

Review

Behm, Nicholas, Gregory R. Glau, Deborah H. Holdstein, Duane Roen, and Edward M. White, eds. *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later*. Anderson, SC: Parlor P, 2012. 333 pages.

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The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later is a remarkable collection of essays. While an earlier collection on this topic, *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus After the WPA Outcomes Statement*, does a fine job both of describing the genesis and early history of the Outcomes Statement (OS) and exploring early thoughts on its application beyond first-year composition, *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* maps territory beyond what was extant when that first volume appeared. Its chapters show a movement through the various levels of the OS, but they also reveal (and revel in) composition-rhetoric's methods of generating and testing knowledge. Before turning to the book, however, I find it important to place the collection in a slightly larger frame, for its subject, the WPA Outcomes Statement, fits into a master metaphor long-loved and long-lived in this field.

When he built his parlor, Kenneth Burke provided composition-rhetoric, perhaps, with our most widely shared metaphor for the swirling melee of ideas in academe generally and the English department, specifically:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depend-

ing upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (110–111)

The adoption of this metaphor has been a generative one, but it has also become a progressively larger potential misappropriation of a metaphor. It is a dialectical metaphor of attack and defense, rather than a dialogic metaphor of creation; the heated discussion is interminable. Winners feel gratification, losers embarrassment.

But Burke wasn't writing of the academy in general and the department of English in particular. Burke was writing of history. More accurately, Burke was writing, in his metaphor of the parlor, of dialectical oppositions and the analysis of history, the shared representation of the past held by members of any collective—the narratives that bind a group's members to one another, that form their shared past and collective memory, that educate generations to come.

The problem is not that Burke's metaphor is wrong or frivolous or misleading. The problem is that by privileging the metaphor of the parlor and its 18th-century, genteel model of symposium-like discourse, we've stopped retaining the discussion with which Burke precedes it. What Burke sought in his metaphor of the parlor was a description of a scene that "could encompass the scene," a revelation of the "social structures of meanings by which" individuals and groups make meaning (108). Most importantly for our present discussion, these revelations bore direct relation to a group's extant documentation: "Every document bequeathed us by history," Burke wrote, "must be treated as a *strategy for encompassing a situation*" (109, italics in original). This notion was foundational for the Burkean parlor—acknowledging from the beginning that context is unknowable in its totality and that disputation continues incessantly—and that documents are the remainder of one-time strategies, available to be mined for meaning within understood past, knowable present, and possible future contexts.

The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later represents a reflection on one of the most influential documents produced within composition studies as a statement of its own purpose—and as a reaction to the imposition of other agendas, including those driven both externally and internally. Editors Nicholas N. Behm, Gregory R. Glau, Deborah H. Holdstein, Duane Roen, and Edward M. White divide their text into twenty chapters, moving from Debra Frank Dew's "CWPA Outcomes Statement as Heuristic for Inventing Writing-about-Writing Curricula" to "Assessing the Impact of the Outcomes Statement," by Emily Isaacs and Melinda Knight. The book travels from invention to assessment, with stops in between for ruminations on matters such as the politics of the OS and the authority it

may—or may not—encapsulate, the adoption and adaptation of the OS both in American writing programs and internationally, and the impact of the OS on ESL students and WAC programs.

This list of topics is by no means exhaustive or all-inclusive, as readers of the collection will quickly realize. *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* defies easy categorization. Yet there is a logic to the organization, a sense of texts working in tandem with one another as they push and pull and palaver on the history, meaning, and uses of the OS beyond and behind what the editors themselves may see.

These chapters stand as documents representing strategies of interpretation and implementation as they speak to one another in Burke's metaphorical parlor. Discussing all of the participants in this conversation on the OS is not possible here, so I focus upon only a sampling of the crosstalk that takes place within *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later*.

As the editors note in their "Introduction," one of the most meaningful definitional aspects of the OS is the fact that its creators "worked diligently to *not* suggest standards, but rather *outcomes*. Outcomes are goals that can be met on many levels, depending on local conditions (students, teachers, curriculum, etc.); standards are points at which those outcomes can be measured" (ix-x). The value of this foundational underpinning in a professional document like the OS is great, for it gives scholar-teachers in composition-rhetoric a way to articulate the complex and kairotic nature of our work—literacy education that must be sensitive to local, regional, national, and international pressures while simultaneously being sensitive to the needs of students. As a former WPA at a small, private university and the current chair of English at a land-grant state institution, I have learned the value of a document like the OS that both frames the discussion and offers the vocabulary—a vocabulary that comes in part from the original document, in part from the earlier book on the OS, and in part from all the intervening work on outcomes in composition studies.

