diana George, ed. *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1999. 184 pages. \$20.00.

Ira Hayes, ed. *Great Beginnings: Reflections and Advice for New English Language Arts Teachers and the People Who Mentor Them*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. 195 pages. \$25.95.

*Theory is autobiography. Exposition is narrative. (Just the opposite of the classic developmental schemes for writing—or maybe one step beyond them.) These paradoxes have structured my writing ever since, as conflicts and tensions, not achievements. I'm not alone. (vii)*

Louise Wetherbee Phelps

There is, by now, a considerable body of scholarship wrestling with the intersection of personal values, epistemological goals, and institutional realities in the life of writing program administrators.<sup>7</sup> These three books, edited collections of essays by a combination of well-known scholars and newer voices, add to that body of scholarship in distinct ways.

Each of these books works to enact Phelps's insight, although for different audiences and purposes; each fulfills its purpose well. Rose and Weiser's *The Writing Program Administrator as Researcher* represents a productive take

Review

Mothers,  
Researchers,  
and Mentors:  
Writing  
Program  
Administrators  
Redefining Their  
Professional  
Lives

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William B. Lalicker

on the problem of translating personal and institutional history into a form the traditional academy can recognize and respect; the untenured WPA will find useful models for making WPA knowledge into published scholarship. Hayes's *Great Beginnings* draws on memoirs to instruct mentors; it's a practical how-to for those WPAs focused on faculty development. George's *Kitchen Cooks* most boldly moves into the riparian zone where personal values and institutional political aims engender creativity and conflict for the WPA; this book does not shrink from showing the difficulties many of us have encountered in that problematic place. Its most appropriate audience is, in my opinion, experienced WPAs: those of us who might take some comfort in comparing our well-earned wounds, speaking a language at the intersection point of pathos and ethos, even as we strive to make productive use of what we have learned through the struggle. The common thread in these books is that they all recognize and honor the role of the personal, of the WPA's direct experience, in our academic lives.

Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser's collection *WPA as Researcher* presents the experience of the WPA as starting point for generating theory, history, and practice. Although *WPA as Researcher* does not always resort to the storytelling mode, the individual perspective of the WPA retains primacy. As Rose and Weiser say in the introduction, "The critical significance of both WPA agency and subject position is demonstrated in the accounts of the research projects discussed in this collection. The position of the WPA itself authorizes and legitimizes the inquiry," because WPAs "develop an intimate knowledge of the program through the lived experience of their own experience over time, which enables them to investigate and understand their own (multiple) subjectivities" (viii). Within this framework—the WPA's experience as starting point for disciplinary work—the first part of the book, "Writing Program Administrators' Inquiry in Action," ranges widely through the concerns of compositionists and program administrators. Muriel Harris focuses on writing center methods; Betty Bamberg and Wanda Martin, in separate essays, analyze assessment in the context of pedagogy; Mark Schaub examines how sociolinguistic profiling creates site-specific contexts for a program; Sarah Liggett assesses teacher preparation; Irwin Weiser demonstrates the use of local knowledge for writing in the disciplines. All of these essays are eminently practical, with the kind of buttoned-down, social-science case-study-style data orientation (abetted by APA documentation and a sprinkling of charts, graphs, and surveys) that deans and tenure committees can appreciate—while the essays

stay rooted in WPA experience. This is a rare and admirable combination.

Two essays stand out as representative of the range of discussion in this part of Rose and Weiser. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Meg Morgan, in "Reflective Essays, Curriculum, and the Scholarship of Administration," reframe scholarship for the WPA around the term "causal inquiry" to show how WPA program research, like students' reflective essays, is most productive not when the program reproduces ideal models, but when it proceeds from the articulation of actual experience (92). As Yancey and Morgan say, "The claim of administrative scholars is that the very stuff of their work has epistemological value; that from this work knowledge can be—and is—created" (92). Yancey and Morgan apply this approach to revise their curriculum and course exemption. In doing so, they expand the notion of "reflective" research: just as the most effective student "reflective" essays articulate the generation of discourse rather than simply producing it, the most effective WPA research reflects on and articulates curricular experience as a basis for curriculum revision. Program revision thus reflects the knowledge-making qualities of the best student writing. In a similarly provocative take on WPA research, Julia Ferganchick-Neufang's "Research (Im)Possibilities: Feminist Methods and WPA Inquiry" sets out to "identify the problems positivist empirical research standards create for WPAs and describe how those standards serve as hindrances to our attempts to define the work of WPAs as intellectual" (19). Basing her analysis on a wealth of feminist questions about traditional epistemological assumptions, the author challenges research methods that "perpetuate androcentrism" by depending on "false assumptions about generalizability" (22). She suggests, as a productive substitute methodology, an emphasis on "situated knowledges" that explicitly reveal the subjective conditions of all research, providing equity for the personal as a legitimate means of investigation (23-24). This essay thus nicely defines an appropriate methodological standard by which the other essays in this volume might be assessed. Ferganchick-Neufang's critique of traditional research, set in the midst of a collection of essays striving to use traditional research formats to justify an epistemology rooted in the personal, shows the complexity of the WPA's research challenges.

