The Activist WPA in Action: A Profile of the First-Year Writing Program at Eastern Michigan University

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Abstract: This writing program profile examines the work of Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner and the ways in which she has redefined writing and the place of first-year writing at her university. The profile highlights Adler-Kassner's development of an "open systems" curriculum and her use of assessment for program visibility and continuous program improvement.

Introduction

Writing Program Administrators, Susan McLeod has advocated, should adopt the role of "change agents" (18), and it is this theme that Linda Adler-Kassner embraces in her recent book, *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writers and Writing*, by arguing that we must change the stories we tell about what writing is and what our writing programs do. But what does a writing program look like that has changed its stories? How has it reframed what writing is and enacted this different vision in its curriculum and program structure? This profile of Adler-Kassner's own writing program presents an opportunity to take a more detailed look at how she has brought into practice some of her story-changing work. Two larger themes emerge from this examination: first, the ways in which the First-Year Writing Program at Eastern Michigan University (FYWP @ EMU) has worked to redefine writing and the work of first-year writing, positioning its role within the heart of the intellectual mission of the University; and second, Adler-Kassner's development of an "open systems" curriculum that balances structure and innovation.

Writing Program profiles are typically written by the program's administrator, so before proceeding I should explain my relationship to the FYWP @ EMU and my motivations in writing this profile. I currently teach writing at San Antonio College in San Antonio, Texas where I am entering my twentieth year of teaching community college English. I am also a Ph.D. Candidate in the Technical Communication and Rhetoric program at Texas Tech University, and this profile began as a research study of writing programs at various universities. As I began to investigate the FYWP @ EMU, I quickly began to see how Adler-Kassner's work and her program aligned with my own values and thoughts on the possibilities for writing programs. Dr. Adler-Kassner has been generous in her support of this investigation by providing two interviews, answers to numerous email questions, and even a review of this manuscript, to ensure a fair representation of her program.

As an outsider to the program, my perspectives during this exploration have been shaped by contrast. My teaching context is quite different from that at Eastern Michigan University. I teach within a two-course traditional Freshman Composition I and II sequence where the first semester is based on non-fiction texts and the second semester is literature-based. We also have a two course Developmental English sequence for remediation. Although my department has a common set of learning objectives, most faculty can do what they like within the broad parameter of these learning objectives and the number of essays required. Faculty rarely work together on curriculum or share strategies for how to teach more effectively. As Jeffrey Klausman described of his own community college English Department, we have a "collection of writing classes, not a program" (239). Our department is ripe for change, but what kind of change? My inquiry into the FYWP @ EMU may provide a model for the kinds of directions my department (and other English departments and programs like my own) might pursue.

But I hope that this writing program profile also offers some navigation aids for teachers and program administrators in various contexts, who are addressing the twin challenges of our current situation in education. The first challenge is an old one for writing instruction—the dynamic between defining writing as the mastery of surface correctness and proficiency with narrow forms of writing or seeing writing and literacy defined more by what Linda Flower calls "literate action": "literate action is a socially situated *problem-solving process* shaped not only by available language, practices, partners, and texts, but by the ways people interpret the rhetorical situation they find themselves in, the goals they set, and the strategies they control" (2). Although this feud is not new between what we might broadly call current-traditional and more rhetorical and "post-process" views of language and teaching practices, it has gained

increased significance in the face of the second challenge to education—No Child Left Behind, the fall-out from the Spellings Report, and the prevailing view that our education system (including higher education) is not preparing the workforce of the 21st century. Despite having a new administration in Washington, we live increasingly in an age of "accountability" and "student success." Adler-Kassner's book, *The Activist WPA,* represents a field guide for addressing these challenging times. Her book identifies three questions central to what writing teachers and programs do, and stresses the significance of how these questions are framed and the stories about writing that our answers tell:

- How should students' literacies be defined when they come into composition classes?
- What literacies should composition classes develop, how, and for what purpose?
- How should the development of students' literacies be assessed at the end of these classes? (14)

The danger is that when we don't have productive answers to these questions ourselves, others with competing answers may fill this void, affecting our budgets, staffing, and control of our curriculum. Chris Anson, in his recent critique of what has occurred in our schools as a result of No Child Left Behind and standardized writing tests, points to what happens when answers to these questions are based upon a narrow view of writing: "This belief in the generalizablility of simplistic textual forms across contexts is wrongheaded. It deceives teachers, parents, educational administrators, and the general public into endorsing an unprincipled method of assessing students' writing ability that drives an equally unprincipled pedagogy" (114). Although standardized testing and a closed curriculum may seem remote possibilities for higher education, their threat is real—particularly for English departments like my own that have no coherence to their curriculum or means of demonstrating what they are doing through valid assessment. For public school teachers enduring a scripted curriculum, constant benchmarking, and high stakes assessments, this threat is their constant nightmare. What this program profile, then, will display is one writing program in one context that has devised good answers to these three central questions, and I hope what I share may support other teachers and writing program administrators in their story-changing work.

