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CHANGING THE QUESTION: SHOULD WRITING BE STUDIED?

Rhetoric and composition, like any academic field, takes shape in crucial respects through debate about the identity of the discipline, the work it values, the questions it raises, and the practices it endorses. If anything, the history of the field can be seen as a matter of what Victor Villanueva so tellingly calls “cross talk.” Sometimes, such cross talk takes place live and in person, as in the case of CCCC sessions in which Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg debated Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch about academic discourse or Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae debated writing with and without teachers. More often, though, these exchanges take place in writing. I think of, say, the Janice Lauer-Ann Bertoff debate about invention in the early 1970s and the debate between Maxine Hairston and composition’s cultural left in the 1990s, but fill in your favorite examples.

A few years ago, I had resigned myself to the withering away of such discipline-defining debates, as the field became more professionalized and internally differentiated (“Close Reading” 137). But I was wrong, and another debate is currently brewing. You can see signs of it, for example, in Gary A. Olson’s response to Wendy Bishop’s argument in the lead article of a special issue of College Composition and Communication. According to Bishop, the teaching of writing has fallen victim to the theorists whose convoluted prose has taken the “joy” out of writing, and self-identified “expressivists” such as herself are being marginalized by the theory machine (a claim Olson—and I—find suspect on the grounds she was, after all, elected chair of CCCC). From Olson’s perspective, Bishop’s complaint represents a “backlash” against the hard-earned work of composition theorists to make the field intellectually respectable.

Now, if my sympathies are largely with Olson in the new “theory war,” I cannot in this article do justice to the full range of issues involved.

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Instead, I want to look at a particular aspect of this debate, namely the current interest in thinking about rhetoric and composition not just as a required first-year course but as a program of study. It is not accidental, perhaps, that back-to-back chapters by Charles Bazerman and Susan Miller in Olson’s recently edited collection *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work* both call for “writing studies,” in Bazerman’s words, as a “major discipline,” and, in Miller’s, as an integrative “mode of inquiry.” To my mind, these two chapters, along with the recent trend to establish free-standing writing programs, four-year writing curricula, and departments with majors and minors, indicate an important shift in the questions our field is asking about the work we do. To put these questions in perspective, let me go back thirty years, to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when advocates of the “new rhetoric” were trying to clarify their theory and practice of writing instruction. Coincidently, this was also the time I started teaching writing, and I remember being both troubled and intrigued by a question that notable people in the field were asking, namely “Can writing be taught?” I found the question troubling because I thought teaching writing was what I had been hired to do, as a part-time instructor of basic writing in an open admissions program. At the same time, since I had had no experience teaching writing before nor any training in rhetoric and composition, I was intrigued, as a newcomer, that this field was asking such a fundamental question about its own activity. I could not imagine literature faculty asking whether literature can be taught or such a question arising in American Studies, where I had done my graduate work, or any other academic field for that matter.

What I could not have known at the time, but that seems clear in retrospect, is how the terms of the question “Can writing be taught?” belong to a particular moment when the new rhetoric was extricating itself from what it called current-traditional rhetoric. Richard Young’s “Arts, Crafts, Gifts, and Knacks: Some Disharmonies in the New Rhetoric” introduced me to the question. Young notes that the current-traditional rhetoric, such as John Genung’s, divides the activity of composing into, on one hand, an art which depends on the predispositions of the composer and cannot be taught and, on the other, a craft which amounts to the technical knowledge of conventions and mechanics teachers can impart to their students. “All the work of origination,” Genung says, “must be left to the writer himself!” (qtd. in Young 53-54) in one of those statements readers now recognize as the well-known neglect of invention that marks a key dividing point between current-traditional and new rhetorics. For Genung, invention is a rhetorical capacity that exists mysteriously, he says, “in the writer himself, in the peculiar bent of his nature” (qtd. in Young 54).

Today, of course, we might well remark on the class bias in Genung’s thoroughly gendered “bent of his nature” and look for the forms of cultural capital, including the rhetorical labor of invention, that Genung both hides and defends by making them unteachable and inaccessible to analysis. But there is also another division on the question “Can writing be taught?” that Young brings to light. This time, though, it appears within the ranks of the new rhetoric—in what Frank D’Angelo termed the “new romanticism.” As Young explains, the new romantics, by putting prime emphasis on the imagination, “maintain that the composing process is, or should be, relatively free of deliberate control” (55). William E. Coles, Jr.’s notion of teaching writing as writing provides the terms. Like Genung, Coles sees writing in part as an unteachable art: “the teaching of writing as writing is the teaching of writing as art. When writing is not taught as art, as more than a craft or skill, it is not writing that is being taught, but something else. . . On the other hand, art because it is art, cannot be taught” (qtd. in Young 55). Unlike Genung, however, Coles does not give up on teaching the unteachable. Instead, he poses the paradox that “what is wanted . . . is a way of teaching what cannot be taught, a course to make possible what no course can do” (qtd. in Young 55).