The slightly shorter second part of Rose and Weiser, "Writing Program Administrators' Inquiry in Reflection," focuses largely on histories. Shirley K. Rose, Ruth M. Mirtz, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps, in separate essays, show how WPA perspectives illuminate individual writing program histories; Barbara L'Éplattenier argues for historical study of the roles and methods

WPAs (especially women) have mustered to negotiate against disciplinary marginalization; Tim Peeples uses postmodern mapping to illustrate the complexities of WPA subject positions (using a fascinating analysis of Wendy Bishop's subject position in an administrative struggle at Florida State). An essay presenting a particularly incisive summary of the problematized place of WPA research is Chris M. Anson and Robert L. Brown, Jr.'s "Subject to Interpretation: The Role of Research in Writing Programs and Its Relationship to the Politics of Administration in Higher Education." Anson and Brown point out a contradiction in the bisected research identities expected of WPAs: we are assessed on the basis of personally-experienced, locally-produced and disseminated program research that justifies the quality of our administrative practices; but we are also assessed (especially for tenure and promotion) as producers of nationally-published research. The contingencies of producing program research may interfere with the goal of larger-scale traditional research and publication. Moreover, "a WPA's research may be anchored on an unrecognized substrate of disciplinary ideology and practice," at least in the opinion of many traditional academics of an objectivist bent (148). Necessary program research may also be interpreted, by competing power centers in the institution, as mere "data-gathering in support of a service unit" (151). Anson and Brown counsel WPAs to succeed by negotiating a credible local persona, based on research practices rooted in careful observation of the complex culture of the local institution; simultaneously, they counsel us to recognize that personally-grounded local research provides cases and contexts for research with national implications. Good advice.

The book *Great Beginnings*, on the other hand, provides equally good advice, but with a different audience in mind. This collection of essays, edited by 35-year K-12 teaching veteran Ira Hayes, has plenty of autobiography, but theory is mainly implicit; teaching (rather than research or administration) is its central concern. Hayes's book takes the notion of "reflective practice" quite literally: these essays are largely autobiographical stories about teaching, person-to-person stories that include practical advice. The first of three sections is called "Memoirs." The second two sections, "For the New Teacher" and "For the English Leader," take on the tone of intergenerational wisdom, shared unpretentiously, to guide novices in the K-12 educational system. The result is a volume that feels like an ideal faculty lounge—one that may not exist between the walls of the average

school, but provides abundant practical help between the covers of this very approachable book. The book's 27 short essays (too many to list here) have quite a few incisive suggestions relevant to WPA practice. For instance, Mary C. McMackin and Judith A. Boccia's "Gone but Not Forgotten: University-Based Support for Beginning Teachers" and Rebecca Foehr's "Avoiding Burn-out: New Teachers Dialoguing with Experienced Teachers" remind us that creating a supportive teaching community is a necessary step toward developing a quality program, and both essays outline practical steps for helping new teachers do their job confidently and competently. Paul Heilker's "What I Know Now: The Personal and the Emotional in Teaching English" shows that the way we care about and respect our students has a profound effect on the success of our teaching (a lesson many a WPA has wished more faculty would learn). Thomas Phillion's "A Storytelling Approach to Beginning Teacher Evaluation" outlines a minimal-stress method for assessing teachers, and this personal approach represents a useful model for composition programs. Although *Great Beginnings* is aimed for K-12 teachers and language arts supervisors rather than WPAs, it will serve WPAs well in that large part of our jobs that consists of teaching, training teachers, and mentoring.

Of the three books reviewed here, Diana George's *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours* focuses most intently on the peculiar subject position of the WPA as a person and as an institutional creature. George divides the book into three parts: "Who We Are; What We Would Be"; "WPAs at Work"; "WPAs in Collaboration." But these section titles hardly suggest the extraordinarily wide range of these essays: confessional and cautionary autobiographies; translations of the personal into the theoretical; examinations of how private life mixes with institutional politics; stories of effective personal administrative practice; analyses of the affect of subject position on disciplinary ways of knowing.