General Writing Program Information and Background

Eastern Michigan University is a comprehensive University with approximately 26,000 students. It is the largest producer of educators in the country and one of the universities of choice for students wishing to enter the teaching profession. EMU, relative to other local universities, is less expensive and draws a large commuter population. Due to problems at the state-level, EMU has been under budget stress in recent years, resulting in staffing tension on the First-Year Writing Program. The FYWP remains within the English Department, rather than in its own separate department, due in part to the unique set up of the EMU English Department which offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate writing programs (Written Communication—Technical and Professional, Journalism, Public Relations, Creative Writing, English Education, Comp/Rhet) and has 14 writing faculty members. This strong presence of other writing programs and writing faculty helps this first-year writing program reside comfortably within the English Department.

The FYWP can generally be described as a mature writing program that illustrates excellent principles and practices in the field of Writing Program Administration. The current WPA, Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner, began her administration of the program in 2000, and she reports the two previous WPAs were rhetoric/composition professionals, so the program has a long history of responsible delivery of composition following accepted practices in the field.

Program Facts

Courses:
English 120 (Elective)
English 121 (Required of all Freshmen)
Number of Students:
Approximately 90% of all Freshmen take ENGL 121 (capped at 25 students/section)
Sections:
170 sections/year, approx. 4000 students/yr.
Faculty and Staff:
Director: Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner
Assist. Director: Dr. John Dunn
14 full-time lecturers

20-25 part-time adjuncts
18 graduate student assistants
Teaching load:
Director: 1*-2 (*This load includes the summer practicum for new writing teachers)
Assist. Director: 2-2
(Normal load for tenure-track faculty: 3-3)
Lecturers: 4-4

Rather than a two-course sequence, the First-Year Writing Program has only one required composition class, ENGL 121. The other course, ENGL 120, is an elective class; EMU offers no Developmental or Basic Writing classes. Students receive credit toward graduation for the elective class, which is designed as a preparatory course for ENGL 121. The nature of these two courses (one elective, one required, and described in more detail below) was in place when Adler-Kassner arrived in 2000.

Framing a Writing Program

What follows will be a description of key ways in which the FYWP @ EMU has rhetorically and structurally framed its story-changing work. Adler-Kassner discusses the significance of frames in the beginning of *The Activist WPA*, pointing to the work of Stephen Reese for a good definition of framing:

> Framing is concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understand [sic] the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources. . . . Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. (qtd. in Adler-Kassner 12)

I purposefully have played on the double-meaning of the word "frame" to highlight the important ways Adler-Kassner has defined this writing program through its language and through important structures that bound the program. The key areas of reframing, described below, each work to redefine what writing is and what the First-Year Writing course is meant to accomplish in relation to these definitions.

First-Year Writing—NOT Freshman Composition

Not long after Adler-Kassner arrived as WPA, the name of the program was shifted to "First-Year Writing Program." Although the catalogue description of the program's two courses remains "Composition I" and "Composition II," the new name for the writing program allowed a new branding for the changes Adler-Kassner instituted in the program after she arrived. This branding, I believe, is significant.

Freshman Composition, as Robert Connors has pointed out, consolidated its basic tenets by 1910 and has remained a little-changed, coherent tradition since that time. The core features of this paradigmatic frame are familiar to us all:

> They include the four modes of discourse (narration, description, exposition, and argument), the methods of exposition (process analysis, definition, comparison/contrast, classification, and so on), the three levels of discourse (diction, sentence, and paragraph), the "narrow-select-develop-outline" invention structure, the conception of the organic paragraph, the rhetorical and grammatical sentence type, and the static abstractions of Unity, Coherence, and Emphasis. (12)

Although the emergence of "Rhetoric and Composition" in the 1960s has largely been founded on a resistance to this tradition, the name "Freshman Composition" still evokes the frame in the minds of students, administrators, and the public that this course is a skills course, focusing on correctness in the mechanics and conventions of writing.

However, the term "First-Year Writing" expresses the more expansive views of writing Adler-Kassner was trying to promote with her curriculum changes. These include a broader conception of genres available for a writing course, the significance of inquiry, and the representation of writing as an intellectual practice rather than a mere skill. This shift in name from "Freshman Composition" to "First-Year Writing" mirrors the shift we've seen in the name of some graduate programs from "Rhetoric and Composition" to "Writing Studies" (or "Rhetoric and Writing Studies") and calls such as those made by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle to change the name of Freshman Composition to "Introduction to Writing Studies."

Outcomes as Framing Statement

The most significant framing device for the FYWP @ EMU is its Outcomes Statement. Currently, the FYWP is revising its Outcomes to better reflect the results of its 2004-2008 program assessments.{1} Although my profile is based primarily on the current and out-going Outcomes, Adler-Kassner describes the new Outcomes as providing richer, more-contextually meaningful objectives rather than anything that is a major departure from what they have been doing. The FYW Program's current Outcomes for English 120 and 121 modify and build on the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. Table 1 plots out the two different outcomes:

WPA Outcomes	Current FYWP @ EMU Outcomes
Rhetorical Knowledge	Rhetorical Awareness
Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing	Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
Processes	Processes
Knowledge of Conventions	Knowledge of Conventions
Composing in Electronic Environments	Use of Technology

Table 1: Comparison of WPA and FYWP @ EMU outcomes

These outcomes represent the FYWP's continued efforts to find a more locally-significant way to fulfill its mission of teaching effective communication and academic inquiry. Despite the changes proposed in the FYWP's outcomes, my discussion examining the philosophy behind the program as revealed in its current general outcomes statement should capture the essential qualities of the program:

> **Outcomes for ENGL 120 and 121 at Eastern Michigan University**
>
> ENGL 120 and 121 are inquiry-based writing courses. In them, students should use writing and reading (primarily from non-fiction texts) to investigate issues that are significant for their development as writers and readers in an academic context. Through this work, students will develop habits of mind that are important for writers: assessing audience expectations; reading critically; engaging with others' ideas in analytic and research-based writing; developing control over surface features of writing; and discovering, cultivating, and being reflective about their writing processes. This development takes place recursively – that is, students master these strategies by practicing with them repeatedly through their work in these two courses and others at EMU. This work begins in ENGL 120 and continues through ENGL 121, by the end of which successful students will have achieved these outcomes. ("Outcomes")

Inquiry-based Writing

The first significant frame used in the outcomes statement is the idea of writing as inquiry. Framing writing as "inquiry-based" defines writing as an activity in which knowledge and learning develop in the act of writing. The term "inquiry" in a common sense way folds within it significant disciplinary notions of rhetorical invention and the belief that writing is epistemic. Placing inquiry as a defining frame characterizing first-year writing, significantly, puts the course at the heart of the intellectual mission of the university—the pursuit and creation of knowledge. Writing is conceived in the FYWP as a way of thinking and "grappling" with ideas. As Adler-Kassner says, "We love the word 'grappling' in our program and promoting thinking and learning as a process of grappling" ("Interview"). By promoting the frame of inquiry-based writing, the program defines itself in other terms than expression, writing process, or the teaching of formal or textual conventions. English 121 as a research-based course is particularly designed to promote this kind of "grappling" in students and help them learn strategies for research and writing crucial to work they will pursue throughout their university experience. As we will see in the section on Presence and Positioning within the University, Adler-Kassner has used this inquiry frame for writing to place the work of first-year writing within the University's General Education Requirements and Learning Outcomes.

Strategies—NOT skills

The outcomes statement above uses the term "strategies," but the phrase "habits of mind" works as a synonym. The program seeks to promote the development of strategies, not skills. The reframing from skills to strategies is significant. The frame of skills-acquisition promotes the idea that writing proficiency is about deficit reduction and what Linda Flower in *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning* called "textual literacy"—the formal, logical, and grammatical features of an essay. Within this frame, these skills are often seen as objects one possesses and can carry to any writing context (a generalizable proficiency). It leads to the mistaken notion that students should learn in first-year writing everything they need to know to write well.

Framing the goal of writing instruction as the learning of strategies, instead, promotes the idea that the strategies involved in the act of writing are things that need constant refinement and retooling for different tasks and contexts. Writing itself is not just a skill; instead, writing is framed as a practice that involves using multiple skills strategically. Referring again to Flower's notions of literacy, the strategies frame promotes the development of "literate acts": "a literate act or practice . . . is performed as part of a rhetorical, social, and cultural situation. . . . Literacy is a set of actions and transactions in which people use reading and writing for personal and social purposes" (20). Students in the FYWP, then, begin a process of learning writing strategies to perform "literate acts," and they will continue to develop these strategies through their academic and professional career.

The seven "interlinking core strategies" of the current curriculum include:

- Critical Reading
- Critical Writing/Representation
- Critical Research
- Critical Analysis
- Revision
- Reflection
- Work with Conventions

These two frames—writing as inquiry and the teaching of writing as the learning of strategies—constitute the two most significant ways Adler-Kassner has changed the story of what writing is and what her program seeks to accomplish through its pedagogy. Everything else about the FYWP @ EMU has developed in alignment with these two principles.

Recursive Development and Portfolios

An important structural frame for the FYWP is the notion of recursive development within the construct of a portfolio pedagogy. As we will see in the close examination of the curriculum, each course is designed around "interlinking core strategies," and each assignment is designed within a continuum for developing these strategies. Thus, the curriculum is built upon a recursive sequence. This notion of recursive development is promoted by labeling the work students do as "stages" rather than "essays" or "assignment." The four major projects in ENGL 120, for instance, are labeled as Stage 1, Stage 2, Stage 3, and Stage 4 rather than "Essay 1" or "Assignment #1."

Table 2 contains the titles for these Stages. Note the inclusion of the word "curiosities" as a way of framing the activity as inquiry, as well as the progressive development apparent in the titles:

Engl 120 Titles of Major Assignments	Engl 121 Titles of Major Assignments
Stage I: Introduction to Exploring Curiosities	Stage I: Exploring Curiosities
Stage II: Introduction to Developing Curiosities	Stage II: Developing Curiosities
Stage III: Introduction to Investigating Curiosities	Stage III: Investigating Curiosities
Stage IV: Introduction to Representing What You Have Learned	Stage IV: Representing What You Have Learned

Table 2: Comparsion of major assignments in Engl 120 and Engl 121

All courses also result in end-of-course Portfolios where students select two essays and revise them. These Portfolios comprise 45-50% of the entire course grade. However, during the course, the major writing pieces do not receive grades; they receive lots of feedback from peers and the instructor, but not a grade. Essay Packets, which

contain drafts and other work related to a single essay cycle, receive full/half/no credit grades, and this essay packet grade can be 15-25% of a student's grade.{2} Feedback, then, can focus on being "formative" rather than "summative," and students have extensive opportunities to revise their writing throughout the course. Structuring the course around the portfolio (without grades in the process of getting to the portfolio) provides the supportive framework for students to develop their writing strategies.

