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WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE “NEW ABOLITIONISTS”: CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES IN THE GREAT DEBATE

If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.

Chinese Proverb

At the 1999 Writing Program Administrators’ (WPA) conference at Purdue University, Irwin Weiser read a paper promoting eleven recommendations for the field of rhetoric and composition. Among them were to:

- aim at a better understanding of the field;
- change the attitude that composition teaching is to be avoided;
- persuade department chairs to offer professional advancement in rank and salary to successful teachers of composition;
- educate the administration in more realistic teaching loads and smaller class enrollments.

These irrefutable calls to action are familiar, even self-evident, to anyone who spends time in the field of rhetoric and composition. However, Weiser was reading a paper written over fifty years ago by George Wykoff, the second editor of College Composition and Communication.¹ Moreover, even by Wykoff’s time, these calls to action were already a familiar refrain, having been issued by teachers and scholars such as Fred Newton Scott much earlier in the twentieth century (see, e.g., Stewart and Stewart). Yet these recommendations remain as relevant today as they were in Wykoff’s

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time as well as in Scott's time, nearly a hundred years ago. As Richard Miller most recently notes, "to work in comp has always meant, for the majority of the labor force, to have low status, low salary, and little chance at permanent employment" (96). Miller's observation is concretely manifested in the poignant narratives Theresa Enos recounts in *Gender Roles and Faculty Lives in Rhetoric and Composition*. The persistence of these unresolved century-long problems makes clear that we have not, for whatever reason, been able to change our direction; the discipline appears stuck in a well-worn path (Goggin and Beatty; Young ""Tracing").

The Chinese proverb that opens this essay can be read in at least two ways. On the one hand, there are times when continuing on a path in the same direction is desirable, times when we want to end up precisely where we are headed. On the other hand, when both the direction and the destination are not desirable, changing the course is the better option. Over the last one hundred years, those in rhetoric and composition have been heading toward—or it may be more precise to say, circling about—the same problematic space, a space that holds a legacy of complaint (Greenbaum). To break out of this space, we argue for opening up the discussion beyond the simplistic binary of removing versus reforming composition instruction—the binary that has been and continues to be the great debate. Recently this either/or position was advocated by Roemer, Schultz and Durst in their ""Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing."

In this essay, we turn our attention to those in our field who have been calling for changing our direction, that is to say, arguing for systemic change. We do so because these arguments, coming primarily from those who have been called new abolitionists, do not seem to be well understood. In fact, some of the responses to the calls for reconceiving writing and writing instruction have ranged from misrepresentations of these positions to simple dismissal. Both discursive moves fail to engage fully with the issues at hand, and thus, serve paradoxically to reinforce our discipline's well-worn path. Instead, as we try to demonstrate here, the arguments for rethinking on systemic levels open up a range of structural options for the enterprise of teaching writing, and thus, hold the potential of removing some of the roadblocks that have prevented calls, such as those issued by Wykoff, a chance to be realized.

Our goal in this essay is to examine and describe some of the positions held by those challenging the status quo and to dispel apparent misconceptions about their goals and motivations. More specifically, we outline the discontinuities between earlier abolitionist calls and recent new abolitionist arguments to illustrate that in these newer calls lies the potential for heading off in new directions and for carving multiple systemic paths for writing instruction in response to local institutional exigencies. Instead of
proposing yet another alternative, we argue that those of us in the field of rhetoric and composition need to move beyond efforts to create a univocal position on the teaching of composition and make space for multiple options for writing instruction.

Staying the Course

In what ways has the field been stuck in the well-worn path? Despite decades of complaints concerning first-year writing instruction, substantial systemic changes in how writing programs are designed, administered, and staffed have been virtually impossible. In a recent large-scale national study of writing programs, Richard Bullock and William Smith found that contrary to proclamations by many in rhetoric and composition about changes in the field, virtually all of the programs they analyzed were firmly rooted in current-traditional practices, a deeply distressing discovery to these two long-time writing program administrators. They argue that composition’s narrative of the victory of process over formalist pedagogies needs to be challenged, for it does not hold up under a close scrutiny of the current state of writing programs. Their study falls in line with other similar national studies of first-year college writing programs, beginning with Kitzhaber’s landmark Themes, Theories and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College conducted in the early 1960s, Carol Hartzog’s Composition and the Academy: A Study of Writing Program Administration conducted in the early 1980s, and Richard Larson’s Ford Foundation study on curricula in college composition conducted in several stages between 1988-1991. During his study, discussed in “Enlarging the Context,” Larson “came to suspect that much of the instruction in writing in first-year courses limited its focus to the formal, and maybe the stylistic characteristics of the text in process and those of the completed text” (113). It is worth quoting Larson’s summary of his findings at length:

We confront . . . a body of first-year writing programs across the country in which a substantial majority exhibit one or more (usually quite a few) of the following characteristics: a heavy emphasis on the teaching of form (in sentences, in paragraphs, in whole essays); relative inattention to processes of substantive invention—gathering, interpreting, evaluating information, and reconstructing that information into new wholes; lack of visible attention to quality of reasoning and to what makes for forceful arguments on behalf of cogent ideas; . . . a general lack of concern for the rhetoric of discourse—for why people compose, whom they address, what they do when they address readers, and how they can judge what they write. And we confront a profession not yet ready to commit itself to defining carefully its goals in

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teaching and to finding out in a systematic and serious way whether its courses are attaining those goals. (120-21)

To be sure, as Larson notes, “one can find pockets of liveliness (and I did) in the theorizing and practice of first-year writing courses” but these are apparently the rare exceptions (120). Granted, national studies such as those conducted by Larson and others cannot account for how individual writing classes are taught. The studies are broad-stroke snapshots, frozen in time and limited in detail. However, taken together, these studies point to a consistency of findings over time that reveals just how deeply dug the path has been for institutionalized writing instruction. The findings raise an important question about why, after decades of dedicated attention to pedagogy and groundbreaking scholarship in writing, do we still find such consistency?

