ANTHOLOGIZING COMPOSITION STUDIES


Victor Villanueva’s *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* gathers examples of work in composition studies from the last three decades. So, too, does *Composition in Four Keys*, a volume edited by Mark Wiley, Barbara Gleason, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps. Both books reflect as well as record composition history. In the good old days, we who teach courses in composition scholarship could easily resort to packets of readings. We would assemble a smorgasbord of articles and book chapters, schlep it to a local copy shop, and have students buy it there. But now our field’s publications have swelled so much that many of us agonize over which to teach. Moreover, the Kinko’s court case has forced us to secure publishers’ permission for packet readings, a task made harder by NCTE’s decision to start charging for use of its articles. Thus, the time seems ripe for anthologies that reprint significant composition scholarship for us.


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Cross-Talk and Four Keys are hardly the first such anthologies to appear. Hermagoras Press has deservedly won acclaim for its Landmark Essays series on particular topics in composition and rhetoric. These books include Peter Elbow’s on voice and Sondra Perl’s on writing processes, both of which came out back in 1994. Like the other Hermagoras volumes, Elbow’s and Perl’s enable a class to take a highly focused approach to composition theory, dwelling on one important element of it. Indeed, even several years later, both Elbow’s book and Perl’s books are worth reading in a graduate composition course. After all, voice remains a topic much discussed by compositionists, and Perl has used the subject of writing processes to present what is in effect a useful history of composition studies’ drive toward professionalization. Many people in the field will appreciate, though, the wider range of subjects that Cross-Talk and Four Keys address.

Other notable predecessors to these two new books are Tate and Corbett’s Writing Teacher’s Sourcebook (now Tate, Corbett, and Myers) and Graves’s Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers. Yet, in comparing the new books to the two Sourcebooks, I sense a change in the implied reader. The Sourcebooks’ mix of theory and practical advice is obviously geared to new writing instructors, who may not permanently specialize in composition but want help figuring out their present job. Cross-Talk and Four Keys appear to target mainly people who do plan on becoming composition scholars. The subtitle of Four Keys is telling: Inquiring Into The Field evokes readers professionally committed to immersing themselves in composition’s history and ongoing concerns. Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps even announce at the outset of their book that their intended audience consists of “scholars and established scholars who want to learn more about composition” (iii). In related fashion, Villanueva identifies his audience as “the teacher of graduate composition theory, the graduate student of composition, [and] the veteran teacher of composition back in the graduate comp course” (xii), a profile that omits the writing instructor who just wants help with immediate classroom problems. When Villanueva proceeds to note that most of his included authors “tend to be mentioned in the works of others” (xii), he implies that his audience is would-be scholars who need to know what names to cite. Certainly Cross-Talk and Four Keys can serve that staple of graduate English programs, the practicum course for new writing instructors. But probably both books were published because the market for them has grown to include advanced seminars in composition theory and research. In this respect, too, the books are historically symptomatic.

The order of selections in Cross-Talk is roughly chronological. The book moves, in Villanueva’s words, from “process to cohesion to cognition to social construction to ideology” (xiv). The six major sections deal in turn with
writing processes; aims and formal features of written discourse; theories of student development; social contexts of writing; notions of voice; and agendas that composition studies might pursue now. Like all editors of anthologies, Villanueva had to decide how opinionated to sound in the book’s introduction and headnotes. One possibility was to break with neutrality, as Elbow and Perl refreshingly do in the introductions to their Hermagoras anthologies. Although Elbow includes in his book viewpoints at odds with his, he begins by arguing that voice is “a practical critical tool” (xvii) despite the theoretical debates about it. Perl is similarly partial when introducing her book on writing processes. While she concedes that composition research of the 1970s and early 1980s neglected the social context of writers’ behavior, she still calls that era “a shining moment” (xi) and praises its interest in “slow and careful” observation (xx). But in Cross-Talk, Villanueva’s presence is rather subdued. When introducing each of the book’s main sections, he is brief and even perfunctory, as if anxious to get offstage.

The very title of the book does suggest an editor out to portray his field as conflicted. And in keeping with this aim, some of Villanueva’s selections critique earlier selections. Yet the reader expecting real exchanges will be disappointed, for the book’s only direct debate is the CCC one between Elbow and David Bartholomae. Meanwhile, the most sustained expression of Villanueva’s views appears not in his book’s editorial apparatus but in one of its collected essays, his own “Considerations for American Freireistas,” where Villanueva’s passionate interest in critical pedagogy is fully on display. His reticence elsewhere in the book does have the value of permitting classes to use Cross-Talk largely as they see fit. Also, Villanueva may have restrained himself because his publisher, NCTE, wants to seem open to multiple perspectives.

