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A Conversation with Gary Tate

On the occasion of the return of Composition Studies to Texas Christian University, where it was founded as Freshman English News by Gary Tate in 1972, the new editors, Ann George and Carrie Leverenz, asked the founding editor to share his views on the current state of the field and journal publishing. Tate, now retired from TCU, lives half the year in Maine, where he teaches at a senior college of the University of Maine, and continues to spread his wisdom at conferences, most recently the 2003 Spilman Symposium on Issues in Teaching Writing and the 2002 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition.

CL: We’re interested in hearing from you both as someone who was a founding member of the profession and also as someone who founded this journal. We know you’re retired and try not to think too hard about the field, but we know that you’re still active. We’re particularly interested in knowing what you think has been the most significant or important development in the field since you began it in the early seventies and also what’s gone wrong in the recent past.

GT: Well, I just spent the last year reading composition journals to prepare a talk for the Spilman Symposium at VMI, and what amazed me was the immense diversity. It’s much more diverse than it was in the sixties and the seventies. There are articles about computers and using computers, articles about service learning and how composition might fit into that, articles about political and social issues connected to writing, and on and on. I missed one thing, though, and I was warned about it. When the Spilman board decided that someone should look at the journals and do a list of maybe ten interesting articles on writing, I volunteered to do it since I’m retired supposedly, and I have more time than other people. [Laughter.] And I’ll never forget when I said, “I think we ought to focus on articles that are about teaching because people come to the Spilman interested in teaching,” and Erika Lindemann, who’s on the board, looked down the table and said, “You won’t find much.” And she was right.

And I started thinking about earlier times when people like Ken Macrorie and Bill Coles would invite us into their classrooms to see what was going
on. Don Murray invited us into his office to see what a conference was like. You don’t get those kinds of discussions anymore, and I think that’s a great loss. There’s a lot of really important, intellectually sound talk about teaching writing and what composition study should be, but we don’t really see, very much, the teaching of writing in action, inside the classroom, inside the office.

AG: Do you think that’s something that Carrie and I and the journal can bring back?

GT: I would hope so. It seems to me that if a journal could do that, it would have a niche in the field that was really important: Tell us what goes on in your classroom. What are your problems? How do you solve them? What are the real issues, day to day, of teaching this kind of writing class or that kind of writing class? What are the students like today? You don’t hear much about what students are like. How do you handle all this diversity? I think it would be a tremendous contribution—because no other journal’s doing it. I know because I’ve just looked. And it would be interesting and exciting. I can’t tell you how many articles I’ve started and I’ve put down because they were so incredibly boring, because they didn’t speak to that particular interest of mine. I think that would be a wonderful thing for this journal to do.

AG: How are we going to get people to do that?

GT: . . . I would start by inviting people you know to talk about their teaching in a very personal, in-the-classroom kind of way. This doesn’t mean that they cannot frame it with theoretical frames or draw conclusions. It can’t be just descriptive, of course.

CL: We wondered whether it would be helpful to have a feature that, say, invited personal essays about teaching—that identified a different kind of genre.

GT: It would be wonderful.

CL: It is what people talk about when they talk to each other . . .

GT: Of course.

CL: But when we publish, we somehow think we need something else.

GT: I remember—I’m not sure if my memory is completely accurate—an early CCC meeting I went to, and Ken Macrorie got up and said, “I’m sick of you people coming to CCC and bringing your own writing rather than your students’ writing. If you were really interested in teaching writing, you would be bringing your students’ writing and grabbing me in the hallway and saying, ‘Read this—look what my students are doing.’ You would be pasting it up on the hotel hallway.” And then he said, “Until you start doing that, I’m not coming back to CCC,” and he walked out of the room. I’ll never forget that. Now I may be misremembering details of it. But it’s absolutely true. We join together and we read our writing. Very seldom do we see student writing.

CL: There are two things that I’m thinking might have contributed to that. One is how much is being written about writing and writing instruction outside of the classroom—that move to talk about other sites for writing and other issues related to writing but not the comp class. The other thing I’m conscious of is all of the talk about the ethics of using student writing—you know, the CCCC statement—and getting permission and so on. And I’m wondering if you have any input into whether all that trappings of research methodology might be keeping people from just sharing student writing in the way they used to.

