

Optimistic Reciprocities: The Literacy Narratives of First-Year Writing Students



Kiosk 4: An Optimistic Proposal

I would like to return to where this exhibit started, with my work as a writing program administrator. In her book, *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories and Writing and Writers*, Linda Adler-Kassner argues that WPAs have a responsibility to reframe the discussions and change the stories about writing, writers, and writing programs. She identifies three factors that should guide these efforts:

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 employs Stephen Resse's notion of framing to understand the how the narratives about student writers operate:

Framing is concerned with the way interests, communications, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding 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. (Adler-Kassner 11)

In the spring of 2008, I was completing the first year of my four-year term as the director of the first-year writing program at The Ohio State University. Through a listserv of writing program administrators at Ohio public universities, news started to emerge that the Ohio legislature, without consulting any WPAs in the state, passed revised code that would force consistency across all public institutions of higher education (PIOHE) in Ohio in how AP credit was to be awarded and how it would count towards undergraduate degrees. Furthermore, the revised code stated that students should not be disadvantaged in the acceptance of AP credit when transferring within the PIOHE system.

Whereas the legislation did not stipulate specific AP scores in its revised code, the Ohio Board of Regents created policy that stated effective Autumn 2009, a score of 3 or higher on the AP exam would provide credit at any PIOHE in Ohio. The credit would count towards graduation, it would meet a general education requirement if one existed in that subject area at the receiving institution, and it would be transferable across all PIOHE in Ohio.

As WPAs in Ohio began to investigate the implications of this change, we realized that of the twenty-eight PIOHE in Ohio, twenty-four already allowed for an AP exam score of 3 to count for the credit-bearing first-year writing requirement. Four PIOHE, including Ohio State, required a score of 4 on the AP exam. The burden of change, in effect, would fall on these four institutions. For the 2009-2010 academic year, 700 incoming Ohio State students who normally would be enrolling in a first-year writing course were no longer required to do so because of legislation and policy being set at the state level.

By the time writing program administrators had learned of the changes, the revised code and the implementation policy were both faits accomplis.

It goes without saying that my colleagues and I felt less than optimistic about the future of first-year writing when these decisions could be made where no writing program directors were consulted, where no research was cited, and where no plans were made at the state level to assess the results of this decision. These were confusing times for writing program administrators. Who had a stake in this decision, and how were these stakes defined? Departments and programs faced a loss in enrollments and, thus, possible funding. Many composition instructors faced possible job loss while faculty in all disciplines, including English studies, spent significant time reconsidering the changing populations of students and the writing experiences they bring to their classes. Outside our writing programs, however, a different picture was being painted. Legislators, keeping the costs of education under control, appeared to be responsive to the public. The public, made up of parents and taxpayers, were grateful that more students could graduate from college more quickly for less money. Universities appeared to be collaborating effectively with state governments while being responsive to parents and taxpayers by realigning their goals to educate students with advanced, college-level content.

And the students? Aside from the obvious gains and losses from some of the stakes listed above, they suddenly found themselves the subject of a shifting narrative that cast them in an atypical light, one that had its roots in proficiency and success instead of deficiency and failure. It didn't take a great deal of spinning to imagine optimistic headlines that could read:

More students leave high school with credit for college coursework

Ohio high schools improve college placement numbers

High school students prepared for advanced-level college coursework

Ohio's "Senior to Sophomore" plan a success

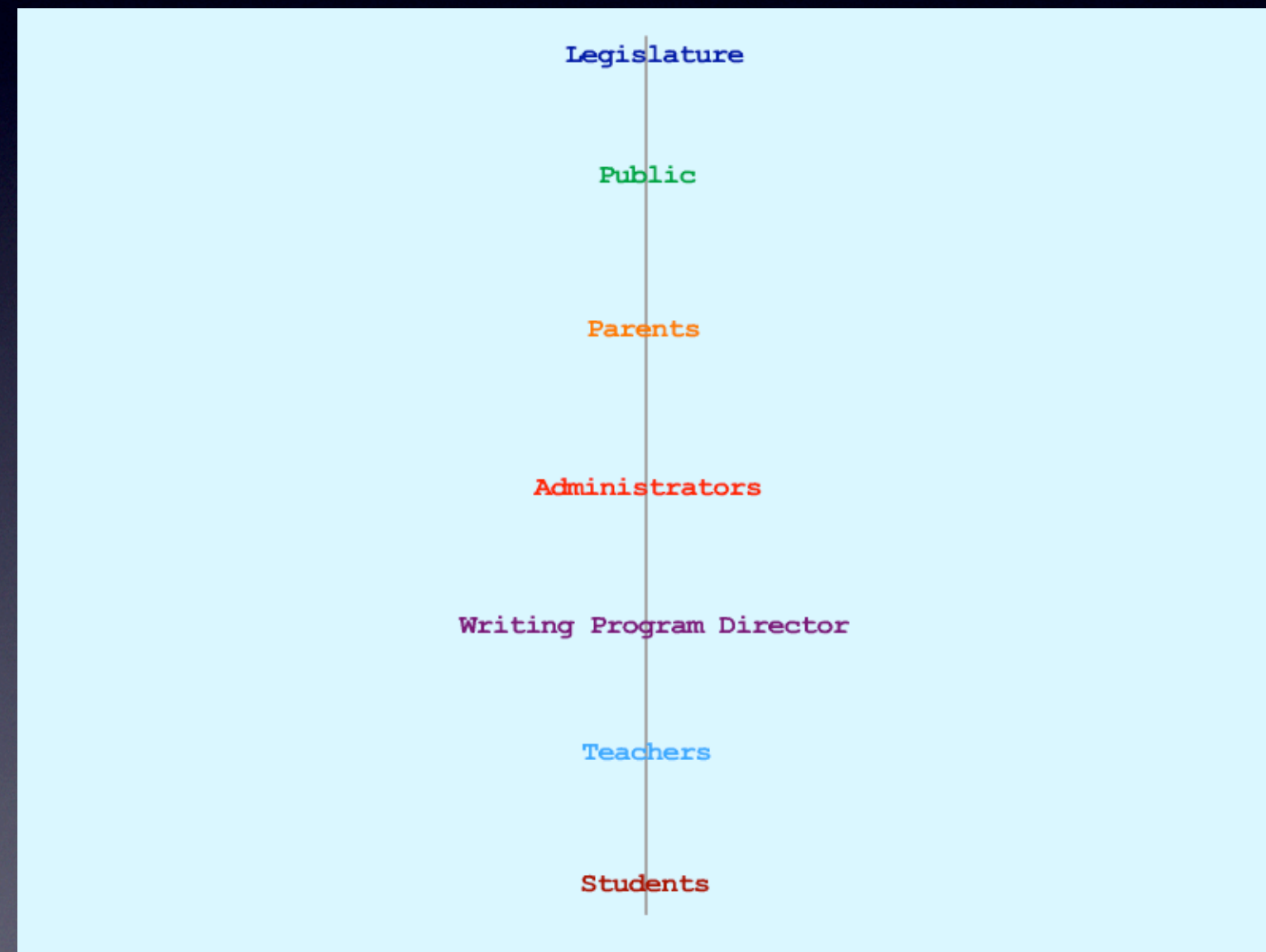
And where did this leave WPAs? My initial inclination, similar to many of my colleagues' and senior administrators', was to construct a longitudinal study that would track students who would have been required under the previous system to enroll in first-year writing. How did these students perform in second-year composition courses? How did these students perform in coursework across the disciplines that required substantial writing and research? What were these students' overall retention rates? I imagined I would collect data to illustrate that these students needed first-year English composition to succeed in college (and beyond). This, I initially believed, was my job as a WPA of a large writing program at a Research I, flagship state university. Coincidentally, this approach to the situation presented me with a question:

Was I prepared to accept that we might discover a first-year writing course was empirically and anecdotally insignificant in these students' success at the university?

Then, a more complicated question came to me, one that made me extremely uncomfortable with my original inclination to construct a study:

Were my stakes in this situation as a WPA so high that I was willing to create a longitudinal study whose results might re-inscribe a narrative of deficiency and failure on our students?

This graphic represents a simplified representation of a top-down environment in which many university writing programs find themselves. (I intentionally did not include “the field” in this graphic. Its influence is, at times, far too complex to represent, running throughout the entire cast of characters, and, at other times, completely non-existent.)

