THE DEATH OF COMPOSITION AS AN INTELLECTUAL DISCIPLINE

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Nearly a decade ago, in 1991, I was invited to present a plenary speech to the relatively new Research Network Forum at the Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention. This was at the time in our disciplinary formation that we now refer to as "the theory wars." Led by a past chair of CCCC, Maxine Hairston, a small but vocal group of compositionists decried the rise of theoretical scholarship in the field and the move away from an expressivist orientation. One commentator characterized theoretical scholarship as "nothing but the voices of vested academic interests and a kind of political-professional careerism" that takes "almost perverse pleasure" in avoiding "the problems of the classroom" and in burying "reality in clouds of words" (Kogan 474). Hairston wrote "with increasing irritation" about "unreadable, fashionably radical articles" that "have little to do with the concerns of most college English teachers" (695). Another past chair of CCCC complained that the "dizzying display of specialized vocabulary" in a collection of theoretical articles about writing nearly gave her a "splintering headache" (Lunsford 267). What distressed some compositionists at that time was that the field of composition was no longer defined simply as self-reflection about the teaching of writing or about one's own (or one's students') writing practices; while it included these concerns, composition had become much more expansive, encompassing broad and diverse investigations of how written discourse works.

The reason that the Research Network organizers invited me to address the forum back then was that they wanted someone to present an

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apologia for theory, a strong statement as to why composition should be
defined in these broader, more inclusive ways. As someone who had (and
has) devoted his entire professional life to helping develop rhetoric and
composition as an intellectual discipline, I was delighted to accept. In that
speech, I argued that if postmodern discourse has taught us anything, it is
that “rhetoric” is at the center of all knowledge making, even in the sciences.
As a field devoted to how discourse works, composition, then, is perfectly
situated to participate in the exciting cross-disciplinary investigations of the
interrelations between epistemology and discourse. That is, I argued that
while we all desire to learn more about the teaching of writing or about our
own writing processes, these are not the only intellectual concerns we
should have as a discipline. Constituting rhetoric and composition as a
discipline whose raison d’être is the teaching of writing—that is, all
research, all theory, all scholarship exists for the sole purpose of furthering
and refining the teaching of composition—is dangerously and unacceptably
narrow and even, in some people’s eyes, anti-intellectual (Olson “Role”).
Louise Wetherbee Phelps expressed a belief that many of us held at the time:
“Deep in the disciplinary unconscious runs a strong undertow of anti-
intellectual feeling that resists the dominance of theory in every institutional
context of the field—journals, conferences, writing classrooms, textbooks,
teacher education—and even in some forms of theory itself” (206).

Since that speech, I had thought that as a discipline we had come to
terms with our intellectual diversity. I watched the field grow in
 sophistication as it addressed scores of important questions about the
 workings of discourse. I read with great pleasure and pride a number of
smart, insightful works by a variety of established scholars—people like Jim
Berlin, Pat Bizzell, Linda Brodkey, Marilyn Cooper, Sharon Crowley,
Lester Faigley, Susan Jarratt, Susan Miller, Jasper Neel, and John Trimbur.
And I was especially impressed with the whole new generation of scholars
who brought to the field an intellectual rigor and sophistication that bodes
well for the future of rhetoric and composition as an intellectual discipline—
people like Michelle Ballif, Diane Davis, Julie Drew, Christy Friend, Xin
Liu Gale, Min Zhan-Lu, Arabella Lyon, Krista Ratcliffe, Eileen Schell,
Todd Taylor, and Lynn Worsham. It seemed to me that as a field we had
finally learned to value theoretical investigation of a wide range of subjects
related to how discourse works.

But, clearly, I was mistaken. Just as we are experiencing a renewed
backlash against feminism—as Beth Flynn so poignantly describes—
composition is also witnessing a revitalized backlash against theoretical
scholarship, especially that associated with efforts to draw connections
between the work we do in composition and the critical work done in other
disciplines. For example, one might read the recent special issue of College
Composition and Communication on “teaching writing creatively” (51.1, 1999) as an opening salvo in what undoubtedly will come to be known as “the new theory wars.” Led by yet another chair of CCCC, this backlash threatens to undermine a two-decade long tradition of substantive theoretical scholarship. I’d like to respond to this attack by examining the lead article in that special issue of CCC, a piece written by Wendy Bishop. It’s not that I consider this essay to be especially cogent or influential; it’s that I find it representative of a trend I see developing in the field, and it carries special weight by virtue of its being authored by the elected chair of our major professional organization.