It is not that writing instruction has been monolithic pedagogically. From its late nineteenth-century beginnings, there have been many competing models of college composition instruction. In fact, Larson notes in his study that he found “substantial diversity: curricula in writing are diverse in focus and strategy . . . [B]ut there is also a good deal of repetitive sameness for all the apparent diversity of subject matters, strategies, and texts in first-year writing courses” (113, 120). That sameness, we argue, stems in large part from the fact that writing instruction as a system has been immutable. As Yameng Liu and Richard Young note, “though it was taught in many ways to students of every kind, freshman composition almost always treated writing as a generalizable elementary skill, independent of disciplinary content” (480). In other words, the ubiquitous composition requirement that mandates a uniform experience for students, usually in two sequenced courses, is a monolithic system. This is not to say that there have been no serious efforts to improve writing instruction; there have been. Nor is it to say that there is no good or even excellent teaching going on in writing classrooms; there is. Rather, the tenacity of this system seems to prevent substantial widespread change.

To us, it is in part the disjuncture between what the discipline of rhetoric and composition does and knows and how the field acts and is enacted through writing programs that needs to be scrutinized, for this gap appears to maintain the status quo of writing instruction. Tom Fox makes this point most forcefully in his response to Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells, and Goldblatt’s College Composition and Communication article on the reform of the writing program at Temple University. Fox points out that “the structure that remains at Temple is a traditional writing program design, no radical departure from a model of writing instruction that dominates nearly every university in the country” (256). He asks: “Is it time to rejoice
when the bulk of writing instruction is still being taught by workers whose jobs are temporary and whose training is brief?” (257). He goes on to note: “If the composition program cannot represent its goals in reasonable complexity, and if it cannot persuade those outside of the discipline to adopt them, then substantive change is not going to happen” (258-59). Fox’s observation resonates with many of the current arguments being issued for reconceiving writing instruction. In the following section we outline the recent history of these calls as way to contextualize these efforts at systemic change.

Defining the New Abolitionists: A Brief History

Many of those who have been calling for substantive systemic reform of writing instruction have been dubbed new abolitionists. Robert Connors coined this term in a piece titled “The Abolition Debate in Composition: A Short History,” a version of which was presented at the special WPA conference, Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change, at Miami University of Ohio in October 1993. This paper followed on the heels of a debate that began with what Connors identifies as the “founding statement of the New Abolitionists,” Sharon Crowley’s essay “A Personal Essay on Freshman English.” Crowley argues that first-year composition is embedded in institutional structures that prevent significant or meaningful reform.

Crowley’s piece led to a roundtable that she chaired at the 1993 CCCC in San Diego titled “(Dis)missing Freshman English: Alternatives to the Universal Requirement” at which Lil Brannon, David Jolliffe and Charles Schuster presented papers that challenged compulsory first-year composition on pragmatic, historical and political grounds. Sparks flew. In the following year at the 1994 CCCC in Nashville a roundtable titled “Dismissing Freshman English: At What Risk?” was put together in response. Chaired by Marjorie Roemer, the panel from the University of Cincinnati offered a multi-perspectival protest. They included the then Chair of the English department, James Hall; past and present WPAs, Lucille Schultz and Russel Durst; WAC Director, Barbara Walvoord; two literature faculty, Lisa Hogeland and Stanley Corkin; and a teaching assistant, Tami Phenix. The debate was taken up yet again at the 1995 CCCC in Washington, DC by thirteen panelists divided into two roundtables titled “Critical Choices for the Future of First-Year Writing: Parts One and Two” that were put together by Joseph Petraglia. In alphabetical order, the participants were: Pat Belanoff, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, Russel Durst, Lisa Ede, Aviva Freedman, Maureen Daly Goggin, Joseph Petraglia, Marjorie Roemer, David Russell, Lucille Schultz, Robert Schwegler, and Lad Tobin. These
presenters explored the implications of the debate over rethinking compulsory first-year composition for faculty, students, and the field on historical, theoretical, and practical levels.

These roundtables were just the beginning. Recognition of the systemic limits of most current writing programs and writing instruction in general has motivated a growing number of teacher-scholars in the discipline to call for reconceiving the teaching of writing on a systemic level. The titles of two edited collections point to this rising interest: Joseph Petraglia’s *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*, and Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen’s *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. While these calls share a concern for rethinking writing instruction, they are by no means univocal in the alternatives they offer, as will be seen later in this essay. Moreover, they demonstrate a seismic shift from previous calls to abolish composition altogether. In the next section we examine some of the reactions against, and apparent misunderstandings about, calls for rethinking/reinventing writing instruction on a systemic level.

**Discontinuities in the Great Debate**

Many of those opposing the recent calls for reconceiving writing instruction mistakenly assume a continuity between older calls for abolishing composition and new ones that challenge the current system of compulsory composition. Roemer, Schultz and Durst, for example, claim: “While the specific complaints and suggested alternatives vary considerably, along with the historical context in which these proposals appear, most of the critiques of first-year writing, including the most recent manifestations, share a number of qualities” (emphasis added, 378). Similar statements demonstrate the unfortunate assumption that there is a close tie—a continuum—between the two abolitionist groups, their calls for action, and their goals.