"The words they carry"—The prominence of reflection

One significant strategy the FYWP @ EMU promotes within its structural framework is reflection. In discussing what students should take away from the curriculum in ENGL 121, Adler-Kassner said that it's the strategies they learn for investigating and writing on topics that matter most, rather than any specific knowledge they have learned about their topic. Reflection is interwoven throughout the curriculum to help students construct a meta-awareness of these strategies that they can transfer to other contexts. Talking about reflection, Adler-Kassner said, "...if you don't reflect on what you are doing, you aren't going to know what you are doing and you aren't going to be able to carry it to those other contexts" ("Personal Interview").

Key places for reflection include:

Quick writes in-class such as entrance or exit tickets
—these are short writing prompts that typically ask students to pull together their understanding of what they have done or learned in the previous or current class.
Reflective letters to accompany submission packets for essays
—These are texts addressed to the reader (teacher and/or peer) that describe the process of writing the essay, including problems and choices made along the way. In addition, they typically involve self-assessment of the text and their experience engaging with the writing strategies being worked on in that assignment.
Reflection letter with the final portfolio
—This document that accompanies the final portfolio establishes the context for faculty to assess the portfolio. Students discuss what they have learned and connect it to their experience in the class and the texts included within the portfolio that demonstrate this learning.

Reflection forms an important structural frame for the program because reflection puts students in a position of distance from which they can gain perspective on their writing practice and invent themselves as writers.

Celebration of Student Writing

Another significant structural frame for the FYWP @ EMU is the "Celebration of Student Writing." This public event is the culmination of ENGL 121 where students display the results from their research projects. The Celebration is held in the EMU Student Center Grand Ballroom and has the feel of a science fair, with students at tables displaying their work and people milling around talking to the students about what they've done. The entire campus community as well as local high schools are invited to view these displays. No one model exists for the display of research projects, and students get very creative in ways they choose to showcase their work. The Celebration creates a public, campus event where "the work" of First-Year Writing can be displayed and talked about outside of the English Department. Just as the portfolio creates a different structure for the writing in a class by withholding summative evaluation until the end, so the Celebration of Writing creates a venue for students to experience the important completion of any inquiry and the writing process—publication and making your results public. This video posted on YouTube entitled "Celebration of Student Writing 2.0 2007" provides an excellent demonstration of what this event is like. In addition, more pictures and videos of the Celebration of Student Writing are available here.

Framing the Writing Courses

What follows will be an overview of the writing courses offered in the FYWP @ EMU, highlighting what I believe are the most interesting features of the curriculum and their story-changing aspects. I will begin with a description of the balance between structure and freedom that Adler-Kassner strives for as a writing program administrator. Then I will describe the FYWP's two classes in more detail, accenting how the courses are guided by the important frames discussed in the outcomes statement.

The "Big Ball Park" and Collaboration: Open System (rather then Closed System)

Adler-Kassner uses the metaphor of "the big ball park" to describe the parameters and guidelines for the First-Year Writing Program. This metaphor expresses the restrictions on the curriculum, as well as the openness that is possible within these boundaries. To elaborate on the meaning of this metaphor as it relates to the FYWP @ EMU, I will explore definitions of open and closed systems offered by Chris Anson and Clay Spinuzzi.

Although Spinuzzi's scholarship refers to how software and documents operate within the workplace, I believe we can translate his ideas to the classroom and writing program as "system." As Spinuzzi describes, open systems create a productive balance between structure and innovation, and he uses the analogy of a starter reef to describe an open system: "An open system is a centrally designed artifact, of course, but it exists as a nexus for workers' innovations, just as an artificial reef functions as a nexus for a developing underwater ecology" (205). Closed systems, as Spinuzzi points out, rigidly try to control work such that innovation is "centrally controlled and fine tuned" (202). The goal of the closed system is to "regulate workers' activities" (204). Anson describes a closed system in this way: "a closed system is one in which the activities admit little variety, are habituated over long periods of time, and are learned through repeated practice" (115). Anson's overall point in his article "Closed Systems and Standardized Writing Tests" is that standardized testing has transformed writing instruction in schools into a closed system with the detrimental effect that "the lack of experience [students are getting] in writing in those larger circles would doom them to adaptive failure" (115). Spinuzzi's work shows how such a closed system inhibits work since the closed system is inflexible and does not adapt to complex contingencies. As a result, workers often work around or subvert the closed system. The open system, in contrast, provides the ability for workers within the system to modify it and add to it. Spinuzzi goes on to state: "an open system can consist of an officially designed core that provides the openings for worker's contributions. The point is not to rescue workers with a better designed system, but to provide the base for workers to build on" (204). Thus, Spinuzzi uses the analogy of systems as ecologies and compares an open system to an artificial starter reef.