GT: I don’t know. I was just thinking that Joe Harris had an article in a recent issue of College English ["Revision as a Critical Practice"]—a fine article, which is important for a lot of reasons. And I’m a little irritated that they put it under “Opinion.”

CL: I was going to say that they marked it as a different genre, right?

GT: Yes. And if you look at the rest of them, they’re opinions, too. And it’s somehow an “Oh-that’s-just-Joe’s-opinion” kind of thing. It’s irritating that they had it like that. Because what they publish in that space is usually the most interesting thing. But he used student writing, and the wonderful thing about it was that he was talking about revision and the kinds of revision you asked for or talked about with the students. I was impressed by what a splendid reader of student prose he is. It was amazing the things he saw in that, and we don’t talk about that. How do we read student prose? And what difference does it make if we read it this way or that way? We aren’t very good readers many times. Which goes back, I think, to the split between composition and literature. You don’t ask students who are going to teach music or be composers to ignore the great composers of the past. We demand that they study them. They study Bach; they study Beethoven; they study Stravinsky. But we say now in composition studies—or a lot of programs do—“You’re going to study composition and rhetoric, so you can teach writing.” And ignore the great writing that has been going on in English for centuries. And somehow that’s—I know the problem . . . the practical problems—but I think that’s a real mistake.

CL: Because you could certainly, even in composition programs that are independent from literary studies, you could still do that. There’s nothing stopping you from doing it, right?

GT: No. Except the old business that now we’ve got a separate discipline, and you know, we’ve got to fight for our own turf. Which I think is a real mistake. The Harris article brings up that issue again. But right next to it there was an essay by O’Dair, and she said that the sort of critical pedagogy that you wrote about, how, recently, so well—she called that the standard model in the field. I’m not sure that’s true. If you read the journals, it seems maybe that it’s the standard model, but if you talk to teachers very much, it seems to me . . . that is not the standard model. But I think that was the model Harris was trying to move us away from and back to a greater concern with the writing of the student. We’ve been more interested in the consciousness and the beliefs of
the student. We should be getting back to the writing of the student. I think it's one of the most important articles I've read in several years, and it needs to be widely known. It really does.

CL: You've made a good point that there's a difference now—maybe there was always a difference—between what professionally trained compositionists want to read or think they ought to read and what teachers of writing want to read or think they ought to read.

AG: Or have time to read.

CL: You came into the field through literary studies, and if you were making a decision today about what kind of Ph.D. to pursue, would you be a compositionist?

GT: I have no idea. It's interesting, though, I think—maybe, maybe not—that I started as a literature person and, as you say, "morphed" into a composition person, but I've morphed back because all my teaching recently has been in literature. And you asked me about teaching at the senior college at the University of Maine. Well, I've been teaching literature. I taught this summer, a course in working class poetry, and I'm going to do a course next fall in poetry of WWI... So I've just sort of moved away from teaching writing. I've come full circle. I'm really enjoying it immensely. I think I missed literature all those years.

CL: What words of advice do you have for readers of Composition Studies that might sustain them through a long career of scholarship and teaching? And is that a word of advice—don't give up reading literature?

GT: Well, that's one thing, but I think the way students write, to a very large extent, probably as much as their basic intellect, determines how well they succeed in college and after college. That's no great mystery or revelation. So I think people who are trying to help students genuinely write better English prose are doing a noble service. But we should be helping them read better, too. That's one thing I think we lack. We can't do everything, but somewhere along the way, somebody has got to start helping students read better and speak better as well as write better.

AG: I've been puzzled, when I'm doing work at the sentence level, that the students don't hear the difference punctuation makes or the different emphasis you might put on a word. And sometimes I've had them read out loud in class, and I see why—they read in a complete monotone, expressionless, kind of stumbling as if words are difficult to process. They don't have that music and that rhythm, that language in their heads.

GT: They're not hearing that. I think most of their lives have been devoid of the sort of emphasis on written literature that a lot of us maybe grew up with. And a lot of people still do, probably. But a great number of young people live in a much more oral/aural world. They're very visually literate.

