CCCC, Difference, and Electronic Literacies: An Interview with Lester Faigley

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As Program Chair for the upcoming 1995 CCCC convention in Washington, D.C., Lester Faigley has just spent the summer immersed in a sea of proposals. As a result, he is able to offer us a unique perspective on the current state of composition studies as well as a sense of where we might be headed. At every turn in the following dialogue, it seems that we are faced with issues of "difference"—not only in the postmodern sense of the term, but also in the sense of change. Faigley talks at length about how our discipline is responding actively to difference and uses the growing influence of electronic literacies as an example one particular type of change. Even the structures and procedures of CCCC itself have become complicated by change and difference. Toward the end of the interview he discusses candidly CCCC’s growing pains and its increasingly awkward relationship with NCTE.

TT Over the past decade and a half you have been a consistent contributor to the scholarly conversation in composition. Given this significant body of work, do you consider yourself a writer?

LF I think of myself as a writer in that I spend a good part of every day writing. My writing has changed a great deal in the last two years as I have become more involved with administrative jobs. For example, I just finished a proposal to fund our undergraduate writing center. Writing as an administrator has been a different experience: the give and take with editors, of course, doesn’t happen; time is often very limited, and you have to turn things out basically in one draft. But my writing is still intensely collaborative. Along the way I have learned some nuances of making arguments to administrators that I was not aware of before. And I’ve learned a little about how upper administrators think and what sort of arguments are likely to appeal to them.

TT You have written a good deal about the influences of electronic technologies on writing. Would you describe how your writing process has evolved over the years, particularly as a result of new technologies.

LF I started using electronic technologies extensively for writing when I came to the University of Texas in 1979. I was writing a great deal at that time. We did not have secretarial support, and I simply couldn’t afford to retype when editors wanted changes. So I began using a main
frame computer through a 300 baud modem which effectively prevented using a full-screen editor because it takes 64 seconds for the screen to fill up every time you make a change. I used an editing program in which, essentially, you couldn't see the text, and it required some pretty heavy cognitive demands to imagine what the text looked like every time I revised. Of course, I had to print fairly frequently. Sometimes I would be working at home and would send the text to a line printer at the university, run over, get a copy, and return home because I would get lost amidst all of the changes that I’d made. As things have progressed, I have found that computers certainly facilitate revising and making editorial changes. But, beyond that, the more recent ability to exchange ideas with scholars all over the world through the use of network technologies has been remarkable. Those capabilities are rapidly changing scholarship, and increasingly we will see the dissemination of scholarship through electronic forums. The economics of publishing certainly favor electronic modes of distribution, and it’s going to change the whole nature of scholarship.

TT But did you sense a significant transition from writing primarily with pen and paper to electronic forms?

LF Well, I didn't sense it immediately because I always revised a great deal. What was absent was the stack of paper that I would always accumulate. Usually I would need a box full of typing paper to produce a single article. I would rewrite the article a few times, and often I would simply have to rewrite from scratch. There are some advantages of doing that: sometimes I could re-see it or get a different line going. In fact, one of my colleagues here is a creative writer who insists on rewriting everything from scratch. But now I just don’t have time to retype everything, although sometimes it probably would be good to think through the whole process again.

TT You have coauthored much of your work, collaborating with what may seem an unusually wide variety of scholars. Composition theory typically endorses collaborative writing, and it appears to be a very productive way for you to work. However, the individualist tradition within English studies has historically denigrated collaboration. Do you believe the politics of collaboration is changing in the humanities?

LF My own collaborative experiences have been very productive. I've learned a lot by writing with other people, and I've very much enjoyed working with other people, and I continue to do it. I have some collaborative projects underway now. I do think that the bias against collaboration in the humanities is changing. Of course, the sciences have recognized collaborative work for many years. Today, there are very fruitful possibilities for working with people in other disciplines, so the collaborative model is now much more recognized. And my sense is that tenure and promotion committees don’t have nearly as much difficulty
with coauthored work as was the case only ten years ago when they would wonder what to make of it. I remember elaborate statements on promotion cases that asked me to comment on how much author X did. I don’t hear those sorts of questions coming from other institutions anymore when I’m asked to evaluate promotion cases.

TT In a recent editor’s column in CCC, Joseph Harris discusses the difficulty of learning “how to situate ourselves within the text as writers” (161). The increased attention to the personal in the act of writing arises from, among other things, the postmodern desire to be more aware of the ideological positions of the author as well as the desire to challenge traditional prose styles which pretend to present themselves as objective. In your writing, you refer to personal elements such as your interest in architecture and your experiences in Singapore. What do you see as the appropriate role of the personal in writing?

