The Cart, the Horse, and the Road They are Driving Down: Thinking Ecologically about a New Writing Major

My English department recently had a discussion of the first year writing requirement. Because the university was projecting a twenty percent increase in enrollment over the next five years, the department faced the possibility of being forced to add roughly forty new sections of first year writing to a program that already offers over a hundred sections a semester. Like most large state universities, our writing program is already overwhelmingly staffed by part-time teachers and lecturers on multi-year contracts. Because the additional forty new sections would no doubt be covered primarily by an expansion in non-tenure-track hires, the department faced the same dilemma that English departments across the country often face: are we willing to increase our heavy reliance on a contingent instructorate? Should we revisit the first-year requirement? Those who self-identify as rhetoricians and compositionists were generally ambivalent in our responses. Already discouraged by the degree to which the department relies on contingent teachers to staff writing classes, some advocated getting rid of the two-semester requirement, if only to reduce it to one semester. Others, however, resisted cutting the requirement. Giving up half of the first year requirement, in this view, was tantamount to surrendering important disciplinary “turf” that could diminish the overall position of writing in the department.

The situation is fraught with issues familiar to most professionals who work in rhetoric and composition, and those issues are important. However, I begin this essay with a description of this situation not because of the pervasiveness of the institutional and disciplinary issues it raises, but rather because it highlights a more general compartmentalization in the way that writing education tends to be discussed and therefore understood in the professional discourse of rhetoric and composition. This was a “writing program” discussion, and discussions of writing at the programmatic level tend to em-
ploy a rhetoric that focuses on administrative concerns. The possibilities and character of writing education were therefore largely constructed in terms of institutional factors such as compliance requirements, budgetary issues, the likelihood of new hires at full- and part-time levels, and the place of writing in general education and in English curricula. In contrast, scholarly discussions of writing pedagogy—method, purpose and praxis in writing classrooms—tend to account for very different factors: textuality, rhetorical theory, ideology, technology, revision, gender, race, and so on. As others have pointed out, though institutional concerns have a profound effect on the character of everyday writing pedagogy, they don’t often appear in research- or theory-driven discussions of postsecondary classroom pedagogy. Jeff Grabill, for instance, notes that research in professional writing often does not account for institutional factors and that this feature is one of the primary characteristics distinguishing such research from research more directly focused on writing pedagogy in postsecondary classrooms (16). Similarly, Margaret Syverson argues that researchers of postsecondary writing, for all of their insistence upon the importance of context, “have been somewhat atomistic, focusing on individual writers, individual texts, isolated acts, processes, or artifacts” (8).¹

In this article, I argue that this compartmentalization should be critically examined and transcended if the field is going to lead the development of undergraduate writing majors. Any new major should be conceived in a way that accounts for the institutional pressures, constraints, and professional contradictions that already characterize writing education in English departments that don’t offer majors. To be clear, this is not another justice-driven argument intended to bring attention to the exploitation of teaching labor in writing instruction. Those arguments have been made, and often made well, over the past decade and a half (see, for instance, Holbrook; Fontaine and Hunter; Schell; and Schell and Stock). Instead, it is an argument that, before we attempt to expand the disciplinary terrain of composition, we should achieve a deeper understanding that what we do in writing classrooms is profoundly shaped by the institutional means by which it is done. Historically-produced hierarchies, the status and working conditions of teachers, and the concrete immediacies of textual production are crucial factors in any pedagogical praxis. At stake with any expansion of postsecondary writing education is not only the status of writing teachers and the discipline of rhetoric and composition, but the vital relationship between the consciousness of students and the socio-material contexts of their literate development. The development of writing majors could present opportunities to transform the broader “ecologies” of postsecondary writing. However, developers of undergraduate majors will need to be aware of not only “the horse,” the scholarly vision that we hope will propel writing majors forward, but also the historical/institu-

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¹ Numbers in parentheses correspond to pages in the cited work.
tional baggage that writing instruction carries, and the “roads” that the field is traveling and will likely see in the future. A materially grounded understanding of “circulation” in postsecondary writing could help us to make scholarly conceptions of literacy and institutionally-situated praxis (pedagogical and administrative) more accountable to one another. Without this materially grounded understanding, however, the development of new writing majors could actually have a negative effect on undergraduate English curricula and the profession more generally.

