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Beyond Critique: A Response to James Sledd

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While I have been called a fool and a knave before, this is the first time it has been by someone I thought I was agreeing with. For it seems to me that James Sledd and I share several key concerns. Sledd criticizes the self-interestedness of boss compositionists; I take his charges seriously in order to suggest more progressive ways of working as a writing program administrator. Sledd identifies himself as an advocate of classroom teachers; I articulate a similar set of commitments both in my essay and my recent book on composition as *A Teaching Subject* (Prentice, 1997). Sledd describes tenure as a "snare and delusion"; I have worked as a scholar and administrator to formulate alternatives to the tenure system that offer writing teachers professional respect and job security.

Where we differ is over the question of whether one can effect real change through working within an imperfect system. Sledd dismisses administration as "tinkering" which can only offer the illusion of progress, while I see such piecemeal, programmatic efforts as one of the few options open to those of us who wish to improve working conditions for teachers in the near rather than distant future. I understand that it can often be hard to draw the line between accommodation and reform, but I see it as my job to try to do so. It strikes me as facile to decry the labor practices of the academy without trying to find concrete ways to alter them, and so I have chosen to work as an administrator

as well as a professor. Doing so has convinced me that we need not only critics of the academy but reformers within it.

But what Sledd has to offer here is only a familiar, if perhaps unusually fierce, form of academic criticism, scouring the texts of his opponents for seeming lapses and investing small niceties of phrasing with large and sinister intent. For instance, in addition to accusing me of being “muddled” in my thinking, of aspiring to become a “benevolent dictator,” and of committing the “evil of misrepresentation,” Sledd derides boss compositionists, in the space of a *brief* note, as plantation overseers, wannabe sons-in-law of ol’ massa, not-quite Iagos, systemites, hell-pavers, and horn-blowers, as foolish and mistaken petty administrators, who are uncritically loyal to a bad system and unable to grasp “what intelligent grad students understand at once,” and yet who somehow manage to thrive in “a hierarchy unfit for human habitation.” Well, as Woody Allen once said, academics are like mobsters, they only kill their own. But the real harm done by such infighting lies in the way it distracts us from more serious work. I am less interested in scoring debating points than in finding ways we might act to make our writing programs more secure, fair, and effective. And Sledd’s own long career, as he describes it, shows how little his mode of ideological criticism manages, in the end, to accomplish—since the same corrupt hierarchy of labor he remembers from sixty years ago in Texas is still the one he claims to see all around him now.

I think we *can* change the labor practices of our programs and departments, though not through critique alone. We also need to be willing, not to buy in or sell out, but to strive for positions of influence within the structures of the academy and to use that influence in the interest of beginning undergraduates and their teachers. I suggested several ways of doing so in my essay. For a look at how I have tried to put some of those ideas to work in the messier realm of institutional practice, readers can visit <http://ctlw.duke.edu/> for a description of the center I direct at Duke University—which includes a first-year writing program that, while lacking tenure-stream lines, asks teachers to design writing seminars that build on their interests as scholars, invites them to participate in defining the collective goals and practices of the course we all teach, and offers them multi-year contracts with livable salaries and benefits. I present this work not as a model of what should go on at other sites, but as evidence that we can move beyond critique and towards real, material reform.