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Composition as Pedagogy or Scholarship, Students as Writers or Workers


The first-year writing course in the last half century has both fueled and braked the disciplinary development of rhetoric and composition studies. CCCC’s formation out of administrative concerns for “freshman comp” is a story well known. Early scholarship in rhetoric and composition was devoted predominately to strategies for teaching and managing the course, and anyone who teaches graduate

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seminars in the field regularly confronts the pull of pedagogical practicality that still bends almost every theoretical discussion towards Monday morning. The sheer magnitude of the enterprise, with hundreds of thousands of students and their legion teachers, economically drives most English departments—and certainly those with graduate programs—though, as has been thoroughly noted, this enterprise is rarely respected or rewarded in proportion to its size, especially with budgets and permanent faculty lines.

This last point, of course, provides one familiar equation for abolishing the first-year writing requirement. Many students plus little money equals a transient, underpaid teaching staff whose work, like that of service workers everywhere, melts in prestige, their exploitation both symptomizing and causing the academic devaluation of rhetoric and composition. The wider academy can—in fact, for certain economic reasons, must—(mis)understand composition studies as freshman composition, an elementary skills-providing activity it deems bereft of useful research beyond studies of student proficiency and teacher efficacy.

Another equally familiar argument for abolition doubts basic rationales for the course. Various authors in the generally compelling 1995 volume *Rethinking Writing, Reconceiving Writing Instruction* contest the idea that a writing course can help students develop skills that are generally transferable to a range of writing situations. One typical rejoinder—that such courses could at least develop transferable processes—was more recently critiqued in an equally smart book, Thomas Kent’s edited collection *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing Process Paradigm*. Proponents of these positions call for writing in multiple specific contexts, perhaps through WAC/WID programs or courses grounded in content, issues, or themes.

A new perspective has begun emerging from these two positions, inflected by developments in creative and technical writing, fostered by the expansion of English into English studies, and catalyzed by freestanding departments of writing. Proponents of this view don’t necessarily call for abolishing the freshman composition requirement, though some would transform the nature of the course required. Instead, they seek to expand rhetoric and writing beyond the rubric of composition. (I should note an exceptional counter movement by scholars interested in graphics and multimedia texts to recuperate *composition* as a more comprehensive term for an activity that involves alphabetic texts—but not exclusively such texts.) Rightly or wrongly, while *composition* connotes

122 *Composition Studies*
a skills-building tour bus, “writing” promises academic and professional destinations beyond the academy.

Considered together, a number of recent books suggest complicated relationships between “composition” and “writing,” between first-year composition and workplace writing, and between pedagogy and research. Maureen Daly Goggin’s *Authoring a Discipline* explores composition’s identity as shifting between teaching and scholarly practices. The ends of those practices and their consequences for undergraduate writing are at stake in four other books. Both Anne Beaufort’s *Writing in the Real World* and Patrick Dias, et al.’s *Worlds Apart* ultimately demonstrate that composition courses are generally incommensurate with research on writing in work settings beyond college. In contrast, the essays in Wendy Bishop’s collection *The Subject is Writing* and Linda Shamous’s anthology *Coming of Age*, ultimately are less directly concerned with the relationships between college writing courses and writing at work. Rather they grow out of very different traditions, a sort of process epistemic as opposed to writing for specific purposes. Together these last four books suggest that the most interesting identity questions confronting composition studies are less those of whether we are constituted fundamentally around teaching writing than those of what the ends of that teaching might be—and its consequences for research.

**Authoring a Discipline**

The book’s first chapter provides a quick narrative of the transformation in the American academy from rhetoric to composition in the later 19th century. As the function of the university changed from transmitting knowledge to producing it, composition’s status as an art, not a science—and a base practical art at that—ensured its low, nondisciplinary status. The argument of the chapter is familiar, but Goggin’s tour is useful, and it provides analytic heuristics for the four decades at the heart of her book.