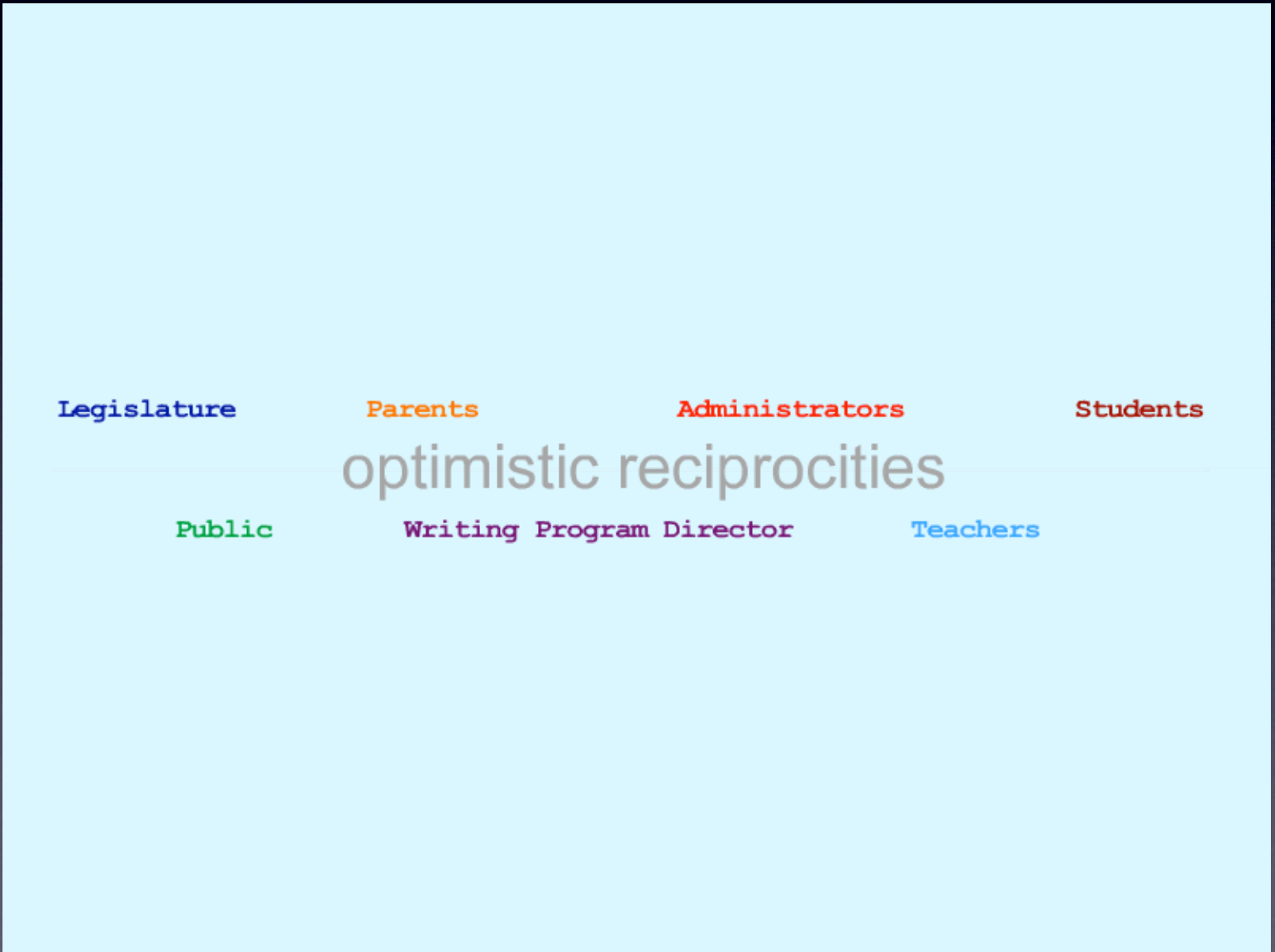


I argue that, despite the possible perceived positive outcomes to the scenario I describe above, this structure does not embrace or promote an optimistic view of writing program administration, writing instruction, or student writing, and, therefore, does not serve anyone well, even those at the top.