As we look at the FYWP at EMU, we can identify a number of features of an "open system." What Adler-Kassner calls "the big ball park" is her metaphor for the "centrally designed artifacts" of the program—the course outcomes, the general course themes, the progression of strategies development through stages in the course, and the specific tasks within each "stage," such as long and short writing assignments or readings. Also, structuring the course around a final portfolio and assessing that portfolio with a common rubric provide productive bounds for the program. Within these broad parameters, instructors are given the freedom and support to be innovative with their own instruction and encouraged to share their assignments with the whole program.

I believe the principles that guide Adler-Kassner's leadership of the FYWP create this open system and collaborative practice. In her 2008 book *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, she describes the principles that guide her work as a WPA:

> a commitment to changing things for the better here and now through consensus-based, systematic, thoughtful processes that take into consideration the material contexts and concerns of all involved; a compulsion to be reflexive and self-questioning about this work so as to consider how all involved are taking into account those material conditions; and a constant commitment to ongoing, loud, sometimes messy dialogue among all participants in change-making work that ensures that everyone is heard and, hopefully, represented. (32-33)

She realizes that one person alone cannot create or maintain a writing program, and she persistently seeks to create a collaborative environment that harnesses the energies of all participants in the program to make it better. When Adler-Kassner and her colleague Heidi Estrem revamped the FYW curriculum after their arrival in 2000, they started with the outcomes and strategies, and then took these to the faculty and asked their ideas for how best to reach these goals. This openness and collaboration is both a philosophy and what might be called a culture for the FYW program. Faculty are encouraged to share innovative assignments, and these are made available to the entire program (this warehouse of pedagogy was housed in notebooks, then online in pdfs, and now in a wiki). The fact that the FYWP course materials are posted and available in a wiki speaks to the openness and collaboration implicit in this program.

ENGL 120

As we turn to look at the first of the FYWP's two courses, ENGL 120, we notice that it resembles a "Developmental"

or "Basic" writing class that might be found in remedial programs at other universities or colleges. However, the way the course is offered at EMU frames it very differently.

Adler-Kassner has written extensively on "Basic Writers," and her expertise and views on this population of writers shape the way this course is put together and presented. The first most significant characteristic of this class is that it is elective—students choose to be in this class rather than are placed there, and the credit for the class counts toward graduation. The program offers students a Guided Self-Assessment website for them to decide which class is appropriate for them to start in. The site includes information about both classes as well as a self-placement survey to help students decide. The survey has nine paired statements roughly describing weak and strong preparation for college-level work. Here are the first two paired statements:

#	Column 1	Column 2
1	Every year for the past four years, I have written and revised three or fewer essays of five or more pages.	Every year for the past four years, I have written and revised four or more essays of five or more pages.
2	I rarely write and revise for myself.	I often write and revise for myself.

Table 3: Sample of guided self-assessment website. ("How Do I Choose a Course")

At the end of the self-placement survey, students are told that if three or more of the statements in Column 1 fairly described them, they should take ENGL 120. Students, of course, have the freedom to choose whichever class they want. When asked if she had done any study to evaluate how well students chose on their own, Adler-Kassner said that they have not done this kind of elaborate study. Instead, they get at this question by asking students at the end of their writing class if they had placed themselves correctly. Most students reply that the course they chose was the right one for them.

Although the course description of ENGL 120 states that a goal of the course is to prepare students for ENGL 121 (a general education requirement), nowhere are students labeled as "remedial" or "basic" or "developmental." Adler-Kassner is quite sensitive to the negative effects of such labels on developing writers, and she is opposed to the type of curriculum that is typically delivered to these writers. This philosophy is expressed in one of the assumptions that underlie the program: "writing development should proceed from what students can do, and writing development should be positively articulated" ("Home"). She sees ENGL 120 as being like other first semester writing classes whose primary goal is to work on the basic tenets of college critical reading and writing.

The particular writing topics assigned in ENGL 120 reveal the inquiry-nature of the assignments. The theme of "Reading and Writing the College Experience" structures the course's assignments and activities. One example of a first essay assignment for ENGL120 is entitled "You as a Writer." Each assignment producing a Long Essay (LE) is called a "Stage" (hence, tying into the frame of recursive development). In addition to the more high stakes (LE) assignment, students write "low stakes" writing pieces called "Writing Explorations" (or WEs) and "Short Essays." A paragraph from LE 1 on "You as a Writer" describes the overall mission of this course:

> We're going to work a lot this semester on honing our abilities to analyze contexts and definitions of good writing, on analyzing what writing strategies we already have that can be used to produce that kind of writing, on developing new strategies to produce it, and on making decisions about whether we actually want to produce it (and why we might decide as we have). ("LE1 Common Assignment")

In addition to the stress on strategies evident in this mission statement, the course encourages students to look at writing outside the context of school as well as within it; thus, students explore a broader definition of writing than most first-year composition classes (which have a myopic focus on the academic essay). LE2 and LE3 focus on genres inside and outside of school, while LE4 is a reflection on the student's first semester at EMU. Each LE has multiple versions of the assignment (created by faculty who have taught the course and shared their work), and teachers can select and adapt these versions of the assignment as they wish (as long as they stay in the "big ball park"). See the "Curriculum guide and sample assignments for ENGL 120."