Two related questions provide the intellectual structure for her second and third chapters, covering the periods 1950-1965 and 1965-1980. Should composition be a discipline (a research-based field defined through its production of knowledge), a profession (a practice-based field concerned with working conditions and status), both, or neither? And should composition seek an identity as an art or as a wissenschaft and, if the latter, as a naturwissenschaft (a natural science) or a geisteswissenschaft (a moral science) (56)? Goggin shows how the issues and articles of the periods reflect different relations to these questions. Early journals were characterized primarily by descriptive and testimonial essays (“how we do it here” and “what worked for me”), suggesting a more professional than disciplinary concern. But although research essays gradually replaced those genres, this trend was not even or universal. Goggin notes that FEN took its founding focus as the dissemination of news useful to first-year composition directors and teachers, practical information less commonly available elsewhere.

However, Goggin’s fourth chapter explains how FEN joined other journals by 1990 in pursuing more of a research/scholarly focus, the group collectively tending to omit the kind of “practical administrative and pedagogical work” that was common until the early seventies (142). Other organizations and forums tend to spring up in these vacancies. Goggin points out that JAC, like FEN, began as a practical pedagogy journal. I note that The Council of Writing Program Administrators formed in 1977 to address practical administrative concerns, to the chagrin of some founding members of CCCC, according to Jix Lloyd-Jones. Consider how early publications concerning WAC spent as much effort describing programs as arguing rationales. Below I’ll suggest that a reorientation from “composition” to “writing” is spawning a descriptive phase common to emerging developments within the field.

Goggin includes a chapter analyzing the academic backgrounds of the journals’ editors, the rank and gender of contributors, and the frequency with which those contributors published. Such information is
compelling since, in the relative absence of doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition, editors, authors, and reviewers were primarily responsible for authoring a discipline. Goggin’s final chapter notes that, however successful they were in this enterprise, they failed to establish a profession, at least one in which writing teachers were granted status by virtue of their knowledge and special expertise. In one of the book’s very few missteps, Goggin digresses to the relationships between rhetorical and literary studies in English departments before returning to the main issue spawned by her book: the conflicts between rhetoric and composition as signal and source of a “pot bound” and confused disciplinary and professional identity. She concludes compellingly, if too briefly, that for the field to thrive in both dimensions, it needs to expand its gaze from first-year composition as arbiter and limit of writing in the academy.

**Writing in the Real World**

Anne Beaufort’s *Writing in the Real World* supports Goggin’s conclusion but from a very different basis. The book is at heart a careful ethnography of how four mid-level employees, all college graduates and two with master’s degrees, write within a nonprofit agency. Beaufort draws a rich picture of the numerous genres, roles, and discourse communities each writer must negotiate, the effect being to complicate practices that many take for granted in composition courses.

After a second chapter narrating the “cultural, social, and physical terrain” of her site, three of Beaufort’s middle chapters provide different lenses on the progressions from novice to expert writer. Chapter Three explores five overlapping discourse communities most salient to these four writers. The agency’s mission to provide work training for disadvantaged people relies on raising its own budget. The sources of this funding are federal governmental agencies, local governmental agencies, foundations, and businesses, which share features but ultimately function as different discourse communities. The fifth, of course, is the agency itself. Beaufort successfully advocates a definition of discourse community that attends to more than texts, to include how writing practices result from “the community’s shared values and goals, the physical conditions for getting writing done, and individual writers’ influence on the community” (59). While this may seem familiar, if not old news three years after the book’s publication, Beaufort’s point is nicely grounded in direct observation.