I believe we need to disrupt this model, and I'm curious about how a view of composition that embraces optimism and hope, one that strives for genuine anticipatory reciprocity, and one that expands definitions of textual production can do that.

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Disrupting this top-down model is not the starting place. Instead, I think it's the destination. In other words, I want to argue that creating optimistic, hopeful, and reciprocal curricular approaches and opportunities in composition can disrupt the model more effectively than simply attacking the model itself.

The legislators and Regents in the state of Ohio made their decision, in part, because of the materials and data upon which they chose to rely. Advanced Placement uses a highly structured, outcomes based assessment process governed by the College Board where trained faculty assess exams according to a rubric that is aligned with the Council of Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. The Ohio Board of Regents also has a learning outcomes statement for the first-year composition course that, while used to guide writing programs in curriculum development, is primarily in place to regulate credit transfer in the state. These materials, coupled with enrollment and matriculation/graduation data, represent writing as something to be measured by scores, standards, and thresholds. This is a model based on efficiency, not on effectiveness, on getting through a college degree as fast as possible, not on recognizing writing and composing as a way of learning and understanding. The result, in this case, is a model that directs students to opt *out* instead of one that listens to students' compelling reasons why and how they want to opt *in*.

How might this decision have played out differently had legislators and Regents instead studied the narratives of first-year students in the DALN, data that are rich with culture, personality, behaviors, practices, and aspirations? Or, what might have happened had legislators and Regents charged writing program administrators and faculty with using the materials and data found in a repository like the DALN to create innovative writing curricula that challenged students, that met their optimism, and that embraced the changing face of writing?

Adler-Kassner focuses her efforts, her "story-changing work" (87), on textual analysis of documents, news reports, and editorials that tell stories of student writers and the work of compositionists. I argue that the materials archived in the DALN provide rich, layered, nuanced data that writing program administrators and faculty can use as optimistic frames through which we can reconsider curriculum design that employs an optimistic pedagogy-- one in which students compose transactionally for genuine audiences from whom reciprocity is expected in a variety of modes and media. Also, the narratives might encourage administrators and teachers to create curricula that do a more effective job of channeling students' willingness to invest in composition instruction, their understanding that the best kind of instruction involves them in the difficult, challenging, sometimes messy and inefficient, work of composing and exchanging meaning, perhaps the hardest and most complicated work that humans ever undertake.

Further, I argue that we need to declare our writing programs, or at least spaces and sites within them, as teaching laboratories where experimentation is encouraged, expected, and required and where this move is viewed as our writing programs' foundation and sustaining force.

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Experimentation is the mode of laboratories and captures the essence of an optimistic approach to writing program and curriculum development. Our programs, when seen as teaching laboratories, become open, future-thinking, collaborative spaces where teachers and students are supported in their work, where they feel safe in adopting an optimistic view of being wrong (Shultz), and where experimentation and risk-taking are valued. The true wealth of such a site is found in human resources, the people, and how they partner to do a new work of composition. Surely, establishing teaching laboratories within our writing programs needs to happen at a variety of different types of teaching institutions that serve a variety of student populations located in a variety of geographical locations, for these are the sites from where new pedagogies and new research findings, or in other words, a new work of composing that cannot be captured in legislation or policy or a test score, will emerge. When we place those commitments at the foundation of our work, we create the primary sustaining force of our programs.

Obviously, the key players in everything I have been arguing are our students. Therefore, work in composition that is optimistic, hopeful, and reciprocal demands that we have a continuing, increasing presence in our students' sites of production.

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As teachers and scholars of **composition**,
we must have a continuing, increasing **presence**
in our students' **sites** of production.

I want to resist the idea of merely allowing students' optimism to inform curricula; that is a passive notion of optimism. If we establish our programs as teaching laboratories, then we are compelled to learn as much as we can by sitting with our students, listening to our students, talking to our students, and composing with our students. We need new pedagogies and new research methodologies and findings to grow out of our presence in our students' sites of production.

Finally, I would like to return to an earlier question I asked: What might student writing and writing instruction look like if we met students' optimism—their imaginations and expectations of the future—in our pedagogies and curricula?

