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The Tyranny of “Best Practices”: Structural Violence and Writing Programs

Roger Thompson

In one of the more striking of recent claims about writing instructors, an educational research group, citing recent scholarship, declared that “writing teachers are among the most resistant to incorporating research-based practices in instruction, preferring to rely on the advice of professional authors and successful teachers of writing instead” (“Many Best Practices”). Research-based practices, sometimes called evidence-based practices (EBPs) or “best practices,” are a relatively new phenomenon within the study of writing pedagogy. They emerge at a time when our institutions of writing instruction are being asked to consider the value of standardization and to negotiate the forces that insist on their desirability. More importantly, they come at a time when implementation of standardized practices are linked to funding and hiring processes.

Even a cursory review of the history of writing pedagogy reveals countless attempts codify writing instruction. Since the emergence of the field of composition, the need to find universally applicable standards has driven much discussion about writing pedagogy. John Brereton’s 1995 history of the early days of composition identifies conflicts over common purposes across institutional contexts, and Katherine Adams’s 1993 history of professional writing illustrates an ongoing tension over which models of instruction might apply across institutional contexts. Sharon Crowley (1998) has suggested that this type of standardization can be read as an attempt to control student thinking and behavior by an institution:

University and college faculty imagine composition as the institutional site wherein student subjectivity is to be monitored and disciplined . . . The course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies” (9).

Similarly, Deborah Brandt’s work (2001) can be usefully read as revealing the ways in which literacy codes function to control or disseminate power to various groups. Indeed, if Brandt has taught us anything, it is that the very conception of “literacy” is bound up in economic and political histories that are often invisible to us. So it is with writing instruction and, more to the point here, the idea of best practices.

The purpose of this article is to describe the invisible history of “best practices” in order to demonstrate the concept’s rhetorical nature. It argues that practices—whether “best” or not—are politicized actions accompanied by histories and epistemologies that, if left unexamined, deflect inquiry and prevent thoughtful implementation of ideas. More importantly, best practices establish institutional structures that foster a specific kind of cultural violence that undermines agency and autonomy.

Zeitgeist

Gary Troia and Natalie Olinghouse, whose article describes writing instructors as particularly resistant to best practices, examines the relationship between Common

Core writing standards and the actual implementation of those standards by writing instructors. In all, the article finds significant gaps between the Common Core Standards and the implementation of "evidence-based practices" that are shown to improve writing, and the authors identify both a root cause of the disconnect and provide a solution. Interestingly, their solution has little to do with writing itself and more to do with the state of mind of instructors. They call for intervention by school psychologists to promote evidence-based research. Writing teachers, for the authors of this article, need psychological intervention in order to ensure that writing instruction adheres to EBP.

Of course, the article is written for an audience of educational psychologists, so the appeal is in some respects reasonable, yet a striking feature of the recommendation is its single-mindedness and its unilateral nature. At no point does it encourage psychologists to consult with writing instructors about their domains of knowledge. Indeed, just the opposite:

School psychologists typically have a strong understanding of both what constitutes good research evidence and a broad knowledge of what practices are currently supported through research. Moreover, school psychologists appreciate the effects of teacher expertise and student/family values on the implementation of EBPs [Evidence Based Practices] within an implementation science framework, or the 'scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice' (Eccles & Mittman, 2006, p. 1). . . . Many educators prefer to rely on the advice of successful teachers of writing (e.g., Atwell, 1998) or professional authors (e.g., King, 2000) to guide their own writing instruction because they mistrust educational research, which is the foundation of EBPs (e.g., Boardman, Arguelles, Vaughn, Hughes, & Klingner, 2005; Jones, 2009). Thus, school psychologists must help inform teachers and other practitioners about the benefits of using rigorous replicated research to select teaching practices (and the plausible constraints of the research for employing a practice with a particular student) and the limitations of practices derived from isolated case studies and professional wisdom, particularly those practice recommendations that fall outside the list of EBPs for a domain or that counter prevailing EBPs. (353)

While the impulse here is clearly to render aid to instructors, the directives illustrate an ongoing and well-described pattern of dismissal of classroom contingencies and, potentially, composition research. The authors are quick to note that individual variables and local conditions need to be considered, but they nonetheless emphasize that the educational psychologist, equipped with special knowledge, must guide the curricular decisions of apparently recalcitrant writing faculty.

At the heart of this study is the concept of "evidence-based practices" and the authors' seemingly irrefutable deductions about the nature of writing instruction and knowledge uptake. Throughout the article, the efficacy of EBP is never much in question:

The current educational Zeitgeist of evidence-based practices and interventions rings loudly in the offices of school administrators, professional organizations and research centers, hallways and meeting rooms of schools, colleges of education and government entities, the host of media, and the education research literature. This is likely as it should be because education professionals, scholars, policymakers, and the public at large all should have an abiding interest in the academic, social, physical, and psychological well-being of children and adolescents. (343-344)

One significant warrant driving such observations is that evidence-based practices are, in fact, the best way to ensure the “academic, social, physical, and psychological well-being of children and adolescents.” This warrant becomes explicit when the authors declare that “evidence-based practices (EBPs) are a *prima facie* mechanism for promoting positive educational outcomes because they are methods, programs, or procedures that integrate the best available research evidence with practice-based professional expertise in the context of student and family characteristics, values, and preferences” (344). In other words, EBPs are best because they claim to be best.