In contrast to the spare apparatus of Cross-Talk, the framework of Four Keys is fairly elaborate. Like many other commercial textbooks, this one provides lengthy introductions to its main sections and also poses several questions for the reader. In brief, Four Keys aims to help its audience conceptually organize or “map” diverse strands of composition scholarship. The navigational instruments that the book offers are the four keys of its title. Part One, “Nature,” assembles texts focused in one way or another on writers’ supposedly native abilities and inclinations. Part Two, “Art,” focuses on writing as craft, with many of the selections touting classical rhetoric or formal heuristics. The third part of the book, “Science,” offers several examples of composition research, from protocol analysis to ethnography. Part Four, “Politics,” includes selections that explicitly examine the role of ideology in composition teaching. It also reprints the Wyoming Resolution, a reminder of struggles to improve the very conditions of writing instructors’ labor. Ultimately, Four Keys spans the same time period as Cross-Talk does.
But because it shifts from key to key, it can’t be as chronological. To be sure, the editors are far from dogmatic with their overall scheme; repeatedly they concede that their keys are just provisional guides to composition studies. In fact, they encourage the reader to consider how an article placed in one section may actually fit another section’s key. Furthermore, the book ends with “Alternative Maps,” articles that present other typologies of composition theory.

Faced with choosing between Cross-Talk and Four Keys, probably teachers will be most concerned with these anthologies’ respective contents. They include almost the same number of readings: Cross-Talk has 42, Four Keys, 47. Yet, interestingly enough, these books have only seven selections in common. In part, the divergence results from different emphases. Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps are more interested than Villanueva is in providing several examples of scientific (or quasi-scientific) research on writing. On the other hand, whereas Four Keys sticks mostly with scholarship of the ‘70s and ‘80s, Villanueva presents quite a few politically-oriented pieces from the ‘90s. Also, he is more willing than Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps are to include multiple selections by the same author. Whereas Four Keys repeats only Ann Berthoff and Peter Elbow, Cross-Talk features more than one appearance by Elbow, Bartholomae, James Berlin, Andrea Lunsford, Mike Rose, Linda Flower, and Patricia Bizzell (the champ, with three).

Both volumes seem rational in their choices. Indeed, both merit a wide audience, and I would be happy to use either in my own graduate courses. Still, when I compare their contents, Cross-Talk strikes me as having more of the pieces that budding composition specialists should know. Among the readings included in Cross-Talk but not in Four Keys are Janet Emig’s “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” Walter Ong’s “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction,” Mina Shaughnessy’s “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” Bizzell’s “Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know About Writing,” Greg Myers’s “Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Teaching of Writing,” John Trimbur’s “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” Elizabeth Flynn’s “Composing as a Woman,” Linda Brodkey’s “On The Subjects of Class and Gender in ‘The Literacy Letters,’” Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” Bizzell’s “‘Contact Zones’ and English Studies,” Richard Ohmann’s “Graduate Students, Professionals, Intellectuals,” and the Elbow/Bartholomae debate. Most of these pieces, dating from the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, reflect composition scholarship’s growing attention to issues of social justice. Would-be contributors to the field need to grow familiar with this trend, even if they want to swerve from it.

Inevitably, volumes like Cross-Talk and Four Keys make one wonder if a composition canon is slouching towards Bethlehem. The editors of both
books hasten to dissociate themselves from this prospect. Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps state that they “made no attempt to select work thought to be the ‘best’ in composition; to choose those most heavily cited or written by the most well-known and well-published scholars or researchers; or to include the most up-to-date information and ideas on a topic” (9). More bluntly, Villanueva declares that his volume “is not intended to establish a canon of comp” (xii). Yet such disclaimers seem a bit disingenuous, for many readers will nevertheless see these books as representing the essence of composition studies. To be fair, anthologies are by no means the only mechanism responsible for canons. At least as important are the reading lists that graduate programs have established for comprehensive exams. Also, few of us involved in such programs are free of canonizing tendencies. As I have indicated, I myself wish Four Keys had included more works that have become compositionists’ standard reading. Let’s concede, too, that anthologists face space limitations, which may force them to omit a myriad of works they would otherwise include. To his credit, Villanueva even acknowledges some topics he wound up slighting: writing across the curriculum, linguistics, grammar, multiculturalism, and evaluation. Still, since canons can be premature and excessively narrow, I wish he and the Four Keys team had said more about the risks of limiting their books’ scope.