As if she wants readers to swallow the bitterest medicine first, George begins Part I with Richard Miller's "Critique's the Easy Part: Choice and the Scale of Relative Oppression." Miller defines the WPA's tasks as essentially social and dialogic; personal desires for the program must be subordinated constantly to the needs and interests of others; "'free choice' is an illusion...all we ever have at any given moment is 'constrained choice'" (7). This isn't all bad; such constraints leave a "space of creativity and imagination" where the WPA "learns to make the best of what's at hand" amid "endless opportunities for innovation, negotiation, and collaboration"

(7). Yet Miller cannot leave this silver lining untarnished, for the dominant epistemology of our discipline itself problematizes writing program administration. Citing Freire and Macedo on the “disciplinary predilection to cast the world of social relations in terms of the writing process,” Miller reminds us that the world does not always agree to be “revised,” or regressed in revision, especially when the WPA divides the revision options into right and wrong. “On the one hand, there’s compliance, complicity, toeing the party line, selling-out, kissing butt; on the other, there’s fidelity, artistic integrity, staying true to one’s vision, speaking truth to power,” Miller says. This false binary, Miller says, leads to a view of writing program administration as “a process of corruption, whereby what is pure and good is sacrificed to what is venal and expedient” (9). Miller notes that this is a “handy way to make sense of the world, since the success of others can be dismissed as mere pandering to the lowest common denominator, while one’s own failures can be infused with a kind of quixotic heroism” (9). Fortunately, Miller the kitchen cook doesn’t just serve up this delicious sarcasm for others. He admits that his own entry into English studies represented an ill-informed choice of “the pure life of writing over the compromised life of the professional” (9). There’s good advice here, too: “the first step in becoming an effective WPA involves recognizing the fact that openly expressing moral outrage about working conditions is actually counterproductive, since this discourse exercises almost no rhetorical or institutional power in the academy at this historical moment” (12). Wish somebody had told me that about fourteen years ago—not that I would have been ready to hear Miller’s talk of operating effectively within “the scale of relative oppression” in which “there is no right answer” (13). I know Miller’s telling a truth that needs to be told, and he does provide practical suggestions: become fluent in the voices that do exercise rhetorical force (statistics, accounting, standardized testing), and make contact to reap “the best of whatever ends up happening” (12-13). But will new WPAs or would-be WPAs be scared away from the profession by Miller’s blunt tale—and should they be?

A close look at another essay may illustrate how the perspectives of *Kitchen Cooks*, even where they are questionable, elucidate most richly and usefully the value of the personal in our understanding of composition and writing program administration. In “Taking It Personally: Redefining the Role and Work of the WPA,” Alice Gillam says that most discourse about WPA work “denigrates the personal in relation to the professional” because “(1)

efforts to legitimize the WPAs' professional status and identity have resulted in coding the WPA as male; and (2) these same efforts have required that personal concerns be separated from and subordinated to professional ones" (67). Much of Gillam's story elucidates the complexity of decisionmaking that WPAs have to make when weighing personal and institutional values. But in moving from personal story to generalization, she cites nine-year-old quotations from Edward M. White's "Use It or Lose It: Power and the WPA" to prove masculinist bias in the ideal imaging of the WPA. According to Gillam, "Not only does White associate power with male sexual prowess in this title, but he also employs military metaphors in describing the behavior of the strong and successful WPA" (68). What would Gillam say of Kate Ronald's repeated use of Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story," from *The Things They Carried*, in her review article "How to Tell a True Teaching Story"? Ronald's essay recommends several books on personal and reflective teaching (the Bishop, McCracken et al., and Trimmer books I cite in note 1 below); Ronald is co-editor of *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetorics* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, forthcoming). Is Ronald participating in coding the WPA as male? I might wish White had refrained from the military metaphors, and I'm not convinced that White's essay title, though clearly suspect as double entendre, is necessarily sexual—or necessarily male. I might wish, equally, that Gillam had complicated and qualified her analysis of a real problem to honor the struggle of so many of us WPAs, women and men alike, who must operate within, but seek to subvert, the masculinist hierarchy of traditional administration.

Mara Holt presents, in her own essay in the George volume, another personal perception of WPA work: "WPA work provides an opportunity for an engaged, feminist work ethos in the profession, a place where many of us can speak about what we care about and then become stronger voices for change in the academy" (40). Gillam's perception is richly true as it expresses what so many of us WPAs, women and men alike, have experienced sometimes in our institutional autobiographies; Holt's ideal is also richly true as it represents the personal ideal many of us WPAs, women and men alike, have equally experienced. Actually, most of Part III, "WPAs in Collaboration," demonstrates how structures respecting the personal have supplanted the vertical hierarchy of traditional academia and have enacted feminist-oriented theory. Kathleen Yancey's "The Teaching Circle, the WPA, and the Work of Writing in the University"; Toby Fulwiler et al.'s "The

Writing Committee at Work"; Beth Daniell's "Envisioning Literacy: Establishing E-Mail in a First-Year Program"; and M.L. Tiernan's "Writing Program Administration and (Self)-Representation: Paradoxes, Anomalies, and Institutional Resistance" all demonstrate this collaborative ideal in practice. What is most provocative and valuable about George's *Kitchen Cooks* is that it recognizes and honors the differing reflections of the discipline provided by Gillam, Holt, and many others in order to demonstrate that personal values are, indeed, integral to the academic lives of WPAs.

