A Review of *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context*

Mary Jo Reiff, Anis Bawarshi, Michelle Ballif, and Christian Weisser, 2015. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, [ISBN 978-1-60235-512-5. 406 pages, including index. (hardcover).]

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In their edited collection, Mary Jo Reiff, Anis Bawarshi, Michelle Ballif, and Christian Weisser address the "ecological" nature of writing programs, arguing that because writing programs "emerge through complex networks of interrelations, depend upon adaptation, fluidity, and the constant motion of diverse rhetorics and discourses," we gain from understanding them as inherently "ecological" (or through theories of ecology) (p. 4). The editorial focus on "ecologies" sets this collection up to profile unique programs, as they have functioned within and around socially constructed systems, evolved over time, and negotiated pedagogical trends in the field of writing studies. The 15 writing program profiles included, each originally published in *Composition Forum,* are organized into sections that reflect four dominant "ecological" characteristics—interconnectedness, fluctuation, complexity, and emergence. Each of these sections begins with a treatment of a specific ecological trait, offering a short introduction to the trait, a discussion of how the trait may help us to understand the dynamic realities of writing program organization, and highlighting the unique contributions to the field each profile has made.

In promoting the ecological nature of writing programs, the authors intend to address an important gap in the field's literature:

> [F]ew scholarly works have connected this notion of the ecology of writing with the often more pragmatic work of writing programs and writing program administration…. We talk about the complexity of writing in our scholarly journals, we postulate theories of writing as ecological, complex, dynamic, and interrelational, and yet when it comes to the programs we help to create and maintain in our universities and other sites of practice, we have difficulty seeing them in the same ecological light…. Our purpose [of this text] is to highlight a few of the particular ways in which writing programs are ecological. (pp. 4-5)

With these ideals in mind, this collection extends the field's conversation about the multifaceted and situated nature of writing program work, demonstrating how others may also take into account the ways that material and discursive conditions may constrain and challenge programs on the ground, how the leaders of the programs profiled have worked to overcome internal and external challenges, and how

various on-the-ground challenges have impacted curriculum, students, and faculty. Overall, *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* not only exemplifies ecologies in action, but also brings to light the mutually constitutive relations central to effective program development.

The text consists of five parts and 15 chapters—a chapter for each writing program profiled. Part I, "The contested ecologies of FYC programs: Negotiating between stability and change," reveals how first-year writing programs participate in the larger complexities of institutional systems and how they respond to and negotiate challenges related to student retention and the revision of curricular demands, demonstrating the ecological characteristics of interconnectedness, fluctuation, and emergence. Part II, "Remapping interdisciplinary ecologies: WAC and WID programs," focuses on efforts to integrate writing instruction across the curriculum and in the disciplines at the University of Georgia, Binghamton University, and Dartmouth College, with the chapters stressing the ecological attribute of interconnectedness. Part III, "Claiming disciplinary locations: The undergraduate major in rhetoric and composition," speaks to the institutional effects of forming and sustaining an undergraduate writing major at Texas A&M, Oakland University, and University of Minnesota, Duluth, highlighting the ecological elements of emergence, interconnectedness, and fluctuation. Part IV, "Situating assessment within institutional ecologies," focuses on California State University, Fresno and Murray State University and their attempts to create assessment opportunities that respond to the exigencies of institutional and student needs. Finally, Part V, "Third spaces: Creating liminal ecologies," focuses on how West Virginia University, University of New Mexico, and Elon University worked to establish cross-curricular spaces where students could further learn about strategies for bettering their writing and where students could gain additional writing practice.

Chapter three, "Taking the high road: Teaching for transfer in an FYC program," written by Fishman and Reiff, is one chapter within the collection that may be of special interest to WAC and/or WID faculty and program leaders. It illustrates how a program emerges as a simultaneous negotiation of emergent literature in the field and local realities. Program leaders at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville "worked to build a program based on the fluid transfer of rhetorical knowledge and the development of multiple methods of inquiry" (p. 21). Fishman and Reiff describe their revision of "English 102 (ENG 102): From literature to inquiry" to support high road transfer, a process of acquiring analytic knowledge and skills in one context, and being mindfully aware of how those knowledge and skills may be applied in different contexts. Course revisions concentrated on "identifying various expert communities; recognizing each community's primary research resources, questions, and strategies; and joining in expert conversations as reviewers, participant-observers, and contributors" (p. 79). Preliminary ENG 102 assessment data suggests that the teaching of rhetorical knowledge aided in high road transfer, albeit slowly and over time, a finding that has implications for the teaching of writing in other contexts. In fact, Fishman and Reiff suggest that, when teachers across contexts and disciplines teach with explicit attention to rhetorical knowledge and ask students to reflect upon such knowledge to aid in metacognitive awareness, high road transfer is more likely to occur, thereby helping students to succeed in other contexts.

In addition to chapter three in the collection, for those readers interested in WPA, WAC, and/or WID work, and/or preparing students to become writing teachers, Kinney and Murray-Costello's "Back to the future: First-year writing in the Binghamton University Writing Initiative, State University of New York" may be useful, as it, too, illustrates the ecological trait of emergence. The authors describe how they sought to transform and reimagine their first-year writing sequence at Binghamton so that it fostered "a cohesive learning community that helps students develop an understanding of how writing conventions *vary according to context* [emphasis in original]" (p. 123). In their profile, Kinney and Murray-Costello reveal the history behind the establishment of first-year writing at Binghamton, a program that seeks to "complement discipline-specific and writing-to-learn courses while also providing first-year students a common experience in an comprehensive introduction to college writing" (p. 142). As the authors unpack that history, near the end of their profile, Kinney and Murray-Costello provide three suggestions for how to help writing teachers support a common WAC curriculum. First, the authors suggest that before graduate

assistants teach writing, they should enroll in a teaching practicum course that would equip them with the knowledge and skills for how to teach writing with a WAC focus. Second, the authors agree on the importance of having new writing instructors participate in a pre-semester teaching orientation to introduce attendees to WAC-focused learning objectives, assignments, and evaluation methods. Finally, Kinney and Murray-Costello suggest the importance of instructors becoming members of "Teaching Circles," where members gather weekly in small groups to gain outside teaching support from other fellow writing instructors (p. 154). These suggestions, coupled with the knowledge revealed in Kinney and Murray-Costello's profile about how to push back against institutional and budgetary constraints, may be most helpful for those who are (or are aspiring to become) WPAs, WAC and/or WID coordinators, or for those seeking to prepare future writing teachers.

As they model the theoretical framework of ecology in action, the profiles in *Ecologies of Writing Programs* provide those interested in WPA, WAC, and/or WID work with a range of knowledge about the issues, responsibilities, and opportunities attached to such work in writing programs. Readers will find models and strategies for navigating critical and threatening situations, essential and critical discussions surrounding the working conditions of WPAs, and accounts of the institutional and material conflicts that can affect collaborative relationships within colleges and universities. Finally, for those familiar with the extent and type of work that WPAs undertake, this collection significantly highlights the exigency for colleges and universities to refigure the evaluation of writing program administration as intellectual work so that more program administrators can be awarded promotion and tenure for their contribution to their programs and to the field. Unequivocally, *Ecologies of Writing Programs: Program Profiles in Context* is a text that every WPA, WAC, and/or WID coordinator will want on her or his bookshelf for the models, strategies, and encouraging words it offers.

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