And this is precisely what the then emergent process movement went on to do. It worked out a way to teach what cannot be taught by reorganizing social relations in the classroom, shifting the role and identity of the teacher from, in Kenneth A. Bruffee’s words, a “donor of knowledge” to someone who sets up the conditions in which students can learn. In a kind of trickster operation, the process movement answered the question “Can writing be taught?” by changing it into the question “How can writing be learned?”

To my mind, this shift is one of the many valuable legacies of the process movement and its workshop model of teaching writing. I do not mean to suggest that no one before the process movement had ever used writing workshops, for that is certainly not the case. Rather the process movement made the writing workshop—with its repertoire of collaborative learning, drafting and revising, freewriting, peer response, and so on—central to writing pedagogy. For process teachers and theorists, the writing classroom is where students work on writing, and the writing workshop became, in effect, the habitus of writing instruction with an accompanying rhetoric of location and symbolic geography that distinguished the workshop from, say, the lecture hall or the seminar room as our place—where we turned the rows of traditional instruction into learning circles.

Shifting the question from that of whether writing can be taught to that of how writing teachers can design courses and set up conditions in which students can learn to write brought with it a suspicion of direct instruction, for explicit teaching had already been identified with what current traditionalists such as Genung thought could be taught—conventions and mechanics. I remember, for example, when I had just started teaching
writing in the early 1970s, the great revelation that grammar instruction could help prepare students for grammar quizzes but that it did not help them learn to write. More generally, process teachers and theorists resisted not only skill-based approaches and the three-tiered composition sequences at the community colleges where I was teaching that began with a semester on the sentence and then went on to a second semester on the paragraph and finally a third one on the essay. The process movement was also resisting that old image of the teacher who “drones on” or “likes to hear himself talk”—there are many unflattering ways to describe direct instruction—because it valued student experience, contextual learning, situated practice, and learning by doing. The writing workshop thereby became the main vehicle and the symbol of the process movement.

Subsequently, of course, there have been any number of doubts raised about the process movement’s suspicion of direct instruction—from Lisa Delpit’s critique of the disempowering indirection in process teaching to Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Columb’s “The Case for Explicit Teaching: Why What You Don’t Know Can’t Help You” to the New London Group’s multiliteracy pedagogy that treats situated practice and overt teaching not as opposites but as complementary moments that can lead further to “critical reframing” and “transformed practice.” Still, I think it is fair to say that writing teachers’ investment in the workshop as vehicle and symbol remains a defining feature of contemporary writing instruction, even in an era we are starting to call post-process. In turn, however, this investment in the writing workshop as an answer to the question “How can writing be learned?” has made it difficult to think of writing as a subject to be taught, to imagine a place in the curriculum for the study of writing as a legitimate field of inquiry.

For this reason, I consider the current trend to think not just of writing courses but of writing studies and a curriculum with advanced courses, majors, and minors so interesting and important. The significance of this current, I believe, is that it raises fundamental questions about the identity and activity of writing teachers and theorists all over again. Only this time the question is not “Can writing be taught?” or “How can writing be learned?” but “Should writing be studied?”

Now, I can imagine some readers are thinking that this is a non-question. After all, asking students to study writing is something writing teachers do and have always done. We teach what writing is and how to do it. But I think it is not so simple, for the question “What is writing?” can be asked in more than one way. When we say “writing,” do we mean its participial form that refers to writing as an unfolding activity of composing or do we designate its noun form to refer to the material manifestations and consequences of writing as it circulates in the world?

I think there is a tension between the participial and noun forms worth exploring—for the terms determine how teachers and students alike encounter the phenomenon of writing. Let me give you an example. Reproduced below are pages from the opening chapter “What Is Writing?” of my textbook The Call to Write. As you can see, I’m trying to get students to recognize how commonplace writing is to everyday life—and what they might learn by analyzing such humble instances of writing. Given my intentions of presenting samples of writing to be studied, I was taken aback when a colleague kindly sent me the responses of a class of honors first-year writing students who had read the chapter. Importantly, he assigned the

Writing in Everyday Life

Writing in everyday life is embedded in our daily routines and private purposes. Much of the writing that takes place in everyday life can be described as self-sponsored writing because it is up to the individual to decide whether, why, and how to write.

The call to write in everyday life emerges from a range of situations. People respond by drawing on various genres to carry out their purposes: they write lists to remember things and organize their daily activities. They write notes for friends or family members to ask for a ride home, to remind someone about a dentist’s appointment, or to jot down a phone message. People use writing to maintain social relationships—whether by means of a letter of condolence, a thank-you card for a birthday present or a note passed between friends in a class. Some people keep personal diaries to record their experiences—and to let off steam, put their feelings in perspective, and cope with the stresses of life. Others write poetry or fiction for similar purposes and for the pleasure of using language to create imaginary worlds.

