

Interview with Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner

Writing Program Director, Eastern Michigan University



Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner has been the Director of First-Year Writing at Eastern Michigan University since the Fall of 2000. She finished her Ph.D. in Communication Studies in 1995 from the University of Minnesota. She is published widely, especially in the area of Basic Writing. She is the author of *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations about Writing and Literacies* (2002) and (with Greg Glau) *The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing* (2002). Her research interests include: “students, writing, and literacy. Specifically, I’m interested in how different groups and individuals define literacy, and how those definitions shape their interactions in various contexts (like school and home).” She is currently the Vice-President on the Executive Board of the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

Interview conducted on 2/5/07 by Lennie Irvin (with some material added from follow-up email correspondence)

Tell me a little about how you got into teaching and becoming a Writing Program Administrator (I accidentally started the recorder about one minute into the interview. I will begin my transcription as I started to record...)

Dr. Adler-Kassner: ...while I worked there [Univ. of Minnesota] on my Masters. I liked teaching there so much that I stayed for a PhD because I wanted to keep my job and discovered that I actually liked being back at school. So my boss there at Johns College was Terry Collins who's a really smart Art Administrator the smartest administrator I've ever worked for. And I kind of learned to do administrative stuff in writing programs from him. I'd already been an administrator because I was an arts administrator. So that's how I got into it. I was at General College for three years as a grad instructor and then became a full time lecture. When I was getting near the end of my time there, I co-administered the program with Tom Reynolds who is still at the University of Minnesota and head of the department. But that's how I got into it. When I left Minnesota, I went to University of Michigan, Dearborn and ran the Writing Center there, and then I left Dearborn after three years for a tenure track job at Eastern and I've run the writing program here ever since. I always say WPA work is sort of in your blood, so it is in my blood.

I guess the administrative background helped out a lot?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah. I'm a very very pragmatic person. So the administrative stuff of administration comes pretty naturally for me. But I also see Administration—I wouldn't do administration, the kind of paper shuffling administration as we sometimes imagine it. To me being a WPA is like being a teacher, it's just being a teacher with lots of lots of people collaboratively and simultaneously.

Could you tell me some about the institutional context and history of your program?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: [The first year writing program at Eastern](#) long long pre-dates me. It's been around for eons. The person who hired me twenty year ago had directed this program, so I don't know how long its been around. At one time it was a one semester requirement. In the early seventies, faculty decided they wanted a grammar add on so they added it. The person who hired me took it away. It sort of has gone back and forth. It has always been in the English department. The person who ran it before me was a rhetorician and the person before that was a comp/rhet person. It's always been well-supported in terms of the time allocated to the director and now the associate director as well. [Our English department](#) is in many ways unique among English departments because we have a very large writing faculty. We have 13 or 14 faculty members in different kinds of writing, so comp/rhet, tech com, journalism, public relations are also in our department. Our writing program beyond First Year Composition is big. At the undergrad level we have tech and professional writing (also grad), PR, and journalism. We all meet as a committee and discuss things. I have semi-minimal involvement with those programs, though, because at the undergrad level I almost always just teach First Year Composition. We also have an M.A. in Teaching of Writing, and I'm very involved with that program. I also mostly teach grad classes (although these days, I do more administration than teaching, which stinks). We're also working on developing a "writing studies" strand of our undergrad program We're a huge department. We exist really happily in our department with our colleagues in literature, linguistics, creative writing, children's literature.

The institutional context in terms of [Eastern Michigan University](#)--it is a comprehensive university, and we have 26 thousand students roughly. We are often the institution of choice for students who want to get teaching related degrees We are the largest producer of educators in the country. Teachers and administrators. We are one of the least expensive institutions in the state of Michigan, and we draw a pretty large commuter population.

(... I trimmed out some discussion about Michigan background here with mentions about poor support for the university from the State.)

I was interested to see that your program is a "First Year Writing Program." The University of Texas at San Antonio has a first year writing program, but it only formed about five to seven years ago, and it was designed to fit the notions of a freshman experience. It was also taken completely out of the English department.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah. Right. And I wonder how their budgeting is done. Those kinds of decisions often hinge on budgeting. That's what happened at Minnesota when the Comp. program got put back in the English department. We've always been in the English department, and its been a very happy place to be.