Another problematic treatment in discussions of the old versus the new abolitionists is to portray the two groups in dichotomous terms, when in fact the calls are entirely different and unrelated. For example, Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells, and Goldblatt call the earlier position “regressive abandonment of composition” and the new calls a “progressive or radical abandonment” (380). Drawing on their argument, Kristine Hansen defines the dichotomous terms this way:

A regressive abandonment of composition, presumably, is one that abolishes a required course or relegates it to pre-university status on the grounds that the teaching of writing is “remedial,” the “transmitting” of a set of superficial “skills” readily applicable to all kinds of discourse, a kind of teaching so
embarrassingly elementary that it is not worthy of university credit. A progressive or radical abandonment of composition, presumably, would be one such as Sharon Crowley and other abolitionists advocate: a refusal to require universal composition courses whose goals are gatekeeping and the erasure of difference. (260)

The dichotomous portrayal of the two calls is no less problematic than the continuum, for it also sees the new arguments as continuous with the old. In the words of Sullivan et al., “this dichotomy raises fair questions about the effect of the same act performed for regressive or progressive purposes” (380). It is in the use of the word abandonment that the problem lies. New abolitionists are not calling for abandonment of instruction in writing; they are calling for various ways of rethinking the system of writing instruction. Moreover, as we show in the following sections, the grounds for the debate, the assumptions underlying it, those engaging it, the motivations driving it, and the people for whom the debate has been generated have all radically changed. In short, the more recent calls are discontinuous with the earlier ones.

Since others have written detailed histories of the early calls for abolishing first-year composition (see, e.g., Connors “Abolition Debate,” “New Abolitionism”; Russell “Romantics”; and Greenbaum) and since our space is limited here, we have decided to highlight some of the major differences between the old and new calls. The earlier calls came primarily from literary scholars who held what Richard Young has described as a view of art as glamour—that is, writing as a mysterious product of genius, and thus, something that cannot be taught, and perhaps not even learned, since one is born with genius (“Concepts”). Under this view, according to Young, “art contrasts with craft; the craft of writing refers to skill in technique, or what Genung called ‘mechanics,’ a skill that can be taught. Art, however, is associated with more mysterious powers that may be enhanced but that are, finally, unteachable” (“Concepts” 134). For many in this group, since writing could neither be taught nor learned, the attempt should simply be abandoned. Paul Wermuth articulated this position well in a late-1950s essay titled “Is Theme Writing Really Necessary?” His resounding answer to the question was “No,” supported by his claim that “writing is a highly abstract art (and it is an art; despite all the recent yakking about ‘skills’) which is not only hard to comprehend but practically impossible to explain” (21). For Wermuth, and others like him, all that is available for explanation is how to analyze and edit prose.

Within this view of art, writing is understood as an autonomous, acontextual, neutral, technical skill—a one-size-fits-all skill that can be employed in all discursive situations. All that can be taught under this view
are surface mechanics, skills that are deemed by some as appropriate only in elementary and secondary education. Therefore, writing courses are considered with contempt as pre-collegiate in scope and function. These earlier abolitionists were motivated, then, by a desire to eliminate what they perceived as elementary or foundational skills courses considered inappropriate for college. In turn, most blamed elementary and secondary educators for not sufficiently preparing students. They were also largely motivated by creating more space in the curriculum for their own interests, namely literature courses. Indeed, Wermuth argues that “since we cannot do a good job, let’s drop [composition] altogether and concentrate on something that can be done. . . . What we can teach, it seems to me, is reading: close, careful, analytical reading of solid books of different types” (23). Of course, what he means by “solid books” is high literature narrowly defined.

To be fair, many of these arguments, especially early on, came at time when those in literature were fighting to hold on to hard-won disciplinary space in the modern university. (See, for example, histories of literary studies by David Shumway, and by Gerald Graff.) Yet these arguments are still being put forth. In a recent manifestation of this position, Michael Bérubé in The Employment of English argues that literary studies must cut its ties to required university writing courses if it is to survive. One suspects that Bérubé’s current argument may be motivated by exigencies similar to those prompting the earlier calls. In all of these cases, though, abolition can be summed up in one word: abandonment.

By contrast, the new abolitionist calls are being issued primarily by rhetoricians in the field who consider, in Young’s words, art as grammar. Art under this view is understood as a praxis and not a specialized product of a privileged few. As Young explains, “art . . . means the knowledge necessary for producing preconceived results by conscious, directed action. As such, it contrasts not with craft but with knack, that is, a habit acquired through repeated experience” (“Concepts” 134). In other words, artists are understood as Aristotle defined them in the Metaphysics: “as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes” (I.1). In short, an artist or a rhetor is the one who knows her knowing. Since this “knowing” can be made available for examination, it thus can form the basis for teaching others how to do the art. Writing then is understood as a praxis that can be studied, learned and taught.

