

Book Review

Composing Feminist Interventions: Activism, Engagement, Praxis

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Blair, Kristine, and Lee Nickoson, editors. *Composing Feminist Interventions: Activism, Engagement, Praxis*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2018, wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/feminist. 511 pages.

In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch called out to feminist writing studies scholars to “ask new and different questions and to find more and better ways to listen to the multidimensional voices that are speaking from within and across the many lines that might divide us as language users” (4). Royster and Kirsch urged feminist researchers to pursue new avenues that will increasingly diversify and expand the field of writing scholarship (4). *Composing Feminist Interventions: Activism, Engagement, Praxis* answers their call. With a focus on social activism, Kristine Blair and Lee Nickoson assemble twenty-six generative chapters in this collection which enact the changes that Royster and Kirsch advocate in their seminal text. Though Blair and Nickoson speak specifically to feminist researchers, their notion that writing can and should intervene in communities within and outside of academia offers writing program administrators a practical way to approach feminist interventions which may, at first glance, seem extraneous to writing researchers at large.

Positioned at the intersection of community-based research, feminist research methodologies, and pedagogy, *Composing Feminist Interventions: Activism, Engagement, Praxis* ultimately culminates with five course designs that put feminist interventions into practice. However, Blair and Nickoson are careful to point out that they consider each of the text’s five sections—methodology, partnerships, activism, praxis, and course designs—“co-

equal points of entry” for readers (6). As such, readers should understand each chapter as intersectional, or, as Blair and Nickoson contend, “work that is multiply situated and that involves multiple lived experiences” (6). Dividing the text into equal sections while still honoring the intersectionality of the works thus affords readers and future writing researchers a look at (a) why intervention is critical to producing feminist writing scholarship and (b) how writing program administrators might engage these interventions to produce research, design writing programs, and create work spaces which reflect communities both in and outside of academia in more diverse contexts.

In the first section, “Methodology,” Blair and Nickoson have collected chapters which aim to engage—and more importantly, to expand—conceptualizations of feminist research methodology. The first two chapters specifically reflect on how reciprocity functions within the framework of empirical writing research. In “Post-Research Engagement: An Argument for Critical Examination of Researcher Roles After Research Ends,” Megan Adams examines what happens when a research project concludes. Adams argues feminist scholars must begin to consider the relationships between themselves and their subjects if they wish to help build community projects that can be sustained post-research. To truly participate in meaningful community building, Adams suggests, feminist researchers are obligated to look inward, to engage in “critical reflection of the nature of relationship building and the evolution of collaboration” in order to truly learn from community work (31). Mariana Grohowski also builds on the notion of reciprocity in her chapter. Specifically, Grohowski discusses the research methodology she utilized while examining the rhetorical practices of two female veterans, both of whom were disabled. For Grohowski, a methodology centered on reciprocity is inherently activist because it demands that the researcher practice listening and “strategic disclosure” in order to strengthen partnerships with research subjects, especially those in minority communities (44–49).

In her chapter, “Methodology and Accountability: Tracking Our Movements as Feminist Pedagogues,” Emily Ronay Johnston continues the work of expanding “ethical practice” by reconceiving “ethical” as “accountable” (59–60); for Johnston, this takes the form of pushing boundaries—e.g., requiring her students to read in different genres—to participate in listening-based discussions, and to conduct primary research which facilitates community involvement. Lauren Rosenberg and Emma Howes similarly advocate enacting listening practices and tending to relationship building as way in which to embody “a feminist ethos,” or, as they understand it, paying particular attention to the ideologies they bring to their own

research (77). Finally, Liz Rohan invites feminist researchers to build community and demonstrate embodied feminist practice by researching case studies using archival methods which recognize the work of feminist actors who “created, occupied, and shaped space” (109). For writing program administrators conducting research into student writing or even evaluating the efficacy of their own writing programs, this section will prove especially helpful. The articles collected in the first section on methodology not only provide a roadmap for re-envisioning how our research into writing can impact both our students and the work they produce, but they also ask writing program administrators to rethink the nature of the relationships we forge with our student-subjects in the interim.