Chapter Four describes how each of the writers were socialized at this agency. Though each came with different backgrounds and skills,
each had to master five domains: discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and process knowledge. Conversations with more experienced writers, such as the agency’s director, at the outset, drafting, and revision phases of writing projects effected much of this socialization, as did consulting peers and existing documents. Writers moved among various roles, including ghostwriter, co-author, and author, on projects with varying degrees of status within the organization. Beaufort effectively quotes transcripts from interviews, the subjects’ drafts, and conversations recorded between her subjects and colleagues to support the conclusions in this chapter and also the next, which explains the various genres important in the agency, from various types of letters to press releases to proposals, among others. What emerges from these central chapters is both an encouraging and daunting picture of how novice writers become relatively more expert in workplace settings. Beaufort’s conclusions about genre knowledge are telling in this respect. She concludes that these genres couldn’t be learned piecemeal but rather all at once, even if minimally. As a result, acquiring genres is an iterative rather than sequential activity, and what changes over time is the depth of writers’ understandings. Further, “genre knowledge was incomplete if divorced from full knowledge of the discourse community” that gave rise to it, but, conversely, “immersion in the discourse community in which a genre was used” did not automatically or alone give writers control over the genre (134-6).

What is encouraging about these conclusions is that the writers all succeed in developing writing competencies over time by working in the agency, through successive iterations of various tasks, with the consort of other writers. What is dismaying is the gulf between how these writers learn and the nature of college writing courses. The subtitle of the book, after all, is Making the Transition from School to Work, and Beaufort frames her study with a discussion of how writers develop expertise. Her study tends to support doubts about “the theoretical soundness of any writing curriculum that focuses solely on general, context-neutral principles for writing” (178). Her suggestion that “no classroom learning can take the place of immersion in the specific context for composing” (180), only makes explicit my own sense, evolving as I read her study, that classroom space is wholly incommensurate to working space. In light of the gap, her pedagogical optimism for collaborative learning practices and
sustained single topic courses, seem a little bit like whistling in the graveyard. No class that meets forty-five hours over the course of a single semester can approximate the social dynamic of the workplace. The richness of the latter environment bears out her critique that, "Asking students to write about capital punishment one week and gay rights the next is at best asking for superficial engagement in the thinking/writing process" (195). Coming under even stronger critique is the efficacy of training situations or short term courses on "principles of business writing" (196). Whether there are other appropriate and more attainable goals for college courses, such as learning the skills of civic discourse, is a crucial topic that Beaufort doesn't take up.

_Writing in the Real World_ is a convincing ethnography, tantalizing in the way good ethnographies are. Beaufort appears to have been sufficiently careful collecting and analyzing a wide range of data from various sources—interviews, field notes, and documents, including from the various experts for and with whom her main subjects write. She deploys quotations strategically and doesn't overstep her conclusions, except perhaps in a chapter discussing the writers' earlier literacies. That chapter is a welcome and ambitious one that portrays three writers' home and school experiences with writing from a very young age. Since the writers had copies of earlier writing, Beaufort relied on retrospective questioning and discourse analysis to characterize their development. In the end, we haven't seen enough to accept that "these three writers appear to have been at different levels of overall writing maturity at the end of high school" (150). But my quarrel is a tiny one compared to the overall quality of this study.

By organizing the book topically, Beaufort gives useful shape to the welter of details, in the aid of a larger argument. Of course we get an incomplete picture, the burden of all ethnographical reports, even ones published at book length. Perhaps some future texts will include CD roms with the full panoply of documents, transcripts, and notes. Beaufort comments on methodological issues at length in her final chapter, defending her approach and explaining how she arrived at her final text. Even though this chapter functions well rhetorically and will be useful to graduate students or others contemplating similar research projects, I would hope we might have gone beyond the need for ethnographers to include reflexive apologia in their works. The old joke comes to mind of comedians attending a convention where jokes are so familiar that they
simply hoist placards with the joke’s number and still draw huge laughs. Beaufort’s final chapter raises the “ethnographic caveat.”

WORLDS APART

As suggested by their title, Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts, Patrick Dias, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré reach conclusions mainly consonant with Beaufort’s. Worlds Apart represents a seven-year study of four matched university and professional settings: public administration courses and government institutions, management courses and corresponding work settings, architecture courses and a firm of architects, social work courses and social work agencies. The research team and its associates collected a wide range of data: inventories of genres in each domain studied, tracks of documents for inception to completion, reading protocols of designated readers, ethnographic observations of writers involved tasks, interviews, and the analysis of conclusions by participants. The result is a highly ambitious, sophisticated, and nuanced book most compelling in the way it uses activity theory to explain differences between writing and learning to write at school and work.