A History of “Best Practice”

The history of the term “best practice” is clouded by its use across and within innumerable fields and industries, and the *concept* of best practice, as with the history of any idea, is even harder to pin down. The term itself appears as early as 1929, though as a subject of extended discussion, the term only gains significant traction in the mid-twentieth century, with W. E. G. Salter’s 1966 text *Productivity and Technical Change* and John Martin’s six-volume set on *Best Practice of Business* in 1978 serving as important milestones in the growth of the term. Still, the term does not appear to expand meaningfully beyond the manufacturing industry until the 1980s when a range of financial institutions appropriate it. By the early 1990s, vibrant discussion of the term had saturated various corporate sectors, and it drifts toward education and the humanities by the beginning of the millennium. To date, no standard history of the idea exists, though numerous articles attempt to trace disciplinary histories of it. Its application to writing practices appears to emerge from those working in business writing, and it appears as a problematic concept even then, as illustrated by Albert Joseph’s 1967 harangue against English faculty destroying good writing by reliance on prescriptive grammars instead of composition instruction. Joseph, best known for his work in professional writing and as author of *Put it in Writing*, a best-selling text on writing, decries universal “principles in writing” and attributes the fixation on such principles to educators who focus on rules and not contexts (38).

Eugene Bardach is often cited for bringing the term “best practice” into more common usage, and though Bardach is often discussed as the person who coined the idea, his career demonstrates his own reticence toward its broad implementation. An Emeritus Professor of Public Policy at Berkeley, Bardach has been involved in public debate about the term for over two decades. His *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis* outlines a method for investigating and writing about policy questions, and he invokes best practice in order to prompt more careful and nuanced writing of policy. His text highlights not just the subject matter of policy and its connection to best practice, but also the actual process of discovery and revision that policy writers face when composing in their field.

Instructors of writing will recognize many aspects of Bardach’s approach to analysis and composition. His focus on critical thinking and careful research embody hallmark traits of many first-year writing programs, and his fixation on the *language* of policy will resonate with rhetoricians even if he doesn’t share a vocabulary with them. Bardach’s text, then, is approachable and accessible to a greater range of readers than its target

audience, and that approachability probably has something to do with his concepts extending beyond his discipline.

The heart of his handbook is the recognition that in order to write effectively, a policy analyst must first engage in a process of discovery that requires critical questioning and careful research. The first six steps of his eight-fold path are acts of invention: define the problem; assemble some evidence; construct alternatives; select the criteria; project the outcomes; confront the trade-offs. Only after going through this process, in this order, does the writer reach the seventh step, which articulates a clear position: "Decide!" The final step, "Tell Your Story," suggests the degree to which Bardach envisions his process as not only writerly, but rhetorical. If the seventh step establishes the actual conclusions of the research and discovery phases, the eighth makes it public by forming a story that can be heard, understood, and acted upon.

Bardach is keenly aware of the rhetorical implications of policy work, and his opening lines press home the ethical obligation of those who engage in the rhetorical process:

Policy analysis is a social and political activity. True, you take personal moral and intellectual responsibility for the quality of your policy-analytic work. But policy analysis goes beyond personal decision making. First, the subject matter concerns the lives and well-being of large numbers of our fellow citizens. Second, the process and results of policy analysis usually involve other professionals and interested parties . . . and the ultimate audience will include diverse subgroups of politically attuned supporters and opponents of your work. (xiii)

Bardach here highlights the civic and political functions of policy writing, while gesturing toward the professional and economic as well. Bardach's careful attention to audience is important, as it gestures toward his ongoing concern with how his "eight-fold method" for analysis must be sensitive to diverse constituents.

Bardach argues that the initial work of defining a problem is actually a process of analysis, and while he does not rely on terminology from the discipline of rhetoric or composition, he insists that understanding language and rhetoric itself is primary to the first step of writing:

Your first problem definition is a crucial step . . . Usually, the raw material for your initial problem definition comes from your client and derives from the ordinary language of debate and discussion in the client's political environment, language I call generically *issue rhetoric*. This rhetoric may be narrowly confined to a seemingly technical problem or broadly located in a controversy of wide social interest. In either case, you have to get beneath the rhetoric to define a problem that is analytically manageable and that makes sense in light of the political and institutional means available for mitigating it. (1)

Bardach's invocation of the term "rhetoric" here is in the most general sense of the term, but the process he suggests amounts to rhetorical analysis, and the end point (the "getting beneath" the rhetoric) resembles Aristotle's enthymeme or Toulmin's warrant. Indeed, he insists that "philosophical and practical" questions "warrant" exploration, and he expands his discussion on the nature of definition (2-3).

The centrality of the rhetorical aspects of Bardach's path persists to the final step, "Tell Your Story." He posits the "New York Taxi Driver Test" (essentially an "elevator pitch") as the best way to conceive of telling your story: a one-minute, "coherent, down-to-earth explanation" of a position (41). The heart of this is consideration of audience.