Where Have all the Writers Gone?

Most of what Wendy argues in her article has been recycled from the debates of a decade ago. She claims that she no longer recognizes the field that she had entered ten years before, that good teaching has fallen prey to “careerists,” that “good writing” is devalued at the expense of a kind of convoluted prose from which she can derive no “joy,” and that the field has rudely marginalized “expressivists” such as herself. (Can someone who serves as chair of our major professional organization—a position of power, prestige, and privilege—really claim to be “marginalized”?)

While I have no doubt that Wendy sincerely feels the injustices she is complaining about, I can’t help but think that what we really have here is a “straw man” conveniently set up to be knocked down. For instance, she asserts that the idea of “the writer-teacher and/or teacher-writer”—that is, “one who advocates that teachers write with and for their writing students as well as with and for their colleagues”—is under attack (9). She claims that we no longer value the Donald Murray types (those who identify first as “writers” and who then try to teach their craft) or the Peter Elbow types (those who identify as “teachers” and who then write about teaching). No one seems to care about good writing and teaching, she claims; the teacher-writer is dismissed or used for target practice. She echoes complaints that there is “no room” in composition for classrooms, students, or teaching (20). Nor do these people write or, she suspects, read. But does anyone really believe all this? Who are these people who don’t value good writing? Who are these people who don’t value good teaching? Who are these people who don’t write and read? I would like to meet one—just one person in the field who fits that description. The fact is, that person simply does not exist.

What Wendy is really saying is that a substantial portion of the field does not share her own values and priorities. It’s not that few of us write anymore; it’s that we don’t write the kinds of prose that she wants to read. It’s not that we don’t read anymore; it’s that we read different kinds of texts from the ones she enjoys reading. It’s not that we don’t value teaching; it’s
that we don’t value teaching to the exclusion of every other intellectual concern. To suggest that those of us who are interested in theoretical scholarship are somehow contemptuous of good writing is like saying, “Unlike you, I read and write the good stuff. When will you, too, finally see the light?”

We all have written and perhaps published poetry; we all, I suspect, have written and perhaps published short stories; and I’m willing to bet that a good many of us, myself included, have written novels—probably unpublished, probably resting peacefully at the bottom of some drawer somewhere, but nonetheless attempted. And there are undoubtedly a good many of us who enjoy crafting and reading critical scholarship. We all went into English studies because we had a deep and abiding love of language—of its cadences, its power, its beauty. Whether we happen to be theorists or writer-teachers or teacher-writers, each of us has a love of good writing—that’s not something that any one person can claim to have a monopoly on.

A Place to Stand?

In her diatribe against the language of theory, Wendy cites a sentence from an article I published as an example of the kind of theory talk she despises. Here’s the sentence that she finds so objectionable:

While Pratt’s notion of contact zone has been useful in interrogating how teachers exercise power and authority, especially in the multicultural classroom, some compositionists have tended to deploy it in such a way as to defend a kind of liberal pluralism, thereby subverting attempts to come to terms with the truly colonizing effects of the pedagogical scenario. (Olson, “Encountering” 47)

Certainly, this is no example of high theory; nor is it particularly difficult to understand. Presumably the vocabulary—interrogate, deploy, subvert—is foreign, not part of the vocabulary of the type of prose she reads and writes. Here’s her comment on that sentence: “For me, the sentence, I realized, had no clothes, and no heart (no organs at all, no human substance) no place for the interested writer/reader/teacher in me to stand”(26). Let me bracket the question of whether when composing “scholarly” writing the most important organ is the heart and instead ask: aren’t there different understandings of what it means to “have a heart”? For Wendy, it’s a neat turn of phrase or a colorful metaphor; for me, it’s a passionate concern for, as the sentence suggests, how the pedagogical scene is often one in which power is used and abused, where students suffer in the name of being “taught,” where well-intentioned teachers can reinscribe sexism and racism. Why doesn’t that count as having “a heart”? Why doesn’t that count as being “human”? And why, I ask, is someone who repeatedly proclaims that
she is ardentely concerned with good teaching—why is she not “standing” right there beside me in my effort to help us all improve our teaching? Clearly, what we have here are two completely opposed ways of seeing the world, of defining “heart,” of defining what it means to be “a compositionist,” and of constructing the field that we both inhabit.

