Canon as Palimpsest: Composition Studies, Genre Theory, and the Discourses of the Humanities

David Brauer

Profession 2005 begins with a series of essays titled “The Future of the Humanities.” Without exception, the authors contend that literary studies must reaffirm, or in some cases reassert, its connection with the humanities in order to retain viability for the foreseeable and distant future in American higher education. In the words of Robert Scholes, the humanities serve to “[remind] us that we have a responsibility to the great works of the past and to those students who may benefit from coming to know and appreciate them” (9). While they stop short of proclaiming that primary texts of literature would share the level of “first order discourse” that many in English Studies afford to theory, these voices insist that the humanities must remain viable in higher education and that we must emphasize them in our scholarship, our teaching, and even in our evaluations for tenure and promotion. They offer no long-term prescriptions as to the curricular or scholarly formulation of the humanities in the contemporary university, but they do set the table for such reflection and discussion.

In this essay I hope to augment the critical reflection on these matters with a focus on their implications for Composition Studies. Even though many scholars in this field have distanced themselves from literary studies, and not without good rationale and fair-minded intentions, our discipline may benefit from cultivating a relationship with the meta-discipline of the humanities. When viewed as a set of interacting, historically contextualized discourses, the humanities offers a focus of inquiry that is more broadly contoured, more open to revision, and more critically accessible than has been recognized by many voices eager for a more autonomous definition of Composition Studies. Once I have contextualized this point in reference to some notable voices in the discipline, I will then incorporate genre theory in order to foster a connection between Composition Studies and the humanities. Thus, I hope to answer the call of the essayists mentioned above and in so doing enhance the positions of both fields of academic inquiry.

The recent calls for increased pragmatism in pedagogies and curriculum revision by the likes of Kathleen Blake Yancey and Kurt Spellmeyer would seem to offer Composition Studies a decisive identity and direction for future scholarship and presence in the academy. In her 2004 CCCC Chair Address, Yancey gives most of her attention to what she terms a new “writing public,” a population for whom writing happens primarily outside the academy. Instead of rhetoric, argumentation, or even academic literacy, Yancey offers
competing definitions of public literacy and the impact of new technologies of writing as the emerging focus for Composition Studies. While her discursive context is an academic one, she acknowledges that the writing that commands the attention of composition professors "seems to operate in an economy driven by use value" (301). She suggests that we adapt to this new discursive/linguistic context by changing our curriculum so as to train students to write and translate across multiple mediums, textual, electronic, public, and so on. The pragmatism exemplified here would allow the discipline to connect classroom work to real-world employment concerns and writing contexts, thus signaling a potentially decisive break with both the formalism and modes-based writing pedagogies of an earlier era and the expressivist pedagogies of recent decades.

Yancey’s vision offers valuable ways to proliferate the loci of composition studies, and the opportunities articulated in her address offer hope for new avenues of critical inquiry and pedagogical development. For all of her apparent expansiveness, though, she neglects the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of rhetorical inquiry and analysis that would complement her more pragmatic ideas. If in fact Composition Studies should pursue a public academic language (see Yancey; Brooks; Gorzelsky), we should remind ourselves that the aesthetic offers a meaningful point of entry into the semiotic and epistemological concerns of our discipline. I contend that a renewed focus on the humanities as a historically situated, rhetorically understood endeavor would bolster the institutional position and curricular role of Composition Studies and would provide for a helpful balance to the aforementioned pragmatic turn in much of our scholarship.

While many see this turn of events as a welcome liberation from the more idealistic concerns of literary studies, others have taken note of unintended consequences for our profession. In his book Arts of Living Kurt Spellmeyer offers a wide-ranging analysis of the state of the humanities in the current academy. He begins his broadly-focused critique by stating the obvious: the humanities finds itself isolated from the activities and concerns of the larger society (4). Though he mentions the predictable sociological factors, including the rise of technology and the increasing pragmatism of students’ attitudes toward higher education, Spellmeyer blames higher education itself, arguing that “the academic humanities . . . [has created] a specialized, often rarified knowledge that justifies not only the privileged vantage point of critical judgment, but tenured positions, research stipends, federal grants, and so on” (6). Instead of encouraging a “direct involvement in the making of culture” (7), the humanities has removed it to a near vanishing point, with unintended consequences for the most basic and most culturally meaningful practices of higher education. Rather than empowering students and, by extension, citizens, the humanities too often removes them from creative and intellectual means of understanding and improving their world.
In the concluding pages of his discussion, Spellmeyer attempts to link Composition to the humanities through a new core curriculum based on dialogue, creative investigation, and issues in current culture. While these suggestions do help us to consider innovative means to making the humanities relevant, they lack two key components. Throughout the many pages of a text dedicated to the humanities and its relevance, Spellmeyer never provides a definition of this key term beyond echoing some of the phrasings of Robert Bellah. As such, we are to see the humanities as a term emptied of meaning yet endlessly contested, simultaneously traditional in reflecting our most trite assumptions about it and progressive in its possibilities. He does take a moment to exclaim that