For Bardach, the goal is “to explain your basic story to someone in sufficiently simple and down-to-earth terms that that someone will be able to carry on with the task of public, democratic education” (42). Here, Bardach explicitly links communication with democracy, signifying not just his sense of the importance of the work being done by policy writers, but the degree to which language shapes the public sphere. His sense is that audience must be central in the telling of the story:

After many iterations of all the above steps—redefining your problem, reconceptualizing your alternatives, reconsidering your criteria, reassessing your projections, reevaluating the trade-offs—you are ready to tell your story to some audience. The audience might be your client, or it might be broader. It might be hostile, or it might be friendly. (41)

Writing instructors will recognize in the list above the focus on revision even as the process moves toward audience consideration, and perhaps most importantly, rhetorical expression that has embedded within it democratic ideals about persuasion of audiences from diverse viewpoints. Each of the steps of the eightfold path have been *reconceived* to emphasize the ongoing need to reconsider findings throughout the process of discovery and invention. Writing instructors will also recognize the emphasis on audience, which is a primary concern of Bardach’s because it highlights the public and ethical nature of policy work.

Bardach broaches the idea of “best practice” in the final section of his book: “Part III: ‘Smart (Best) Practices’ Research: Understanding and Making Use of What Look Like Good Ideas from Somewhere Else” (71). Bardach’s section title here is at pains to distance itself from the term, and his attempts to qualify it—placing it within parenthesis within quotation marks—border on the absurd. Still, the idea apparently has currency, and he attempts to address it by describing it as a process that identifies practices “that appear to have worked pretty well, tries to understand exactly how and why they might have worked, and evaluates their applicability to one’s own situation” (71). “Best practice” in this instance is not a practice at all, but instead a hermeneutic that examines a practice within its rhetorical situation.

That Bardach’s conception of “best practice” is, in fact, a method of analysis is apparent in the subtitle of his book: “an eightfold path to more effective problem solving.”¹ Nonetheless, that defining aspect of Bardach has been lost in the more popular adoption of best practice research, which most frequently recommends a set of practices that can be implemented across contexts. Even research that attempts to qualify applicability of one set of practices within another situation nonetheless relies on the efficacy of a practice with broad appeal and, more importantly, the force of purported expertise behind it.

The problem with the idea of “best practices,” then, is not contained within the term “best,” but within the term “practice.” Practice implies something that needs to be done. It suggests a specific action must occur to mitigate a particular problem. Replac-

1. The phrase is the subtitle to Bardach’s book, but I highlight it here because I want to draw attention to Bardach’s as a method of “problem solving.” The language suggests that the book is about establishing solutions, when he in fact recommends something much different than that. I suspect part of the tidy readings of Bardach—those that focus on “best practice”—emerge in part from the promise of the title, even if they are convenient misappropriations of the text.

ing "best" with "smart," "thoughtful," "promising," or even "evidence-based" does not mitigate the problem because the term "practice" perpetuates the notion that a packaged solution, developed beyond a particular context, can be unfailingly deployed. In fact, the process described by Bardach is not a practice, but a hermeneutic grounded in rhetorical inquiry and research, and it provides a means to assess an action without actually insisting on its implementation.

The Migration of Best Practices Epistemologies

Criticism of the idea of best practices emerged in the 1990s just as the idea was gaining popularity across multiple fields. That criticism was especially apparent in the manufacturing and financial sectors, when the rapid growth of best practices was met with sometimes apocalyptic warnings about its implementation within those fields. Alan Pilkington, for example, suggests in 1998 that "best practice" research actually stifles innovation in manufacturing and cites evidence for the "demise of best-practice." By the mid 2000s, as the concept found purchase in Information Technology, Adam Shostack and Andrew Stewart note with skepticism that "'Best practices' have proliferated within IT, and especially so within the security industry," despite the fact that "consultants, vendors, and the security industry as a whole has a vested interest in the security decisions that are made" (36-37). The result is that "anyone can (and does) call their advice a 'best practice'" (37). Some researchers attempt to address these concerns by offering new understandings of the term. Early in the migration of the term out of business and into education, Mary Peters and Timothy Heron attempt clarify the actual meaning of best practice by evaluating and categorizing the types of best practice scholarship. Writing about special education best practices, they observe that best practices have varied approaches, ranging from product orientation to process (373-375). Finding such a range problematic, they propose criteria that allow teachers and administrators to assess the utility of best practice scholarship (379-382). Their hope is to maintain the idea of best practice while minimizing the "undesirable effects" it incurs. They insist that "the term *best practice* is misleading to consumers who believe it to embody a finite set of critical programmatic features that have been thoroughly researched, replicated, and validated" (377). The implication, of course, is that it may not have been researched, replicated, or validated at all, and their criteria are an attempt to ensure that it has.

Still, Peters and Heron participate in the very process they are attempting to dismantle when they outline their criteria. They offer "an operational definition of best practice as a standard by which to review such practices systematically in special education" (382). Their "measurable criteria" embody the type of practices they wish to call into question, and while they propose to rethink the idea of best practice, their goal is to create a mechanism that holds true in all areas of special education:

This notion may also be extended to all aspects of special education, where the discrepancy between best and current practice is evident in various instructional settings. Perhaps teacher trainers would be more effective in transmitting best practice methodologies if there was consensus as to its composition and if *best practice* were considered to be a reliable and valid term for the communication of critical program features. (382)

The authors' goal here is not to rethink best practice as a problem, but to standardize its implementation to ensure adherence and submission to the terms of evaluation. The result is best practice on steroids, in which not only the practices are standardized, but the method for creating and assessing them are as well. In short, an epistemology—a way of knowing what constitutes a practice—is mandated.