Wendy goes on to say that I am “intentionally not interested” in “inviting eighteen-year-olds to enter the sentence.” Now here is a statement that genuinely mystifies me. I certainly did not intend that prose for eighteen-year-olds. For a quarter of a century, I’ve been teaching that good writing is all about addressing a particular audience for a particular reason. Why in the world would I want an undergraduate to “enter” a piece that is explicitly about composition “scholarship”? The audience is the undergraduate’s teacher. Yet, this is a theme of her critique. She cites Toby Fulwiler, who similarly complains that the “exclusionary use of language” by the discourse community of composition scholars “makes it difficult for eighteen-year-olds to enter and participate” (Fulwiler 220). Since when is scholarship in any field written with undergraduates in mind? Do we now have to certify that nuclear physicists write in such a way that sophomores can “enter and participate” in their scholarly discussions? Surely, there is serious confusion here between the goals of and audiences for scholarly writing and the goals of and audiences for other types of writing.

The language of a discipline becomes “specialized” (what we so often call, usually pejoratively, “jargon”) for good reason: a shared vocabulary makes communication more efficient. When I say the word prewriting, everyone in the field understands what I am referring to, even while an outsider to the discourse would not. If I couldn’t use this word of jargon, then I would necessarily need a great many words to capture all that we have come to associate with that term. Being able, within our particular discourse community, to employ this term and therefore evoke a whole array of associations that attach to it, allows me to communicate efficiently to my intended audience. What’s more, because a disciplinary word does evoke an array of associations, because it “resonates,” it allows me to communicate more effectively as well. That is, far from being a detriment to communication, critical jargon, when used well, is a valuable tool to make communication more effective and efficient.

The real point, I think, is not that Wendy or Toby or Maxine despise jargon. Presumably they have no problem with prewriting or freewriting or audience invoked, but they do with interrogate, deploy, and subvert. What they detest is the particular type of jargon that is evolving in the field. Why? Because they hate how the field itself is evolving. Quite clearly, what we’re seeing here is ideological difference, ideological struggle, masquerading as a love of “good writing,” a love of “good teaching.”
A Sense of History

It’s unfortunate that in these so-called theory wars some commentators stoop to attacks that border on the *ad hominem*—only that a “homme” is never expressly named. Ten years ago it was Maxine Hairston and Steve Kogan; today it’s a new generation of commentators. For example, Wendy blames what she sees as the sad state of affairs in composition on “careerism.” Apparently, she believes that so-called Current-Market-Forces drive compositionists into “rapid professionalism” by creating the “need to appear ever-more scholarly, historical, and theoretical” (12). She claims that “professionalism” compels certain people to write “a certain type of professional text.” To suggest that those who engage in scholarly work are somehow selfishly careerist is not only an insult to a good many colleagues, but it couldn’t be further from the truth—at least for the scholars that I mentioned earlier. Far from being selfish, most “scholars” make enormous sacrifices to produce their work, gladly devoting huge spans of time to their projects—not simply to further their careers but because they love the subject and are devoted to the discipline itself. Does anyone really believe that Susan Miller, whose three books have all won national awards, is a careerist driven by market forces? Or Jasper Neel? Or Lester Faigley? Or any one of the scholars I mentioned? Accusing colleagues who do a particular kind of work of being careerist (or bad writers or bad teachers) simply because they do a different kind of work from what you do is not a productive way to further the debate over disciplinary identity. Wendy adds that professionalism is not only “blunting” her “fervor” for composition, but that it is “dismantling” much of what she “had come to care for—composition as [a] community that writes also” (20). Of course, composition is a community—or, more accurately, communities—that writes; it just doesn’t always write in the way that Wendy does, and that is what she simply cannot abide.