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I am convinced that anticipated reciprocity—the expectation that their composing is transactional and reaching a genuine audience—is key in answering this question. One might argue that the common practice of peer review in composition class does this. However, peer review is rarely valued as an act of knowledge making or text production in and of itself. Instead, more often than not, peer review is positioned almost entirely in service to “real” writing, those texts for which students would receive a grade in a particular class. Whereas the audience for this activity may be genuine, the contexts and investments rarely are, relegating the activity to a school-related exercise. In addition to moving students to compose in a variety of modes with a variety of media and teaching them to make careful rhetorical choices when deciding which modes and media best serve their purposes, we must design curricula that involves genuine audiences and genuine occasions for reciprocity for students’ composing. Two curricular innovations exemplify this goal.



Eli: Better Writing Through Review is a composing environment that coordinates peer review activities, provides analytics for teachers and students (e.g., “helpfulness” scores for reviewers), and provides teachers and students with views of their writing process that are not possible with existing technologies. In this way, Eli can facilitate curricula where *review*—the process of offering and receiving good feedback—is at the heart of writing instruction and learning. Invented by, Jeff Grabill, Bill Hart-Davidson, and Michael McLeod, Eli is rooted in basic learning theory on peer scaffolding and on the strong evidence that revision processes are where learning and improvement in writing happen.



Hart-Davidson says, “Learning to be a better reviewer is critical because it helps to externalize the knowledge that you’re learning as a writer yourself. When you have to give that advice to someone else, you’re creating a kind of dialogue in your own mind about what is valuable in writing.” Grabill argues that a curriculum in review forces students to ask, “Can I respond to [my peers] in a productive way to try to help them to become better writers?” in relationship to a structured set of criteria and values that relate to work in review.



Eli automates the work of writers submitting writing, reviewers reading writing, reviewers responding to writing, and writers strategizing revision based on reader feedback. Aside from an innovative technological platform and sound theory in reading and writing, Eli is built on an anticipated—and stronger yet, an expected—reciprocity and optimism. It's impossible to work in Eli without reciprocity and optimism: there is always a future event—a reading, an engagement, a response, and a revision.

(View developers describing Eli here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfrGI36ZCTg&feature=player_profilepage)



In the Commonplace curriculum, designed by Michael Harker, Aaron McKain, and Scott Lloyd DeWitt, students produce academic research and writing with an optimistic eye toward a future assignment that asks them to write about their research for a public audience. In this assignment, students are asked to produce writing that is timely, relevant, and compelling to the readership of an online journal of undergraduate writing, Commonplace. These manuscripts are concise in comparison to their related research projects and follow a different set of conventions, thus asking student to perform numerous rhetorical shifts in their move toward public writing.



Then, after an elaborate training, students participate in an inter-section, anonymous peer review of student manuscripts where they compose substantial review memos that evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the writing according to a set of analytics: identification of a central argument, adherence to thematic commitments (timely, relevant, and compelling), and the performance of sentence level craft. Using these analytics, students exercise their editorial responsibilities by deciding if manuscripts should be published on *Commonplace* (whose tag line is, “Because You Say So”—instructors teach the editorial process but do not make publication decisions).



The review process is divided in two steps. First, students write detailed, individual review memos that argue for one of three publication decisions: Accept with Minor Revisions, Revise and Resubmit, and Reject. Second, students work in groups of at least three and come to consensus on their publication decision; they write a group memo that reflects that conversation. Like Eli, review is at the heart of this curriculum. All participants review real manuscripts written by real writers, and they produce review texts guided by an anticipated/expected reciprocity because they know their review texts will be delivered to writers participating in the project. Every piece of the curriculum requires students and teachers to imagine multiple futures.

In his address at the 29th Annual Conference on Law and Higher Education, Thomas A. Workman argues, “Much of what we fear is based on our own generational lens and not the lens of those we’re trying to educate.” This exhibit suggests frames for reading archived narratives and creating focused invitations for collecting new narratives about 21st Century literacies. I argue that we should carefully consider and meet students’ optimism—their imaginations and expectations of the future—in our pedagogies and curricula. Reading literacy narratives in the DALN for optimism, hope, and anticipated reciprocity can inspire curricula and practices of innovative college writing programs in the same areas.