LF As you point out, theory’s interest in the situated self has led to a great deal more personal writing in scholarship, and it looks like the trend has hardly peaked. But I don’t think one can make a blanket statement about what the role should be. It can be aggravating when writers pretend to have no investment in a particular set of issues. When an autobiographical narrative is of particular relevance to an issue—such as when certain scholars are writing on feminist issues—it is very appropriate to bring in your own experience and address your particular investment. In some cases it tends to be, if not overdone, at least not done in ways that seem very interesting. It varies. Some people, obviously, have a great deal more to bring to bear—such as Gayatri Spivak who comes from India and has the perspective of a vastly different cultural tradition. When a writer like Spivak brings her experiences to bear, it can be very powerful compared to someone who may not have as much to offer in terms of difference. And it varies greatly according to genre. I have written nonfiction travel narratives that are almost exclusively personal. My sense is that when one’s personal history intersects in interesting ways then it is often a mistake not to highlight those kinds of experiences. The personal can provide a kind of a way in and also a way of understanding. In my writing I have tried to work through particular questions that have been of personal interest. For example, my undergraduate training in architecture connects to issues such as postmodern theory. The demarcation of postmodernism is fairly clear-cut in architecture, and to think about how that discipline had changed from how I was taught in it was an important juncture for me as I started looking at the relationship between postmodernity and composition.

TT Cultural studies, as a field of inquiry or a methodology or whatever it may represent, is beginning to exert an influence on composition theory and pedagogy. Henry Giroux, for example, argues that texts from popular culture should be included often in the writing class. However, part of our challenge as teachers of writing is to connect
students with discourses from outside of their comfort zones. How can we productively integrate popular culture into composition pedagogy?

**LF** First of all, many popular materials do fall outside of students' comfort zones, especially if they're asked to look at them critically. In fact, some people have argued that we, as writing teachers, sometimes work too hard to distance students from the popular texts that they very much enjoy and that we are somehow invested in spoiling their participation with certain kinds of cultural texts. But I do think that one can gain a great deal from introducing popular materials. If you are interested in the critical study of language, for example, you could talk about how certain uses of language become commonplace, how others are introduced in ways that contest dominant discourse, how cultural artifacts acquire meaning, or how people organize themselves around cultural texts. Or rather than having students criticize the content of television, you could have them study how people watch television. I have read papers from students that have provided some insightful analyses of instances of viewing texts. I am thinking in particular of one student who wrote a paper on the social dynamics of watching soap operas in the student union: one group in the front was very actively involved, and another group in the back was minimally involved; the people who were actively involved acquired the responsibility of informing those minimally involved when key events were about to take place. So it was a kind of multiple-use cite. The viewers were basically strangers who had gotten together every day and assigned themselves functions and formed a social group, watching this particular soap, even though they had very little contact otherwise. That paper was especially interesting because I had actually witnessed this dynamic but had not thought very much about it.

**TT** In an interview you and Gary Olson conducted with Noam Chomsky, Chomsky claimed that teaching was mostly “common sense.” Yet, notions such as “common sense” and the stable, unified self—and, therefore, the idea of a stable, unified pedagogy—continue to be challenged. Would you describe your pedagogy as the product of “common sense” and/or the result of continual evolution?

**LF** As you pointed out, notions of common sense, now, have often been demonstrated to be culturally bound, and we are becoming increasingly aware that the common sensical notions contained in our textbooks may not be common sensical to students from other cultures and nationalities. “Common sense” is very much a historically and culturally specific construct. So, to the extent that I teach from things common sensical, I think we all do because we occupy a particular historical space and because some practices seem natural to us. I would describe what I and most writing teachers do as a kind of an eclectic mix. We teach from a variety of pedagogical practices, and to some extent we reflect upon
them and to some extent we don’t. We inevitably fall back on a kind of common sense; therefore, it is important for a reflective writing teacher to consider cultural boundedness and the interests that are being served by certain kinds of assumptions.

TT The second chapter of Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition, “The Changing Political Landscape of Composition Studies,” takes a hard look at the way legislators, the media, and business influence our field. One of the major tensions in this political landscape arises over accountability: should writing teachers serve the interests of commerce by preparing members for the workforce, or should we provide a haven for the valuing of ideas, removed as far as possible from the demands of capitalism? How do you view the writing teacher’s ethical responsibilities in regard to this tension?