The insistence on providing a consistent way of knowing is palpable in such work, but scholarship has noted the problems with such a drift toward foundational ways of thinking. Russell Gonnering, for example, has argued that in terms of management, best practice may only be possible in “simple” situations. Most situations call for more adaptive methods, and he argues that best practice research relies on “transfer of primarily explicit knowledge,” but that institutional improvement is most heavily dependent on implicit processes and assumptions. As a result, he argues that “the question is more important than the answer” (97), and he insists that the “seductive allure of ‘best practices’” is that it offers external solutions to processes that are typically formed in the culture of a particular institution or organization: “Are we up against a cultural or societal bias in favor of such an externally imposed solution to our problem? I think we are” (97-98).

The difficulties posed by a process divorced from genuine engagement with local realities has resulted in serious questioning of the concept of best practices even in fields that, for many people, appear utterly reliant on the idea. In medicine, for instance, increasing scholarship suggests that focus “best practice” effectively eliminates more careful treatment planning and methodologies. One study, “When Best Practice is Bad Medicine,” suggests through a case study of South African health care availability that the “best practice imperative” exasperates global inequities in health care access, “crowding out” certain levels of treatment for people most in need (Kenyon, et al. 352). Another study (Dunning 2003), conducted by cardiologists in the UK, reveals that invocation of “best practice” pressures doctors in ways that may be less productive than a local, problem-solving strategy. The authors argue that doctors move from a conception of “best practice” to one of “best available evidence” as a way to switch the focus from standardized implementation to a method of forming more reliable questions in local contexts (405).

Among the more compelling studies of best practice in medicine is one (Woolf 1999) that suggests how best practice guidelines actually undermine patient care. The study, published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, part of the United States National Institutes of Health, illustrates precisely why best practices should be approached with significant caution or even skepticism. Indeed, the authors argue that on three highly significant levels, best practices are essentially untrustworthy and undesirable. First, they insist that “scientific evidence about what to recommend is often lacking, misleading, or misinterpreted. Only a small subset of what is done in medicine has been tested in appropriate, well designed studies.” Second, they note that “recommendations are influenced by the opinions and clinical experience and composition of the guideline development group. Tests and treatments that experts believe are good for patients may in practice be inferior to other options, ineffective, or even harmful.” Third, and not distant from the point of the article about South African medicine, the authors of the NCBI study point out that “patients’ needs may not be the only priority

in making recommendations. Practices that are suboptimal from the patient's perspective may be recommended to help control costs, serve societal needs, or protect special interests (those of doctors, risk managers, or politicians, for example)" (528-9). In all, the authors insist that "Too often, advocates view guidelines as a "magic bullet" for health-care problems and ignore more effective solutions" (529). Even in medicine, a field that focuses on testing hypotheses and replicating facts by some measure of objectivity, best practice poses significant risks—life-threatening ones.

Eugene Bardach as early as 1994 remarked on these very limitations, and while he seems unwilling to jettison the term entirely, he has been at pains to redescribe and clarify it. In "The Problem of 'Best Practice' Research," he identifies these "epistemological problems" and reminds the reader that "one true theory of knowledge has not been discovered yet," despite the "positivist" yearnings of certain management theorists. More than a decade later, he develops this line of thinking in his "Extrapolation Problem: How Can We Learn from the Experience of Others?" The heart of this article is Bardach's concern that "best practices" are mindlessly adopted without considering how to extrapolate meaningful information from them. He laments early in the paper that "compendia of 'best practice' in dozens of policy areas are now exploding on the internet. These compendia purport to offer guidance to all and sundry, usually drawn from experiences in one or a few sites. But these and many other compendia I have seen assume that users are considering replication rather than adaptation or inspiration" (206). Bardach here begins a criticism of those who create best practices by arguing that they are peddling in narrowly replicable (and implicitly infallible) certainty. His point throughout the paper is that, regardless of intent, creators of a best practice necessarily fall short of their goal. Bardach insists a solution is possible only when creators attune to their own processes (as opposed to the final practice) as a means to help extrapolate findings and apply them to other circumstances. He establishes three heuristics, one of them a "semantic trick" for deploying a new mindset around best practices and another grammatical tip whose sole purpose is to help adopters "view the program as a process rather than as an entity" (213-216). In the simplest terms, Bardach suggests that a "best practice" can only provide us with ideas for how to pursue our own work:

Extrapolating from the experience of others is not literally "extrapolation." It is more like searching for interesting ideas about successful mechanisms that might be adapted at home, and then inferring from the experience of others plausible estimates about the chances of success or failure in implementing the adaptation. (218)

Bardach identifies the ways in which the term has been misapplied, and he articulates several solutions in subsequent paragraphs. Those solutions, some of which he labels semantic, are more accurately called rhetorical: they seek to understand mechanisms that drive a message, discern the context of it, and extrapolate meaning. In short, Bardach's concern with "best practice" is rooted in rhetoric, and he can rightly be read as resisting the term.

"Best Practice" in Writing Instruction

The history of the idea of best practice in fields other than writing suggests that it is hardly a settled term and that it has been, in some cases, overtly dismissed. Yet the term

is now widely used and animates much discussion around assessment and curriculum. Among the adopters of the term has been CCCC, NCA, NCTE, CEE, MLA, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, whose purpose is, in part, to “advocate and help members advocate for best practices in the teaching of writing and the administration of writing programs in postsecondary institutions” (“Join,” WPA). Being able to use and apply best practices in writing programs has at times even entered job descriptions in the field and appears regularly as organizing principles of conference sessions. The history of the CCCC’s (Conference on College Composition and Communication) or WPA’s (Council of Writing Program Administrators) invocation of the term—or more broadly, the field’s invocation—will likely never be fully recoverable. But as central national bodies that drive discussion on writing program practices, their statements on administration, assessment, and review of programs are especially important.