CL: There's a lot of current interest in visual literacy, but it's a literacy of reading images, which is, in fact, how they get most of their information. So the print visual literacy—many of us are good spellers because we have a visual memory of the way words look—they don't have that.

GT: And the way sentences sound. I just feel "that's not a good sentence," but that feeling isn't there. And that's a real problem because you're struggling against the entire culture.

AG: And probably not many of your friends and colleagues, and not many of Carrie's and mine, could say, as my students do now, quite often, "Well, I've never read an entire book before." Or "It's been four or five years since anybody asked me to read a whole book."

GT: Which means they have not read many good English sentences. Which means that it's a great mystery to them—what makes a good sentence, what makes a good paragraph.

CL: So, it's worth trying.

GT: Sure. It's worth trying with individual students and individual classes. Writing is the basis of the education system, and anyone who helps students, even a little bit, with their writing is performing a heroic service but also a very valuable service.

AG: Do you think that students need to read prose or just anything? If they read tons and tons of poetry will that make them better essay writers?

GT: I don't know. I don't think anyone knows that. You could try it.

AG: I'm suddenly wondering because I just taught Cicero in my rhetorical history class, and he said that the writing exercise that made him an eloquent speaker was translating poetry, which he did for several hours every day.

CL: I do think that our literacy skills and literacy needs are different now. I've found myself, in the [TCU composition] program and in my own teaching, attending to the analysis of public discourse. I teach a course called Cyberliteracy where the subject matter is pop culture, representations of computers. In that class, students read theory; they read some good writing, but it's not literary writing. I think I probably, maybe even prior to this conversation, would have said, "Well, there are other kinds of reading they need to be doing other than literary reading that would really benefit them more as citizens right now." I don't know. Do you have insights into what we ought to be doing?

GT: I think that they should read both. That is, it's hard to move them forward to some kind of public writing; on the other hand, never to have read some of the great writing of our language, it seems to me, is very unfortunate. I've heard a lot of people say, "I don't care what they read as long as they read a sort of decent English prose. It doesn't have to be a great masterpiece." And I feel that way to a certain extent. But I also think students should read—and
teachers should read—some really good literature once in awhile just to remind themselves of what really good writing is like . . .

CL: What it can do.

GT: Sure, how it can affect you, how it can function, what it sounds like.

CL: We've talked for awhile about ways to reconnect literary studies and composition studies, but we're also interested in your thinking about the relationship between rhetoric and composition. When Ann and I were graduate students, we were both in programs—Penn State and Ohio State—where the two were together, and it was "rhetoric and composition." And I think increasingly—we've certainly seen it in the way that conferences get constructed and in the way our graduate students construct themselves—that they're claiming an identity either in rhetoric, which they think of as theory and history, or composition, which they think of as teaching. What are your thoughts on the relationship between rhetoric and composition?

GT: Well, you can't teach composition without using rhetoric. It's impossible to do. Should we worry about the fact that some people get interested in rhetoric, per se—its history, its function as a body of knowledge? It seems to me that I used to worry about it more than I do now. Well, I used to worry about a lot of things more than I do now. [Laughter.] . . . I would hope that there would be numbers of writing teachers who see in rhetoric what's really there—a foundational knowledge that any writing teacher should have. But there are students who want to say, "My interest is in the history of rhetoric as a body of knowledge." That's fine, but I would want those people also to know something more and very deeply about the relationship between the teaching of writing and rhetorical studies. I don't think it has to be either this or that.

CL: It made perfect sense when I was in graduate school . . .

AG: Yes, it did.

CL: . . . that I was doing both.

GT: But they're not two separate things, really; in a sense they're the same. But we can do a history of composition and not do very much about teaching writing, and we can do a history of rhetoric without doing very much about teaching writing.

AG: The thing that really struck me is that Carrie and I both have believed for a long time that they're sort of the same thing, and yet if somebody asks me, "What do you do?" I would never say, "I'm a compositionist." I would say, "rhet/comp" or "rhetoric."