[a]s for ... professors, we continue to believe—or at least to claim—that a knowledge of Plato, a reading of Shakespeare, a brush with current historiography, an immersion in possible worlds theory . . . will somehow enable young Americans to make better decisions than if they had more pertinent information at their ready command. As far as I'm concerned, this is the sheerest superstition. (244)

Spellmeyer's point here rests upon a relatively clear distinction between everyday (i.e. “pertinent”) genres and the humanities, the latter of which is a set of genres deemed too remote or impractical to serve “young Americans.” But this distinction ignores the innately dialogical character of public discourses whereby boundaries between “high brow” and “low brow” texts may be conceptualized but not easily maintained. While knowledge of so-called classic texts may often prove too antiseptic and credulous for its own good, Spellmeyer seems quick to jettison certain discourses in favor of others; thus, he evokes a hierarchical conception of cultural knowledge that does not necessarily account for the dynamic interplay among aesthetics, rhetoric, and utilitarianism that we recognize in the genres that we use.

In a move reminiscent of Gerald Graff and many others who attempt to properly historicize modern English Studies, Spellmeyer's institutional and intellectual history goes back only to the beginning of the twentieth century. His bias toward the contemporary and the pragmatic reduces context (cultural, institutional, ideological) to the concerns of the moment and to an unforeseeable future, implicitly rendering Composition as a discipline that is isolated from History and Philosophy rather than open to their influence. In the curriculum that Spellmeyer champions and describes, the courses are designed not around texts but around “dialogues,” inquiries based on “the problems that college graduates might be expected to face in the next twenty years or so, not as doctors or lawyers or Indian chiefs, but as ordinary citizens” (242). Intriguingly, Spellmeyer references a common cultural subject position, “ordinary citizens,” but his strategy begs a question: are ordinary citizens (if such a subject position even exists) always informed
and determined merely by ordinary, pragmatic discourses in which they participate frequently? The dialogues in question seem relatively flexible and open-ended, but the context and exigencies are thin, driven more by newspaper headlines than by the interplay of disciplinary inquiry. While his pedagogical vision is attractive, his view of public genres seems narrowly focused on current, utilitarian discourses.

Spellmeyer's attitude toward Plato and Shakespeare is emblematic of our profession: in spite of our improved status as a discipline, our embedded subject position within the academy ensures a tortured relationship with the intellectual and artistic conversations that have defined us and provided us with cultural capital to this point and will likely continue to do so. Though I concur with Louis Menand that we should not use the humanities as a means of propping up dominant cultural hegemonies (16), I do not agree that a reinvestigation of the humanities both as an admittedly open canon of texts and as evolving cultural practice would indicate that we have somehow lost our ideological nerve. Bruce Kimball defines a contemporary academic manifestation of *artes liberales* as "prescribing the reading of classical texts primarily in order to develop critical intellect" (219), a definition that does not emphasize writing but does generally align with the liberatory pedagogies of English Studies. Karen Fitts and William Lalicker have called for a "symbiosis" between composition and literature as enabling a "reconstitution" of the curriculum (428). Their scholarship challenges the binary opposition between the two fields, but their focus on disciplinary hierarchies limits their attention to pedagogy. Building on their argument, though, I look to voices from within the academy but outside the traditional discursive *terra firma* of scholarship in English Studies.