Much of the scholarship in rhetoric and composition is founded on the assumption that writing is a complex act that involves understanding the intersections between knowing that and knowing how. Literate knowledge, as Deborah Brandt observes, “is a knowledge embodied in a doing, a knowledge in which what is made is not separated from the making of it”
Many scholars have shifted their gaze to various social and cultural acts to theorize a range of literate practices: historians (e.g., H. Graff), linguists (e.g., Gee; Street), ethnographers (e.g., Heath; Scribner and Cole) and rhetoricians (e.g., Bazerman; Berkenkotter) have demonstrated that reading/writing practices are multiple, competing practices that not only shift over time, but co-exist in time, to serve different kinds of functions, contexts and people. This multi-disciplinary research challenges what Brian Street terms autonomous models of literacy—models that assume a monolithic literacy independent of those who engage in it, absent of the purposes for which it is invoked, apart from times and places it occurs. Such models construct a binary of literate/illiterate that is not only meaningless but culturally and socially debilitating (Street 19). As James Gee argues, “claims for literacy [under autonomous models] are often tacit ways to privilege one social group’s way of doing things as if they were natural and universal” (“Orality” 50). Those who, for whatever reason, do not read and write in the privileged way are thus deemed abnormal and defective either intellectually or morally, and as a result are effectively marginalized and kept marginalized. In other words, as Peter Vandenbarg explains: “what it means to be literate has always been tied to the needs, aspirations, and technologies of dominant sociopolitical institutions; and at least since the development of Freshman English in the 1880s, some conception of literacy has functioned as an indicator of success within those institutions while its absence has been associated with criminality and social abnormality” (554). This limited definition of literacy perpetuates the dangerous binary of literate/illiterate that is a hallmark of an autonomous literacy model. Indeed, it may be that many of the new abolitionists are calling the current system of compulsory first-year composition into question precisely because it was constructed on the untenable grounds of an autonomous literacy model.

Instead, most new abolitionists profess what Brian Street has called an ideological model of literacy, which understands reading/writing as “an ideological practice, implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices” (1). In this view, literacy becomes multiple literacies that are associated with particular social practices. An individual is not then perceived as either literate or illiterate, but instead may be understood to control any number of different literacies, using them at different times, in different places and for different purposes, yet perhaps experience literacy difficulties in other contexts.

Given this perspective, it is hard to defend a universal structure of compulsory composition that is meant to render a uniform experience for all students. As Crowley notes, “it is difficult to design a course for a large amorphous audience when, moreover, the course fits into no discernible disciplinary or scholarly sequence” (“Debate”). For the new abolitionists, it
is not that composition is too elementary a subject for higher education. Rather it is complex and deserves systemic structures that can accommodate innovative and effective curricula that those in rhetoric and composition create. But as it stands now, such curricula “are difficult to implement and sustain because of the size and impermanence of composition faculties,” features that result from the requirement but are not endemic to writing instruction itself (Crowley “Debate”). The new abolitionists, then, are not, as past abolitionists, “passing the buck” to the lower schools. Indeed, it is their commitment to college students that fuels their arguments. Far from trying to ignore student needs, they are motivated precisely because of student needs and what they perceive as impediments to helping students develop multiple, complex literate practices. They are not calling for the abandonment of writing instruction. Rather they are calling for the dismantling of the current system in order to build new, more effective ones. In fact, Crowley makes this point most clearly in “A Personal Essay on Freshman English” when she writes that she is “not proposing the abolition of Freshman English”; rather, she is arguing that it be made an elective. Similarly, as one of us argues in “The Disciplinary Instability of Composition”:

I want to make it clear that . . . I am not advocating that we abandon the teaching of literate practices. In fact, I am arguing just the opposite. What I am suggesting is that we abandon the GWSI [General Writing Skills Instruction] system we inherited over 100 years ago in favor of a rhetorical one that would instruct students in the complexities and richness of literate practices as they occur in a variety of situations and for a variety of purposes. What I am finally suggesting is that we let our pedagogy emerge out of our discipline rather than let our discipline be ruled by an ill-conceived and rotting pedagogical structure. To put it another way, I am advocating that we put down the paintbrush and take up the sledgehammer. (Goggin 43)

Yet another distinction between the old abolitionists and the new can be made. Many of the older abolitionists were not seeking to improve composition instruction; rather many sought to preserve their hard-earned disciplinary positions as literature scholars and teachers. By contrast, the new abolitionists are not trying to preserve disciplinary positions but are trying to effect systemic change (cf. Russell “Vygotsky”). In so doing, many argue for reconceiving writing instruction within a disciplinary frame, and advocate teaching our discipline as a way of helping students develop stronger literate and critical-inquiry practices. In other words, many of those who are arguing for teaching what we know about discourse practices—i.e.
teaching our discipline—are doing so on much different grounds than those who argued for replacing composition with the study of literature. These recent scholars ground their arguments in the assumption that understanding discursive practices will contribute to learning how to engage in a variety of literate practices (e.g., Fleming; Trimbur). In other words, these arguments are built on the premise that knowing how cannot be separate from knowing that.

If abandonment may be best understood as the key word for the earlier abolitionists, reconceptualization may be understood as the key term for the new abolitionists. In fact, perhaps it is time to change the terms of the debate itself. We propose that the new abolitionists would be better described by the term reconceptualists. Such a change provides a semantic disconnect between the old calls for abolition and the recent calls for systemic change. We, therefore, use this new term throughout the rest of the essay.

The Many Voices of Reconceptualization

Although virtually all of the reconceptualists share a deep dissatisfaction with the current state and system of writing instruction, they are not univocal in their positions. To present all reconceptualists as proposing the same thing is to simplify the diversity of the calls in order to create a convenient dichotomy—"us versus them." The irony of this argumentative move is that it not only glosses over the complexities of the many different proposals extended by the reconceptualists, it also unfairly simplifies those who oppose their arguments, for neither are they a univocal group. Here we focus our attention on some of the differences among the reconceptualists' positions.

There may be a temptation to dismiss reconceptualist calls precisely because there is great diversity among them. However, we argue that the diversity among the reconceptualist calls may be best understood as a strength insofar as these present an opportunity for the field to reassess the current efforts at a univocal position on the universal requirement, an effort that often essentializes writing and the learning of writing. Constructing a space for these various voices opens up the possibility for different programs and institutions to find successful systemic options for their students.