CL: And I think of myself only as a compositionist even though I've taken courses in rhetoric . . . So the rhetoric journals publish rhetoric, and the composition journals publish composition.

GT: And there's no reason for that. It's separated. It's as separate in some ways, now, as literature and composition. It's a sort of a triangle now . . .

CL: It hasn't separated departmentally, but I think, within departments, even in ours with six faculty, our graduate students identify one or the other as the dominant interest.

GT: And I wish we could get them over the idea that they had to choose. I have to do this, or I have to do that.

CL: I'm just curious where it comes from. I think the journals and the conferences contribute to it.

GT: Well, sure. My memory is that when people began to be interested in classical rhetoric back in the fifties and sixties and early seventies, it was strictly as an aid to the teaching of writing—rethinking invention and all of that strictly within the context of composition. But as it grew, and the conferences started and the journals started, people got interested in the thing itself quite apart from composition. And that's fine as long they don't just study that and then try to teach writing. I'm interested that over the years, the people who have invited us into their classrooms to see how they teach and talk most intelligently about teaching are not the rhetoricians.

CL: And I think people, both inside and outside of composition, argue about whether composition is only about the teaching of writing. When I first came to TCU, I had Ph.D. students taking comp theory exams who said that composition is [only] about teaching first-year writing. Its history is such that that's where the intellectual work began, but most of us now are doing many other things and thinking about writing much more broadly but continue to have an interest in teaching. But there are folks who argue that that's not intellectual work—and you probably know some of them [laughter]—who don't think composition will ever be a discipline as long as it continues to tie itself to the first-year course and to a focus on teaching.

GT: And one of the things we've neglected over the years is advanced composition. We don't even know what it is.

AG: Exactly. We're trying to figure out what courses to offer at the upper level, but when we come to advanced comp, we think, "What do we do—just a bigger and flashier sophomore comp?"

GT: And the Journal of Advanced Composition has "morphed" into a theory journal.

CL: I want to talk a little more about the journal since that's the occasion for this conversation. I've wondered who was responsible for changing the name and why "Composition Studies"?