LF I don’t think that it’s necessarily an “either-or” situation. Many of the things we teach and value turn out to be also valuable in the workplace. Collaborative writing and working together in groups is a valued skill in the workplace. But our field sees collaboration in different terms, as one that contests the ideology of individualism and helps students to see how knowledge is socially constructed. Quite clearly, giving people advanced literacy skills, particularly in electronic forms of literacy, is a very important kind of cultural capital that will certainly assist many students economically after they graduate and, in a sense, can be looked upon as training for the world of business. Electronic literacy is also an important kind of ability for people who are interested in political change because participation on networks is one way that many people can be reached and that associations can be formed with people outside of hegemonic structures, thereby contesting the status quo. I don’t know that you can easily label whether a particular practice supports consumer capitalism or contests it. It can be read differently. It is important for writing teachers to constantly interrogate their practices and continually ask what their pedagogy is doing in the lives of the students they teach. They’re not going to come up with easy answers, but it is important to keep asking the question.

TT As a leader in the field of composition and a mentor to graduate students, you are acutely aware of some of the problems that arise from the economic realities which cause a disproportionate number of writing classes to be led by relatively inexperienced faculty. Yet due to a tradition of treating the classroom as the sacred domain of the individual instructor, teacher-training tends to be a problem at all levels of experience. Are there ways to constructively “peer-edit” each other’s teaching similar to the way we review each other’s writing?

LF One of the keys is not to envision teaching as a private activity that we do behind closed doors. It’s very important, particularly for
people entering the profession, to see a variety of teaching styles. Sometimes an extroverted approach is held up as a singular model for new teachers, but that particular style might not be appropriate in all cases. Introverted teachers, ones that are relatively reserved and allow students a lot more space, can also be very effective. It’s important to see different kinds of teaching and for people to talk about what they do and why they do it so that an array of styles and practices are viewed and discussed.

TT However, do you think that the systems we currently have in place do a good job of exposing faculty to a range of teaching styles and encouraging critical discussion of such exposure?

LF By and large, they don’t. We have tried to address this problem in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition by having a lot of activities that bring people together to talk about teaching. We have regular lunches where people get together and talk about teaching, and we have the possibility of visiting each other’s classes. The networked classroom has been an important innovation for the enhancement of teaching. You can discover a great deal about learning and instruction by looking at not only essays but also the network or e-mail discussions that students generate. We try as much as possible to treat what is put on the network as public discourse so others can examine what goes on in our classes. Also, you can observe networked classrooms in progress more unobtrusively than you can a traditional classroom. In the networked classroom people are very much working and writing, and you can drop in and participate in the conversations that are going on, as often happens in our classes at the University of Texas. We’re now accustomed to having visitors, and we try to perforate the walls of the classroom so that we have a lot more interaction. We also have students writing back and forth to each other in different classes and, in some cases, even across institutional and national boundaries. For example, during the Spring semester one of our graduate student instructors was teaching a course that dealt with issues involving South Africa. He actually had students writing to people in South Africa to get on-the-spot reports about the elections. It was very, very engaging for the students to receive immediate and emotional responses from people living in South Africa. And since our aim is to engage students in public discourse, we have worked to make our classes more public through the use of electronic media. Of course, this brings a host of potential problems with it as well. But we try to talk about these problems, about what happens when students run into objectionable kinds of discourse, and even about what happens when they themselves produce it. So, when we discuss public discourse, we try to foreground some of its difficulties and not just simply plunge in happily, thinking everything is going to swim along just because we have students on a network.

TT You could virtually witness from a separate physical location another instructor’s classroom.
LF That’s true. We’re talking more about this. In fact, the first virtual class was offered this past year in the philosophy department. We haven’t gone to the virtual class just yet; we still meet. Actually, I think it is important for people to gain a sense of each other through face-to-face meetings as well as over the network. But it’s clear that more and more student discourse is going to be conducted over the net. Our campus is about to be completely wired-up, and there’s no question that interactions such as student-proffessor conferences are going to occur more frequently on-line. We are discovering many fascinating uses of virtual space, and it’s only going to increase.

TT In Fragments you argue that despite the field’s apparently liberal values, we are actually quite conservative in our resistance to “the fragmentary and chaotic currents of postmodernity” (xi). You claim that we continue to cling to stable notions of the self and discourse communities, causing us to remain “in many respects a modernist discipline.” Are there any indications that we have recently begun to turn away from our de facto conservatism? If so, what are they? If not, doesn’t this question the value of theory since the growing abundance of work on postmodernism continues to be ignored?