Here we review just a small sampling of the calls for reconsidering writing instruction to provide a sense of both the growing number of calls and the diversity among them. In the lead article to the Fall 1997 issue of *Writing Program Administration* (an issue that focuses on alternatives to compulsory composition), Betty Bamberg provides a useful summary in her
review of several alternative models that have been proposed and/or enacted: 1) replacing first-year composition with writing intensive courses; 2) replacing first-year composition with freshman writing seminars; 3) linking writing courses to other general education content courses; 4) reforming first-year composition through specifying a content for it. In the same issue, Graham, Birmingham and Zachry describe the restructuring of first-year composition at Iowa State University that redistributed the pedagogical responsibility among all tenure-track faculty in the English department. Kearns and Turner describe the creation of a center for the teaching of writing that moved writing instruction out of the English department at the University of Winnipeg. Sherrie Gradin describes how the university writing requirement was redistributed across the general education program in Portland State University.

More recently, David Fleming argues for replacing first-year composition with a rhetorical course of study based on a definition of rhetoric as “the study of speaking and writing well, a historically prominent and remarkably consistent program of instruction involving both theory and practice and aimed at the moral and intellectual development of the student” (172). In “Shaping Sophisticates,” Joseph Petraglia argues the implications of the rhetorical turn for rhetoric education as a corrective to what he terms elsewhere “general writing skills instruction” (GWSI) (“Introduction”). For him, the exigency for creating a new vision of rhetoric education may reside in “a sheepish acknowledgment that composition and public speaking classes are pale reflections of what we know about rhetoric and the demands for rhetorical training emanating from elsewhere in the academy” (“Shaping” 92). Based on his national study of writing programs, Richard Larson’s position resonates with Petraglia’s observation. In his words, “my own recommendation at the moment would be to place first-year students in a discipline-centered writing course, taught by faculty in the discipline, instead of a ‘generic’ writing course” (123). Larson further recommends extending instruction, particularly in disciplinary and professional writing, beyond the first year.8

Still others argue for establishing undergraduate programs (majors, minors and certificates) on theories, histories and practices in rhetoric and writing. David Russell, for example, calls for constructing courses about writing. He concludes:

The tens of thousands of people now involved in writing instruction in higher education might well do more good and find greater rewards, in every sense, if they focused their efforts on conducting research in the ways writing works in human activities at every level, sharing that research in a practical way

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with disciplines and professions who need their expertise to improve their work . . . , and teaching what they have learned about writing, both in introductory liberal arts courses and through professional courses that prepare future generations to carry on the task of making writing more useful to students and to the society that they will recreate using this immensely flexible tool. ("Activity Theory" 76)

Finally, John Trimbur argues for programs in the study of writing in which "the first-year course figures as an introduction to the field of writing as much as the universal requirement students encounter when they enter college" (11).

Clearly, the designation reconceptualist encompasses more than just one position. For some, it means abolishing the requirement but not the course (e.g., Crowley "Personal"); for others, it means reinventing the course but not abolishing the requirement (Fleming; Petraglia; Trimbur), for still others, it means moving the course out of the first year (Schuster) or out of the English department (Larson), and so on. Huddled under this umbrella are various teachers and scholars who cannot be represented by one scholar or one perspective. This is a multi-vocal group, tied together by the common goal of rethinking the current system of first-year writing instruction to better serve our students.

**Intersections among Oppositions**

In light of the differences between old abolitionists and reconceptualists as well as the differing voices among the latter group, recent claims about the reconceptualists simply do not hold up under scrutiny. Especially suspect are the claims that the new group has an expressed desire not to work with beginning college students on composition-related matters, particularly given the perceived lack of interest of this group in improving their writing and thinking; a corresponding preference to teach more advanced, engaged students on subjects more compatible with the interests and abilities of the college English faculty; and an evisceratingly negative depiction of the first-year course, its students, its teachers, and its defenders. (Roemer et al. 378)

These claims simply do not square with the arguments being posed by the diverse group of reconceptualists.

Perhaps the greatest irony is that those who oppose the reconceptualists share much more in common with those currently calling for change than reconceptualists do with earlier abolitionists. All sides in the debate over the universal writing requirement are voices coming from
within the field of rhetoric and composition and want what is best for students. The reconceptualists are not abandoning writing instruction or students; rather, they are motivated precisely because they want to improve the teaching of literate practices. They simply see little evidence that the current system—constructed on assumptions of autonomous literacy models now long challenged and built for a select group of students who were largely homogenous in terms of class, race and gender—can be reformed to help students learn the kinds of complex, multiple practices involved in reading and writing in a variety of personal, public, professional and academic contexts.

**Heading in New Directions**

Although the proposals offered by the reconceptualists are not panaceas for all the troubles in the field of rhetoric and composition, they do offer rich starting points for addressing some of the century-long problems. Here we return briefly to the recommendations Wykoff offered over a half-century ago to suggest how reconceptualist perspectives may be understood to respond to these challenges.