In the context of the WPA’s diverse constituency during a time of significant growth, rapid evolution of the classroom, and constraints on resource allocations, best practices are appealing.² They appear to provide a measure of certainty, and by appealing to the expertise of the central national body, WPAs can advocate for change within their organizations. When that expertise comes in the form of “best practices,” WPAs gain credibility. An example from CCCC is perhaps useful in making the point.³ When CCCC issues a statement indicating, for example, that writing classrooms should be capped at a certain number of students, the organization does so with more than a theoretical purpose. CCCC is attempting to facilitate change on campuses. Writing faculty and administrators use the statement as a proxy, which stands as expert testimony when they make their case within an institution on issues such as staffing, student learning, and curricula.

While statements of best practice from CCCC or WPA may not hold the same power as statements from other central academic organizations (e.g. The American Medical Association), the rhetorical purpose is the same: facilitate change, advocate for members, provide voice to central concerns of the discipline. The desire to assert a prac-

2. Surveying the number of books that are dedicated to best practices in writing reveals the degree to which the concept has saturated the field. Among the most noteworthy is *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* by Steve Graham, Charles MacArthur, and Jill Fitzgerald. This best-selling text for writing instructors is linked explicitly to the new Common Core, and among its central premises is that we should “focus our will on bringing these best practices in writing instruction more fully into all classrooms” because “we stand at a unique moment in the history of writing instruction in schools in the United States” (3–4). That moment is the wide adoption of the Common Core, and while various authors in the text are careful to warn instructors against “slavish” adoption of any practice, the urgency of the message suggests that adoption is preferable to supposed continued (yet undemonstrated in this text) lack of change in classrooms over the last decade.

3. Both NCTE and CCCC have issued a variety of statements on “best” or “promising” practices, among them policies on dual credit achievement in digital environments (2012), tenure-track hiring (2016), and electronic portfolios (2015). Perhaps most notable of recent declarations of best practices is CCCC’s statements on online writing instruction (Hewett, et al. 2011). Given the contested nature of online coursework, new media composition, and electronic pedagogies, these statements have special force as the field wrestles with the changing landscape of writing pedagogy.

tice is, in part, a rhetorical act intended to pressure colleges and universities to listen to WPAs and writing faculty. The goal is to facilitate change at the institutional level by bringing the prestige of a professional organization to bear on an issue. Administrators at universities, seeking to best position their school, colleges, and departments, can look to these practices to claim evidence and advocate for change.

The issue, of course, is that statements of best practices work in multiple directions. Not only can the practices serve as tools for adopters, but they serve as constraints on institutions and administrators. Further, if "best practices" can be used as tools by faculty, they can also be used as tools by institutions seeking to make changes based on issues not directly related to the field at all. The practices can, in other words, become criteria against which a program or a faculty is judged, for good or ill and regardless of institutional commitments or histories. The result is a kind of workplace fundamentalism, where appeals to external certainties trump local, on-the-ground realities.

Of course, identifying potential drawbacks to a position does not mean the position itself is undesirable. One might argue that despite the potential that a best practice could ultimately undermine a writing program as it seeks to advance its position, the upside in having the imprimatur of a national organization is too great. The problem with this reasoning is that the "upside" here participates in an activity fundamentally at odds with rhetorical ways of knowing and doing. The elimination of difference, the insistence on certainty, and the establishment of unquestionable authority across contexts—in any other domain we would call this the foundation for tyranny and social violence. And yet, within our discipline these conditions have taken on the guise of improvement and progress. They are, in fact, hallmarks of totalitarian epistemologies, and when applied to education, they develop into especially worrisome consequences for students.

As states have moved to adopt Common Core standards, curricular innovation, student learning, financial stability, and workplace security have become increasing enmeshed with the idea of best practices. The opening of the fourth edition of *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms* serves as a useful example of how best practices deploy power in organizing curricula (Zemelman, et al.). The fourth chapter of the book discusses best practices in writing instruction, and the introduction to the work betrays the stakes implicit in establishing best practices in writing classrooms.

The book's initial move is to assert its ethos: "This is a book about excellent teaching and powerful learning. Its principles come from authoritative and reliable sources—the major professional organizations, research centers, and subject-matter groups in American education" (ix). Wound into that ethos is the attempt to align the book's findings with "excellent teaching and powerful learning," and the authors insist that "the practices endorsed here have proven effective with students from kindergarten through high school, across the curriculum, and among learners of diverse languages, abilities, backgrounds, and learning styles" (ix). The breadth of the claim is noteworthy, not so much for its ambition, but for its certainty about the student learning experience. The authors extend such certainty beyond the students:

This book is for everyone in education—for young teachers just entering their training; for principals, administrators, instructional coaches, parents, and school board members; for researchers and policy makers and politicians; and even for old-timers like us three coauthors—each with more than forty years of teaching under our belts. The

work of this volume is to get us all on the same page, speaking the same language about kids and learning. Here, we gather to find the consensus, the core, the fundamental understandings that bind us together in the service of students, no matter what role we take in their growth and development.