These purposes have in common a tendency to be personal rather than public. Similarly, intended readers are generally limited to people the writer knows well, intimate acquaintances such as friends and family—or even to just the writer. Not surprisingly, the tone is characteristically informal and familiar. And although these writings are personal, they are, like everyday life itself, tied to the larger social and cultural context.

ANALYSIS OF WRITING IN EVERYDAY LIFE: A SHOPPING LIST

Nothing could be more ordinary than a shopping list. But this makes a shopping list ideal for our analysis of writing in everyday life. Shopping lists reveal one of the most powerful aspects of writing: writing frees us from having to commit everything to memory. It’s easier and more efficient to write items down on paper, to let a list remind us of what we want.

A typical shopping list might look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apples</th>
<th>Butter</th>
<th>Rice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spaghetti</td>
<td>Meat for Sunday dinner</td>
<td>Hot dog rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bananas</td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>Hot dog rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>Bread</td>
<td>Paper towels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken</td>
<td>Two cans of tomatoes</td>
<td>Salad stuff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
chapter without preacing it and simply asked students in an open-ended assignment to give their reactions. It was the beginning of the term, so students’ expectations about the writing course and the textbook were relatively uncontaminated by instruction. At any rate, what I found so striking in their responses is that they felt insulted by such a mundane text as a shopping list. They said they already knew how to write shopping lists, and so they did not see the point of including it in their textbook. Not to put too fine a point on it, they thought the textbook author was insipid and that shopping lists did not belong in a college writing curriculum.

My point here has to do with the dominance of the participial form of the word “writing.” It is precisely because these students expected so thoroughly to be taught how to write, they could not imagine writing in its noun form or the shopping list as an object of inquiry. Because they could not imagine being taught in college how to write shopping lists, they could not imagine any other use for them. There is a double elimination going on in their responses—first, of writing as a subject of study and, second, of the genre of the shopping list as quotidian and ephemeral, beneath their notice as college students. In other words, the students provide evidence that what Lynn Worsham has called the “pedagogical imperative” operates from below as well as above—that students, as much as teachers, hold an overriding desire to convert writing theory into classroom practice. The students believed that the goal of their required first-year course was to improve their writing, and for that reason my effort to pose writing as a subject of analysis was misguided at best and at worst impertinent and irrelevant.

Now certainly adherence to the pedagogical imperative—on the part of students and teachers alike—does make it difficult to imagine writing courses that focus not only on developing writing abilities but also on an education in rhetoric and writing studies. The shift from the question “How can writing be learned?”—which already has well-prepared answers in the process movement’s workshop practices—to the question “Should writing be studied?” clashes with the sensibilities of many compositionists, for whom writing is figured not as a field of study that belongs in the curriculum but as a practice that pervades the curriculum, beginning with the first-year course and extending into writing across the curriculum, where writing specialists urge colleagues to adopt workshop activities.

On the other hand, as I have mentioned, a trend has emerged to give an affirmative answer to the question “Should writing be studied?” This current is still in the early stages of development, but you can get a sense of its possible meanings in the collection *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*, in chapters such as Andrea Lunsford’s “Histories of Writing and Contemporary Authorship,” Gail Stygall’s “Discourse Studies,” Richard Leo Enos’ “History of Rhetoric,” and Beverly Wall’s “Political Rhetoric and the Media.” The editors, Linda Shamoon, Rebecca Moore Howard, Sandra Jamieson, and Robert A. Schwengler suggest that three considerations are crucial in designing an advanced writing curriculum—to provide students with historical and theoretical awareness of the study of writing as a discipline, to prepare them for careers in writing, and to prepare them to use writing as a means of persuasion in public spheres. Robert A. Schwengler’s chapter, “Curriculum Development in Composition,” gives a particularly strong answer to the question “Should writing be studied?” To provide students with a sense of disciplinary membership and thereby to include them in the construction of writing studies, Schwengler says, we must present writing as a subject of intellectual inquiry.

These positive answers to the question “Should writing be studied?” signify a shift from the first-year composition course as the main focus of writing teachers’ and theorists’ attention to a lateral four-year curriculum.

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| apples | bananas | salad stuff |
| chicken | meat for Sunday dinner |
| two cans of tomatoes | rice |
| spaghetti | paper towels |
| butter | milk | eggs |
| bread | hot dog rolls |
| cat food |

Notice that only the writer could actually bring home exactly what he or she wants. Someone else wouldn’t know, for example, how many apples or what kind of meat to buy. The voice in the writing is imprecise and self-referential, the kind of private code that works when you want to talk to yourself. If, however, someone else were to do the shopping, the writer would need to be much more specific and make the voice more precise and clear.