GT: I don't know. No one asked me. I think it was a good move. The early problem was . . . there were three things: the look of it—as a sort of cheap newspaper; the name of it [Freshman English News] didn't sound very scholarly; and the fact that it was, as people said, not refereed. Well, I always argued that it was refereed. I just happened to be the only referee. [Laughter] So, those
three things. And they’ve pretty well been solved. It’s now refereed; it looks
like a journal; and it has a different name. So, I think that’s all to the good.
CL: I asked in the preliminary questions if you could tell us a good story about
editing the journal—a memorable event or something funny.
GT: Well, the memorable event is that the second year of publication, I decided
I needed some help. So I asked Priscilla Glenn, [laughter] who was teaching
composition part-time at TCU, to be my associate editor, and we used to paste
FEN up—literally—we used paste pots, and our hands touched over a paste
pot one day . . .
AG: And it was like magic . . .
GT: . . . and we’ve been married for 30 years.
CL: That’s a wonderful story.
GT: The other thing I remember about the journal most vividly is the contest
we ran in ‘74 for the best issue-length essay. I had such fun with that because
I wanted a diverse panel of judges. So I got Ed Corbett and Mina Shaughnessy
and Peter Elbow. It was wonderful. Ed, with his passion for classical writing;
Mina, with her passion for basic writing; and Peter with his passion for free writ-
ing and cooking and writing without teachers. And they were all unanimous
about the winning essay.
CL: And what was the winning essay?
GT: It was Richard Coe’s “Rhetoric 2001,” which has recently been chosen by
Erika Lindemann in a new book as a neglected essay we should go back to. It’s
in Christina and Robert McDonald’s recent Southern Illinois University Press
For the first part of the book, they asked eight well-known people in the field
to choose a neglected or an older essay, which they reprint along with a com-
mentary by the person choosing the essay. An inspired idea, I think. The second
half of the book consists of new essays by younger people in the field.
CL: Good.
GT: And it’s wonderful that these neglected, older essays—I’ve always dis-
liked the idea—and I’ve done it myself so often—that we so often focus only
on what’s being written right now in the field. I had a student once who did a
sort of semi-bibliographic dissertation on journals in the seventies, and every
week she would come in and say, “Look at this! Here’s this wonderful article.
Why don’t we read this?” I often wanted to teach a seminar called “Reading
the Old Articles.”
CL: We have some anthologies now like Villaneuva’s Cross-Talk [in Compo-
sition Theory] that try to bring some history . . .
GT: And that’s very important because you can’t just slough off what happened
10-20 years ago as if it weren’t important . . .
CL: And it’s also really good to look—and Lisa Ede has made this argu-
ment—to look at that early work in its historical context. So, it still has rele-
vance—yes, but . . . it’s easy to dismiss expressivism now, but when you go
back and realize what a radical move it was and how it was related to the Civil
Rights Movement . . .
GT: I’m not so sure it’s easy to dismiss it even today.
CL: At your keynote address at the Watson Conference, you told the audi-
ence that they would be wise to publish their own work rather than spend all
of their time publishing the work of others, and yet you wanted us to edit this
journal . . .
GT: Somebody has to do it. [Laughter]
CL: Could you talk a little about the pros and cons of editing collections or
journals?
GT: It’s a matter of time and the effort that you have to put into it. It’s very
hard work, I think. And the way the discipline’s going . . . It was okay when
I did it because everybody was happy that something was getting published,
but you couldn’t make a career just doing editing today in the way I did. I
loved it, though. I just loved bringing people together and saying, “Let’s work
on this.”
CL: Well, it strikes me that part of the fun of it is that it’s teaching writing in
the same way as working on a dissertation with a graduate student or teaching
first-year comp. For me, it’s all the same level of engagement, trying to put
someone’s ideas in the best possible form.
GT: And it’s also, to an important extent, determining not only what people
write, but also what people in the discipline read. And that seems to me to be
probably the most important function of it. So that if you want people to be
reading more, and consequently thinking more, about what actually goes on in
writing classes around the country, and you decide to make that a focus of the
journal, you can influence the outlook of thousands and thousands of teachers
and people in the discipline about what they’re doing every day.
CL: There is always the question of whether editing is scholarly or service. But
doing the editing work itself, when you’re doing it, sure as heck feels scholarly
in the sense that you recognize that you’re helping people shape arguments that
are then going to influence people.
GT: And it will influence you, too. And, so, it goes both ways.
CL: And yet, it’s seen as service or that’s where it traditionally counts—where
most of us already do more than enough service.
GT: Well, the best defense is in, again, the McDonald’s book . . . In it, Steve
North writes a long postscript about my career, and it turns out to be, in part
at least, a defense of editing. He calls it “The One Who Attends.” You should
read it. Not for the parts about me, but for how he argues. It’s the only thing
24 Composition Studies

A Conversation with Gary Tate 25
like that in the field. I can't believe how much he put into that essay. He knows more about me than I know about myself.

CL: Do you have any questions for us? [Laughter] Or last words?

GT: The one thing I would most like to see in the discipline in the future is some kind of coming together—and I think Harris suggests this indirectly—some kind of coming together of people who are interested in critical pedagogy and those people who are interested primarily in the craft of writing. I don't see why it has to be either this or that. But it seems to have been in the past... I think that's one of the greatest problems in composition studies—that if you believe this thing, then you must reject all of these. We have this kind of singular mindset.

CL: I'm teaching a graduate course in the politics and ethics of writing instruction, and when we were reading a little history of the University of Texas flap over that course there... students still wanted to make the distinction between teaching politics and teaching writing. I think I have political motives for teaching writing... I teach students to use a semi-colon, but I also talk to them about the effects of language.

GT: It's a political move. Sure.

CL: Teaching writing is absolutely political. But for some reason, a distinction is often made—"I teach writing which means I tend to sentences and structure" or "I actually have students read about issues and we talk about those things," as though there's not any writing instruction going on. And Brodkey actually argues in her piece ["Making a Federal Case Out of Difference"] that no one ever looked at the syllabus, no one ever talked about the fact that there was group work and revision and all the things we understand to be composition typically. And the debate became about something else really, not about the course but about something else.

GT: It became about the labels.

WORKS CITED