Beyond the plurality of settings, the most important distinction between this book and Beaufort’s is that Dias et al. used specific professional courses to provide the comparison with workplace writing. Even in those courses most specifically designed to steep students in the practices of the professional workplace, there was a vast incommensurability in genres, motives, actions, and operations. Grounded in an epistemic motive as opposed to an instrumental motive, the activity of school writing is almost inalterably less complex than that of work writing, so much so that these researchers extend the myth of transcendence to question not only the shortcomings of first-year composition but nearly all academic writing. I underscore “nearly,” for the authors do explain courses configurations and practices that could more readily bridge the gap between school and work. Still, in many respects, Worlds Apart presents the ultimate implications of 1990’s social theories for the teaching of writing. The book’s opening section smartly condenses this body of theory, and along with the concluding chapters, this review of issues is reason enough to read the book. The two middle sections, one on school writing, the next on work, are dense with assertions and evidence, sometimes ponderous in their aspiration to precision, but well-grounded and thought provoking. The work on architectural writing is particularly fascinating.
THE SUBJECT IS WRITING

However (and it is a big however), the question that neither of the
"World" volumes addresses at length is the desirability and sufficiency of
measuring the school setting in terms of workplace expectations. In The
Subject is Writing, Wendy Bishop collects several essays from a markedly
different trajectory of writing instruction. Rather than worrying about the
efficacy of composition courses for workplace writing, the authors in
Bishop's anthology are grounded in what might be called the process or
craft tradition most complexly and richly understood.

Each of the twenty brief essays this second edition is directed to
students. As a result, theory and research are distilled into advice for
writers in a welcome textbook most easily characterized by a selective list
of titles:

- "Writing as a Tool for Learning and Discovery"—Thia Wolf
- "Journeys in Journaling"—Chris Anson and Richard Beach
- "How to Get the Writing Done"—Donald Murray
- "A Lesson in Revision"—Toby Fulwiler
- "Does Coming to College Mean Becoming Someone New?"—Kevin Davis
- "How Writers and Readers Construct Text"—Jeannette Harris
- "Responding—Really Responding—to Other Student's Writing"—Richard Straub
- "What is a Grade?"—Pat Belanoff
- "Style: the Hidden Agenda in Composition Classes or One Reader’s Confession"—Kate Ronald
- "When All Writing is Creative and Student Writing is Literature"—Wendy Bishop

The advice here will be familiar to nearly every writing teacher reading
this review, but the measure of this volume is less its originality of theory
and research than its presentation of writing practices intelligently for
student readers taken seriously. Many teachers will find the collection
useful both as a textbook and as a teaching resource.

In the context of this review, most striking about The Subject of
Writing is its focus on writing per se, on writing as an act sufficient to
itself, salutary in its own right, its practices, behaviors, rhythm, and
strategies fundamental and malleable, transferable to various situations in
which writers may write. The book is devoted to what I call "craft" issues
of writing, more on how to produce texts than on why or how specific
circumstances may shape the act of writing. It is telling, for example, that
a number of essays discuss finding a topic or something to say. Exigency exists mainly at the broad level of “you’ve received a writing assignment” or perhaps not even that, and students are imagined to have considerable agency, almost as freelancers with broad tasks. Note that this is agency within social contexts, as several authors here affirm. While I believe composition has been recently derelict in regarding craft issues and the subject position of writer (as opposed, say, to the subject position of “political science student who writes” or “future accountant who writes”) and, thus, I find much refreshing in this book, I do note that it runs counter to the thrust of Beaufort’s and Dias’s visions of college writing. Those persuaded by David Russell, Joseph Petraglia, and others’ critiques of the general transfer or transcendence model will likely challenge basic assumptions of this volume.