What is the scope of your writing program—things like the number of students, the size and make up of your faculty, and the number of course sections for your two courses you offer typically each semester?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Our course are taught by a few faculty, 14 full-time lectures, 45 part-time adjuncts, and then we have 18 graduate instructors many of whom want to come back when they are done. Our program is a really happy place to work. People love being there.

Adjuncts would teach 1 -3 classes?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: They teach one to four classes, and we try to have fewer people with more classes than a lot of people with one class each.

And the full-time lectures teach four?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: It depends what they are teaching. They teach fewer writing course than lit courses because of the work load involved. That's all in their contract. They are unionized, we're unionized faculty. The adjunct and the grad students are not unionized. It's the magic of numbers. Fortunately, we have a good department secretary because I can't keep track of it all.

FT lecturers have a scale of 3 levels (Lecturer I, II, III). I think pay starts around \$30/35K and goes up from there. Promotion depends on teaching and service and professional development (not necessarily publications, though). FT lecturers are on one-year contracts. Some have PhDs, some don't. Adjuncts *would* wind up in the FT Lecturer bargaining unit if they taught a FT Lecturer number of credits for a couple-three terms, but we're not allowed to have them do that because the university can't afford any more FT lecturers – which goes back to the budget stuff and the state, etc. (and stinks, because our adjuncts are some of our most fab instructors.). There's another story here about how the ft lecturers we have were made ft lecturers once they got unionized, but I won't get into that.

It is an interesting mix. I thought you would have more graduate students. I guess the adjuncts need to at least have a masters.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: No, they need at least a Masters.

I was interested in your course sequence 120 and 121. Is your 120 class a kind of developmental class? It is an optional class they can take on their own.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Isn't that an interesting question. The question is how do you define what is developmental which is the subject of a graduate class I'm teaching this semester—"basic writing at the college level."

If you define the course as developmental, you define the students as developmental.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Right, and I never define anything as developmental. To me developmental or basic writing is a label that institutions apply to certain courses or groups, and it's not a label that I'm—you know, it's a mixed label. I'm all about access, and I'm not about labeling people and certainly not about the kinds of curricula that can be included in those course. It is an optional course. It is like other first semester writing courses in that it has structure to work on the basic tenets of college critical work, reading writing.

Your 120 is like my department's Freshman Comp. I 121 is like our Freshman Comp II (which in our dept. is literature based).

Dr. Adler-Kassner: You know the interesting thing to me. I'm all about students having as much time as we can afford to give them in a writing class. We always talk to students about how 120 and 121 are sort of like gifts of the university to them. All you have to work on here is your writing and we structure the course in really supportive ways. But I hate zero levels. At Dearborn I taught a zero level writing classes but I hated that it was fictional, added on fictional credit.

120 is an elective class like any other elective that students take – that is, it's not part of their major, but it counts for graduation.

You mentioned that your program is collaborative. Could you elaborate on the ways in which it is collaborative? I noticed the wiki which is collaborative by its nature.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: The program when I was hired—I was hired with Heidi Estrem who is not longer at Eastern, so when I say we I always mean she and I. When Heidi and I were hired, she was just coming out of grad school, and I was coming from several years out of graduate school and WPA work. Our department head said, “It’s your program; go for it.” So we revised the curriculum for both courses. We did it in such a way that we set broad parameters that we now always refer to as the “big ball park.” The big ball park is things like in 120 the theme of the course some broad parameters like number of project in a semester. [In 120 they write four big projects](#) that you would call long essays and they revise two for a portfolio. [In 121 they do three projects](#), two of which are research essays and they revise them. We use different models for research essays. We sort of set the big ball park. OK. We said to everybody in the program, “Let’s figure out how we want to make this work. What do we want to change whether it is working or not? What do we want to do?”