**Aim at a Better Understanding of the Field**

In what ways might the admittedly varied positions held by the reconceptualists contribute to a better understanding of the field of rhetoric and composition? As Crowley notes, “Like it or not, university, faculty, parents, and taxpayers still assume that the required introductory course teaches grammar, spelling, punctuation, and organization. Because of this they view composition faculty as literacy gatekeepers rather than as intellectuals and teachers” (“Debate”). Creating a better understanding of rhetoric and composition, however, is complicated by the unique circumstances of our field. Composition studies, as Donald McQuade points out, “remains one of the few academic disciplines in which outsiders insist on naming and authorizing its activities, without accepting the intellectual responsibility—and institutional consequences of doing so” (484). One of us articulates this complex problem by observing:

The conundrum for our field is to figure out how we are to explain and cope with a public who, paradoxically, is so absolutely certain that they know all there is to know about us when it is so clear to us that they have absolutely no inkling who we are, what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. Their absolute confidence to a great extent prevents them from understanding, or even from realizing there is anything to understand. (Goggin, *Authoring* 191)
Yet it can not be said that those of us in the field have been entirely innocent in this dilemma.

In what ways have we in the field been complicit in this complex situation? A strong case can be made that our field is so little understood because our discussions are largely contained in spaces only we inhabit, namely, our conferences, journals, books and graduate programs. We speak and write primarily among ourselves. Virtually the only contact those outside the field have with us is in the ubiquitous first-year writing course which does not—and perhaps cannot as it is now structured—introduce students to our ways of knowing or to what we have learned about the complexities of literate practices. We offer very few undergraduate courses in rhetoric and composition in less than a handful of undergraduate programs across the country. Many of the reconceptualists are calling for reconceiving writing programs in ways that would help to address this problem. Teaching our discipline both in introductory courses and in undergraduate minors and majors in rhetoric and composition would effectively broaden the base of understanding, thus, reaching future administrators, faculty, parents and taxpayers.

*Change the Attitude that Composition Teaching is to be Avoided*

How can the reconceptualists’ positions contribute to changing negative attitudes toward composition teaching? The answer to this question is related to the first call. Until we can create a better understanding of who we are and what we do, those outside the field will continue to construct us (if they think about us at all) and by extension the work we do in impoverished terms. So long as composition continues to be constructed in these ways, it will be perceived as clean up work that is beneath contempt, a place that one does one’s service and escapes from as soon as possible. This problem is also intimately tied up with the stratified labor practices that the current system of writing instruction sustains, a problem more fully addressed in the next section.

*Offer Professional Advancement to Successful Teachers of Composition*

The system of first-year composition is fraught with ironies. On the one hand, it is considered valuable enough by administrators, faculty and the public at large that it remains a universal requirement on nearly every campus throughout the United States. On the other hand, it is most often staffed by the most vulnerable, highly transient and easily disposable faculty in the academy—graduate students and adjuncts. The Final Report from the *MLA Committee on Professional Employment* that was published in December 1997 found that "first-year courses are often taught
entirely by part- or full-time non-tenure-track faculty members and (where they are available) graduate student instructors” (8). The table below displays their findings by institutional type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution/Rank</th>
<th>Graduate Student Instructors</th>
<th>Part-Time Instructors</th>
<th>Full-Time Non-Tenure Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD-Granting Departments</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA-only-Granting Departments</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA-only-Granting Departments</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data from the MLA Committee on Professional Employment: Final Report 8.

What is clear from these data is that little teaching in first-year courses is done by full-time, tenure-track faculty (about 4% in PhD-granting departments, 36% in departments where the MA is the highest degree awarded, and 50% in departments where the BA is the highest degree granted).10 While there are certainly some exceptions, the two-tiered system of the haves and have-nots appears to be firmly entrenched in institutions of all types.

In what ways might alternatives offered by the reconceptualists act as correctives to the problematic labor practices sustained under the two-tiered system? In most of her publications, Sharon Crowley, along with others, has been motivated precisely to address the issue of inequitable treatment of faculty in writing programs, a point that comes across clearly throughout her Composition in the University. Most recently she noted, “Ten years ago I wrote an essay in which I suggested that universities and colleges stop requiring their entering students to take an introductory course in composition. I wrote that essay because I had been participating since 1986 in what was proving to be a frustratingly unsuccessful professional effort to better the working conditions of the people who teach the required first-year course” (“Debate”). For Crowley, the requirement creates the conditions that foster exploitative labor practices because unlike other courses in higher education staffing of first-year courses is driven almost solely by enrollments which vary year by year, semester by semester, and are difficult to predict. To her mind, offering the first-year composition course as an elective would allow control over the number of sections that could be
responsibly staffed, and “since such departments will know how many sections of the introductory course they plan to staff, far in advance of any given semester or quarter, they can redesign their hiring practices to meet professional standards as well as the needs of teachers of writing who reside nearby” (Composition 245). Under such circumstances, part-time positions could be converted to full-time, preferably tenure-track, positions with the advantages of the political power (academic freedom, department voting privileges, and so on) and material support (e.g., benefits, adequate office space, computers, phone privileges, travel funds, and so on) that would accrue.

Simply lifting the requirement, however, may not have this salubrious effect everywhere. Indeed, it can only operate, as Crowley so well reasons, in those places that rely predominantly on transient faculty, particularly university departments who depend heavily on graduate students and adjuncts. Graduate students are temporary faculty by nature both because they are in a department to earn a degree that will take them elsewhere and because they generally have time limits on the amount of support they are given, typically two years for MA students and five for Ph.D. students. Similarly, adjuncts are not in stable positions in most places; they move through a revolving door that lets them in when enrollments are high and moves them out when these dip. Granted, some adjuncts choose part-time work precisely for its flexibility but far more are in these positions because there are few other options. Thus, while some who have opposed Crowley’s stand on the basis that it would mean widescale genocide of writing faculty, that argument only holds in those places that do not rely on contingent instructors to deliver most of the courses in writing.