In the second section, “Partnerships,” each of the six chapters details the researchers’ individual community partnerships and offers *WPA: Writing Program Administration* readers insight into how to actualize the process of community building outlined in the first section. Keri E. Mathis and Beth A. Boehm begin this section discussing the University of Louisville’s implementation of Ideas-to-Action, an “enhancement plan that holds community engagement as one of its core principles” (115); here, they address the reality that many graduate students are left out of university engagement projects and draw attention to the need to reconceptualize doctoral education, much like Mary P. Sheridan does in the section’s closing chapter. In Chapter 7, Jenn Brandt and Cara Kozma also relate their experiences at their institution, High Point University, as it advances “learning together” approaches to facilitate student-community engagement. Likewise, in “Crafting Partnerships: Exploring Student-Led Feminist Strategies for Community Literacy Projects,” Kelly Concannon and four former students argue that multilayered partnerships, such as the one they put into practice, lay the groundwork for assessing work done in the community because the approach focuses on “mentorship and reflexivity” (157). Interestingly, in this article, each student includes his/her own narrative of the experience in an attempt to preserve student representation and put into practice the philosophy of the multilayered partnership. Christine Denecker and Sarah Sisser then present a collection of Ohio farm stories that combines ethnographic features which narrate the tenets of feminist research methodology outlined in the first section. Finally, in chapter 10, Kathryn Perry studies Louisville’s Family Scholar House utilizing the actor-network theory notion of translation, which she argues is a feminist intervention because she uses the theory to “follow the ‘traces’ of literacy sponsorship that are manifested through the shifting *relationship* surrounding a particular moment of translation” (197). Although the realities of investing in community partnerships may not be suited for writing program administrators of all stripes, the task

of forging community partnerships is a certainly noble undertaking, one which encourages WPAs to locate writing outside of academia and reconsider the role of university writing with a greater sense of community.

Much like the second section focuses on community-based partnerships as a method of enacting lived feminist ideology, the third section, “Activism,” spotlights how community-based research can be, and is, decidedly activist, while the fourth section, “Praxis,” concerns itself with intersectionality. However, because they chronicle how feminist interventions are ultimately not bound by academia or proximity, the chapters which comprise these two sections are especially compelling for those working in writing program administration. Take, for example, “Literacy, Praxis, and Participation in Environmental Deliberation,” in which Barbara George draws attention to the energy production policies of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio and the literacies affecting environmental risk representation, or “A Peek Inside the Master’s House: The Tale of Feminist Rhetorician as Candidate for U.S. House of Representatives,” in which Angela Zimmann recounts her campaign for a seat in Congress. The subjects of these studies are, of course, especially situated, but both authors point to a larger implication: the praxis-oriented initiatives that influence feminist research methodology offer a way for writing program administrators to implement course designs which emphasize the fact that writing and literacy have a very real, lived impact on the world.

The same is true of chapter nineteen, “Coming Out as Other in the Graduate Writing Classroom: Feminist Pedagogical Moves for Mentoring Community Activists.” In their chapter, Jessica Tess, Katie Manthey, and Trixie Smith examine “coming out moments” among graduate students, which they argue are not exclusive to homosexuality (376). Instead, the act of othering oneself, of making oneself exist in discomfort, is a kind of feminist rhetorical act. They ultimately argue that writing for the other functions as an exercise in social justice. Here, Tess, Manthey, and Smith offer insight on how writing teachers might mentor their graduate students and model feminist rhetorical pedagogy within the writing classroom. Again, while they do not speak directly to writing program administrators here, Tess, Manthey, and Smith do suggest that when writing instructors acknowledge the feelings of otherness a number of their own undergraduate writing students feel in their writing classrooms, they generate opportunities for students to reconceive writing and its intersection with identity and place. The conversation the authors chart in “Coming Out” is, I contend, especially significant; they echo existing calls to expand the roles of WPAs within graduate schools. Indeed, the recently published edited collection *Supporting Graduate Student Writers: Research, Curriculum and Program*

Design covers an array of subjects regarding graduate student writers, most notably the fact that a graduate student's writing education is very often fragmented and completed in insolation. In this article, Tess, Manthey, and Smith advance a view of graduate writing which places community at the center and offers WPAs a way to reconceive graduate writing in the future.