ENGL 121

Inquiry is the heart of ENGL 121, which is primarily a course on research writing and research strategies. Rather than

similar classes at other colleges and universities that focus on argument or literature and composition, EMU's course focuses on academic inquiry and writing from this research. The ENGL 121 General Education Course Rationalestates: "In English 121, EMU students develop the foundation for writing, research, and critical thinking strategies that they will use throughout their college careers and in the workplace." As the course that 90% of all freshmen must take, ENGL 121 has received the most attention in terms of curriculum development and assessment.

The overall theme for ENGL 121 is researching community. For example, many students choose "Researching the Public Experience: College as Community," which allows students to use their university context as the subject of their research. Students can also choose to research communities outside the university setting. Students write three or four Long Essays, and in the process of these essays produce 50-70 pages of draft work and 20-30 pages of polished, final-draft work. Students also complete a project for the "Celebration of Student Writing" that represents findings from their research. The knowledge gained on any particular subject, as Adler-Kassner mentioned earlier, is not as important as the strategies students learn in this course for researching and intellectual inquiry. As in the case of ENGL 120, Long Essays are not graded (but essay packets receive full/half/no credit), and students select and revise two of the Long Essays to include in an end-of-course Portfolio that gets a major course grade.

Faculty shape their course around one of three researched essay models: the Ethnographic Researched Essay, the Inquiry-Based Researched Essay, or the Multi-Genre Researched Essay. What follows will be a brief description of the three models for research available to students:

> **Ethnographic Researched Essay**
> In this research model, students choose a community to become a "participant-observer" within. They collect written and spoken documents, conduct interviews, make observations, and engage in research into their chosen community and the issues it faces. A key resource for this research model is the text Fieldworking by Elisabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Sunstein.
>
> **Inquiry-Based Researched Essay**
> The second model for research highlights the significance of inquiry in research—the genuine interest in finding out something about a subject. Students are also encouraged to see that "the shape of the essay should grow out of the development of that inquiry" ("English 121 Curriculum Guide"). In other words, what modes of inquiry students decide to use as well as the textual forms they choose to represent their research are determined by the pursuit of their inquiry. Bruce Ballinger's Curious Researcher is a principle resource for this research model.
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> **Multi-Genre Researched Essay**
> This model of research, as the ENGL 121 Curriculum guide states, "asks students to see, understand, interpret, and know a subject through multiple genres." Genres are used as "both a lens and a rhetorical tool." Students are thus encouraged to research their subject through multiple genres (such as text and video) and represent their thesis or theme through multiple genres as well, especially through New Media.

Some instructors will use two researched essays, starting students with an inquiry-based essay that gets extended into an ethnographic or multi-genre essay. In addition, in the pursuit of their research, students are encouraged to engage in multiple modes of inquiry. Rather than only engaging in textual research and rhetorical analysis (which can be the sole range of modes of inquiry for many first-year composition classes), students are encouraged to inquire into their research question through other methods such as interviews, field observations, surveys, and even experiments. In this way, freshmen are introduced to notions of methodology and methods that are often restricted to students in graduate classes. The encouragement to pursue various research models and modes of inquiry also allows students who may be pursuing particular disciplines to pick a research approach aligned with their future pursuits. Lastly, because students in this class are surrounded by other students engaged in many different ways of approaching research, they learn more about the many ways research can be conducted. A full description of each research model can be found in the ENGL 121 Curriculum Guide.

Assessment: Visibility and Responsibility

Assessment is a crucial, ongoing part of the FYW Program at EMU. In Adler-Kassner's view, without assessment how can a writing program represent what it does to others, and thus affect the discussions about writing on campus? Without assessment, how can a writing program see what it is doing well and see what it needs to improve upon? Assessment is most often framed by the terms "transparency" and "accountability," but she prefers using the terms "visibility" and "responsibility." Everyone in the program and university community—graduate students, adjuncts, lecturers, and professors—are engaged in assessment and encouraged to collaborate on how to interpret

and act upon the results of this assessment. Adler-Kassner believes that by involving so many stakeholders in participatory assessment and redesign of the curriculum, everyone feels they have a voice in the program. As she said, "you get huge buy in" ("Interview"). Adler-Kassner's approach to assessment was particularly influenced by Bob Broad's *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing* and Brian Huot's *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*.

Assessment in the FYWP generally falls within these three categories:

1. **Placement—Guided Self-Assessment:** as I discussed in the section describing the ENGL 120 curriculum, the FYWP @ EMU uses guided self-assessment for placing students. All Freshman are required to take ENGL 121, and only about 10% manage to place out of the class based on their transcripts, but students on their own can choose to take ENGL 120 before they take ENGL 121.
2. **Portfolio (Course) Assessment:** as mentioned earlier, both ENGL120 and ENGL121 have end-of-course portfolios. Students select two major essays to revise and include in the portfolio. In addition, students write a reflection letter to accompany the portfolio. The FYWP has developed a [common portfolio assessment rubric](#) that teachers follow as they grade these portfolios individually (portfolios are not graded together in a holistic grading setting). This rubric is tightly linked to the Program Outcomes with an evaluation criterion for each Outcome. The program also keeps an extensive number of past portfolios with grades, so teachers and students can think about the rubric and its standards illustrated by these writing examples. Since the FYWP has the portfolio as a common assessment instrument using the same criteria, these portfolios become a significant means for larger Program Assessment.
3. **Program Assessment:** Adler-Kassner believes in being pro-active with assessment, and it is in her program assessment that we can see some of her most interesting work as a "change agent." As she states, "I think that one thing that good WPAs do is look proactively for the horizon and think about how to position their program, their students, and their instructors in ways that are going to be helpful to students learning and instructors teaching" ("Personal Interview"). Since arriving at EMU in 2000, Adler-Kassner has led three major assessments of the FYWP.