There is not one solution that will serve as a corrective to problematic labor practices on all campuses. Steps toward rectifying unfair labor practices will need to be taken on local levels, department by department, institution by institution. Theresa Enos makes a similar point when she calls on those of us in the field to “work for change within our programs, departments, and institutions” (134). She warns: “We must not depend on our professional organizations to bring about needed changes. Our history tells us that despite efforts made by MLA, NCTE, and CCCC, little change has occurred despite various position statements” (134). As one of us notes, “this lesson should have been well learned by the Wyoming Resolution, which focused attention on the powerlessness of writing instructors but was itself powerless to effect any real change in the hiring or treatment of writing faculty or in the structure of writing programs” (Goggin, Authoring 189). To this we would also add the relative powerlessness of the important Portland Resolution ratified by the Council of Writing Program Administrators at the
beginning of the 1990s that was meant to extend the Wyoming Resolution to address working conditions for both writing program administrators and those who teach in writing programs.

Despite the shift toward post-Fordist employment practices that rely on contingent workers in academia at large (Crowley, *Composition* 254; Faigley 10-13), there are indications that the timing may be ripe on some campuses for improving the labor situation. In a recent issue of the *ADE Bulletin*, Elizabeth Langland recommends that English department chairs "examine the dollar commitment in their departments to lecturers and adjuncts to determine if some of the temporary and part-time positions can be converted to tenure-track faculty lines" (10); she reasons that "adjunct faculty members and lecturers may be a huge drain on a dean’s budget because salary increases (at least for adjuncts and sometimes both) come out of the dean’s discretionary funds instead of the general salary pool. Thus your conversions to regular lines may net monetary gains for your grateful dean" (11). She also warns that "Chairs should be wary of moving composition wholesale from the English department at this moment. Departments that made the move earlier were able to establish their continuing budgets under more prosperous circumstances" (11). Her warning—a double-edged sword for those of us in rhetoric and composition—may be used to our advantage. Part of what will help sustain such arguments is a demonstration that our programs are responding to the students who populate our institutions. As Langland councils, "if you want new resources develop new courses and programs that address needs opened up by the changing intellectual landscape and that promise to attract students... Develop new arguments for resources based on new developments in your discipline" (11-12).

In the same issue of the *ADE Bulletin*, Cathy Davidson makes the case even more strongly when she argues,

> If English departments are going to be convincing, they must be willing to show the ways that they are capable of thinking through their role and function, within the academy and within society. The minute tinkering with curriculum that characterize most reforms in English departments do not convince administrators of the vitality of our field and its essentialness to the world of our students. (4)

In what might be taken as a reconceptualist statement, Davidson advises, "By looking carefully at our own assumptions about what an English department is and rearticulating our vision and mission not only within the context of the academy but also beyond, we can claim a central place in the educational mission of the next century" (5). She goes on to note, "To do this requires curricular introspection and a willingness to examine our own
resistance to any kind of fundamental reassessment of who or what we are” (5). Reconceptualists, though certainly not the only group within English studies, are undertaking the necessary fundamental reassessment, and some, as we do here, are examining the resistance (e.g., Goggin “Disciplinary Instability”). Furthermore, the multiple perspectives of the reconceptualists may offer the grist needed for marshaling varied arguments on local levels. Such arguments, however, will need to be tailored to the particular needs of each institution, which brings us to the final challenge.

Educate the Administration: Realistic Loads, Smaller Enrollments

Arguments for realistic teaching loads and smaller class enrollments are intimately tied up with the three other calls. Until the field is better understood, until the status of composition improves, until labor practices are significantly changed in ways that challenge the two-tiered system, and until we can construct arguments for upper administration along the lines suggested by Langland and Davidson, it is unlikely that much headway can be made with administration. Moreover, any headway that is made will only be accomplished on local levels according to local values.

Constructing Many Paths

The binary of reformists versus abolitionists—what has been termed the great debate—is not only not useful but is perhaps quite damaging. There is no one answer, no one structure, no one system that will fit all sites. As Arthur Bochner and Eric Eisenberg, in drawing on Richard Rorty, observe: “To universalize a perspective is to ask that ‘reality-under-a-certain-description’ be viewed as accommodating all possible descriptions of reality. By disavowing its relativity, such a claim assumes a privileged status that makes ‘all other descriptions unnecessary because it is incommensurable with them’” (315). In other words, in the great debate that challenges the current efforts to maintain a univocal system of compulsory composition, the answer is not to find a new system but to find a way to open up possibilities for multiple systems that can change over time and place. As Geoffrey Chase argues, we need to “think about the local conditions at our institutions, evaluate the internal coherence of our programs, and consider the degree to which our programs are externally relevant.” (47). What is new then in the new abolitionists is that they are mapping out multiple possible trajectories for teaching complex literate practices, and in the process providing ways for imagining still other possible paths.

Those of us in the field need to construct a flexible space in which to debate how to rethink writing instruction that will permit us to move beyond the debilitating binary in order to begin imagining multiple paths. If we fail to do so, it seems highly likely that indeed we will end up where we are
headed. Those coming after us will in all likelihood hear the same complaints at the centennial celebration of CCCCs when someone, like Irwin Weiser, will read George Wykoff’s paper again, and the litany of complaints and calls to action will echo in empty chambers.12

Tempe, Arizona

Notes

1 See George Wykoff “Toward Achieving the Objectives of Freshman Composition,” *College English* 10 (1949): 319-23. Wykoff delivered this paper at the November 1948 NCTE conference that served to launch the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Weiser’s reading was part of a celebration of Wykoff’s contributions to the profession in general and to Purdue University in particular. The multi-media celebration of Wykoff was presented by Shirley K. Rose, Irwin Weiser, and Patricia Harkin.