Robert Proctor's *Defining the Humanities* had its initial publication date over a decade before Spellmeyer's *Arts of Living*, yet the former anticipates the latter and its own internal problems in uncanny ways. Whereas the latter proves an exercise in epideictic rhetoric, the former offers sustained deliberative rhetoric in its most important passages. A professor of Italian literature and language, Proctor begins his text by acknowledging openly what traditionalists seem loathe to admit, that the "humanities" as a term has been emptied out, not merely by specialization in the disciplines and persistent anxieties about tradition in higher education but also resulting from a break with the Greco-Roman tradition in the West fomented by Renaissance humanists. Bruce Kimball argues that the ongoing disagreement about what constitutes a humanities-based education stems from a millennia-old conflict between orators, who favor education based on its perceived intrinsic value, and philosophers, who favor education based on its perceived use value. Proctor attempts to break this impasse by offering a realistic accounting of the intellectual history of the West that reveals not continuity but disjunction; paradigmatic shifts in epistemological, religious, and cultural assumptions.
have proven the norm over the last two millennia rather than the exception. Rather than imitate conservatives in romanticizing the past or imitate progressives in relativizing it, Proctor suggests a third possibility:

The tradition of classical education, which began in the Renaissance and flourished in Europe and America until the end of the last century, is gone now. How should we react to the death of this tradition? We can either mourn it and try to hold on to it, or we can see its passing as a liberation and as an opportunity for us to appropriate the past in new ways. I prefer the latter. (xxviii)

Another reprisal of the Great Books approach to general education pace Allan Bloom and William Bennett will not do. That approach assumes, quite falsely, that texts from the past speak plainly and unproblematically to contemporary readers. Proctor explains: “[The Great Books approach to education] encourages students to think that they can read Homer with the same frame of mind that they read Tolstoy or Shakespeare because all great writers, no matter when they lived and wrote, were struggling with the same basic questions. They weren’t” (192). While Proctor ascribes to a predictable reading list as embodying the building blocks of a humanities canon, he also emphasizes the historicity of texts in ways familiar to scholars in English Studies and Rhetoric and Composition. Proctor sees texts as historically-determined and responsive to exigencies, deriving from particular assumptions and serving specific cultural roles. They are not simply declarative or artistic statements to be accepted without question or critique but are symbolic actions that serve rhetorical and epistemic ends, allowing the audience to negotiate the interplay of mundane, abstract, and even traumatic experiences.

In developing his main critique of contemporary approaches to the humanities, Proctor asserts that methodology has become an end in itself to such a degree that debate over pedagogy has all but eclipsed any sustained questions of content choices and textual reception. His solution? More attention to hermeneutics, historical context, and the contingent, variant strategies of approaching the same questions and problems in different eras will help to provide balance and more imaginative possibilities for research and pedagogical praxis. Such engagement of a historical and discursive Other will offer a context for understanding our own hermeneutical idiosyncrasies and blind spots vis-à-vis texts from the past. In Proctor’s words: “The whole point of studying the history of the humanities is to arrive at an understanding of this deterioration which will permit us to see why we can no longer read and teach the ancients the way our ancestors did” (173). His definition of the liberal arts will likely prove a bit narrow for those associated with English departments, as he focuses on the works of Greeks and Romans exclusive of the tradition of literature written in the
English language. Even so, Proctor’s conception of the text as a historically circumscribed, fundamentally rhetorical act should find common cause with many in Composition Studies.

The inconsistencies and aberrations that characterize the Western tradition challenge the notions that reading texts from the past amounts to a hunt for weighty ideas or familiar archetypes, or that genre distinctions can be captured by identifying the formal characteristics of texts. Rather, each text must be engaged according to its discursive functions and socially-negotiated role, its relationship to other texts always problematic, always open to inquiry. Using this combination of positive and negative tenets as a foundation, then, I would like to extend and apply Proctor’s ideas to Composition Studies by incorporating genre theory as my principle vehicle. Carolyn Miller has identified genre as “a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence” (163). For Miller, attending to genre circumscribes discursive practice while allowing the individual to recognize and fulfill rhetorical purposes. Genre theory focuses primarily on the creators and users of discourse, but it does not ignore the material texts themselves. Amy Devitt argues that the social use and context historically associated with a particular text serve crucial roles in both its rhetorical function and its generic aspects (“Integrating” 704). While scholars in genre theory focus on “everyday language” (Miller 155), I believe that their ideas may be applied broadly in order to demonstrate how formal, academic discourses and more common discourses mutually inform each other. Miller’s system of genre classification focuses on discourse that is “pragmatic, rather than syntactic or semantic” and that “take[s] seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves” (155). Though it expands the focus of composition, genre theory has undervalued the role of textual reception, effectively if not intentionally undermining the significance of discourse that cannot be recognized quickly as having obvious public use value.¹⁰ A more balanced approach to genres would help students to understand the symbiotic relationship between reception and participation in various social genres.