“Circulation” and Power

Momentum for the development of new writing majors seems to have been increased by Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 2004 CCCC chair’s address, and published later in *College Composition and Communication*. Referencing a broad range of scholarly discussions, Yancey proposed a major that emphasizes the ability to adapt to new trends in technology, and rhetoric as situated action. Yancey’s proposal realizes that emerging digital technologies are dramatically changing literacy and that academic writing is increasingly disconnected from the shape that writing is taking virtually everywhere other than in classrooms. Postmodem in content and form, the proposal blends visual rhetoric with a creative style of explication, and resists framing the major itself in terms of what one might call traditional disciplinary content. For instance, rather than using terms like “subjects” or relying on rhetorical modes as a basis for curriculum, Yancey employs the more fluid term “approaches.”

The “approaches” to composition that will be encompassed by her new major are “all oriented to the circulation of texts, to genre, to media, and to ways that writing gets made, both individually and culturally” (315).

While I certainly find aspects of Yancey’s proposal very engaging and reflective of current scholarly concerns, her avoidance of institutional factors—of the material terms of labor that frame everyday writing pedagogy and the production of students’ texts—is crucial. This avoidance becomes especially salient when Yancey asserts that “First-year composition is a place to begin carrying this [major] forward . . .” (315). The proposal doesn’t mention the circumstances under which first-year composition is typically taught: it doesn’t mention contingent teaching labor, or the fact that professional scholars with Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition don’t actually teach the overwhelming majority of first-year composition classes. If professionals in rhetoric and composition who are in a position to do so “carry forward” from first-year composition, will it be as managers and theorizers of a project that further expands the de-professionalization of teaching in academia? Because
this proposal is driven by textual theory and doesn’t take on questions of institutionality, it leaves open the possibility.

Yancey certainly alludes to the material contexts of writing and education. For instance, she stresses the need to found the writing major on an understanding of “circulation.” She cites two kinds of circulation: “(1) the circulation of texts generally and (2) the circulation of a student’s own work within an educational culture.” She goes on to say that circulation and activity theory are basically the same thing: “What I am calling circulation can go by other names. Charles Bazerman and David Russell, for instance, call it activity theory, but basically it’s the same point” (312). This is no small part of Yancey’s vision. She cites a lengthy passage from Bazerman and Russell that describes texts as parts of broader activity systems; she cites John Trimbur’s articulation of the circulation of writing; and the entire proposal—in its own way—emphasizes production and the social functions of texts.

I agree that circulation and activity theory have potential as starting points for envisioning a new writing major. I also think that analysis of circulation might be far more inclusive of important institutional factors. It is helpful to be mindful of the theoretical and ideological foundations of activity theory. Yrjö Engeström and Riejo Mittenen, who have been instrumental in the promotion of activity theory in the U.S., point out that while often not explicitly recognized in American scholarship, activity theory derives from Marx and dialectical materialism (5-13). Its foundations are in Soviet psychology and linguistics—in the work of Lev Vygotsky, Alexsei Leontiev, and Alexander Luria—and it was only after English translations of their primary work gained more currency in the late 1970s and early 1980s that activity theory began to catch on substantially in the West.

The Marxist perspective and conceptual framework that informs the research method is vitally important because it connects context with consciousness, and human productive activity with the systems of social organization that shape it. As Engeström and Miettinen put it, “the appropriation and creative development of central theoretical ideas of activity theory presuppose a careful and critical study of Marx” (5). In both Marx’s work, and in the ongoing critical discussions that have followed, “circulation” is among the subjects of activity analysis, and the term carries particular resonances in the Marxist analytical framework out of which activity theory derives. It situates production within broader socio-political networks. While analysis of the circulation of student’s work within educational cultures is now very useful, I think a different understanding of “circulation” might help us to recognize the full range of challenges with, and the broad potentials of, new undergraduate writing majors. Specifically, an examination of circulation can be directed
toward yielding new understandings of how ideology and institutional power relations are wired into sites of production in postsecondary writing education.

