education within specific fields of English studies should address hard and specific questions about institutional pressures, curriculum, employment, the undergraduate major, and graduate work. (Can’t a feminist strategist ask and propose scrupulous answers to such political, theoretical, and logistical problems? I have to believe so.) If we are to draw from available means not only in the classroom but in the profession as we think critically about ways strands of English studies can speak to one another—and I am persuaded that we are—then we should have access to more than reprints of well-wrought syllabi, excerpts of student writing accompanied by teacher responses, and autobiographical reminiscences of how graduate work shaped a talented writer and teacher like Haake.

What Our Speech Disrupts is full of tantalizing and provocative ingredients, but I cannot help but rejoin that we have to do something with the ingredients in order to make them into something new. Bricolage certainly jars and stirs the imagination, but is bricolage enough for reform? Haake’s moxy and innovation as a writer, scholar, and teacher is thoroughly evidenced by the way What Our Speech Disrupts places us imaginatively in one of her classrooms; her argument to bring feminism and creative writing to the forefront of a reimagined English studies deserves to be articulated beyond bricolage so that her important ideas can be brought out and deliberated by those of us who are eager to sit down at the table.

Nashville, Tennessee

WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Rebecca L. Jackson, Texas State University

Recently, one of my colleagues expressed irritation with our textbook committee’s decision to scrap the handbook we’d used for years in favor of an altogether different text: new publisher, new authors, new approach. It is this last feature—the approach—that my colleague found particularly troubling. “What’s with all the visual stuff?” she asked. “Designing pages, using visual images, creating websites—are nt we supposed to be teaching students how to write? What happened to just writing essays?”

I suspect my colleague’s complaints are shared by others in our department—literature, creative writing, and rhetoric/composition faculty alike—and for very similar reasons. The new handbook challenges what the editors of Questioning Authority, Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, call
"textual authority": notions about what “the essay” should look and sound like, what form it should take, and what language it should employ. Textual authority, Adler-Kassner and Harrington observe, “is perhaps the most authoritative idea we carry with us to the classroom” (9), and yet it is not, they argue, the only “authoritative voice” that influences our work in composition. Classroom practice is also shaped, at times constrained, by notions of “personal authority,” the “touting of narrative and lived experience as the basis of writing” (Hesse 26), and by various theoretical approaches to teaching composition. Authority shapes writing, Adler-Kassner and Harrington observe plainly, and their interest, at least in part, is in assembling essays that describe the three kinds of authority they consider most pervasive and influential—personal authority, textual authority, and theoretical authority. What they and the contributors to the collection are most interested in, however, is how individual teachers and students understand, use, question, and revise ideas of personal, textual, and theoretical authority. The “fundamental dynamic” of the composition classroom, the editors argue, “turns on questioning assumptions about authority and the essay,” for it is only when teachers “question received authority about composition [that] they promote generative change” (13). Particularly compelling is Kassner and Harrington’s efforts to (re)see authority through the lens of story: that is, to talk about the “authorities” that influence composition studies as metanarratives of sorts (although this term is never used), as “stories of composition” that currently narrate our work in the field and are simultaneously questioned and (re)narrated by writers and teachers in their daily work with one another. Adler-Kassner and Harrington provide a sketch of this overarching metaphor in their introduction, yet it is the essays themselves that illuminate its nuances blending discussions of narrative, theory, and classroom practice to illustrate the ways in which authority is questioned and, often, rewritten.