LF I think the discipline has responded not only to issues of theory but also simply to changes in the culture itself. One example of this response is the popularity of current writing courses that take into account issues of difference. The introduction of postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and other kinds of theory reflects a growing awareness of theory in writing classes nationally. I would also say that what we just discussed, the ability of students to reach outside of their classroom and participate in networked discussions across their campuses and even around the world, represents a significant movement away from a narrowly compartmentalized discipline. The conception of students as eighteen year old people who essentially come to college as blank slates is also changing. As the student population has become older, the needs and uses of literacy have changed. Many students now are not there specifically to be credentialled. Most of them probably are still hoping that the degree will lead to economic advancement, but we now recognize many other reasons why people want literacy skills and many different uses that they put them to. That’s been a definite change. If we look at the question narrowly in terms of particular kinds of theory, we might not see as much change as if we think about larger changes in the culture, which are being very much reflected in writing classes. My sense is that the essay as the privileged form is being challenged in many classes, including some that we teach in our division. We have an elective course in which students don’t engage in writing essays. They write a variety of electronic discourses, including hypertext. These new kinds of discourses
are challenging the privileging of the essay that's been maintained throughout the history of composition teaching in America. We are seeing new kinds of writing courses emerge that disrupt the whole notion of writing itself.

**TT**  As Program Chair for the 1995 CCCC, your call for proposals emphasizes the importance of the impact of electronic technologies on writing, and you have been involved with computers and writing research for some time. What forces have you experienced in opposition to the increased focus on computers and writing?

**LF**  The speed in which computers have come into the curriculum has certainly produced some different kinds of resistances, including just finding the money to pay for them and training people to teach in new environments where, suddenly, they do not control the discourse. One of the most interesting effects of the networked classroom is that it challenges the notion that we are somehow empowering students. When students enter the networked classroom, increasingly, they arrive with knowledge of how to use computers. As a discipline we have assumed, by and large, that students do not write on their own, have no purpose for writing, and lack mastery over forms of writing. Some students spend enormous amounts of time writing back and forth on computer networks; so a significant minority of them possess more experience writing on these networks than their teachers. This reversal of expertise challenges the notion of empowering because these students are already empowered. And then it can become a question of "Do I really want to involve my course in a type of literacy with which I could sometimes be less experienced than my students, or do I want to try to maintain more control?"

**TT**  So often I hear the argument that computers are an agent of dehumanization. But if I had had access to the Internet when I was an undergraduate, I would have been able to maintain better contact with friends in other places.

**LF**  Sure, that's been an experience of mine. Colleagues from the distant past have now resurfaced through the network—people I went to graduate school with, and even a number of my earlier friends have been suddenly reconnected through the net. Many of my colleagues whose children are away at college keep in touch through e-mail. So, yes, it has been a way of maintaining contact with a large, diverse group of people and, of course, entering into conversations with whole new sets of people whom you don't know but with whom you share certain interests. It has just been remarkable.

**TT**  The radical "technologizing of the word" in new media such as the Internet has brought about a period of seeming chaos. Even though some scholars have been active on networks for years, the recent massive influx of users to these systems has caused some problems. Colleagues aren't quite sure what to make of these powerful, new electronic capabili-
ties. Many have been critical of the quality of conversations taking place across the various lists. For example, four days ago MBU (Megabyte University), one of the first and most significant lists in composition, completely erased its membership list in order to start over because of the chaos associated with having grown so large. On the other hand, the re/interview you conducted on the Pre/Text list provided a fascinating opportunity for a wide audience to participate in a type of scholarly conversation formerly unimaginable. How do you evaluate this period of instability?

LF It's a complex and important moment, and there are many issues at stake here. I have heard predictions that the days of free access to the Internet are numbered and that access will be severely limited in three or four years. I don't know if this is in fact the case. Clearly, the capacities have grown at an extraordinary rate, but I think we're talking about different kinds of capacity here. First, we face the technical capacity and the costs associated with connecting, now, something like 15 million users of the Internet. Then there are also the issues you raise with MBU, of the logistical or cognitive capacities of, let us say, getting all 9,000 members of CCCC on-line. The amount of traffic that would be produced by an active 9,000 person list would exhaust everybody. You would spend your entire day reading e-mail. While such a list could be very interesting, a point would arrive at which you could no longer keep track of it. One of the wonderful things about the Internet is that your interests can be highly specialized and you can still find a number of other people who share your background. But there is also a continuing complaint from users who find the Internet's varying levels of specialization and familiarity annoying. For example, one of my colleagues specializes in Old English, and given the narrow scope of that research and its high degree of specialization, a networked discussion group is sometimes a wonderful tool for him. But he also complains about undergraduates who were assigned papers on Beowulf in sophomore literature classes who would intrude on the conversation of national scholars. Similar problems have happened in feminist discussion groups. I remember a prominent example of one group that was disbanded after someone joined the group and began making misogynist statements. So the whole question of access and how participation should be regulated is one that is still very much up in the air. I certainly hope that we are not going to encounter a major restriction of access, and people who use the Internet a great deal hope not either. It seems that even this chaos is preferable to a situation in which access would be limited to only those users who could afford a fairly sizable fee to get on the Internet. Such restriction just doesn't seem to suit what was thought to be the democratic potential of the network. Again, these issues are being debated right now, and something that bothers me
a great deal is that scholars and people in the academic community by and large are having very little voice in these discussions; primarily large corporations and the government are making these decisions. It's very important for us as scholars and users to begin to have a voice concerning access to electronic resources and to computer networks. One of the reasons why I framed the CCCC theme statement the way I did and invited certain speakers was to try to increase our knowledge and to try to encourage us to be more active in policy decisions about access to the networks.