In "The Politics of Pedagogy: The Outcomes Statement and Basic Writing," Wendy Olson inserts her voice into the ongoing conversation, writing that, "strategic use of the WPA OS allows [her] to position basic writing classes . . . as part of a holistic curriculum that prepares basic writing students for the expectations of first-year composition" (18). With its focus on outcomes rather than standards, the OS is a uniquely useful document, creating a framework in which a writing program can gather together its disparate parts in order to enforce not conformity but consistency. Speaking of her specific context—one common to many of us, truly—Olson describes a situation wherein the "exclusion of basic writing from the curriculum . . . was more neglectful than malicious" (24). The OS offered a way to articu-

late to those beyond composition-rhetoric the deep and abiding complexity of learning to write at all levels, and it offered this understanding in the garb of a professionally vetted position statement—with all of the authority such a document can hold within an institutional setting.

Like Olson, Paul Kei Matsuda and Ryan Skinnell, in “Considering the Impact of the WPA Outcomes Statement on Second Language Writers,” argue that the OS has been influential on basic writers, a group often used as a catch-all category for any and all writers who fall outside of the locally defined regular composition course or course sequence. But this chapter, like many in the collection, offers important criticism of the OS, and Matsuda and Skinnell note what may be one of the most important of the document’s flaws: The OS’s silence on second-language writers is deafening. In context, the OS’ discussion of “language” clearly does not touch upon second-language students: “*language* as it is used here seems to refer to a socio-political notion of language rather than many of the language issues that challenge second language writers who are in the process of developing their English proficiency—namely, sentence structures, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic concerns” (232). Across their chapter, Matsuda and Skinnell provide an insightful and incisive analysis of the extant literature on the OS and second-language students, concluding that the OS’s primary focus on rhetorical awareness “seems to come at the expense of language issues that a growing number of students in first-year composition courses face” (234).

In “Released from the Ghost of Platonic Idealism: How the Outcomes Statement Affirms Rhetorical Curricula” and in “Is Rhetorical Knowledge the Über-Outcome?” Doug Sweet (in the former) and Barry M. Maid and Barbara J. D’Angelo (in the latter) turn directly to a consideration of the topic of rhetorical knowledge in the OS. But even the discussions of rhetorical knowledge—the most broad-based and difficult piece of the OS—turn quickly to matters of pedagogy and theory, that place in the parlor where all discussions of composition seem to end up eventually. Sweet writes that, for example, “we can use the WPA OS as a response to the inevitable resistance we encounter from faculty, administrators, and students who still cling to notions of language as a neutral transmitter of meaning (knowledge) found elsewhere, whether that elsewhere is identified empirically, rationally, mystically, or divinely” (73). The OS is deeply enmeshed in the philosophical debates of rhetoric from the pre-Socratics onwards, but the OS, by its very nature, is also deeply enmeshed in the debates on composition, from the classroom outwards. It is the versatility of the OS, its cross-contextual value in our diverse professional settings, that is part of its strength—as virtually

every chapter in *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later* acknowledges, in one context or another.

Sweet uses the OS as a way to enter the Truth/truth debate in relation to language and knowledge—and to frame a fascinating and all-too-common sort of outburst at a department meeting (71–72). Maid and D’Angelo use the same aspects of the OS to speak of their use of it to bring together the diverse elements of technical writing at Arizona State University—including the need to pursue outcome-oriented thinking with every stroke of the administrator’s or teacher’s pen. They write, of their study, “Our initial assumption was that students majoring in an undergraduate technical communication program would lean more heavily toward the outcomes related to processes and knowledge of conventions.” With no equivocation, they explain how badly this assumption worked out: “Our assumption proved to be wrong. Rhetorical knowledge clearly emerged as the outcome that seemed to outweigh the others” (266). Taught by those educated in rhetoric, within a program designed with the OS as a model, the students involved saw themselves as much stronger agents in the written world.

Readers will find the same sort of cross-talk that I have described here taking place among the other sixteen chapters. As importantly, this collection is built around consideration of a single document—one with its own history and one “bequeathed us by history” (Burke 109). It is a document that provides the vocabulary for discussing the habitual matters of composition-rhetoric and the matters that are most complex. The OS is a strategic document encompassing our rhetorical situation. Of course, in this Burkean parlor, some of the original writers of the OS are still here, still taking part in the discussion, still putting in their oars even as new voices join the conversation.

WORKS CITED

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