Transcription: "Locally Grown: Cultivating Value-Rich Writing Programs"

Run Time: 9:46

TD: Tim Dougherty (host)
LAK: Linda Adler-Kassner (guest)
TJG: TJ Geiger (respondent)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

TD: Welcome to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives. This week's episode is called "Locally Grown: Cultivating Value-Rich Writing Programs." I'm your host, Tim Dougherty.

Cue intro music: "Where I'm From" by Digable Planets.

Writing programs are complex ecosystems, rooted in particular institutional soil, populated with a shifting mixture of personalities, pedagogical priorities, literacy goals, and both administrative and public pressures. As Writing Program Administrators, we have to strike a fine balance between the particulars of the local and the disciplinary best practices our field has negotiated in this current national educational climate. To understand the finer points of this balance, we spoke with Linda Adler-Kassner, Writing Program Administrator at University of California-Santa Barbara and author of *The Activist WPA*. In her book, Adler-Kassner draws from prophetic pragmatism and her own commitment to the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, which means "healing the world." It's a way that we consciously shift the frames about writers and about writing toward a more just and humane practice both within our programs and in the national conversation about literacy education writ large.

We began by asking her how she works to enact these values in her own program at UCSB, and then we continue by getting her thoughts on the current national debates around literacy education. And we conclude with a response by TJ Geiger, a colleague and grad student here at Syracuse University who calls us to answer those looking for public accountability of professors and writing teachers with robust narratives that describe all the work we do to ensure our students are receiving the best in literacy education.

So we asked Linda how her wider ideals and philosophies activate her work as a Writing Program Administrator.

LAK: So I think about this a lot. And I think about it in terms of my own process and about identifying it in the program where I work because it's not just my own values; it has to be the values that everybody in the program shares. So for myself, when I think about the ways that I think about the idea of *tikkun olam*, and just sort of doing right by the world and theories of prophetic pragmatism.

But in the program, I think it's more interesting to do it with a bunch of people. One of the things that I do that we've done in our writing program here is actually a lot of work having people write short little vignette stories about what they really liked about teaching and what they really liked about their classes. Then we used those as the basis from which to identify values that really spoke to people. So we had a big retreat, and people brought these vignettes, and then they'd circle or underline words that they thought indicated values that were associated with that work. Then we'd put those up, and everybody shared and made comments on those on big sheets of paper. Then from that, we collaboratively developed a set of values that we thought would really work for the program, and then we built out from there.

I think it's really important to do that kind of work because we're always making strategic and tactical trade-offs about things. At some level, there has to be a core there, otherwise you're just sort of an empty shell [making] tradeoffs for no particular reason. There has to be something at the center that grounds your work.

TD: So it's important to get teachers talking about their values. What happens when folks disagree, or come at questions in radically different ways?

LAK: I would guess that everybody's invested in language to some extent, right? We all care about it; we're all interested in it. But the way we did that at Eastern, the way we worked on that, was by working on our curriculum. So we spent a lot of time—and I mean years and years and years—thinking, what do we value?

TD: In order to ground this discussion of how departments can begin to think about creating shared values, Linda pointed to Bob Broad's book, *What We Really Value*. In the book, Broad outlines a methodology he calls "dynamic criteria mapping," and Linda explained it in a bit more detail for us here.

LAK: So dynamic criteria mapping, or the idea of sitting down with a bunch of texts and saying, "Hey, what do we like here? What do we value?" That's a fabulous way to develop conversations that then can branch off into eight million different directions. So you can work on developing curriculum, you can work on shaping your outcomes, you can talk about what your program should be. That's a wonderful way to get people engaged in that conversation from whatever perspective because even when there are disagreements, that's really rich and interesting and fun to talk about. I never see this stuff as set or stable. There's always something to do; there's always something to explore, and that's very much the pragmatist in me. It's always in motion. And if it's always in motion, then there's never…there has to be kind of…you don't want it to always be crazy in motion like "Aah! There's no center!" So you want to have a center of some core values, and then you want to say, "What are we going to do next? Where are we?" And that gets everybody into the conversation. So I think as long as people are talking, that gets them involved, and that actually very much comes from that interest-based organizing perspective. It's like, everyone has interests, you just have to keep them coming back.

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TD: Dr. Adler-Kassner speaks to the question of identifying interests that we share—interests that keep stakeholders in conversation. But what does that mean when there's so much discouraging news about education policy in the United States? TJ Geiger, doctoral student at Syracuse University, responds to the climate of our work in higher education.

TJG: Linda Adler-Kassner names many of the problems and possibilities that confront those of us who work in education. One issue she discusses is how those of us in writing and English departments must articulate with each other what constitutes our shared values. Another reality that all of us in higher education must confront is the fact that much of our labor is, for the most part, invisible to the broader public.

In spring 2012, as the Conference on College Composition and Communication was in full swing in St. Louis, an opinion piece was published in *The Washington Post*. David C. Levy, who is with the investment firm Cambridge Investment group, asked the question on March 23rd, "Do college professors work hard enough?" In short, his answer is basically, "no." While I could take the time to dissect his argument, which seems written as if some vantage point so distant from the realities of most higher education faculty and built wholly on unrepresentative examples, I won't do that here.

What I will comment on is the brilliance of higher ed laborers who organized the fast and the first in what I hope will be an ongoing creative response to arguments like those that Levy makes. Lee Skallerup, the Inside Higher ed blogger at College Ready Writing, issued a call on March 27th for a Day of Higher Ed, where folks who work in colleges and universities would live-blog and tweet a typical day in their work life. She proclaims, "April 2nd. Record your day. Blog it, share it, promote it, make our voices heard, if only for a day." Promoting the Twitter indexing feature, the hashtag, Skallerup called on Twitter users to mark their posts with the term hashtag #dayofhighered. That way, it was possible to collect many of the wide-ranging contributions to this effort. At the end of the day on April 2nd, at least 460 academics took part—sharing almost 1500 tweets. I don't want to strike a celebratory note here because these self-reports don't by themselves constitute change; however, the move to make transparent and public the work we do, we academics can't shy away from the task of speaking to the broadest public audience. It's important for us to talk with each other about our values. It's also critical that we create opportunities to talk publically about our work and hopefully change the conversation about higher ed.

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LAK: There was a big NCTE anniversary session at 4Cs, and I heard Leila Christenbury's talk, and I loved her talk because she was talking about how this is not a bellwether moment in education. It's a pretty scary time, but she was like, "You know what, man? It's cyclical. There have been non-bellwether moments before, and there will be non-bellwether moments again. So you can't get freaked out that right now things aren't all the way we want them to be because the pendulum will swing."

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Allison Hitt and Ben Kuebrich with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.