**TT** It is interesting that Gregory Ulmer's *Heuristics: The Logic of Invention* is scheduled to follow *Fragments* as the next re/inter/view on the Pre/Text list. Ulmer has become recognized for his radical approach to composition pedagogy. In particular, he endorses the primary use of actual visual and audio elements in composition through hypertextual/multimedia technology. Is this the kind of "hybrid literacy technology" that your 1995 CCCC call for proposals is "interested in"? Or do you think pedagogies such as Ulmer's may be going too far?

**LF** I've not read Ulmer's new book yet. But, yes, in general, we do need to broaden our notion of literacy. In fact, it is being broadened in the larger culture, and we have to become more aware of the potential for different kinds of literacies and the combinations of these literacies. Many of these literacies are enabled through computer technologies, and we can make great use of these technologies in all sorts of courses. But we first have to become much more knowledgeable ourselves. One of the problems that we're having in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition is keeping up with the pace of technological change. Remaining informed almost requires having a designated staff person who is constantly researching new products and possibilities, and it quickly becomes almost a breathless chase just to keep pace, much less to develop any sense of what's going on at the forefront of technology. Even graduate students, who presumably have more to gain by investing themselves in developing computer literacy, frequently ask me whether they should bother learning a particular software application when they know it is going to be obsolete in a short time. The rate at which one's knowledge becomes outdated can be frightening. I know computer science graduates who are in their early thirties whose knowledge is now totally obsolete; they either have to learn something new or leave the field.

**TT** At your home institution, the University of Texas, the Division of Rhetoric and Composition has recently broken away at least partially from the Department of English, thus realizing the call that Maxine Hairston made in 1982. Breaks of this kind have occurred in other institutions and are likely to continue. As the Director of the Division of Rhetoric and Composition, you have had to oversee this potentially tumultuous transition. Are such "secessions" a good idea? What are
other departments that are currently considering such a break likely to encounter?

LF The situation here was unusual because of the particular history of this institution. The impetus for change came not from the faculty but from the administration. I think the reasons for it were complex, but certainly the pressure for accountability in undergraduate education at a large research institution had a lot to do with the creation of the Division of Rhetoric and Composition. Our secession, since it was initiated by the administration, was not a rancorous thing unlike some of our recent tumultuous episodes in the English department. The separation came about relatively quietly and came down to a question of resources: would there be added resources under the new arrangement? It turned out that the administration was sincere in its commitment to provide additional resources for the teaching of writing. When that became evident, then both the writing faculty and the literature faculties supported the concept. However, it is difficult to predict what other institutions might face, because of differing circumstances. In our division, we are fortunate that we do not employ part-time instructors. A seceded department or division that is made to rely heavily on part-time instructors might develop into a kind of academic ghetto. So it’s important for others who contemplate such a separation to make sure that the resources are available, that such a maneuver does not become merely a cheap way to teach writing. Secession runs the risk of perpetuating some of the worst conditions for teaching writing. Again, the situation varies by institution. At very large universities where the mission of the English department is extremely complex, it makes sense to separate writing into its own unit simply because it is easier to administer and it has a kind of accountability to the administration that it might not have if it were in an English department with many other responsibilities as well as the teaching of writing. But, in a smaller institution, I’m not so sure that separating is necessarily a good thing. If you separate you’re always vulnerable in a way that an English department probably isn’t because it has a much longer history as a larger unit. Units that secede as programs or divisions run the risk that a new dean or president might come along who is not as sympathetic to the teaching of writing and sees a place to cut the budget and might simply axe a good chunk, or even all of it. But if the administration is committed, then having a separate unit does solve a lot of problems. It is better for junior faculty to advance through our division because we have the power to make recommendations for tenure and promotion, and we are better equipped to assess the scholarship, service, and teaching of someone whose primary interests are in rhetoric and composition. In that respect, I think the division is an improvement. We are also going to be better off in terms of hiring because we have specific responsibilities and the hiring committee will all be writing specialists.
TT At the 1994 CCCC, Christina Murphy discussed the role of the scholarly journal editor. While she admitted that to a certain degree the editor does act as a "gatekeeper," she said that the role was more aptly comparable to a taxi-driver, implying that what seems like a position of omniscience is actually more akin to a difficult service occupation. To what degree do you see your role as Program Chair of CCCC as a gatekeeper, and does gatekeeping, whatever it might entail, deserve its much maligned reputation?