The first assessment in 2002 surveyed students' confidence levels and provided evidence of the effectiveness of the new curriculum developed after Adler-Kassner's arrival in 2000. This assessment also sought to link students' work in ENGL 121 to their future studies in other subjects. The second, more involved assessment of ENGL 121 occurred from 2004-2006 and revolved around these two questions:

> If qualities of good writing are context-specific, what are the qualities of good writing in our local (EMU) context?

> To what extent are these qualities of good writing evident in the final portfolios of students in English 121 (EMU's required first-year writing course)? ("EMU First Year Writing Program 2004-2008 Assessment Summary")

To answer these questions, Adler-Kassner engaged multiple stakeholders within the university community to join focus groups to define criteria for "good writing" that were context-specific to EMU. The results of analyzing the transcripts of these focus groups were then taken back to those same groups as a way of gaining deeper perspectives on this analysis. Through this assessment development project, the FYWP involved the university community in a participatory role. By listening to these stakeholders and dialoging with them about what makes good writing and what students were doing in these first-year writing classes, Adler-Kassner engaged them in shaping these courses, and she was able to educate them more about the FYWP. The phases of this assessment were as follows:

- Hearing about Qualities of "Good Writing" in EMU Context
- Identifying Qualities of "Good Writing"
- Developing Assessment Instrument Reflecting Qualities of "Good Writing"
- Analyzing the extent to which qualities of "good writing" were evident in a sample of portfolios from ENGL 121 ("First Year Writing Program (FYWP) Assessment—2004-2008—ENGL 121")

The results of this assessment established a locally derived standard of "Good Writing" from which to measure and demonstrate the ways in which the FYWP was meeting (and not meeting) this standard. Significantly, since the entire program has a curriculum that is cohesive (or as Adler-Kassner says, within the same "ball park") and uses end-of-course portfolios in each class, it is possible for her to engage in a study that sought to answer the question of whether the "program" was helping students in its classes meet these standards of good writing. This kind of assessment would not have been possible without these program-wide structural features in place. The assessment identified eight criteria for "good writing" that these final portfolios from ENGL 121 "addressed or exceeded" and four

criteria where the FYWP might "dedicate further resources for pedagogical development" ("[EMU First-Year Writing Program ENGL 121 Assessment Preliminary Report](#)"). With these results, Adler-Kassner had a research-based answer to what her writing program was succeeding at and where it needed improvement. The results of this assessment study led to revisions to the ENGL 121 curriculum and began the process of revising the course Outcomes (that is near completion).

The third and most current phase of assessment demonstrates the continuous improvement to the key class—ENGL 121. In 2006-2007, the FYWP collaborated with librarians to improve the research components of this class by incorporating more information literacy outcomes, articulating the research process more clearly into the framework of the class, and developing strategies for supporting the research process. By enlisting librarians to assist in improving the research curriculum in the class, again, Adler-Kassner continues to reach out to other departments on the campus to improve the FYWP. The result of these efforts was a revised ENGL 121 curriculum that was pilot tested in a number of sections in Winter 2008. This third phase of assessment sought to learn how well this revised curriculum was working and revolved around these two questions:

1. What do students do with sources in their ENGL 121 classes?
2. To what extent do portfolios produced by students engaging in the revised curriculum demonstrate qualities of "good research?" [{3}](#) ("FYWP Follow-Up Assessment 2008")

In order to answer these questions, portfolios from faculty piloting the new curriculum were then compared to faculty who were not yet using this research process. The anticipated response of this assessment will be to improve the curriculum and teaching in ENGL 121. (For more details, [see the following summary](#) of these three assessment cycles with links to the various reports quoted above.)

Stepping back for a moment, we see how integral assessment has been in Adler-Kassner's story-changing work. By performing on-going, recursive assessment, she has used these evaluations to make her new framing of writing-as-inquiry more visible to her university community. By engaging stakeholders from her university in the assessment process, she has also been able to show that her curriculum and the mission of first year writing is responsive to the larger mission of the university and that her program is enacting this curriculum responsibly by showing its clear successes and its directions for continuous improvement. In her book *The Activist WPA*, Adler-Kassner states, "It's blending ideals and strategies that is the key to successful story-changing work" (183). I believe it is within her assessment work that we can see this blending of ideals and strategies. The principles that form the core of her "story" of what writing is and what her writing program does (the ideals) have been shaped and sustained by the strategies of assessment that she has pursued. To her credit, it is a story that she would say is never perfectly or completely told.