How, then, may we reconcile genre theory with Proctor’s reformulation of the humanities? Kenneth Burke’s concept of logology, or the function of symbol systems, identifies the linguistic sign as having both material and transcendent characteristics. Because they often imitate and thus affectively “interpret” life experience, texts with rhetorical power for a given audience provide “terministic screens” on the world for that audience even as they are produced by historically contextualized linguistic systems (Language 44-52). Rhetorically, such texts depend upon aesthetic and axiological means of persuasion. If, as Burke famously noted, “form and content cannot be separated” (Language 487), then the generic conventions of the literary text do in fact distinguish it from the academic essay or the newspaper editorial. Those conventions create expectation and either satisfy or frustrate those
expectations. But it is never merely artifact or ornament; rather, it provides “equipment for living” (Philosophy 194). As such, the literary text proves to be more than merely aesthetic or contemplative; at its core, one finds rhetoric manifested in artistic discourse that serves pragmatic, epistemic purposes. Michael Gamer asserts that the imaginative text “makes more general claims for the truthfulness of a particular way of seeing.” And this process is not merely receptive, either, for Gamer notes that imaginative texts will enable students to “connect their thinking about abstract ideas to their own experience” (283-84). The act of textual reception demonstrates an active, critical edge as opposed to a passive “banking” of information, and it conflates the processes of interpretation and rhetorical invention.

This multivalent semantics of the literary text as defined by Burke might seem to reinforce its privileged stature, but the application of his theories has also embedded literary and other humanities discourses (e.g. history and philosophy) in the larger activity systems (to borrow a term from Lev Vygotsky and David Russell) that inform our reception and use of such texts. When incorporated into the study of literature in past eras, genre “merely, name[d] what writers have created . . . and specifie[d] formal features” (Devitt, Writing 4), serving as a means of distinguishing and classifying texts according to surface-level criteria. The “great text,” whether literary or otherwise, was a “well-wrought urn,” timeless and untouchable. After Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism, genre became the tool of the informed reader, resulting in discursive practice that “makes the critic all-powerful and rhetorical interaction negligible” (Devitt 170). The new focus on the reader, best exemplified in the primacy of Fish’s discourse community, eruvated the text of any innate discursive power. Genre theory as articulated by composition theorists challenges both assumptions. Or rather, it balances the considerations of each, allowing for the recognition of exigency, purpose, and strategy, both in the social role of a text and in a reader’s reception and use of that text.

Thomas Beebee, writing about the study of literary genres, explains that “genre is only secondarily an academic enterprise and a matter for literary scholarship. Primarily, genre is the precondition for the creation and the reading of texts” (250). Genre theory locates texts in their historical situatedness, both for the author and the reader, and it evaluates their rhetorical and semantic functions, accounting for aesthetic and ideological effects alike. Though the text produced by Plato or Julian of Norwich is always more than merely a discursive manifestation of a given “zeitgeist” from a particular historical moment, its seemingly transcendent qualities are rhetorical and generic in origin rather than “natural” or merely the product of an author’s individual genius. Any qualities and purposes that a text may “contain” are always reproduced by a reader’s acts of reading, interpretation, and evaluation. In turn, a reader’s own use of a text may be seen in her response to
that text in her own writing as she engages its discursive properties (artistic, semantic, ideological, and rhetorical). Genre theory thus offers writing instructors theoretical freight for enabling students to make use of assigned texts for their own rhetorical purposes rather than merely respond to or analyze them for content and ideas. The incorporation of multiple genres (poetry, drama, history, philosophy, news accounts, biographies, etc.) in the humanities writing course will help to diffuse the binary distinction between the hallowed assigned text and student writing when one genre or set of closely related genres dominates the reading list.