LF Certainly the program chair of CCCC is much more like the taxi driver. The reviewing decisions are actually made by reviewers in the specific areas designated in the program. By and large, the program chair is charged with assembling the program, and my own inclination is to try to get as many people onto the program as possible. People want the chance to attend and participate, and receiving travel money from their home institution often depends on getting onto the program. I think that the CCCC program should be open to the great majority of people who want to be on it. I'm not sure everything should be taken, but certainly the majority of people who want to be on the program should be on it. So the gatekeeping function, here, is not a particularly appropriate model for the program chair. In the case of journals, it is a different situation. As long as we have an adequate number of journals to address different viewpoints (and I think we have reached this situation in rhetoric and composition where there are journals that accommodate the dominant points of view in the profession) and one is not excluded from being published simply by holding a particular viewpoint, then editors as gatekeepers do serve an important function. Our journals have taken on a variety of personalities and addressed different kinds of issues, and if you pick up a particular journal you know what sorts of articles you are going to find in it. Gatekeeping is a healthy function in the sense that it enables journal editors to generate interest in topics they want to explore and in the kinds of scholarship they wish to foster.

TT What changes in content and format are you implementing to make the upcoming CCCC convention in Washington more responsive to the CCCC membership?

LF I'm trying to get away from the exclusive emphasis on three-speaker panels and trying to open up a new kind of session called "forums" that will allow people to present research by bringing an abstract or doing a poster session. These "forums" will encourage more dialogues and fewer monologues. It is extremely important to have more opportunities for everyone to participate and to talk about issues that they want to discuss. This year we are also going to put part of the conference on-line so that people who do not attend will have some access and some sense of what kinds of papers are being presented. CCCC Online will be conducted this year on a volunteer basis of submitting electronic versions
of abstracts. Even if you are a diligent conference-goer, you can only see a small fraction of the convention program, and CCCC Online will also help those who do attend to acquire a sense of the many sessions that they weren’t able to go to. There’s an abundance of good stuff on the 1995 program, and one of the things that has impressed me is how much good work is being done in many different areas and how vast the discipline is now. The on-line opportunity is also important because it addresses the problem of dissemination. CCCC has a very poor dissemination process to its members—there’s a lot going on that I think the members would be interested in knowing about. For example, there’s much work going on now in assessment, and there’s a task force now on accreditation. CCCC has very good people working and producing statements on many kinds of practical, professional issues. In fact, statements on curricular principles and on assessment are forthcoming, and we will have sessions on those at the 1995 convention. These kinds of statements from professional organizations can often be very useful in making arguments at specific institutions. Position statements can ward off, for example, assessment practices that we think are unsound and are one of the most valuable services CCCC can offer. Having national resources to draw upon when arguing for local policy can be very important. CCCC needs to improve its dissemination of such statements in order to better support its members.

TT In the December 1993 issue of CCC Phillips, Greenberg, and Gibson published a report that identified you as one of the most frequently cited scholars in composition since 1980 (50-54). Their survey also indicated that the scholars and their works in composition have a relatively short shelf-life. In Fragments you write “the young discipline has experienced not only rapid growth but also a rapid consumption of theory so that what seemed at the cusp a decade ago now is regarded as little more than shards from a distant and superseded past” (6). Do you expect that your fifteen minutes of fame is over? And more importantly, what is at stake if we continue the “rapid consumption of theory?”