2 The great debate is best exemplified by the legendary exchange between Warner G. Rice and Albert Kitzhaber at the 1959 NCTE convention; their debate was published as two essays the following year in *College English*. Rice’s essay, “A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, As It Is Now Commonly Taught,” argued for abandoning first-year English while Kitzhaber’s “Death—Or Transfiguration?” argued for its reform.

3 It is perhaps unfortunate that Robert Connors chose to call those challenging the status quo new abolitionists (“Abolition Debate”). First, as we note later in this essay, the term has created a grave misunderstanding about the relationship between the earlier century-long abolitionist calls and the current ones. Second, it is a problematic term because of its historical significance and reference to conditions and events with far more serious stakes. Although it might be argued that the term is apt since, as Sharon Crowley has shown, our own professional literature has been saturated with characterizations of writing teachers as slaves and composition instruction as a form of slavery (*Composition* 127-31), we argue later in the essay that we need to literally shift the terms of the debate.

4 Joseph Harris makes a similar observation, though on historical rather than empirical grounds, when he argues:

The problem with the older current-traditional approach to teaching writing, as has been argued over and over, was its relentless focus on the surface correctness of students’ texts, so that writing was reduced to an empty tinkering with verbal forms. But the advocates of process did not redirect attention to what students had to say so much as they simply argued for what seems to me a new sort of formalism—one centered no longer on textual structures but instead on various algorithms, heuristics, and
guidelines for composing. This new formalism has proven little different from the old. (56) Also see Brock Dethier who observes “an unfortunate and ironic twist in the evolution of process thinking in composition has been the rigidifying of a particular set of process steps as the way to write” (49).

5 Such consistency is in part maintained by one of the strongest apparatuses for writing programs, composition textbooks (Connors “Textbooks”; “Mechanical” 69). As Peter Vandenberg observes: “While the professional discourse of composition studies reflects an attention to rhetorical concerns, composition textbooks continue to privilege a narrow range of empty forms and stock strategies; and it is within these structures that all possibilities are incorporated” (557).

6 More recently, Sharon Crowley and John Ramage debated the first-year writing requirement at a special opening session of the 1999 Western States Composition conference; the transcript of this debate and the question and answer period that followed appears online in the Basic Writing e-Journal at http://www.asu.edu/clas/english/composition/cbw/bwe_fall_1999.htm#sharon.

7 Connors carefully explicates the vast differences between the earlier abolitionist calls and the new ones (“The New Abolitionism” 23-25). Somehow, interestingly enough, this is typically overlooked by critics of the new abolitionists.

8 Larson makes his reconceptualist stance quite clear in his introduction where he notes: “My argument, quite simply, is that most colleges and universities have no moral justification for requiring students to take their first-year writing courses without requiring that they later engage in writing within the academic and professional disciplines. I will, indeed, suggest that colleges and universities in general—there are of course exceptions—have little justification for requiring the first-year writing course of all students” (109).

9 We are acutely aware of the irony that we are complicit in this critique by writing this essay to and for those in rhetoric and composition. However, we believe that the problems we deal with here are internal problems that the field must grapple with in order to effectively address the very real external ones.

10 Larson argues that some of the findings from his large-scale study may be explained by the “inexperience of large numbers of teachers who staff these courses” (109); he goes on later to note “if first-year writing courses are staffed heavily by teachers with little training, one can easily see why these teachers rely on textbooks, familiar and easily grasped taxonomies of reform, and imperfectly thought-out generalizations about the ‘composing process’ to guide their work” (117). We can do the math to

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support Larson’s observation. In *Textual Carnivals*, Susan Miller provides a conservative estimate that “at least 25,000 individuals are engaged in college-level composition teaching each academic year” (5), a number based on data from the late 1980s. The number is probably higher today. With current membership in CCCC at around 10,000, a generous estimate would suggest that somewhat more than one third of those who teach in writing programs probably subscribe to CCC and even fewer attend its conference. Moreover, with PhD programs in rhetoric and composition awarding around 100 or so doctoral degrees per year in the field (Stygall 383), our numbers in the whole scheme of writing instruction are pretty small.

11 The timing indeed does seem ripe. In January 2000 the WPA listserv contained posts that discussed several institutions that were hiring or contemplating plans to hire significant numbers of tenure-track faculty to teach composition. Robert McEachern, for example, discussed the rationale behind the nine tenure-track positions that opened at Southern Connecticut State University for 2000-2001; he noted that the chair of his department made the push to hire “TT assistant profs to teach FYC exclusively, as a way to redres[s] labor inequities in the department (we have about 25 FT Tenured/TT profs who teach comp as part of their load and another 25 or so adjuncts who teach 1 or 2 sections per semester” (online posting). Roger Gilles described the strategy at Grand Valley State University which had also been “given the green light to hire TT folks to teach FYC and other required courses” (online posting). Finally, Susanmarie Harrington described a proposal being entertained in her department at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis that would call for up to eight new tenure-track positions in composition and an additional eight lecturers so that the “dept could cover 50% of writing sections with full-time faculty (instead of the 5-10% right now)” (online posting). These postings and the thread of responses they generated are archived at http://lists.asu.edu/archives/wpa-1.html under January 2000.

12 The authors would like to thank Peter Vandenberg (Editor, *Composition Studies*), Pat Belanoff and an anonymous reviewer for their careful reading and thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. We are also grateful to Lisa Cahill and Shelley Rodrigo Blanchard for their helpful suggestions, and to our colleagues Sharon Crowley, Jan Norton and Katherine Heenan for their close reading and insightful responses.

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