

REVIEW

***Discord & Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator.* Eds. Sharon James McGee and Carolyn Handa. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005. 222 pages.**

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According to Sharon James McGee and Carolyn Handa, the editors of *Discord & Direction: The Postmodern Writing Program Administrator*, postmodernism bears on writing program administration in two ways. First, it helps set the scene in which such work takes place: “the cultural and intellectual legacies of postmodernism affect the world of WPAs daily as they work to direct their composition programs and tackle the unending numbers of problems that invariably arise” (2). Second, it provides a method of analysis, “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). The essays in the collection, then, are intended to serve as examples of one or both of these claims. Toward that end, McGee and Handa use Ihab Hassan’s notion of postmodernism, specifically his list of postmodern characteristics, because, they claim, it “aptly characterizes the world in which WPAs must function everyday (*sic*)” (2).

Hassan’s schematic is insufficiently rigorous to bind these essays in a substantial way. However, the range of issues WPAs face, and which this collection covers, is known well enough by people in the field that a strong organizing principle is not really necessary. What this book offers, then, is a group of thought-provoking essays that anyone interested in writing program administration will benefit from having read.

Given space constraints, were equal time devoted to each chapter of *Discord & Direction*, the result would be little more than

a series of annotations. So I will highlight instead the book's two most notable chapters. Every contribution in *Discord & Direction* offers something of scholarly interest and/or practical use. But the two on which I focus address, respectively, the cultural functions and psycho-ideological underpinnings of the WPA enterprise in particular and composition instruction in general.

Jeanne Gunner's "Cold Pastoral: The Moral Order of an Idealized Form" might be the single most significant contribution to this volume. It challenges what might be the core administrative piety of WPA discourse: the idea that to work tactically (or, as Gunner puts it, to take "pragmatic approaches") within given institutional constraints is, at bottom, the right thing to do. Gunner is "unwilling to celebrate" the minor gains made through such means "without also recognizing their insufficiency and typical inability to produce systemic change" (30). Likewise, she sees little in this approach that can address "the powerful cultural forces we must challenge for significant change to be possible" (30). Furthermore, she regards the writing program itself as a social genre that is "conservative and inherently hostile to systemic change," comparing its cultural function to that of the literary pastoral, highlighting the tendency of both to recall "a mythically traditional moral order" (30, 33). This "Arcadian landscape" to which writing programs and the pastoral refer acts as a brake on anything but incremental change: "Like the pastoral, the writing program points to an idealized social realm that validates not the tension of competing linguistic and cultural communities but a golden age of past and potential linguistic purity, where language and culture were and will once again be natural and simple, in a seamlessly pristine relationship" (33).

In part, Gunner's claims about the function of writing programs and, by implication, the WPA position echo those of Marc Bousquet, who in 2002 raised some WPA hackles by subjecting this piety to a similar ideological critique. But one key difference between Gunner's and Bousquet's claims is that Gunner's are made from within, and after years of experience,

thus making any out-of-hand dismissals implausible, though hackles might be raised.

Another difference between Gunner's and Bousquet's arguments is that, ultimately, she sees systemic change as something that is realistically imagined as coming from within. For example, Gunner identifies Directed Self Placement (DSP) as a change-from-within that offers a "major subversion of conventional placement practice," in turn creating a change that "empowers students, at least potentially, to avoid a class- and race-based gatekeeping system" (35). Such efforts are attempts to "undermine the writing program's ideological functions," which, again, are conservative and "repressive" (38). Gunner believes that "if we can help deconstruct common program practices that form the elements of writing programs generically, we can undertake program changes that reintroduce difference and tension as dialectical elements" (38).

Of course, the idea of "reintroducing" elements suggests that here too is an "idealized form" being offered as a way to establish order. Perhaps it is a question of which idealized form one prefers. In any event, as far as I can tell, within WPA discourse currently too little critical work is being done that analyzes the reproductive functions of writing programs as well as the managerial nature of writing program administration. It sometimes seems as if we have allowed our abiding faith in *practicality* (I hesitate to cast aspersions on *pragmatism* as such) to excuse us from the hard, perhaps unsettling work of critique to which composition studies has submitted other aspects of its disciplinary domain. Through its provocative pastoral analogy, Gunner's essay provides an opening through which to begin doing so.