**Coming of Age**

The several essays in *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum* collectively mediate both the “writing as writing” and “writing for specific (vocational) purposes” polarity enact by the previous three books and the “composition” versus “writing” issue I suggest partly drives Goggin’s volume. In fact, part one of *Coming of Age* is entitled “Redirecting the Field from Advanced Composition to Advanced Writing,” and the several essays there, by Lynn Bloom, Rich Bullock, Bob Schwegler, and Tom Miller collectively analyze the floating signifier of “advanced composition.” As Tom Miller notes, “Rhetoric and composition have been peculiarly fixated with freshmen” (32).

The essays that follow present an extraordinarily suggestive map of the possible terrain of advanced writing courses. When we read this book in a recent doctoral seminar, one student admitted feeling more excitement about the prospects for composition studies than he had felt previously, and my own enthusiasm matched his. By painting a plenitude of writing courses the essays reveal how much the uncertainty about teaching writing stems from our having too-narrowly conceived our pedagogical sites: freshman writing, advanced writing, creative writing, technical writing. There is, after all, a vast gap between most of our truncated curricula and our theoretical knowledge about multiple genres, discourse communities, and local textual ecologies. It is as if we constituted the literature curriculum by offering “beginning literature,” “intermediate literature,” and “advanced literature” and then wondered why we felt continually dissatisfied with, even skeptical of, the very possibility of our even teaching literature.
The success of this book lies less in the profundity of the individual essays than in their generative synergy. The pieces, some thirty-eight altogether, are themselves very modest, five to ten pages long, by contributors representing a who's who in rhetoric and composition studies. Part Two divides options for advanced writing into three core areas, preparing students for participation in the discipline of writing studies, preparing students for participation in public writing, and preparing students for participation in the profession of writing. The trifurcation of "advanced writing" into these areas is a simple way of exploding the term.

Like the ones in Part Two, the essays in Part Three provide brief rationales for and descriptions of writing courses, following the same three divisions. Descriptions generally include reading and writing assignments, discussions of student projects, and arguments for sequences. Unlike the earlier essays, however, those in Part Three are represented in the print text by only by a single page; however, they are fleshed out in a CD-ROM that is bound with the book. The editors take great care to explain that, "While most are designed to provide information that is supplemental to a book's text, this CD-ROM is actually part of the book's text." What the editors and publisher have done, in fact, is to find a way to provide a much fuller resource than likely would have been practical in a print volume alone. The one-page print portion serves as a useful précis to the longer work. It's a little annoying to have both media, but that annoyance is more than offset by the wealth of material thus available. As a small sample of that material, consider Dennis Baron's course "Literacy and Technology," Beverly Wall's "Political Rhetoric and the Media," Patricia Bizzell's "Writing as a Means of Social Change," Diana George's "Cultural Studies: The Rhetoric of Everyday Texts" or Mary Lay's "Technical Communication."

Part Four of the volume, also presented in précis/CD format, discusses strategies for programmatic entities. Theresa Conefrey, for example, explains the development of a writing major at Hawaii-Hilo, Kathleen McCormick and Donald Jones discuss a professional writing program at Hartford, and David Schwalm provides insights on such enterprises from a central administrator's vantage.

To make too much of Coming of Age's CD is akin to celebrating a handbook just because it is spiral bound. The book is stimulating much less because of its format than because of the way it seeds new thinking about the possibilities for writing courses. Still, other authors and publishers should seriously consider this combined mode of print/digital
publication including, as I noted above, for ethnographic studies, whose supporting materials otherwise would be prohibitive to publish.

While I doubt any of the courses in Coming of Age can satisfy the challenges posed by Beaufort or Dias et al., their number and range are promising because they shatter a too-small conceptual vessel for composition. Certainly the authors in Bishop’s collection would assent to this break. Goggin’s history concludes with a fear that composition has become pot bound, especially to the extent that teaching first-year composition remains the almost totalizing object of our scholarly and pedagogical gazes. Taken together, such widely disparate books as these suggest what more there is to see.

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WORKS CITED