To touch on the rest of George's book: it's full of good stories, and they quite frequently bring autobiography and theory together to illustrate effective administrative practice. Many of the essays suggest personal administrative practices to counteract the relative marginalization of composition or the WPA: in the writing center (the essays by Barbara Conroy, Nancy Maloney Grimm, and Ralph Wahlstrom); for the graduate student administrator (an essay by Johanna Atwood Brown and an essay by Stephen Davenport Jukuri and W.J. Williamson); for the new WPA (the essay by Mary Pinard). Finally, three essays are even more personal than the rest. Doug Hesse's essay is an affecting confession; Keith Rhodes provides a cautionary tale tinged with the blackest of humor; and Marguerite Helmers provides what appear to be entries in a travel journal on a jagged trip to the center of a WPA's being, where life and work coexist creatively.

Which of these three books would I recommend for a graduate seminar on writing program administration? The most useful and judicious for the WPA-to-be would be Rose and Weiser's *WPA as Researcher*. For the WPA whose task is not so much to restructure a program as to guide new composition faculty (especially neophyte teachers), I'd recommend Hayes's *Great Beginnings*. The book I'd recommend most carefully to a new WPA happens to be my personal favorite: Diana George's *Kitchen Cooks*. I found myself wanting to quote long wonderful passages from some of its contributors, to argue at length with others, and to cite my own story in an fully-engaged dialogue with sisters and brothers speaking as family, all of us in the WPA clan. As I write this, I am nearing the end of a tenure and promotion year in which I will be successful, but not without having tasted the pain of which some of George's contributors write. I am afraid that some of the essays in the George book may leave too soon a bitter taste in the mouths of new, as-yet-unseared WPAs. And as the deadline for this review article approached, I had to postpone writing (and sleeping) for a couple of

days because my university's Curriculum and Academic Policies Council suddenly proposed the cancellation of half the writing program, to coincide neatly with my 14-month-old daughter's resumption of teething: the writers in George's book would understand perfectly what such an episode means in the life of the WPA as parent, theorist, teacher, and administrator. It's the George book, even as its stories leave questions as well as answers, that speaks to me most completely.

Finally, what will make all of these books important and useful in the history of our discipline (whether we call it Composition, Written Rhetoric, Writing Program Administration, English Language Arts, or English Studies) is that they redefine our work in ways far more integrated—more recognizant and real—than the ever-narrowing visions of academic life represented in the traditional image of the institution. These books all, in differing ways, connect living and teaching, thinking and acting, epistemology and praxis, public and private life. As Patricia Bizzell says in the foreword to *Kitchen Cooks*, "In theory, I admire writing that does serious intellectual work by combining the personal, the professional, and the political....But in practice, I often find it hard to read, and even harder to write" (vii). Or, to return to observations Louise Wetherbee Phelps made a dozen years ago in *Composition as a Human Science*,

*We're working, all of us in theoretical discourse from anthropology and psychology to composition and literary theory, toward new genres with the expressive power to represent in their very form what we now believe and feel about the personal nature of knowledge. Meantime we are seeing hybrid, tortured, mixed, and often unsuccessful discourse forms....But theory is autobiography. (viii)*

Our professional lives as WPAs will be richer for the hybrid, mixed, but finally not unsuccessful autobiographical theorizing the writers of the stories in these three books share. These books must be recognized as serious intellectual works, continuing to define the special disciplinary epistemology of composition and writing program administration as a creative dialectic of knowing, in which the personal and the intellectual earn equal authority.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, besides Phelps, more recent books by Wendy Bishop, *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories* (Utah State UP, 1997); H. Thomas McCracken, et al., *Teaching College English and English Education: Reflective Stories* (NCTE, 1998); Duane Roen, et al., *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline* (Erlbaum, 1999); Joseph F. Trimmer, *Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life* (Boynton/Cook, 1997). A large number of articles also explore the intersection of the personal, the professional, and the political; see, for instance, Wendy Bishop and Gay Lynn Crossley, "How to Tell a Story of Stopping: The Complexities of Narrating a WPA's Experience," *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 19.3 (Spring 1996); and Laurel Black, et al., "Writing Like a Woman and Being Rewarded for It: Gender, Assessment, and Reflective Letters from Miami University's Student Portfolios," *New Directions in Portfolio Assessment: Reflective Practice, Critical Theory, and Large-Scale Scoring*, Laurel Black, et al., eds. (Boynton/Cook, 1994).

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