We started like having huge numbers of meetings and luncheons and workshops and got everybody on board. Now it is eight years later, and everybody is just used to it. We’ve always tried to collect everything everyone has done as models for everyone to draw on, look at and throw out or whatever. We used to do it in binders and then in pdfs, and now we have it in the wiki. We are actually in the process of redesigning the wiki because people don’t like the way it is working. It is usually collaborative. But people are hired, and we say, “Here is the big ball park. Here are the parameters, try it, look at our models that we have and as soon as you get this under your belt let’s talk about what we should do.”

We do a lot of assessment work. When I say we, I mean everybody. Grad students, adjuncts, lectures professors. We do a lot of assessment and then we talk about what we want to do from the assessment results we get in terms of revising the program. For example, we are in the middle this semester (beginning last spring) of making revisions to 121 based on a two year assessment project we did from 2004-06. Then we are working with some of the librarians who are working with that, so it is very much a big tent program. It is because we really, I mean I really love working collaboratively and everybody in the program does because you get huge buy in. You get huge participation and everybody feels that they have a voice because they do. You know. You can’t make a program up by yourself.

Do you have a place where you describe the tenets and principles and practices of the pedagogy that goes into the big ball park? I’m thinking about what you do with a teacher who comes in and thinks teaching writing is all about read-and-discuss, analyze, and fix grammar. How do you steer a teacher toward more modern understanding of teaching writing and away from current-traditional notions?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: We have all kinds of curricular material that list the outlines of the bbp, yes... [they’re all on the wiki](#). (Curriculum guides, etc.) Frankly, we don’t have/wouldn’t hire a teacher who wanted to teach read-and-discuss, analyze, and fix grammar. We interview everyone, and we have the chance to work with instructors at all ranks through lots of professional development... so it just doesn’t happen.

Looking at your site, [I’m looking at the 121 site](#), and you have Stage I, Stage II, Stage III, Stage IV which are kind of like the four essays?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah, exactly

Within those stages/essays there are options or approaches? I see your grid for each stage.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: That's why we are redesigning the site. People like the grid, but it is hard to have the assignments placed in the grid. We're changing it.

Yes it is a lot of stuff to mix in.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: There is also like eight zillion assignments and activities that aren't in there. So we're getting those up.

These assignments are the kind of thing people can submit.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Oh yeah.

So as a teacher you can look at this selection of assignments and you can make some choices and adapt them for yourself. But it is all working within what you call the ball park.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah. It is all in the big ball park. It isn't like we want people to come in and say OK what do you think you should do? The big ball park is based on a huge amount of best practice research, experience and everything else. And we want people to contribute to the big ball park, but first they gotta figure out what it is.

You mentioned about assessment and I was wondering about portfolio assessment. Is that the major type of assessment? What sort of other sorts of assessment do you do to watch over the program to assess how it is doing?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: We do portfolio assessment in courses. Our grading is based on portfolio assessment. We do all kinds of assessment. We do assessment for grades, for placement tests—self placement. Then we do program-wide assessment. So I would say that in the past eight years that we've done three big assessments, we are in the middle of the third. The first one was a survey of student confidence levels with the outcomes of the courses. This was early on in 2002. Based on the results of that, we took some stuff about reading and focused work on developing the reading curriculum in courses. We took the results of that assessment to our Dean, and she said, "Listen to what students think? Who cares what students think? What do other people think? " When we got over this "what the hell" so we—its kind of a good question. We had just read Bob Broad and Brian Huot's book, and we... [What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing by Bob Broad and (Re)Articulating Writing Assessment by Brian Huot.]

Let me add one thing in--

Our program has always been very much about affecting public discussions of writers and writing on our campus, and we've done a lot of events around that. So at this time in 2004 we've been there for four years and we've seen some affects of our work, and we are pretty comfortable having some pretty broad-based discussion about writing with people that weren't part of our writing program. So we designed an assessment that essentially convened focus groups of stake holders and first year writing (so that's students, faculty, staff, administrators, and then people from the program). We had discussions about qualities of good writing from our context, working from the premise that we always say qualities of good writing are context-specific, so what are they here? So we convened focus groups, transcribed them, did some mapping of the transcripts and then came up with an assessment instrument that we use to rate portfolios from 121. This we call the "Campus-based Context Specific Assessment Project."