When we educators read and discuss this rich and powerful information—as veterans, as newbies, as faculties, as teams—we define for ourselves what “best practice” means, and how we can embody it in our work with young people. (ix)

The final point, that we can “define for ourselves” the nature of best practice is striking because the purpose of the book is to actually identify, name, and establish what those practices are. In other words, while suggesting that we might define for ourselves a best practice, the authors actually provide a set of epistemologies that constrain the discussion.⁴ Those epistemologies become clear in the text’s discussion of the term “best practice” itself, which is defined by way of opposition:

Some people insist that education as a field does not enjoy the clear-cut evolution of medicine, law, or architecture. But still, if educators are people who take ideas seriously, who believe in inquiry, and who subscribe to the possibility of human progress, then our professional language must label and respect practice that is at the leading edge of the field. So that’s why we have imported (and capitalized) the term Best Practice—as a shorthand emblem of serious, thoughtful, informed, responsible, state-of-the-art teaching. (2)

The implication for teachers here is clear (and made more so in subsequent passages): if a teacher does not attend to the “Best Practices,” he/she apparently does not believe in inquiry, human progress, or cutting edge research. Indeed, that teacher is irresponsible, ill-informed, and unthoughtful—and likely a fuddy-duddy to boot.

While some might dismiss this text as idiosyncratic or inapplicable (it is neither), it lucidly paints a picture of a cultural impetus attendant to the Common Core that has far-reaching effects on students and educators. Indeed, the authors revel in the promises of the Common Core, and the promises rest precisely their ability to eliminate difference:

These are landmark developments. Since America’s founding, the work of educating children has mainly been left to local communities. Indeed, some have said that our public schools are the last vestige of local governance left in our democracy. Now, with the Common Core and all its ancillary mandates, America for the first time moves toward a truly national educational system. Some, but not all, of the most educationally effective countries in the world have taken this approach. Now we are going to see how it works for America. (3)

To imagine that these “landmark developments” and “ancillary mandates” are not linked to concrete and high stakes evaluations of students, faculty, and administrators

4. Steven Zemelman’s body of work suggests his deep commitment to education and his focus on student learning. Indeed, some of his work explicitly criticizes the standards he appears to endorse in this work. For example, he writes eloquently in defense of story-telling and narrative in an online article, “Common Core: Caution on Narrative Writing.” My analysis should not be read as an *ad hominem* attack on the values of the particular authors. Instead, I am attempting to point out that the authors control the terms of debate and make inquiry into them not only undesirable, but tantamount to resistance to improved learning and teaching.

would be to fail to survey the current environment of public secondary education. The ability to implement these practices is facilitated by their connection to revenue streams, promotion evaluations, and student aid. If this book illustrates promising new practices with which many of us would ultimately agree, it also illustrates an educational experience that requires unquestioned adoption of its ways of knowing. It resists not only inquiry, but innovation as well. Equally important, it points to an educational mindset that posits external formulas as fundamental certainties that demand adherence. The most worrisome consequence, as Shostack and Stewart point out, is that "as soon as a template and a script for performing a piece of work exist, an associate can do what would have previously required a senior manager or partner [to do]" (37). Best practices, by their nature, situate authority outside the adopting institution, even while institutions insist that internal authorities forgo their expertises in order to ensure consistency and efficiency.⁵

Our professional organizations have, to some degree, embraced that externalization of authority in subtle yet inescapable ways in an effort to advocate for writing instruction. For example, the WPA's 2003 "Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices" illustrates the stakes that are involved when best practices in a rhetorical field are invoked.⁶ The set of practices prescribed are likely to seem uncontroversial, and indeed, seem to embody precisely the type of practices many writing instructors embrace. For example, the practice of "Explain Plagiarism" or the one to "Attend to Sources" seem almost absurdly obvious to many of us who teach writing. Their capacity to function across institutional lines might be hard to dismiss. Implementation of some of the other practices, however, may have more far-reaching implications than might be readily apparent. An obvious example would be the suggestion that WPAs and writing faculty participate in or facilitate the creation of a campus-wide Honor Code. For those campuses that already have one, this task may seem straightforward enough, but for those without or those with particularly lax or ineffective codes, the prospect of facilitating change of this scale in addition to traditional curricular and staffing oversight is more than daunting. This type of work stands to put the faculty at the center of a particularly ambiguous and controversial topic, and such topics for untenured WPAs are especially problematic. More importantly, working on concepts like "honor" as it relates to writing presumes a shared understanding of how plagiarism undermines honesty, integrity, and "honor," a point that researchers such as Rebecca Moore Howard have demonstrated are far from simple to determine.

5. Shostack and Stewart point out that because best practices are often purposefully vague, they are "inefficient by their very nature" because applying a general practice to a specific instance may create inordinate expenditures of time, energy, and resources (37).

6. This statement no longer appears on the WPA website, a testament to the organization's careful attention to recent scholarship on plagiarism. I include it here because it remains in wide circulation, with many institutions still using it as a kind of primer for new teachers, both formally and informally. My point in using it is not to criticize the organization, but to draw attention to the impulse to deploy and use best practices. Further, I think it worth attending to our own field's history in order to construct a more nuanced understanding of how best practices are used within rhetoric and composition—and education more broadly.