Circulation is central to one of Marx's primary projects in Capital: exposure of the contradiction between use value and exchange value—a contradiction that enables exploitation in part by separating products from production (Marx 188-244). Marx's project involved careful description of circulation—and through the description, a re-articulation of the relationship between labor in the context of production and a "commodity" at the point of exchange. When the product of human labor ceases to be valued as something immediately useful and becomes a commodity—when it is produced and sold in an organized market—it assumes exchange value. As commodity for exchange, the labor product comes to seem divorced from the socio-material processes of production and its uses as an aspect of the daily material lives of human beings. This divorce is affected, in part, through "circulation." As material goods are circulated from sites of production through mechanisms of distribution and exchange, they are revaluated, and those who are in a position to do so make a profit from this revaluation. So, and this is what is most important to my concerns, circulation is described as a means of identifying material relations of power. Those who are so positioned can pay $x to have a good produced, but then sell it as a commodity for $y. "Circulation" maps the network of relationships and exchanges that enables people to sell blue jeans produced under sweatshop conditions for pennies on the dollar at a substantial markup at an upscale mall. In contrast, in a primitive economy, workers themselves directly exchange products with other workers—for instance a chair for an ax. Through circulation, facilitated by money within the complex relationships that constitute a modern industrial economy, various parties profit from the movement of products from worker to consumer. "Surplus value" in the form of money, is created through circulation, and as Marx rather dramatically puts it: "Circulation sweats money from every pore" (208).

Marx's description of this process is painstakingly detailed and nuanced and, over the years, his analysis has been lauded, critiqued, dismissed, and expanded upon in response to global economic changes. Regardless of your views of Marx's economic analysis, however, "circulation" has a necessarily Marxist hue when connected to "activity" and "labor" in activity theory. This mode of analysis accounts for the particular historical and material circumstances of production as a means of understanding—and eventually confronting and transforming—relations of power. Leaving the particulars of circulation vague or general mystifies those relations, reproducing existing ideologies and oppressive social relations. Activity analysis is both somatic and systematic: it examines particular activities in order to connect physical bodies to products, sites, and institutionalized networks of relationships. It
is driven by the realization that there is no labor generally, only particular laborers involved in particular productive enterprises: as Marx puts it, “always a certain social body, a social subject, which is active in a greater or sparser totality of branches of production” (86). Production can be understood in terms of its unique social, historical and material terms. To gain a deeper understanding of those terms, however, we need to examine the entire ecology of human labor, from the particulars of its immediate context, to the historical circumstances that have shaped that context, to the circulation of its products.

We have much research that examines how ideology and power are deployed through literacy education in K-12 institutions and in community literacy organizations (see, for instance, Brandt, Cushman, and Grabill). We have few models, however, for such an examination of writing classrooms in postsecondary writing programs, and thus institutional factors remain at once pervasive in writing program discussions and largely invisible in most pedagogical research. Though Yancey’s proposal examines “circulation,” because it doesn’t mention the terms of labor in composition, it omits important questions of power, agency, politics, and historicity from the framework of understanding. This “bird’s eye” view, therefore, can ironically have the unintended effect of distancing texts from the factors surrounding teaching and writing that analysis of activity and circulation can be particularly useful for examining. Stripped of the imperative to enhance an understanding of textual production in critical, perhaps even ideologically meaningful ways, “circulation” largely references only movement—the appearances of texts in one place and then in another. So while the proposal seeks to account for “the circulation of a student’s own work within an educational culture,” it doesn’t discuss the complicated matrix of factors that produce that culture, or frame that work, or sustain its power relations (312). Ironically, the proposal actually downplays the importance of institutionality. New writing majors might be developed “in whatever site: English department, writing studies department, [or] rhetorical studies program . . . the institutional site is less important than the major itself, which can begin to secure our position in the academy while it makes space for the writing that students do on their own, now, without us” (321; emphasis added). Within this frame of analysis, the circulation of texts within educational cultures doesn’t seem related to the terms of labor in composition, nor to the institutional constraints on the goals and production of writing in educational settings. Nor does the vision explicitly connect to a broader political project—such as exploration of the relationship between rhetoric and civic life, or enhancement of the general understanding of literacy and ideology, or affirmation of human dignity. Circulation is, rather, employed as a means of identifying naturalized professional terrains that are
to be articulated and controlled by the rhetoric and composition professionals who are in a position to do so.