The [collaborative rubric we use right now](#) actually reflects our current outcomes; we're in the midst of

revising those based on the assessment here. I'll send you a new assessment we're doing, too, that will ultimately overlap with WAC assessment. Our challenge regarding all of this is that we're incredibly strapped for people and money... it's just hard to have the personnel and time to do these assessment projects.

Sounds a little like Thaiss and Zawiki's study at George Mason University.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Something like that--deriving criteria from the discussion. Yeah. That was a two-year process between the focus groups and now the developing assessment instrument for rating. So from that we took some stuff from research writing and it was a very complicated rubric and we had help from a math faculty but it allowed us to get some interesting correlations. And we took that and we have worked on the revisions to 121, especially around the research writing process. And now this semester we'll do an assessment looking at the changes we've made based on the success with working with the librarians to see how those are showing up in students portfolios. We are very proactive in that regard. I think that is one thing that good WPAs do is look proactively for the horizon and think about how to position their program, their students, their instructors in ways that are going to be helpful to students learning and instructors teaching. So I think assessment has a big part to do with that. You know if we can gather good data and use it to improve teaching and learning in our courses, that's benefiting everybody. We're always on that.

With the portfolio assessment...is that done where you gather as a group and score them holistically together or does each teacher score their own individually.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: At the end of the semester instructors grade their own portfolios. We did a pilot many years ago where we traded portfolios, but everybody decided they weren't getting paid enough to do that much work.

I saw the rubric you have. Do you also have examples that match the rubric?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: The [rubric](#) is developed collaboratively, and we don't have standard examples that match it, but we have like three thousand gazillion portfolios so people grab portfolios and take them to their class and have their students grade them. And they talk about what grade they gave them and why. Which we find for us is a really successful way of helping students think about that rubric. We find it more affective to have students grade things than explain to them why they gave them the grade they did than explain what this is what an "A" looks like and a "B" looks like because they are intuitively working through those things, and they do it themselves. And then they also have to explain why they gave it what they gave and then have them look at their own portfolios to say what would you give to yours.

I was lucky the first semester I taught. I didn't know what I was going to do, so I visited some of my colleagues' classrooms. I asked if I could sit in to see what you do and I got in class with Ellen Shull who used portfolios and I have used them ever since.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: This class I am teaching isn't quite a portfolio class, and I tell my grad students I can't stand putting grades on things. It makes no sense to me. They are doing four projects that feed into a larger project. I feel totally uncomfortable with this. I have to think of this differently in my mind. You are right. Portfolios are the only thing that makes sense. Why else are we here?

Mechanics question—so student writing doesn't get a grade in 120 or 121 until it is graded in the

portfolio, right? I know students go through multiple drafts. Do you have a program-wide policy on drafts before the final portfolio? What incentive do you have for students to do the drafting before the final portfolio?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Good question. Students get full/half/no credit on their submission drafts. They can't pass the class unless they do all of those. They also get "grades" (either real ones, or plus/check/minus which translate into A, C, NC) on short essays that they write building to Les. That said, students go bananas because they don't get grades – but when I say (and I mean me, in my own sections): Do you think you'll be a better writer at the end of this course than you are now? And they say, "yeeessss..." and I say, "Then why would you want a grade on something now, before it's done, rather than at the end?" They don't like this, but they begrudgingly accept the logic.

I am interested by some of the ways you have "framed" the curriculum and pedagogy. I particularly like how you use the terms "interlinking core strategies" rather than terms like "skills" or "learning objectives." You use the notion of "stages" rather than "essay cycles" or "assignments." Each of the stages is framed as "curiosities" (as in explore, develop, investigate). Could you explain some of the rationale of the language you use in your curriculum?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: We call it an inquiry-based program. We're very, as I said a few minutes ago, part of what I'm saying is that I'm very concerned with contributing to the ways that writers and writing is discussed on our campus and that's because all of us, we always hear you can't do this or students think or whatever and that's just not true and it's not a productive way of thinking about learning or students and not a way that's going to encourage students to do their absolute best work that they are always capable of doing because they're all super smart. Neither I nor Heidi like to talk about skills because skills are sets of things that you acquire and then have. We like talking about strategies because they are things that you are always working on and thinking about how to apply and constantly refining and retooling.