LF Well, I’m ready to be put out to pasture if someone would come along with a golden handshake and offer me a nice buy-out. I would certainly be willing to retreat to obscurity. I don’t know that one can necessarily say that the pace of change in the profession itself is good or bad; it just simply differs according to one’s perspective. On the one hand, it has created a great deal of new space for people coming into the profession. For example, some of the leaders in technological issues, now, are often graduate students. In fact, Eric Crump, who will be managing CCCC Online, is now working on a dissertation at the University of Missouri. So we have people who occupy prominent roles in the field who technically haven’t entered the field in a regular position yet. And
this is very much the case, here, in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition. Some of the most innovative work in teaching is being done by graduate students. So in the sense of having a field with a lot of energy and a lot going on, I think rapid change is good. Sometimes, perhaps, work is too quickly forgotten, and it makes certain work risky. Researchers might question whether or not to commit to a project that will take several years because the field may have no interest in what they’re doing by the time they’re finished. This rapid consumption has affected our view of what we should be engaged in and how quickly we should get work out. And I only see this continuing to accelerate because the form of distribution will more often be electronic. Formerly, the conception was that when you published an edition or a journal article it would be a lasting artifact that people would consult for many years to come. Increasingly, work is going to be produced very quickly and is probably going to be consumed and forgotten quickly too. But that has the advantage of creating a kind of currency and excitement and has been good for people entering the field.

TT Yet, I imagine some kind of critical mass where the speed of dissemination and consumption causes a breakdown, a point at which the acceleration will cease or reverse.

LF It will probably happen differently in different disciplines. There are economic reasons why this is going to be the case. Journals are fairly expensive to produce, and, certainly, if you figure in editorial time they are very expensive to produce. If scholarship is distributed electronically, without the financial support of subscription fees, many journals will not be able to maintain themselves. We may find that items such as the MLA bibliography which take an enormous amount of capital to produce may not get the kind of return that enables them to continue. A lot of these issues have to be worked out. Issues of intellectual property are very much up in the air, and decisions will be made in the next few years that are going to shape our careers and what we do as scholars. That’s one of the things that I mentioned earlier that disturbs me: people in our field have little say in these decisions. I fear that some of these decisions are going to be made in ways that end up having bad effects for us.

TT Do you think there’s a danger that you might now be acquiring an image as a technophile, as someone who seems to wantonly throw a computer into every writing situation?

LF That criticism has been made—“unhesitating advocacy of the electronic juggernaut” was one phrase that was used (Bleich 293). But I see computers as something that we as writing teachers need to deal with, and I’m hardly unequivocally enthusiastic about these new technologies. On the other hand, I have also been accused of taking a skeptical, throwback “fifty-something view” (which hurt a little bit because I’m still a “forty-something”). New technologies are certainly launching us into many new areas. But I don’t know if one can say categorically that we have
entered into a new era. I like Cynthia Selfe’s metaphor—that we have "overlapping" literacies. In fact, we still use pencils and pens and typewriters, and they’re handy tools. We do see multiple technologies in place, and having different media emerge in classrooms that are supposedly addressing literacy skills is very exciting because it brings a perspective on particular technologies and what sort of assumptions go into these products. To give you a simple example, no one thought much about fonts until the Macintosh came along and students started using all of the different fonts that were available. Then all of a sudden writing teachers became aware of fonts, and now we have opinions on fonts and type size that we never had before. I get annoyed by nine point type because I find it difficult to read. Perspectives on considerations such as type styles inevitably reshape our active pedagogy in both subtle and obvious ways. These kinds of considerations are not necessarily issues of good or bad, but are simply changes that have made the teaching of writing different and exciting. They also make us aware of our students’ unique abilities and enthusiasms.

TT bell hooks has recently criticized scholars for being too eager to censor themselves as well as others, thus repressing a lot of sincere but possibly unpopular insight. Yet, in *Fragments*, a book that argues for the importance of postmodern theory in composition, you are not afraid to make the honest admission that you are “ambivalent about postmodern theory” (21). How can scholars and teachers of writing more often encourage a constructive lack of self-censorship?

LF It is important to be aware that not everything comes neatly to closure, that many questions are open to different interpretations, and that we’re not likely to achieve resolution easily. I remember in another interview in which you asked Pat Bizzell what her position was on academic discourse, and she replied, "Beats me" (Dobrin and Taylor 62). These are difficult issues, and we wrestle with them, but we are not going to bring them to resolution. Having the license not to have to bring everything to a neat conclusion is important because simple solutions to very difficult problems in relation to pedagogy as well as larger political issues are likely to be misleading. Many of those issues are extremely complicated. They deal very much with students’ situatedness and their individual backgrounds, and one just cannot make general claims and hope they hold up. The willingness to tolerate tentativeness and more exploratory discourses has been a very healthy development. Honesty, therefore, often involves not pretending that we can occupy a privileged stance in which we can make broad pronouncements that are going to be suitable for everyone. It also helps us deal with students as adults and realize that they have backgrounds of their own that they bring into the writing class.
TT You have been involved in postmodern and social constructionist theory as well as cultural studies and the integration of technological advances in pedagogy. What directions do you see composition theory and pedagogy taking in the next decade? And what do you see as CCCC’s role in affecting some of these directions?