Of course, the likelihood is slim that the WPA committee making these recommendations envisioned a wide swath of administrators seeking to create honor codes, but the example stands out for that very reason: the “best practice” articulated by the committee seems a remarkable goal for WPAs, even for those who are particularly activist or concerned about plagiarism. Perhaps a less obvious, but no less significant, example is the following best practice recommended by the council:

Support each step of the research process. Students often have little experience planning and conducting research. Using planning guides, in-class activities, and portfolios, instructors should “stage” students’ work and provide support at each stage—from invention to drafting, through revision and polishing. Collecting interim materials (such as annotated photocopies) helps break the research assignment down into elements of the research process while providing instructors with evidence of students’ original work. Building “low-stakes” writing into the research process, such as reflective progress reports, allows instructors to coach students more effectively while monitoring their progress.

The research methods described here are undoubtedly excellent ways of not only conducting research, but understanding material to compose essays. Nonetheless, the model here may be beyond the means of many writing faculty, let alone students. In those programs that are staffed with high numbers of contingent faculty, or those with both high teaching loads and high seat counts, the process must look more than onerous; it must look unrealistic and threatening. “How can one possibly expect *me* to do *that*?” I can hear the faculty member say, who teaches a 5-5 load with 30 students in each class. Perhaps more to the point: what happens if faculty are judged on their capacity to follow such practices?

I realize the impulse here would be to insist that local concerns would, of course, be considered in implementation. Invoking a “best practice” does not require that the practice becomes a criterion for evaluation or judgment. Such a claim, however, obliterates the very reason best practices seem so appealing—so that we have a standard against which to judge our activities and professional choices. Best practices inherently imply a set of judgments to be made. Does your program, we might ask to make this point clear, employ “best practices”? Most of us don’t want to be on the negative side of that question, and our response illustrates our sense that we are being measured, assessed, and perhaps even implicated as either resistant to or deeply enmeshed with the principles outlined in the practices.

Structural Violence

While many of the examples above derive from the Common Core and public secondary education, the power that best practices deploy already regularly inform policy and curriculum decisions in universities, especially as states begin in earnest to investigate university classroom practices across the country.⁷ The issue here is not,

7. Editors’ Note: See research on higher education degree program productivity, e.g., Byron G. Augustine, et al. “Winning by Degrees: The Strategies of Highly Productive Higher-Education Institutions,” New York: McKinsey & Company, 2010. <http://www.aascu.org/corporatepartnership/McKinseyReport.pdf>

of course, whether or not public institutions require some measure of oversight, but instead how the use of best practice to measure or assess performance of programs, departments, research centers, or faculty imposes epistemologies that circumvents dialogue and inquiry. Indeed, they may undermine autonomy and agency of programs and individuals.

Because best practices function to deploy power in ways that explicitly marginalize, they embody what Johan Galtung (1990) has called "structural violence." Galtung's theories emerge from political and peace studies, and while his early work introduced the idea of "structural violence" as how institutions might harm individuals, his work has expanded considerably. He insists that structural violence is any institutional force that prevents agency or self-realization, and he argues that violence is best understood not from the point of view of the person or institution inflicting it, but from the perspective of those who have been disenfranchised. Such a viewpoint allows for broader consideration of what violence might be. For example, prohibiting access to medication to certain groups of people would not be considered violence from the point of view of those withholding the medicine (e.g., doctors, nurses, insurance companies). They might justify their actions on any number of fronts—some reasonable, others insidious—and they can hardly be accused of directly inflicting physical harm. However, from the viewpoint of those without the medicine, who will absolutely suffer without the medicine, the violence of the act is real and palpable. In that case, Galtung might say, the structures that allow the prohibition against prescribing the medicines commit institutional violence.

While an example concerning medicine is useful, it does not fully account for the expansiveness of Galtung's vision of violence. In "Cultural Violence," he extends the idea to symbolic violence, which may not physically harm but nonetheless damages people, and in his widely cited *The True Worlds*, he develops, as Kenneth Parsons points out, the idea that violence is the "between the potential and the actual," including "inequality, injustice, exploitation, penetration, fragmentation and marginalization"—in short, anything that "impedes personal growth and is built into structures . . . any unintended or indirect constraint on an individual's personal growth is structural violence" (175-176). Parsons, in fact, wants to reclaim the term "violence" as something that does more direct damage, but he invokes Galtung both to serve as a foil and to demonstrate, in agreement with Galtung, that most of our thinking on violence is too narrow and too likely to allow certain injustices to persist.

Galtung's notion of structural (and later cultural) violence have been taken up by scholars in numerous fields, including those in disability studies, anthropology, and, though less so, educational theory. For example, William C. Gay has described "linguistic violence" as "that portion of cultural violence which negates 'identity, meaning needs,'" which may, among other things, demonstrate that the violence is "more psychological than physical" (14-15). Perhaps more usefully, Deane Curtin and Robert Litke trace a taxonomy of violence, from personal to institutional and from overt to covert. Within each category, intent is less significant than the damage inflicted, so that in covert institutional violence, "the damage is no less real" than overt personal violence (such as an assault). Their discussion of covert institutional violence is especially useful for considering how structures like best practices foster violence in educational settings: "If a pervasive

assumption is made within a school district that boys, but not girls, should take additional years of science or mathematics, this is covert institutional violence. If a fire fighter's public exam makes unjustified assumptions that only men can be firefighters, this is covert institutional violence" (xii). In both examples, covert institutional violence may or may not be intended to alienate or prohibit participation, and yet functionally, it does.