My own sense of the field’s history is much different from Wendy’s, perhaps because I’ve been around to see a lot more of it. Wendy thinks that a bunch of careerist social constructionists (her characterization) suddenly and without provocation began cruelly “marginalizing” the expressivists. But this is not an entirely accurate description. In every discipline there is hegemonic struggle over the identity of that discipline. That is, one group of like-minded individuals attempts to further its vision of the field, while other groups do the same. For example, throughout the 70s the people that we’ve come to call “cognitivists” and those we’ve come to call “expressivists” battled between themselves over how the field should be defined, and in doing so they both maintained tight control over the means of dissemination of scholarship: the few journals available to publish work in composition. Those of us who were interested in philosophical, critical, theoretical
scholarship (and in broadening the disciplinary boarders of composition to include such interests) were effectively excluded from the conversations. *Research in the Teaching of English* published only empirical work; under Dick Larsen, *College Composition and Communication* had a decidedly cognitivist bent; *College English*, while it was a venue for some “expressivist” work, was less a “composition” journal than it is today. And, of course, few presses in those days would take a chance on publishing a scholarly book on composition. Consequently, the only compositionists who had a reasonable chance to get published, to be heard, were those doing cognitivist or expressivist work; the rest of us were muted.

This imbalance dramatically changed in 1980, when, out of frustration with being silenced, several scholars created “alternative” venues for publishing composition scholarship. During that year *PRETEXT* and *JAC* were born, followed closely thereafter by *Rhetoric Review*, and then a whole range of other, specialized journals. (Subsequently, editorial changes in the NCTE journals reflected these same changes in orientation.) Finally, for the first time, scholarship other than the cognitivist/expressivist types could be heard; finally, those of us who thought that rhetoric and composition could be a much broader, more inclusive, more theoretically informed discipline could be heard. And lo and behold, many in the field were receptive.

**Hegemonic Struggle and the Future of Composition**

What I am describing are the workings of hegemonic struggle. Since the beginnings of composition as a field, we all have been struggling over how to define it, over its heart and soul. Certain people—with good intentions and pure motives—labored to make it a social science, drawing heavily on developmental psychology and related fields. Others—with equally pure motives—disagreed, insisting that composition should be a more humanistic discipline that draws on the work of “creative” writers and on our own self-reflection about the writing process. Interestingly, the challenge to the two dominant groups in composition coincided with the opening up of new and alternative publishing venues. Those who wanted to define the field as one devoted not just to the teaching of writing but to all aspects of how discourse works turned to critical theory from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, feminist theory, philosophy, and sociology. Clearly, this latter group has made substantial progress. For twenty years, composition scholarship has developed as an interdisciplinary, “intellectual” enterprise—and we are much the richer because of it.

Hegemonic struggle is not a bad thing; in fact, a democracy cannot function without it. Yet, such struggle can be collegial and congenial or malevolent and mean spirited. In her discussions of the intricacies of how
hegemonic struggle works, Chantal Mouffe distinguishes between “enemies” and “adversaries.” Enemies attempt to destroy each other, while adversaries “respect the right of the opponent to defend his or her point of view” (qtd. in Worsham and Olson 166). That is, between adversaries, “respect for difference is put into practice as the principle of action in a democratic political community” (Worsham and Olson 166). We all wish to convince others that our way of seeing the world is best; that’s the basis of hegemonic struggle, of democracy, and of rhetoric itself. My own sense of how rhetoric best works, how one can best persuade one’s colleagues that a certain way of defining the world is superior, is not through straw-man attacks, not through mischaracterizations, not through ad hominem assaults, but through dialogue, through persuasion, and, finally, through mutual respect. Wendy says that, for her, being a teacher-writer is “an ever-evolving process of finding places to stand and be counted” (20). And this is exactly the point: we all want to find such places. Wendy wants creative writers to “matter,” and I want composition studies to matter as an intellectual discipline. I don’t begrudge Wendy’s attempt to swing the discipline in a certain direction, and she shouldn’t begrudge me the same.

Let me make something very clear: this exchange is not about Wendy, and it’s not about me; it’s about the future of composition as a discipline, and it’s about whether we as individuals will position ourselves as “enemies” or as “adversaries” in this struggle. And the stakes are high: for me, it’s the potential death of composition as an intellectual discipline.

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**Works Cited**