And they differ depending upon what you are working on and the context.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Right. We're also very keen on promoting an inquiry-based program because we both worked in lots of different contexts where students see writing, and especially research writing that tended to prove something that they already know or prove something period. When writing is of course a way of thinking and wrestling and grappling. We love the word grappling in our program. And promoting thinking and learning as a process of grappling. Where if you come out with more questions than you did before and they are different questions and more sophisticated questions, that's a wonderful thing. That's why we have always worked with these inquiry-based strategies and the research essay models that you see in our 121 course area all meant to facilitate that kind of grappling. The multi-genre essay is the closest thing we have to the classic, traditional argumentative research paper. It does offer the opportunity: if students choose it and it is appropriate to their audience, they can choose something that they have learned about in their earlier research writing to sort of make a point to a specific audience, but through different genres emphasizing their research. We really like it because students really like it.

I think getting away from the notion of skills based is crucial. And it is still very much defined that way with our developmental classes in my department.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah. How better to drill the fun out of writing? And it should be fun to wallow in ideas and roll around with it for awhile.

I have a research interest in reflection. Could you elaborate on the role you see reflection playing in your curriculum (I notice it is in the grid for each “stage” of learning in each course)?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Sure. When we talk about the work that students do in 121 we always talk about the fact that what students are going to take away from 121 is not the subject of their research or the precise things they wrote. It is the strategies they develop doing that stuff. So there is the stuff they are doing. I hesitate to use the word "content" because I hate the separation, but for ease of reference for the moment there is the content they are working on and the strategies they are using to do it. And it is the strategies-- sometime I refer to them as the "words that carry"—that they need to understand what they are doing and then take it to other places, take those things to other places. So reflection is super super key right there because 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 different contexts. We had a grad student who finished and is now working on her PhD at Kent, Jennifer Castillo, who did her master's project on reflection and it is so smart, and she contributed a huge chunk of the strategies that we use to facilitate reflection in the program. She did lots of workshops on them while she was here.

Did she publish her MA? Is it online.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: No. I'll give you the URL for our electronic reserve so you can read it.

I'd love to look at it.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Another piece of this, I'm sort of the interim director of our writing center and we've shifted our writing center model from delivering one-to-one consulting to doing workshops that support the writing strategies for the courses. So we've talked a lot in terms of these workshops about how to get students when they sit through and participate in these workshops, that it's the strategies that they need to take from these workshops.

So that's the relevance of reflection and transfer stuff. We think really hard about that. We think that's the really important feature of any writing course and is woven through our program for that reason.

Does it tend to come in any particular places in the stages or in the course?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: All over the place. It comes in the form of exit tickets or entrance tickets. On any given day in class, we'll say, “What did we work on today and what did you take away from it?” That could be an exit ticket on any day. Students always do reflection letters with the portfolios they submit. Their drafts called submission draft packets, those always have a reflection letter, reflection activities, they're all over the place. One of our GAs named Nicole Bryant has a brilliant thing for revision. It is somewhere in the wiki, but if you look probably in 120 in the fourth stage under reflection. She has this three rings of revision, reading like a reader, reading like an editor... . She has some really smart strategies. People come up with the coolest stuff. I can't say if it is like this everywhere because I have been here for a long time and you lose perspective, but the people I work with are so smart and creative. Nobody could build a program as strong as this program by themselves.