Presence and Positioning Within the University

Adler-Kassner has worked hard to reframe the role and place of the FYWP at EMU, and I believe it is worth discussing the key ways that this public presence of the program has been constructed. Three strategic activities—restructuring the curriculum, continuous assessment, and the Celebration of Student Writing—contribute in the most noticeable ways to the FYWP's presence and position within the University. As a consequence of this effort to make its presence and work known and understood more broadly within the University, Adler-Kassner can justify and advocate for the work and goals of the program more easily. By reframing the curriculum for ENGL 120 and ENGL 121 around inquiry and strategies rather than skills, the FYWP shifted the perception of First-Year Writing from a one-stop service course where students obtain writing skills to a course that introduces and launches students into the world of academic learning and writing that the entire university community has a stake in. In addition, each phase of assessment has been significant in helping others in the university to see and understand what the FYWP does. By creating a public event like the "Celebration of Student Writing" displaying work from the ENGL 121 classes, Adler-Kassner and her faculty showcase the writing program to the entire student population, faculty, and administration of EMU.

But one of the most significant ways in which Adler-Kassner has positioned the FYWP inside the larger university is through the FYWP alignment with the University General Education Outcomes. The process of revising these Gen Ed Outcomes happened concurrently with Adler-Kassner's 2004 assessment eliciting campus-wide input on what defined "Good Writing" at EMU, and her work to derive context-specific goals for First Year Writing influenced the eventual General Education Learning Outcomes that emerged. EMU put considerable effort into this re-visioning of their General Education philosophy and outcomes, and their efforts were rewarded by receiving the 2007 Association for General and Liberal Studies Awards for Improving General Education. The university offers this description and

rationale for its General Education program: "General education teaches students to think critically and communicate effectively; it provides an introduction to the methodologies and practices of the. . .academic disciplines; it promotes intellectual curiosity and a love of learning. General education. . .(is) the heart of an EMU education and a source of institutional pride" ("General Education Information"). Although the General Education Learning Outcome for "Effective Communication" dictates the requirement for ENGL 121 and a Freshman-level Speech Communication class (as well as an upper-level Writing Intensive class within a student's major), we have already seen how key frames for defining the FYWP based on inquiry and strategies fit with these university-wide outcomes. In particular, we can see the important FYWP goals of meta-awareness and inquiry in writing and research clearly stated within a number of these learning outcomes:

- Selected Gen Ed Learning Outcomes for ENGL 121
  - Demonstrate the ability to make explicit choices about the form and content of their writing.
  - Understand multiple modes of inquiry and demonstrate the ability to incorporate significant research into writing that engages a question and/or topic.
  - Understand that writing takes place through recurring processes of invention, revision, and editing and develop successful, flexible strategies for their own writing through these processes.

- Selected Gen Ed Learning Outcomes for Upper-level Writing Intensive course
  - Develop and employ successful, flexible writing and reading strategies that support sustained inquiry in a discipline.
  - Formulate research questions and employ strategies for researching and responding to those questions. ("General Education Requirements and Learning Outcomes")

Although the Learning Outcome is labeled "Effective Communication," these goals value writing much more broadly as inquiry and literate action. They position the FYWP as having a significant role in laying the foundation for EMU students' future intellectual practice and inquiry within their eventual major, and they help make the changing story of the FYWP a part of the university's larger story it tells about itself.

Conclusion: What is the Next Step in Changing Stories?

I want to end this writing program profile by making reference to a significant document published in May 2008 that has gotten little attention, "Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas."

This "Work in Progress for Conversation and Further Development" was composed by 35 Superintendents from some of Texas' largest school districts, and represents a manifesto for a new direction away from No Child Left Behind and the educational reform initiatives begun by the Bush Administration. In a section titled, "A Moral Imperative: Why We as Public Education Leaders Must Speak and Act Now," these Superintendents state: "we assert that schools must be transformed based upon a different set of assumptions and beliefs if they are to accomplish their intended purpose in this new world that is so dramatically different from the nineteenth and early twentieth century world" (7).

It is in this climate of change that I believe the FYWP @ EMU offers a significant model for reform. For me, it offers a middle ground between the closed, bureaucratically-controlled system these Superintendents are trying to change and the anything-goes "un-system" of my own English department. Referring back to the three questions Adler-Kassner says are crucial for any writing program to have answers for, these two poles represent having wrong answers to these questions and having no answers at all. By framing writing as inquiry and a literate practice, by having an open curriculum that balances structure and freedom, and by enacting assessment that provides for the visibility and the evolution of the program, the FYWP @ EMU represents a writing program with answers to these questions we can all learn from in these changing times. These are steps for change that Adler-Kassner has already taken, but for many of us, they are ones we still need to take.

Notes

1. Below is a comparison between the current and proposed program outcomes. Evident in this proposed revision is the program's progressive emphasis on inquiry and research:

Current FYWP @ EMU Outcomes	Proposed FYWP @ EMU Outcomes

Rhetorical Awareness	Critical Reading and Analysis
Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing	Research Practices and Processes
Processes	Writing Process and Representation
Knowledge of Conventions	Use of Evidence
Use of Technology	Syntax and Mechanics

Table 4: Current and proposed outcomes for FYWP @ EMU

([Return to text.](#))

2. Instructors have some discretion for determining how much assignments count. In addition to a portfolio at 50% and the Essay Packets at 15-25%, the rest of the grade could be made up of a research blog, short assignments, class participation, and participating in the Celebration of Writing. ([Return to text.](#))
3. These qualities are derived from the 2004-5 focus groups and from additional descriptive assessment conducted within the FYWP during the 2006-7 academic year. ([Return to text.](#))

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