Materiality and unresolved questions about the subject and identity of the field are significantly subordinated to the professional imperative to, in Yancey's words, "secure our position." I wonder about who "we" are here. Because the material terms of production are omitted from this analytical frame, "our" could include both institutionally vested professionals in rhetoric and composition, and the armies of contingent teachers who teach the overwhelming majority of writing classes. "Our" positionality, status and ethos as workers is distinct, and blurring that distinction erases the differences in power in highly problematic ways. Unfortunately, and ironically, texts produced in educational cultures in this view of "circulation" appear in new contexts like products on store shelves. They might obviously bear the imprint of new digital technologies that enable them to be widely, almost instantly, reproduced and dispersed. They might also display the authors' abilities to adopt multiple subject positions in a way that we associate with postmodernity. However, this view divorces student texts and writing education from the concrete, material circumstances that create and sustain most postsecondary composition programs. The institutional practices that characterize writing education are thereby rendered invisible, and arguably, student writing labor is itself functioning as a commodity from which a kind of surplus can be extracted, as it continues to create the professional terrain of rhetoric and composition: as subject of research; as illustration of successful curricular initiatives (in program assessment); as outcome of programmatic goals, etc. Implicit in this argument is that the concrete particulars of student and teacher labor aren't that relevant. The imperative is professional expansion: the field should move to rationalize types of writing not currently subsumed by academic scholarship and pedagogy as the territory of rhetoric and composition. The curricular vision may be new, but the institutional means are business as usual, just bigger business.

Avoiding a discussion of institutionality keeps the conversation concerning a new major firmly, and too safely, within the terministic screen of a scholarly discourse that is about texts and curricular vision. This is where scholars understandably feel most comfortable when we do scholarship. This safety, however, comes at a cost. When we put on our writing program hats, we understand that curricular initiatives don't spring from the heads of scholars; they are bound to the material practices of specific institutional settings. New writing majors should be informed by the road behind us and in front of us—by the historical position of writing education and recent and emerging trends in funding and administration in academia.
Rhetoric and composition carries the baggage of its history. A number of disciplinary histories describe how the field forged its identity and struggled for status within environments in which it has long been considered subordinate to literary studies. This is well-covered terrain (see, for instance, Berlin, Brereton, Crowley; and Miller). Some things certainly changed in the 1960s and 70s due to a variety of factors (see Harris, Teaching); however, the field continues to struggle against deeply-entrenched notions that writing instruction is remedial and not quite worthy of substantial focus and proportional resources at the postsecondary level. Unfortunately, the emergence of rhetoric and composition as a distinct scholarly field has done little to address the fundamental terms of teaching labor in undergraduate writing. This is true not only in traditionally-structured English departments, but also in freestanding writing programs. A Coalition on the Academic Workforce (whose membership includes CCCC and MLA) sponsored survey found that 93% of all introductory classes in freestanding writing programs were taught by non-tenure-track faculty. Moreover, only 60% of all undergraduate courses were taught by contingent faculty (“Report” 338). Freestanding writing programs also had the lowest proportion of tenure-track faculty (14.6%) of all the nine fields in the humanities and social sciences covered in the study.

Research on general funding and administrative trends in academia point toward a potentially troubling future—especially in the humanities. As sociologist of educational labor Gary Rhoades argues, “seeking status within the academy is a fool’s paradise. It is even more of a fool’s paradise to seek status within a low-status field (English) that has declining status within the academy” (262). The heavy use of contingent teaching labor to teach writing is a part of a broader trend toward “casualization” (see below) of teaching in postsecondary education. Indeed, much research suggests that recent decades have brought about a systematic subsumption of educational functions and goals—including in the humanities—within disciplinary market models (see, for instance, Aronowitz; Martin; Rhoades; Slaughter and Leslie). Legislative and political changes affect the daily work of academics in myriad ways, including a gradual rise in academic administration and a movement toward cheaper instruction involving larger class sizes and more courses taught by non-tenure stream faculty.