It sounds like you have a model that is more akin to an open source model, like the wiki or a software version of it, rather than a proprietary program in a box?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: Yeah. Very much. We have the big ballpark. Even Linux has boundaries to it. So yeah, as long as stuff is in the big ballpark we are very open. One of our most creative instructors is an adjunct named Cindy Jeehan. Would that we could create more full-time lecture positions, but because of the financial situation of the university and union exigencies, we can't. Cindy is brilliant. She has the most creative, cool, assignments. Her students make things out of cardboard, and wire and amazing multi-genre stuff in her courses. She's an incredible teacher. It is in that respect--it is very open source. Once you are sort of in the ball park, Cindy and Jennifer Castillo are good examples, the sky is the limit. We figure that working with strategies as we do, students don't have to write "lines on a paper" type of papers. They do have to write lines on a paper, and I don't want to disregard that. But there are many many other things that they can do, in many genres. So they can incorporate lines on a page papers, they can write reflections about stuff. It is much more about the strategies and the thinking than that kind of "now I am typing a five page paper" because a five page paper can be about throwing up five pages. Not that that doesn't happen in our program because it does.

As I mentioned in my email you'll find our program is bimodal: Bimodal distribution (as in two modes) – really strong students and really not as strong students, with very few of the medium kind of students in between. We have real strengths. We have not a single computer classroom, and we pay our adjuncts 3K a course.

What do you like most about your role and job as WPA?

Dr. Adler-Kassner: It is a really fun job. The people I work with are awesome. The people in our First Year Writing Program are awesome. My department is mostly, we've been able to do a lot of things basically anything we want to because it has been smartly done and we've done lots of assessment. Seeing the work that students do. You would not believe the things people create. There is this woman who used to teach in our program, Diana Agee, who always said, "It makes my heart sing." It really does make your heart sing what people can come up with. I love it when students surprise themselves, "Who knew I could do such a thing?"

We have the best [celebration of student writing](#). Check out CSW the movie version I and II. It is a celebration and students are always amazed, "Who knew I could do this and people would be interested?" It is so amazing when students see that people are interested and they can do such great stuff.

The celebration is a campus event.

Dr. Adler-Kassner: It is a huge event. It is one day. April 10th. Students create a project based on their research in 121. If a class decides to participate, then everybody participates. I am no fan of separating and sorting based upon my basic writing experience. Everybody should be recognized for their smartness all the time. They create these projects that are wild. They bring them to our student union and display them. It is an hour and a half. It is jammed and loud. You have to watch the movie. It is just a total hoot.

There are so many things I love about my job. It's just an awesome job. Being a WPA in this job in this place is awesome.

Thanks you so much for being willing to talk with me.



Reflections and Thoughts on the Interview

My first impressions from doing this interview with Dr. Adler-Kassner is how friendly and forthcoming she has been. Our interview took 40 minutes, and then we have had about four email exchanges since. I can imagine how busy she is, so I am quite impressed and grateful that she would take the time to help me with this project. In the following reflection upon the First Year Writing Program, I will structure my discussion according to the topics of program description, staffing, pedagogy, and assessment.

Program Description/Classification:

The First-Year Writing Program at Eastern Michigan University is what I might call a “mature” writing program. It has a long history as a writing program with competent leadership from Writing Program Administrators with solid backgrounds in Composition/Rhetoric, and it has a coherent set of practices and goals based upon contemporary understandings of writing instruction. Dr. Adler-Kassner has very consciously avoided framing the first-year writing program, even its lower-level class, as remedial or skills-based. Interestingly, the program remains within the English Department but appears to have avoided or outgrown *belletristic* and current-traditional rhetorical notions of writing instruction. Neither composition class is literature-based. It seems that the overall writing programs at EMU are broad enough and strong enough to allow the FYWP to focus on writing and not be a surrogate to the literature program.

I would classify the program as a “collaborative” writing program. Dr. Adler-Kassner, along with her former Assistant Director, appear to have done some wise moves as they re-formed the program upon being hired. In addition to opening up the program development to comment and additions from the other faculty involved in delivering the curriculum, they asked for input from the wider campus community. Although I will talk more about this topic in my pedagogy section, it appears that the program aims for the goal of praxis, the fruitful dialectic relationship between theory and practice. No doubt, creating the program as an inclusive entity has helped its position within its university context.

