
Reviewed by Kelly Lowe, Mount Union College

In WPA Circles, the question of how best to organize the administration of writing programs has not been widely debated. Many programs are the result of forceful personalities or historical accidents rather than conscious planning.

--Christine Hult, “Politics Redux: The Organization and Administration of Writing Programs”

Ten years ago Christine Hult’s comments were particularly apt. At that time, I was writing a dissertation which theorized a postmodern Writing Program Administration, and I began by arguing that there was little at the time that could be called Writing Program Administration Theory, citing Edward White’s book Developing Successful College Writing Programs as “the only book-length theory of writing program administration to date.” How things have changed. The past decade has seen tremendous growth in the scholarship of writing program administration. Books and edited collections by Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen, Diana George, Linda Myers-Breslin, Irene Ward and William Carpenter, and Shirley
Rose and Irwin Weiser have significantly deepened and broadened our discussion of what it means to administer a writing program.

One thing almost all of these books have done is to attempt to move WPA scholarship beyond the “here’s what we did at my school” genre, although in many ways, the ultimate argument for much WPA scholarship still seems to revolve around the simple fact that it works. Indeed, the only way to move beyond the “here’s what happened to me” argument is to work in a theoretical realm, which is what Shirley Rose and Irwin Weiser have encouraged their authors to do in the collection *The Writing Program Administrator as Theorist*. This text, which complements their previous volume, “continues to construct the figure of the WPA as agent by developing a description and characterization of the theoretical work of writing program administrators, suggesting a profile, if not a detailed portrait, of the WPA as theorist” (2).

The essays in this collection fall into two basic categories: theories of program and theories of personal. To wit: many of the essays deal with the complexities of writing program work within the larger cultural, social, and political institution of college/university/public life; these essays tend to look at theoretical structures on a programmatic level. For instance, essays examine how archival theory (Bishop), existential phenomenology (Hemmeter), or reflection theory (Popham, et al.) might (positively) affect the writing program as a part of a larger whole. The other essays deal with the writing program administrator-as-theorist. For instance, essays by Rita Malenczyk and Ruth Mirtz and Roxanne Cullen present cogent arguments about disparate theories WPAs might adopt to make their professional lives more bearable.

What makes this division even more interesting is that the essays in the first category (theorizing the program) deal with what, on the surface, might seem like easier targets for a theory of program administration: curricular design, T.A. training, assessment and outcomes planning, and the choosing (or not choosing) of textbooks. The essays in the second category, all of which are grounded in one theoretical position or another, revolve around the day-to-day issues of how to survive as a WPA: asking for money; keeping class sizes stable; working with/for deans, department chairs, parents, state legislators. But the subtext of all of the essays in this collection is the argument that WPAs need to fashion themselves as more than clerks and that they need to look upon their programs as more than something that merely services the larger interests of the institution.

Despite the fact that the book has two different kinds of essays, it does have a significant number of unifying ideas at play throughout; perhaps the most important and interesting are the ideological/political work of the WPA and/or the writing program and the WPAs’ need for theory in order to survive. These two central arguments are what should make this collection required reading for graduate students and WPAs, especially those at institutions with substantial TA training programs or graduate programs in administration.
The question of theory itself is taken up by many of the authors. Not only do WPAs need a theory (or theories), the essays argue; they also need to consider the nature of theory itself. For my money, the best discussion of the kind(s) of theory that WPAs need to develop or, alternately, the best way to consider theory comes from Shamoon et al., who write that “we need a definition of theory not as a unitary understanding or as the desired source for our practices, but as a flexible concept, one that embraces complexity and that responds analytically and critically to ongoing, real-world circumstances” (67). Those central ideas, that theory needs to be about the complexity of practice and that any theory about program administration is imbricated in the real world, are reflected in nearly all of the essays in this collection.

Rose and Weiser begin the collection by asking several specific questions about the theoretical nature of WPA work:

• How do WPAs develop theories about their programs?
• How do WPAs use theory to inform program planning and design?
• What is the role of theory and theorizing in the intellectual work of WPAs?
• How do WPAs develop their professional knowledge base?

The essays in the collection go about addressing these questions in a variety of ways: practically, theoretically, and, most interestingly, ideologically.