The first section of Questioning Authority, “Personal Authority,” explores what Douglas Hesse refers to as “the embrace of ‘the personal’ in composition studies,” the privileging of teachers’ and students’ lived experience and personal narratives as somehow more authentic, true, and authoritative than traditional forms of academic writing (31). In the first essay, “Stories, Style, and the Exploitation of Experience,” Hesse provides a frame for the essays that follow, raising important questions about motives for storytelling in the composition classroom and the implications of turning experience into “artifact.” Using his own essay as a case in point, Hesse weaves together personal history and narrative, theory, and classroom practice to challenge the notion that pedagogies emphasizing personal narratives are somehow “more faithful to postmodernity” than others—that they take a “stance against modernist rationalism and all its evils” in ways that other classroom practices do not (27). Hesse observes that when lived experience is expected as the “basis of student writing,” the essays we read are

no less conventionalized than are lab reports. They are rhetorical moves whose presence or absence tells readers to accept or reject a
personal narrative as a good, effective, or authentic one. “Authentic voice” . . . is authentic only insofar as it matches received conventions of authenticity. The magic of the whole concept of “authentic voice” is that it depends on a disavowal of convention. (27)

In other words, such “disavowal of convention” obscures the often strategic use of story for primarily instrumental or aesthetic functions, “experience turned into strategy in order to serve purposes that are, but simultaneously are not, ‘faithful’ or ‘just’ or even ‘respectful’ of that experience” (26). Hesse’s essay is intended to raise more questions than it answers and, for this reason, it works as an interesting counterpart to essays by Zawacki, Peters, and Golson, which focus on actual classroom practices, on ways to organize writing courses around a more complicated notion of “self” as always already fragmented, shaped by innumerable material, social, cultural, and ideological constraints (Zawacki 39). Terry Zawacki, for example, describes her current classroom practice of using personal writing as a vehicle for examining culturally produced identities, to explore how we (students and teachers alike) are “written into certain stories and not into others” (46). And Brad Peters and Emily Golson each discuss the ways in which personal narrative might be used as a springboard for reflection and for “forays” into alternative stories, perspectives, and histories.

Contributors in Section II, “Formal Authority,” tread more familiar ground in their focus on the authority of textual conventions in the writing classroom. Computer classrooms, ongoing discussions about the role of visual rhetoric in first-year and advanced writing, our students’ own media savvy—these realities have challenged those of us in composition studies to rethink notions of “text” as well as what we mean when we say that we “teach writing.” Readers will find essays here that extend conversations already begun in our field and describe specific classroom practices designed to challenge and, at times subvert, the traditional essay.

In “La Huesera,” Laura Brady invokes the legend of the Bone Woman, a collector of artifacts who “crisscrosses borders, goes against the grain, disrupts conventions” and “draws our attention to the politics of genre” (97) to elaborate a pedagogy based on the “shape-shifting” nature of the essay: from formal and didactic to conversational and exploratory (103). Anderson and Aronson in “Visualizing the Academic Essay” examine academic writing’s “outlaw of the visual” (116), while Thomas Reynolds in “Expository Essay Form and the Future of Newer Electronic Forms” foregrounds the essay as a “form of cultural authority” with roots in middle-class values. For Anderson and Aronson, the concept of “design” reinvigorates the practice of writing by encouraging an “integration of visual thinking into all aspects of the composing process” (127). Reynolds’ position is more overtly political: hypertext and other electronic media give students the chance to “write in forms that encourage them to combat the negation of difference found historically in the essay” (136).
In the last section of the book, “Theoretical Authority,” contributors offer a range of perspectives on the ways in which theory—both general and particular—drives classroom pedagogy. This section is the least consistent of the three, combining three essays that question particular theoretical constructs with one essay that demonstrates a particular theory’s relevance to the teaching of writing. This last piece, Ed Nagelhout’s “Essaying as Action,” offers a compelling look at the ways in which activity theory might be used to challenge the essay as composition’s “primary form” (204), but it might have been better placed in Section II with essays focusing specifically on the genre of the essay. That said, I found the essays in this last section more engaging: they explore issues of theory in composition studies that, as of yet, have not been widely discussed. This is particularly true of Dawn Skorczewski’s “Want to Tell a True Story about First-Year Writing Programs?”—a fascinating look at what the writing programs and writing curricula at Harvard, Syracuse, and the University of Pittsburgh tell us about their allegiances to particular theories of writing. Skorczewski concludes that no such single allegiance exists, that a “true” story of writing programs is less about a coherent and stable philosophy of writing than it is about “writing program directors constructing and reconstructing themselves in particular moments, in relation to local constraints, constraints that both limit directors and emanate from them” (179). Essays by Laura Gray-Rosendale and Ruth Mirtz examine the ways in which theory—at both the individual and disciplinary levels—shapes teachers’ and students’ work in the writing classroom. In “Once Upon a Theory,” Gray-Rosendale turns attention to our discipline’s embrace of contact zone theory and pedagogies, noting that, in her own classroom at least, contact zone pedagogies that promised to “authorize [her] students to speak,” actually authorized only one voice in particular—her own (161). Gray-Rosendale challenges those of us who use or might use contact zone pedagogies in our classrooms to closely examine the assumptions upon which the pedagogy rests and to listen to students when they tell us that our writing classrooms are serving teacher interests rather than student needs (161). Ruth Mirtz, in “Essaying Theory,” discusses the role of metadiscursive writing in interrogating the “folk theories” that shape teachers’ and students’ attitudes about and approaches to writing. For Mirtz, activities like interpretive paraphrase and invisible writing “put the conflicts between students’ and teachers’ theories on the table for discussion” where they can then be questioned and, perhaps, reinterpreted (188).