On the very first page of their introduction, the editors of Four Keys recognize “that twentieth-century composition and rhetorical studies have been defined and practiced from the start as multidisciplinary” (1). Ironically, an anthology may best represent composition studies by drawing from other fields some works that have influenced us or might be worth our notice. Both Cross-Talk and Four Keys remain, however, within composition studies strictly defined. Their portrait of the field is centripetal, whereas a centrifugal collection would reveal how far-flung the field’s intellectual sources are. Cross-Talk does include Charles Schuster’s essay “Mikhail Bakhtin as Rhetorical Theorist,” but Elbow’s collection on voice includes an excerpt from Bakhtin himself. Overall, one of the charms of Elbow’s volume is his willingness to roam beyond composition studies per se. In effect, he challenges limited definitions of a “landmark essay” by featuring such authors as bell hooks, Barbara Johnson, June Jordan, Carol Gilligan, and Clara Claiborne Park. In particular, Park’s 1989 Hudson Review essay is a real find, being a fascinating genealogy of literary critics’ references to “the speaker” of a text.

As I read through Cross-Talk and Four Keys, I felt twinges of nostalgia, because I remembered encountering several of their selections years ago. For the veteran compositionist, each of these volumes may seem a series of dream-like visitations by figures from one’s past. (Why, it’s Janet Emig and Lynn Bloom! You’ve come back!) Needless to say, a person new
to composition studies will respond to these books differently. Thus, I find myself wondering how, precisely, they will get used in classes that adopt them. Take a piece that’s in both books, Bartholomae’s 1986 “Inventing the University.” Villanueva places it in the section he calls “Talking About Selves and Schools: On Voice, Voices, and Other Voices.” Wiley, Gleason, and Phelps link it to their “Politics” key. Certainly a class could discuss Bartholomae’s essay under either of these rubrics; just as certainly, many classes will devise their own frameworks for it. In my experience, graduate students who currently teach composition treat Bartholomae’s essay as if he wrote it yesterday. They see him as identifying behavior that their own students display as writers; they share his sense that the academy operates through various discursive conventions. They do disagree about some of Bartholomae’s points: a number of them find him too loyal to academic tradition, others believe he is willing to question it, and they debate how compliant their own students’ writing must be. Nevertheless, “Inventing the University” seems immediate to them. Yet, instead of regarding the essay as new, a class might historicize it: considering, for example, how it focused on written products when “process” was still all the rage, or how it encouraged the field to make a “social turn.” From a slightly different point of view, the class might analyze the essay’s roots in a particular institution, the University of Pittsburgh’s basic writing program. Also possible is a biographical perspective; the class might consider how Bartholomae’s graduate school mentor, Richard Poirier, elaborated ideas about invention in his book *The Performing Self*. Now that anthologies like *Cross-Talk* and *Four Keys* are being published, interesting research could be done on the variety of ways that classes incorporate them.

I have indicated that both of these books can be used in courses whose main aim is to prepare new writing instructors, especially graduate teaching assistants, for their pedagogical duties. Often, these students are teaching even as they take the practicum course, so that basically it prepares them to do what they are already doing. In fact, anyone who has taught one of these preparatory courses is familiar with a certain disjuncture: the instructor wants to discuss theory while the class wants to discuss concrete difficulties posed by their own students. Were *Cross-Talk* and *Four Keys* used in such a course, they would delight the theory-minded instructor but might frustrate practical-minded class members. I must confess that more often than not, I am the “theory maven” sort. When students in a practicum of mine long for pedagogical formulas, I try to accommodate them, but I keep in mind that graduate education should prefer complexity to simplicity. Of course, the yearning for practical help stems in the first place from institutional priorities. Needing cheap labor to staff first-year writing, research universities fling new graduate students into it.
Since the situation won’t change soon, practicum courses should help new teachers explore how theory and practice can inform each other. Indeed, maybe our field’s most valuable contribution to knowledge lies in our willingness to use the messy, unpredictable world of the writing class as a test site for theories of composing. Hence, I wish Cross-Talk and Four Keys had included more readings about teachers and students who struggled together to learn from texts and events emerging in their classrooms. It may be argued that composition studies hasn’t generated enough readings like these for collections to include. In which case, the fault lies not in our anthologies, but in ourselves.

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