

ATD Reviews

A Review of Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition

Edited by Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, & Amy Lynch-Binieck, 2017. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse. [<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/contingency/>]

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The conversation about labor conditions in the field of composition has been well trod over the last thirty years. Contingent faculty members, now comprising two-thirds of the university's instructional workforce, are on the front lines of increasing corporatization in this age of austerity. Often underpaid (particularly in the humanities) and offered little in the way of benefits or job security, these faculty are typically bound to one-year contracts without guarantee of renewal (Coalition of the Academic Workforce, 2012, p. 1). Composition, especially, has seen a "near-total conversion" of its work to this "system of flexible managed labor" (Bousquet, 2004, p. 5). Unfortunately, these material realities have become "a condition to which composition studies has been normed" (Scott & Welch, 2016, p. 5). Focusing on reform efforts, the eighteen chapters in *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* advance the labor conversation in important and invigorating ways, offering definitive steps toward organizing, advocacy, resistance, and change for those ready to take action.

Chapters include the voices and perspectives of faculty members at all ranks as they describe their struggles, successes, surprises, and solutions arising from their work on labor concerns in unique institutions. The editors organize the included works around five threads: professionalizing and developing in complex contexts; local changes to workload, pay, and material conditions; self-advocacy; organizing within and across ranks; and protecting gains, telling cautionary tales. These are not disparate threads easily separable. In fact, this collection reminds us of how intricately these threads are tangled. For instance, a key argument that emerges in this collection is that exploitive labor conditions promote neither the professional identity nor the professional growth needed to improve pedagogical practices. The structural and material inequalities that restrict contingent faculty's participation in the larger community (their participation in curricular and programmatic decisions, their participation in pedagogical research, etc.) results in professional isolation and stagnation. Professionalization must be recognized as an aspect of materiality, and so, an often invisible cause of inequity. Professionalization is subsequently tangled with advocacy and organizing efforts and must be understood less as a panacea than one more situated aspect of our political economies. Likewise, gains and set backs. Progress, after all, is often interrupted. But when it is, solidarity may incite further forward movement.

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Readers will come away from this collection with a greater sense of the solidarity that can be achieved across the disciplines and, indeed, how important such solidarity is to organizing efforts and outcomes. We learn of its importance amongst faculty through Wootton and Moomau's discussion (Ch. 13) of faculty alliances as key to advocating for contingent faculty's participation in governance, and in Donhardt and Layden's discussion (Ch. 12) of how a faculty coalition can actively work to spread awareness of labor conditions not only within departmental walls but also amongst the student body and larger public. We also learn of the importance of building solidarity amongst administrators through McBeth and McCormack's discussion (Ch. 3) of how a WPA can work with committees within the department, college, and larger university to convert adjunct positions to full-time lecturer positions. Of particular relevance to conversations involving administrators and tenured faculty working in solidarity with contingent faculty is Kahn's discussion (Ch. 16), which offers ethical considerations for those advocating on behalf of the exploited, especially if such work is to facilitate a movement.

Although chapters such as these address the enormity and complexity of what we might rightly call a crisis, they successfully avoid feeding a "rhetoric of despair," which, as Nardo and Heifferon point out (Ch. 2), promotes a pervasive sense of powerlessness and so, justifies hopelessness and a lack of explicit work for change. Instead, this collection focuses on action and thus inspires rather than disheartens, which may be its greatest strength.

As an example of this action, Laubach Wright (Ch. 17) analyzes how the rhetoric of excellence, a seemingly innocuous phrase at first glance, fosters research as a commodity and thus devalues teaching (by reducing teaching to that which subsidizes research), but then offers an argument for how this rhetorical phrasing can be turned around to work for faculty equity. Blankenship and Jory's contribution (Ch. 10) offers another take on rhetoric-oriented action by describing how they involved contingent faculty in the compilation of a report to accompany official reports completed by their department. In this move toward solidarity and the enfranchisement of those who may otherwise have been erased or silenced, the authors demonstrate how to effectively engage in genre appropriation as a form of rhetorical activism. More subtle rhetorical activism is demonstrated elsewhere in the collection through a call to change the discourse about writing instruction at large, through strategic rhetorical choices such as referring to course releases as "course reassignments," and through other forms of protest and resistance, such as reading aloud, as if memorializing, the names of contingent faculty members whose positions were cut. There is something quite beautiful about these rhetorical efforts, which we don't often find in the literature on labor. Perhaps nowhere is this more demonstrative than in the collection's closing piece by LaFrance and Cox (Ch. 18) on institutional architecture and the rhetoric of space, in which the academic narrative is intertwined with images and reflections, reading somewhat like a lyric essay.

The conversation on labor, resistance, and effective moves to make change in composition has been largely insular, confined to the field's journals; however, in the past decade, we have been fortunate to see strands of this conversation moving out into the public sphere through position statements (such as those from NCTE and CCCC) and through editorial pieces (such as those in *HuffPost* and *The Atlantic*), which is helpful for building both awareness of and momentum for the ongoing labor movement amongst outside stakeholders. It is thus significant that this collection is being released electronically through an open-source publisher, as this allows for such an essential read to be accessible not only to faculty and administrators, but to those typically outside the conversation, such as our students, their families, and the public at large.

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