Questioning Authority is a difficult collection to classify: it is at once a collection of essays on theory, on practice, on the authoritative stories we tell about theory and practice, and, ultimately, on the ways in which we question, challenge, resist, subvert, and revise those stories. Novice teachers will find the collection an important guide to current conversations in the field, while experienced teachers may find the metaphor of story itself most interesting and productive, a way of reflecting on and reimagining their roles as teachers, scholars, and writers. In their introduction to the collection, Adler-Kassner and Harrington envision a work that
“authorize[s] readers to raise questions of their own, to revisit past practice, to have different kinds of conversations with students” (15). The essays in this collection give us a motive and a vocabulary for such activities.

San Marcos, Texas


Reviewed by Bruce Horner, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

This collection of essays presents a variety of arguments, many by prominent scholars of basic writing, for whether, how, and why students otherwise designated “basic writers” (and, in one case, those designated “ESL”) might be “mainstreamed” into “regular” composition courses. While all of the essays are new to this collection, several authors rehearse or draw extensively on previously published work. The collection is not a comprehensive gathering of all seminal work on the mainstreaming debate: relevant work by such figures as Peter Dow Adams, David Bartholomae, Tom Fox, Karen Greenberg, Judith Rodby, and Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson, for example, is discussed in many of the collection’s chapters but not included. Nonetheless, the book provides compositionists attempting to better understand what mainstreaming basic writing might mean with a useful introduction to such matters.

Gerri McNenny, the book’s editor, opens with an overview of recent shifts in the political climate and public policies prompting or even forcing many mainstreaming efforts and identifies some of the key issues. Following this overview are seven chapters comprising Part I, “The Controversy Surrounding Mainstreaming: Theory, Politics, and Practice.” These chapters present not simply arguments for and against mainstreaming, but also arguments about such arguments on the basis of analyses of national trends, local institutional histories, and reviews of the scholarly literature. In Edward White’s “Revisiting the Importance of Placement and Basic Studies: Evidence of Success” (a revised version of his 1995 essay “The Importance of Placement”), White reviews statistical evidence from the Institutional Research Office of the California State University and reports from the New Jersey Basic Skills Council on the effects of remedial writing programs on student retention. While cautioning that “[w]e must be careful about generalizing from the California and New Jersey programs” (27), he concludes these do demonstrate success in helping students remain in school. In sharp contrast, Ira Shor, in an extended elaboration of arguments he has made earlier (in “Our Apartheid” and “Illegal Literacy”), denounces basic writing courses as part of a long tradition of using literacy instruction as a means by which to justify and