Staffing

The FYWP appears to have similar working conditions as most composition programs. In other words, it appears to be as bad there as any place else (though perhaps not as bad). Doing the math from the numbers Dr. Adler-Kassner gave me, it appears that roughly 3/4 of the writing classes are taught by adjuncts or graduate students who have no benefits and lower pay. The full-time lecturers receive more pay and have a gradation system of levels for experience, and they have benefits. These lecturers have it better than the adjuncts, but they still do not have full-status as university professors. I didn’t get the full number of sections taught by tenure-track faculty, but Dr. Adler-Kassner indicated it was only a few. That means nearly 100% of the courses in the FYWP are taught by teachers without full university status as university-level professors. As we have talked about in class, this situation of believing writing instruction does not deserve the same status of faculty as other disciplines is well-illustrated in this writing program.

Despite the poor status given to the FYWP faculty by the institution, Dr. Adler-Kassner has created a supportive, inclusive program that appears to create a working environment teachers like.

Pedagogy

The FYWP at EMU, as Dr. Adler-Kassner notes, is an inquiry-based writing program. That would place it more in the New Rhetorical, epistemic writing type of program. This notion of writing being about meaning-making and “grappling” with the development of ideas and thinking is at the heart of the program, especially the research component of the 121 class. As I mentioned before, the program seeks to reach praxis in its balancing of theory and practice. Let me explain what I mean by that. Dr. Adler-Kassner describes their curriculum as the “big ball park.” The big ball park is the set of instructional assumptions and theories about writing and the teaching of writing that form the framework for the program. Each course has a fairly programmed set of assignments with clear and common learning objectives and outcomes. Each course also has well-articulated assessment measures. These are the abstract principles and theories that guide the courses (the big ball park). However, each course also has accompanying it a large set of example assignments that can be done to meet each assignments objectives. These example assignments form a kind of cafeteria of options for each teacher to choose and learn from. The result is a balance between choice and structure for the faculty. In practice, they have flexibility in how they will meet the theoretical structure of the course/assignment. What I see Dr. Adler-Kassner promoting is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (as Louise Wetherbee Phelps describes in *Composition as a Human Science*). She seems to be very open to the innovation of teacher practice and letting that innovation inform the theory guiding the overall structure, just as she lays out the theory to guide less experienced faculty members practice. I compared this dialectic to the open source development of a software program.

Assessment

If I can extend the open source analogy, I believe that Dr. Adler-Kassner has implemented assessment with the notion of the program being in a “perpetual beta” development situation (at least, I see that she is in the perpetual beta stage right now with her program). In 2000 when she arrived, I believe she made some smart moves to institute changes in the program by involving the entire community in the development of these changes. Using terms from Technical Communication, I would say that her first assessment phase which involved a lot of surveying and interviewing of students was an act of User-Centered Design. The second phase of assessment involving focus groups and meetings with other stake-holders in the FYWP across the campus was a combination of User-Centered Design and Participatory Design. By asking for feedback on the curriculum and program from the faculty involved in teaching it, Dr. Adler-Kassner definitely enacts Participatory Design.

She made one statement about assessment that really struck me as smart: “I think that is one thing that good WPAs do is look proactively for the horizon and think about how to position their program, their students, their instructors in ways that are going to be helpful to students learning and instructors teaching. So I think assessment has a big part to do with that.” Dr. Adler-Kassner has done a good job of doing the kinds of assessment that has and will proactively position her program for success. The current assessment of 121 and its research writing curriculum is a good case in point.

The last thing to say about assessment has to do with having a common assessment measure for all courses. I think this program has a nice balance between having a common measure, but not having a restrictive and overly defining “test” as its measure (like a common final exam or standardized test). The assignments allow a broad flexibility in the curriculum, and the portfolio and portfolio rubric provide a means of common measurement of writing.

Conclusion

I have learned a lot from my interview with Dr. Adler-Kassner. I think my background as a classroom-

instructor within a department that really does not have a writing program has shaped my interview questions and perspective. I see that I have been much more interested in pedagogical and curricular issues, while not really focusing as much on the administrative realities of a Writing Program Administrators day-to-day work (the meetings, the budgeting, the hiring-firing, the problem-solving, the crunching of numbers, the student complaints). This interview represents my first level of field research into the First Year Writing Program at Eastern Michigan, and will provide a valuable start for my larger profile of the Writing Program.