Fred Kemp's "Computers, Innovation, and Resistance in First-Year Composition Programs" offers a different but no less significant challenge. In it, Kemp describes how the writing program at Texas Tech University (TTU) "implemented a series of instructional and administrative changes that could well prove to be the closest thing to a genuine paradigm shift in composition

at the university level in over a hundred years" (107). Immodesty notwithstanding, he might be right.

The program Kemp describes significantly reorganizes, redistributes, and systematizes four of the traditional components of first year writing instruction: students' texts, peer reviews, instructor comments, and evaluations. A homegrown "database-driven Web software" program called ICON (Interactive Composition Online) divides the labor of large-scale writing instruction in new and, to some, alarming ways (107).

Kemp describes the effect and intent of this program: "In its rawest form," he writes, "the system separates classroom instruction and draft commentary" (107). Specifically, the work of commenting upon and evaluating students' texts is done anonymously by people other than the classroom instructor. Kemp offers the following rationale: "We are making the clear assumption that writing instruction is improved when the principal effort for the student is shifted significantly from listening and discussing in a classroom to writing itself and receiving peer and professional commentary" (109). Consequently, he writes, "We are moving the center of gravity of teaching from what happens between teacher and students in a classroom to what happens between teacher and students in a piece of writing" (109).

Where Gunner's essay questions a basic administrative piety, Kemp's challenges "a mostly unstated and unexamined attitude that permeates the principal motivation of those who become English teachers" (108). This is the idea that the relationship between teacher and student is somehow sanctified, that something vital but unquantifiable happens in their interactions over the course of a semester, especially when the subject matter is the student's writing. Kemp claims that teachers' resistance to ICON resulted from this "psychology of loss," a belief that despite the program's logical soundness (to which, according to Kemp, even those in resistance agreed), something was missing.

The full range of ICON's implications—for writing program administration, composition studies, and the teaching of writing in

general—have yet to be determined. While satisfied thus far with its effectiveness at TTU, Kemp reminds us that “all solutions are local,” and that “it is not the computer networks and software that succeed but the local mix of personalities and resources” (122). Still, he is willing to assert that WPAs should “shift the principal instructional responsibility from the individual teacher to the *system* of instruction we employ” (121). This is the essay’s most controversial claim. It is one that, to my mind, merits sustained theoretical, empirical, and practical inquiry not only into its effectiveness and local applicability but also (and perhaps more importantly) to its philosophical implications. The prospect of sustained inquiry into new configurations of the teacher-student relationship is genuinely exciting and suggests that the claim of a potential paradigm shift is not far off the mark.

Moreover, the very idea of a systemic approach echoes previous, though less technologically-oriented, attempts to re-imagine the relationship between teacher, student, and institution. Consider, as only one example, Roger Garrison’s attempts in the 1970s to reorganize classroom time to better focus on student writing. That most composition classes meet in a designated physical space for 150 minutes each week has probably driven the bulk of curricular and pedagogical experimentation to date. That such an “administrative convenience” (to borrow Garrison’s phrase) should have played such a central role in our work is remarkable. But, as Kemp’s essay makes clear, it is no longer unavoidable. To the extent, then, that ICON loosens constraints under which writing instruction has labored, the challenges and possibilities it presents should be taken seriously.

Postmodernism may no longer be a term capable of conceptual heavy lifting, but that is not to say that the issues currently facing writing programs and their administrators are entirely familiar. Nor does it mean that they are amenable to equally familiar methods of analysis and understanding. To varying degrees, the essays collected in *Discord & Direction* acknowledge these two claims and thus offer perspectives suited to the exigencies of the present moment. Therein lies the book’s

contribution, not only to the growing body of WPA scholarship but also to that of composition studies in general.