In many ways, Jeanne Gunner’s essay “Ideology, Theory, and the Genre of Writing Programs” sets the stage for the rest of the collection. Gunner’s provocative and challenging essay argues, “If writing programs are meaningful social structures and sites of meaning making—if they are more than a value-free housing of the first-year course—then they are ideological entities, and the writing program theorist is necessarily engaged in ideological work” (7). Gunner goes on to give the WPA/Writing Program a significant role in shaping the university’s relationship to language and culture, maintaining that the writing program needs to be looked at ideologically because it is “a social construct that helps establish and reproduce ideological values” (9).

Gunner’s argument is central to understanding the text because it establishes the point that in order to understand the role of the WPA and the cultural and ideological work of the writing program, one needs not only to understand a, theory, but to understand how theory works within a larger ideological structure.

That said, none of the other essays are as overtly ideological as Gunner’s; indeed, most of the other essays revolve on a problem-theory-solution axis. For instance, Susan Popham, Michael Neal, Ellen Schendel, and Brian Huot argue that reflection theory is an interesting way of complicating the writing program—particularly its role in GTA training. In the essay “Breaking Hierarchies: Using Re-
ffective Practice to Re-Construct the role of the Writing Program Administrator,” they argue that “[a]s administrators, we use reflection to understand and assess our program and its growth and to evaluate our role in that program” (20). And while they never discuss the role that ideology might play in their program, it’s implicit in many of the decisions their writing program has made, for instance, the decision not to include an institutionally mandated student reflection in writing classes.

Related to the argument made by Popham, et al. is Tom Hemmeter’s fascinating suggestion that one way to define a writing program is as a “living entity” (29). Hemmeter claims that “writing programs exist to nourish the experimental qualities of writing, a perspective leading to the conclusion that writing program communities exist precisely in the living relationship programs embody” (30). This idea, familiar to those who have read cultural theory, makes sense in terms of program administration—to keep the program focused on the lived experience of the students. Hemmeter writes persuasively about “the relevance of engaging students in analyzing social structures, ideologies, and institutional pressures from the world outside academia, aspects of their lived experience in the world” (31). This notion, of course, is similar to deCerteau’s call to “bring scientific practices and languages back toward their native land, everyday life” (6). Again, Hemmeter’s argument does not overtly discuss ideology, but the very idea of working with students’ lived experiences is an ideological move.

The one essay in the book that really tries to turn program administration on its head is Joseph Janangelo’s “Writhing Across the Curriculum: Contemplating Auteurism and Creativity in Writing Program Direction.” In it, Janangelo argues that directing a writing program is akin to directing a film. Citing auteurist film theory, Janangelo makes a strong case that the work of a WPA is collaborative to a point, and yet there are many potential pitfalls in considering oneself “the director” of anything. In perhaps one of the most cogent statements on the tension between being both a program administrator and a theorist, Janangelo argues that “[a]uteurism shows WPAs that a project’s commercial component, however pervasive, can coexist with its creators’ artistic, intellectual, and political commitments” (148). Indeed, that’s a comforting thought for many.

Perhaps the only area where this collection disappoints is in its omission of straight-up management/administrative theory; indeed, it would seem fairly obvious to include, in a book on administrative theory, an essay that looked at systems management, strategic management, or operations management and how those theories might fit with/in a writing program. A few of the essays come close, and the Diane Kelly-Riley et al. essay touches on some ideas from organizational and network theory, but the book would have benefited from a look at the highly developed theories that scholars in business schools are working on. These theories, which touch on issues of marketing, management, administration, personnel, economics, and budgeting, can be very helpful to the WPA—especially the WPA who has to deal with those outside of her department, division, or school. The argument from strategic planning theory, for instance, that a good administrator
needs to understand “the way in which a[n organization] allocates people and resources to organizational tasks” (Hill & Jones 223), with special attention to the distribution of decision-making authority, would be right at home in many of the essays in this collection.

Be that as it may, this is an incredibly valuable book. Current and future program administrators will benefit greatly from having it on their bookshelves or as required reading in their graduate seminars in program administration. Once again Rose and Weiser have done the WPA community a great service.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Mary Lamb, Georgia State University

English academics often blame television and new media for students’ literacy difficulties; indeed, composition studies itself has been seen—both from within and from without—as a way to offset the detrimental effect of television by offering print literacy and the incumbent critical thinking and analysis as a “social inoculation” against a mass media mentality (31). However, a growing body of scholarship on the rhetoric of new media offers a fertile field for exploring the complex relationship we all have with electronic media. Most notably, Kathleen Welch’s Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism, and a New Literacy (1999) addresses both computers and television. Drawing on classical rhetorical theory,