Finally, in what is perhaps the most practically useful section for writing program administrators, the fifth and final section, "Course Designs," outlines the ways in which feminist interventions can be put into practice. Split into five chapters, this section begins with Florence Bacabac's call to establish campus-community partnerships while upper-level students are still enrolled in coursework so that they may foreground beneficial relationships before leaving school. Bacabac concludes that her course, a service learning grant writing course, not only helps students hone critical thinking skills but also genre knowledge of grant writing which they may then use to benefit their communities; this, she argues, creates students who "act as feminist rhetorical agents" capable of "sustainable, social change even after they exist the course" (435).

The second of the course designs, "Making the Political Personal Again: Strategies for Addressing Student Resistance to Feminist Interventions," finds Julie Myatt making a case for her course *Feminist Interventions*, during which she dispels student misunderstandings of feminism. Students are instead asked to put feminist inventions into practice through a series of assignments which detail the lived experiences of women who have been systematically shut out of the power structures that shape their lives. Katherine Fredlund, too, argues that writing instructors must challenge students' resistance to feminism and activism in chapter twenty-five, "Feminist Activism in the Core: Student Activism in Theory and Practice." Like both Bacabac and Myatt, Fredlund directed her general education students to community partners with whom they organized their university's annual Take Back the Night march; doing so, Fredlund contends, undermines the stigma associated with the notions of feminism and activism.

Finally, in chapters twenty-four and twenty-six respectively, Stephanie Bower and Julie Nelson share their personal experiences putting feminist interventions into practice in the writing classroom using multimodal approaches. In "Because Your Heart Breaks and It Moves To Action: Digital Storytelling Beyond the Gate," Bower recounts her time teaching an upper-level composition course on visual storytelling in which students were required to construct the digital stories of members of marginalized groups. Drawing on the scholarship of Adrienne Rich, Bower acknowledges that the goal of the course is to "disrupt hierarchies of knowledge" and advance the stories of those most often ignored. Nelson, too, interrogates

ways of knowing by making *Wikipedia* writing the center of a sequence of assignments in her course, *Writing for Social Change*. In “Rhetorical Interventions: A Project Design for Composing and Editing Wikipedia Articles,” Nelson offers an account of her assignment wherein she asked students to interrogate the racial and gender disparities surrounding the subjects of *Wikipedia* articles and who actually writes the widely used articles. Nelson contends that this particular project is an example of feminist intervention at work because not only does it invite students to examine the rhetorical features of *Wikipedia* as a discourse community, but it also challenges students to consider who makes knowledge, how it is culturally situated, and who benefits from knowledge structures. Obviously, the chapters in this section are most useful for WPAs, particularly those who direct writing programs, because they present course designs which WPAs may integrate into their own programs or share with WAC/WID faculty in other departments, but I also find these chapters generative because the authors demand that WPAs reevaluate the structures of discourse, genre and knowledge-making which inform their own pedagogies – pedagogies which will ultimately determine how they design writing courses and programs.

Taken as a whole, *Composing Feminist Interventions* questions how writing scholars conceptualize writing research and teaching and, like its forerunners *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words* and *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*, demands that we, as scholars of the written word, prioritize collaboration and inclusivity in our research and teaching practices. The collection also speaks to the many contexts in which WPAs work and compels us to ask questions of our own research, programs, and institutions: are we investing in listening as a tool to engender reciprocity with our students? How are we fostering mutually beneficial, community-based research in our own writing programs? Are we considering the lived experiences of our student writers as we design writing courses and programs? For many of us, the answers are unclear and not every article in this text will be applicable to every WPA, but Blair and Nickoson’s edited collection offers insightful feminist intervention strategies which can serve as a place for writing program administrators to expand the work we do.

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