Writing majors will need to be developed mindful of how current institutional practices already shape the ongoing concerns and work of the field. They will need to account for the deep historical legacy of bureaucratically-managed writing education and to respond to the synergies between the material terms of academic work, on the one hand, and the economic logics of academic and textual production, on the other. These logics have often positioned rhetoric and composition as “management science”: reluctant facilita-
tor of the casualized academic management model that relies on contingent faculty to teach large portions of a department's total offerings. The creation of administration-driven writing curriculums has created a foundation for a new discipline but, in many cases, has also desperately truncated the potentials of writing education by efficiently marshalling the labors of institutionally-vulnerable teaching staff toward fulfilling administratively-dictated curricular goals. Some have tracked how what Donna Strickland calls the field's "managerial unconscious" has shaped its scholarly concerns. Marguerite Helmers, for instance, has argued that the field tends to generalize about students and methods in order to commodify that method—"transhistorical," generic students and learning experiences are a foundation for a more stable, more portable, more administerial or administratable curriculum (29). Similarly, Bruce Horner has lamented that student writing is produced as a commodity "in ways that guarantee its lack of exchange value: it is clearly authored by and for institutions, not the individual writer, and has an extremely limited range of circulation" (51). We should not "carry forward" from first-year composition toward development of any new major without first confronting what is deeply wrong with first-year composition and undergraduate writing education more generally at medium and large postsecondary institutions. When we create writing majors, we need to think beyond our historically-produced tendency to imagine undergraduate writing in terms of "writing programs" that sustain a dynamic in which literacy education is particularly vulnerable to technocracy. Curricular innovations need to be imagined in conjunction with fundamental institutional changes.

INTEGRATED TRANSFORMATION

Activity theory recognizes two basic processes operating continuously at every level of human activities: internalization and externalization. Internalization is related to reproduction of culture; externalization as creation of new artifacts makes possible its transformation. These two processes are inseparably intertwined. (Engeström and Miettinen 10)

Activity theory need not be about analysis and reaction to culture as given; it can be about creating understandings of positionality and power that can lead to new possibilities for agency and action. We can struggle to resolve the contradictions that exert a perpetual drag on our field through seeking to make administrative, scholarly and pedagogical work a singular praxis, an extension of integrated—if actively contentious and evolving—philosophies of labor, literacy education, and culture. New writing majors might be imple-
mented as parts of broader efforts to change the ecologies of postsecondary writing and thus have both what is written and the writers themselves be transformative.

Institutional transformation is necessarily local and varied, so eroding the numbers of courses taught by people who don’t hold full professional status will involve a number of measures, perhaps including abandoning the first year requirement. The issues of “abolition” and situated administrative pragmatism are well-covered and beyond the scope of this essay, but with the development of a variety of classes staffed by fully-vested professional teachers, we might see letting go of first year composition programs in their present incarnations as liberating. Rhetoric and composition might be able to move into a post-writing program era. Professionals in rhetoric and composition can then get out of the business of teacher management, and postsecondary writing pedagogy can be less constrained by technocratic mechanisms, such as mandatory syllabi and textbooks, and coercive assessments of teachers and student texts. More writing classes can be taught under conditions that enable professionally informed divergence and experimentation in pedagogy.

Writing education can be characterized by ongoing struggles to understand and positively transform the particular historical and material circumstances of textual production inside and outside of academia. They can be driven by an awareness of the dialectical relationships between materiality, social relations and consciousness. Neither the student nor the educational institution are transhistorical givens. Each is continually recreated by the daily labors of human agents and is therefore a potential site of positive change and hopeful possibilities for writing that have yet to be conceived. Let’s not allow any new majors to become business as usual in postsecondary composition.

Notes

1 There are some notable exceptions: Margaret Marshall and Bruce Horner, for instance, who discuss the relationship between the material terms of teaching labor and pedagogy in postsecondary writing. Nevertheless, the field has a surprising, and perhaps telling, dearth of research that critically examines the effects of managerial practices (programmatic policies and goals, evaluation procedures, required syllabi, etc.) on writing pedagogy and student learning in postsecondary writing programs.

2 I use the term “ecology” in the way that has had currency in literacy studies over the past decade. The term is developed extensively in Barton. See Grabill; Syverson; and James Zebroski for applications of ecological perspectives more specific to rhetoric and composition. Of particular relevance to the discussion that follows, Zebroski draws on Marxist theory to advocate “theory in an ecology of practices” in which “theorizing practices . . . are related to
writing practices, curricular practices, disciplinary practices and professional practices."

3 This deprofessionalization has been documented and theorized in important ways by a number of scholars. Margaret Marshall offers a useful recent discussion of how it might be addressed. Others, such as Teresa Enos, Sue Ellen Holbrook, and Donna Strickland, have associated this diminished status of teaching composition with the more generally subordinate status of "women's work" in society.

4 The majority of those classes, 75%, were found to have been taught by part-time instructors and graduate assistants.

5 For an extended discussion of this issue, see Bousquet; Harris ("Be-

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