With some small changes, the shopping list could be written to be an organizing tool as well as a memory aid. The shopper could compose the list so that it corresponds to the aisles in the grocery store:

This analysis points out how purpose and audience do indeed shape the writing task. Even as simple and straightforward a piece of writing as a shopping list can be written to serve different purposes. From a broader perspective, these lists also express the shopper’s relationship to other common cultural activities, such as planning meals, entertaining guests, packing children’s lunches, caring for pets, and cleaning and managing a household. The act of writing a shopping list also locates private homes in relationship to social institutions, such as the larger economic order of food production and distribution that includes agribusiness, cattle ranches, dairy farms, bakeries, supermarket chains, and the huge corporations that make everything from lasagna to light bulbs.
I do not believe you can answer the question “Should writing be studied?” within the confines of the first-year course. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the first-year course exists in a state of “accumulative disequilibrium,” overburdened by the demands of various stakeholders—college administrators, students, parents, prospective employers, and the public, as well as compositionists themselves (“The Problem”). These demands, no doubt, are familiar ones: to help students negotiate the literacy tasks of college courses, to validate the integrity of the undergraduate degree, to increase retention, to critique media and mass culture, to negotiate differences, and to enable students to communicate “effectively” in the workplace and responsibly in public spheres. These demands on the first-year course can be a source of aggravation (when, for example, state legislatures or the accountability movement gets involved), but they have also been a powerful source of energy and innovation. Still, there are epistemological consequences in banking so much on one course.

Critics such as Susan Miller and Sharon Crowley have legitimately blamed the institution of the first-year course for the low status of composition and the exploitation of adjunct faculty. What has not been pointed out, however, is how the workshop model of teaching writing has shaped the kinds of questions we can ask about writing. The workshop is not just a set of pedagogical practices. It is also an epistemological standpoint. Unlike the earlier question “Can writing be taught?”—which calls for stipulative answers about what can and cannot be taught—the central question of the writing workshop “How can writing be learned?” has led to a proliferation of answers with no end in sight.

At the same time, embedded in the workshop model of the first-year course that we inherit from the process movement is a pedagogical imperative that casts the question “Should writing be studied?” as a scandal. Two related responses are typical. Some compositionists want to defend the first-year course, the notion of “strong” composition, and allegiance to a mission of service on the part of writing programs (Roemer et al.; Sullivan et al.). From this perspective, an advanced writing curriculum appears to abandon our historical responsibilities. Instead of thinking that a first-year course might be linked to an ongoing undergraduate program in writing studies, these compositionists are concerned that writing teachers will forfeit their longstanding commitments to the pedagogical imperative of the writing workshop. The second response is more frankly political and holds, quite simply, that the shift from the first-year course to a four-year writing curriculum grows out of self-interest and creeping professionalism. Richard Bullock’s accusation that undergraduate programs to study writing amount to “feathering our nests” reveals the fear that our field will wind up just as careerist as the MLA.

I believe these twin fears are understandable but misplaced. They are understandable because the question “Should writing be studied?” suggests a shift in symbolic space from the workshop to the seminar room. This change in the geography of writing instruction imagines a classroom where students are located around a seminar table with the teacher at its head as a representative of a body of knowledge and where the activity that takes place is not so much writing as discussion. This symbolic geography, of course, typifies the upper division course in any discipline, where the field of study is the central topic. But for writing teachers, changing the rhetoric of location from the workshop to the seminar can be wrenching because it involves a change in identity. The seminar room seems to stand for everything the workshop has tried for years to correct by decentralizing the classroom and organizing new relations between teachers and students.

My feeling, though, is that fears of the seminar room, while understandable, are misplaced. There is an important sense in which the pedagogical imperative and workshop model of the first-year course are not counterposed but dialectically related to the seminar room given to the study of writing. If anything, I think it is reasonable to say that it has been precisely the historical and theoretical construction of the first-year course, with all of its debates about literacy, rhetoric, culture, and technology, that has laid the groundwork for a curriculum devoted to the study of writing. The achievements of the first-year course have made an advanced writing curriculum thinkable precisely to the extent that our knowledges of writing are too much for a single course to contain. Quantity turns into quality, and in many respects the work of theorizing and enabling the study of writing is to make transparent and teachable the social relations and bodies of knowledge that now silently underwrite the first-year course—to organize the study of writing as an intellectual resource for undergraduates.

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NOTES

1I am indebted here to Nedra Reynolds’ “Composition’s Imagined Geographies: The Politics of Space in the Frontier, City, and Cyberspace.” College Composition and Communication 50 (1998): 12-35. Reynolds’ article initiates attention to the rhetorics of location and the symbolic geographies in writing instruction.

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