LF Well, there’s been an enormous growth in rhetoric and composition in the last twenty years. It has gone from a relatively unimportant discipline in the larger scheme of things to one that I think is beginning to realize the call for restoring rhetoric to the center of the curriculum. Increasingly, writing and literacy skills are becoming a focus of the undergraduate curriculum. One can safely predict that the field is going to spread into new areas and become broader and broader until we have to question whether terms like “composition studies” or “rhetoric and composition” are adequate (they’re probably not; there’s just too much going on). I continue to see the CCCC as being a kind of a large tent in which many interests are brought together. There may not be a conversation among a lot of the interests, but at least they are in physical proximity and there is some sense of a loosely associated people who are dealing with writing. And CCCC is at an interesting historical juncture. It has become a very large and successful organization in many ways; however, it is still run basically on a 1960 model in which the people in the organization are presumed to know each other. So CCCC is intensely democratic, but it has become so large that many people are excluded from participating simply because they don’t know how to join in. CCCC is going to have to figure out a structure that works. It’s technically a conference within the college section of NCTE, but for all intents and purposes, it is the college section of NCTE. Unfortunately, its organization is complicated by a structural anomaly in which it is subordinate to something that it is much larger than. Sooner or later CCCC is going to have to recognize that it is a large organization. It is going to have to come up with a structure that acknowledges that fact, and, probably, it will need an executive director like Phyllis Franklin in MLA. It has gotten along so far largely by volunteer help. And while the people who have been chairs of CCCC have been extremely capable people and have managed to cope with a lot of the issues that have arisen, it is clear that this cannot go on forever, that the organization is so large now that it needs professional management. If it doesn’t develop an appropriate structure, the result is that it will not have the kind of clout that it might. For such a large organization, it is a relatively weak one in exerting influence. For example, Phyllis Franklin knows and talks to U.S. Senators; there is no way you can establish that kind of network if you are only chair for one year. And having volunteers as chairs causes problems because these leaders usually have a tremendous amount of additional responsibilities at their home institutions. CCCC needs to have more clout because the
conditions for teachers of writing at many institutions are not what they should be. If it's going to have the kind of force to improve working conditions for teachers and learning conditions for students, it needs a more effective structure than the one it has now. I don't know how quickly these changes might come about. There is an overwhelming impulse within the organization to try to maintain the very democratic and informal heritage on which it has operated so far; and, certainly, that tradition is a good one. The crux will be the development of a kind of structure that would accommodate the size of the organization but would not be hierarchical and bureaucratic. Size and structure are key problems that CCCC faces, and how it resolves these problems will have a lot to do with its effectiveness toward helping its members.

TT: It seems like CCCC has the strength to be autonomous.

LF: Well, it certainly could be; in fact, this is debated. I think many people in the organization do not want to leave NCTE because they do not want to lose the link with the secondary schools. I would not favor a complete separation from NCTE for that reason. But it does need at least budgetary autonomy, and it needs to have more of an affiliated relationship with NCTE rather than being a conference within the college section—that is not working very well. I don't think people understand how democratic the organization really is, that it really is an organization that serves its members. CCCC is what its membership wants. Its democratic traditions are an advantage that it has, but the problem is that it has grown so large that it is not able to exercise those traditions. Many people don't know what is possible, and there is what I would call an appalling lack of knowledge about the organization on the part of its membership. I knew very little about how CCCC worked and how democratic the organization really was until I was elected as an officer. I think that many opportunities are being missed to help various constituencies. For example, there's much that could be done to help two-year college teachers lobby to improve their working conditions. I would like to see CCCC have much more political clout in order to come to the support of its members.

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Notes

†Those who interested in submitting abstracts or revised abstracts of presentations for the 1995 CCCC Online should send them to Eric Crump via e-mail at cccc95@showme.missouri.edu or conventional mail at Eric Crump, Learning Center, 231 Arts & Science, University of Missouri, Columbia MO 65211. CCCC Online will be made available through gopher, World-Wide Web, and listserv; to find out more information check listservs such as MBU or WPA or contact Eric
Works Cited


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**SYMPOSIUM**

"What Comes After Composition and Rhetoric?: Issues Facing the Discipline" will be the topic for the Fifth Annual Symposium on the Teaching of Composition presented by English graduate students at Texas Christian University on February 25, 1995. The symposium will feature keynote speaker Janice Lauer along with C. Jan Swearingen and Meta Carstarphen. For information, contact Rachelle M. Smith, Department of English, Texas Christian University, TCU Box 32872, Fort Worth, TX 76129, (817) 921-7240. e-mail rsmith@gamma.is.tcu.edu