Best practices function as a comparable covert institutional violence. While in most cases not intended to create harm, their claims to *prima facie* truth limit participation and, more problematically, delineate the terms upon which participation is even allowed. Ultimately, they function rhetorically to mandate institutional policies and curriculum, and their rhetorical power derives from their claims to purportedly authoritative ways of knowing. Adherence to or departure from best practices help shape community identity, and deviation from a best practice within a community often has explicitly negative consequences. Because a best practice often lays claim to what is most desirable, most sought after, and most "right," it likely will gradually come to govern decisions about how we construct our institutions—from funding, to curriculum, to faculty promotion. It presumes to manufacture an ideal reality for an institution, one that is purportedly applicable across institutional contexts, and failure to achieve that ideal often has very concrete consequences for stakeholders.

Best practices are appropriated, then, not as a series of questions that might be asked or a set of processes that might offer insight into a particular organization's governing principles, but as a set of measures that must be achieved in order to demonstrate mastery of the terms of improvement. Whether or not such mastery actually demonstrates "improvement" is beside the point. What matters is an individual's ability to negotiate the terms of achievement implicit in those practices. While best practices might provide some basis for improvement by appealing to a set of standardized criteria upon which improvement can be based, they simultaneously become unquestioned judgments that drive and define "improvement" within that community. To question those assumptions is tantamount to doubting the supposed communal achievement in establishing the practices in the first place; it suggests failure to improve, failure to understand, or failure to participate in meaning-making for a community. Removing oneself from participation in a "best practice" suggests revolt, recalcitrance, or even insubordination, and the implementation of the practice functions to quell opposition to its own epistemologies.

The notion of "best practice," then, is itself rhetorical. A best practice is meant to convince stakeholders to accept its way of knowing, and its objective is to persuade them to adopt its way of doing. When a practice is identified as "best," it achieves a type of authority that resists scrutiny and rhetorical inquiry. The label itself hierarchizes, eliminating competing views as subordinate, less desirable, and "not the best" to such a degree that to speak for an alternative means embodying the language of the outcast, the disenfranchised, or the discontented.

Practice as Architecture for Inquiry

Best practices rely on providing answers that function effectively across time, institutions, departments, or even socio-economic, gender, or color borders. Best practices assume the position of tested and verifiable data and reliable truth, and they purport

to be certainties on which we can place our professional trust and allegiance. Most importantly, they become the vehicles through which we form judgments about our institutions and the people working in them. In doing so, they do more to undermine curricular innovation than support it because they demand that we ultimately become consumers of knowledge and not participants in meaning-making.

Such thinking, of course, works against much of what we do as educators, especially as writing instructors. Writing faculty have learned that the linkages between thinking and expression are often too densely woven to be neatly teased apart, and that reducing the act of meaning-making in a particular writing exercise to a set of checklists undermines the very nature of much of what we hope to accomplish. This is not to claim that we cannot have verifiable and tested data with which to support our claims—we indeed should and must have both—but instead it is to claim that *inquiry* into applicability of external data to particular circumstances should be at the center of any consideration of a practice. While practices across institutions provide meaningful data upon which we might forge our own set of practices, they should be used to prompt parallel questions and ways of knowing through which an institution might discover its own meaningful and also testable practices. In other words, processes across institutions and disciplines should provide avenues of inquiry, not final claims.

Engaging with “best practices,” then, becomes a rhetorical act: what is this particular practice trying to convince me of and/or persuade me to do and why does it want me to do it? Are these practices in keeping with my own institution’s demographic, geography, set of expertises, and economic realities? When practices are evaluated as themselves rhetorical actions, they become subject to difficult questions that are most meaningful when placed in cultural, communal, and organizational contexts. They become not practices at all, but investigations. Recognizing the rhetorical nature of best practices requires us to investigate complexities, draw nuanced distinctions, and respond in thoughtful ways to reasonable criticism.

When we resist best practices and encourage rhetorical inquiry into organizational structures (whether economic, cultural, or otherwise), we function as architects of possibilities. We create space for new ideas and for learning by facilitating questions within communities, not by mandating the terms of improvement. Much like an architect provides a vision by inquiring into the purpose, context, and space available for invention, we in writing studies can best build our writing architecture on a series of meaningful questions that derive from our own histories, our own institutional contexts and demographics, and our own avenues for funding, support, and development. If we strive to mandate externally-created changes, even well-meaning ones, we participate in a system of education that imagines certainty at its core. If we strive to see practices as rhetorical possibilities, we encourage education that finds living questions animating our institutions.

Exasperation, cynicism, or even nihilism may lead us at this point to throw up our hands and declare, “Well, what’s the use of experts then? Why investigate successful practices at all?” Bardach, of course, would answer this by pointing us toward extrapolation. What can we, he might say, extrapolate from a set of practices that resonate in our particular communities? I would go further. Expert study and research into success provides us with a set of questions and builds a framework for inquiry. If we are seeking intelligent questions that we can pose to our communities instead of a set of packaged

practices that we can implement or impose, we are doing more than simply extrapolating good ideas. We are treating our own home communities with dignity and respect, and we are modeling to our students the value of living in questions while seeking solutions. If we do otherwise, we have not only adopted an idea (that of “best practice”) that does not apply to rhetoric as a field, but we have adopted it from disciplines that have found it wanting. We have imported, in other words, not a best practice at all, but a tyrannical certainty whose promise for achievement can never be attained.



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