Just as the humanities is a contested tradition, the first-year writing course has also seen varied justifications for its persistence in the curriculum. Use-value exigencies have driven the first-year writing course for much of its existence. Since its emergence in the 1870's at Harvard as a response to weak entrance examinations, its *raison d'être* has reflected shifting cultural anxieties about literacy and the purposes of higher education. Mainstream assumptions about its current purposes include both introducing students to academic discourse and preparing them for disciplinary writing, but its "service" course status belies any meaningful connection to the rest of the curriculum. The content of many first-year courses may exacerbate this issue. Because the essays found in composition readers often focus on current events, pop culture, or "hot topics" such as climate change, euthanasia, or gun control, the writing in turn may prove reactive and topical rather than argumentative or investigative. Many of these texts are distinctly non-literary, in part to distinguish the course content from that of a literature course, in part to distinguish Composition from Literary Studies. If engaging their culture and increased awareness of disciplinary writing are reasonable objectives for such courses, we can approach texts not merely as tools for analytical exercises but as manifestations of genres with specific cultural roles and rhetorical purposes. Amy Devitt explains that "genres are defined less by their formal conventions than by their purposes, participants, and subjects: by their rhetorical actions. "Genre, as redefined in rhetoric-composition . . . is defined by its situation and function in a social context" ("Integrating" 698). In a course that applies genre theory to humanities texts, students will consider not just the aesthetic or ideational value of a given reading (though they might) but its use value, as well. This balancing act will enable the writing course to maintain its pragmatic orientation while the genre focus will orient students to a range of disciplinary discourses.

So if genre theory applies mainly to the practical discourse of ordinary citizens, how might it apply to literary genres and the discourses of the humanities, texts that Devitt has denigrated as "the special texts of a cultural elite" (163)? Even in reference to formal monikers, genres themselves do not remain static entities but instead change over time. Formal poetry has seen sonnets and ballad stanzas give way to free verse, philosophical treatises
have abandoned both the Socratic dialogue and the Thomist disputation in favor of contemporary academic style, and the novel has splintered into various sub-genres. In fact, the role of genre in helping readers or critics identify “great texts” is tenuous at best. Devitt notes that “[g]reat authors have often been admired for their ‘breaking’ of generic conventions, thereby expanding the literary universe” (174). In reference to genre as a means of understanding how texts work, discourses in the humanities offer exceptions that prove the rule and rules best understood by texts that challenge those rules. But these observations merely clear the table—they do not answer the questions of use value, social function, and audience that constitute the primary focus of genre theory (Devitt 178-79). To address these questions, instructors might envision assignments that ask students to analyze the content and conventions of assigned readings, reflecting and bending those conventions as they participate in the dialogic conversation for purposes useful both for members of the class and for audiences outside the academy.

Teaching humanities texts in the context of genre theory will enable students to understand the architectonic character of genre in the reception and interpretation of texts. While a Shakespearean sonnet or a medieval mystery play may be recognized initially by formal features, genre theory identifies the semantic and ideological features of a text so as to locate it in relationship to other texts against which it has been defined. This identification of genre function moves beyond “high brow” and “low brow” binary distinctions to show that texts are never understood in isolation from other texts. Rather, it is the delimiting interdependence among texts that allows individuals to recognize contextual markers and to produce meaning as they both interpret and create genres. In order to demonstrate the culturally constructed nature of genre, a course informed by genre theory should include significant attention to diachronic analysis of textual reception and genre function. Devitt acknowledges that “universality” might serve as a generic function whereby a literary (or other) text moves beyond “local situations or particularized functions” (184). If we can extend this function to texts in the humanities more generally, we can then compare how a text speaks to its initial context as well as to student readers. For example, Shelley’s Adonais served as an elegy for the death of John Keats, but it also had the rhetorical and very public effect of buttressing Shelley’s position among the Romantic poets. Contemporary reception might contradict these genre functions by focusing on other functions—the poem as an artistic treatise on the power of art or as a reflection on mortality, with the latter option placed in relief to a newspaper obituary, for example. Though a text’s genre might not change, its genre function will demonstrate the decisive roles of broad cultural context (e.g. North America circa 2009) and specific reception (a first-year writing course) in determining not only how we analyze and interpret a text but what kinds of values and functions readers assign to the texts that they encounter.
One of the purposes of a humanities course informed by genre theory should be to analyze how genre boundaries allow texts to respond to particular exigencies and to serve specific cultural purposes. Why do some texts and genres enjoy a privileged social status, and what social purposes and specific audiences are served by such texts? In their analysis, students may find that they prefer *The Colbert Report* or *The Simpsons* to “The Rape of the Lock” or “A Modest Proposal,” but they may also recognize that even the genre of satire serves a variety of functions in culture. Inevitably, students will see that genre hierarchies are culturally determined and unstable. But such transient status reveals that texts and their genres do not passively reflect cultural norms, but instead play significant rhetorical, semantic, and ideological roles, often simultaneously. Anis Bawarshi explains the significance for literary genres: “The genre function . . . elevates genre from a transparent category to a site of action” (26). Texts in the humanities tradition reflect the ideological constraints of their respective cultural milieus—this principle has seen its most sophisticated articulation and treatment in new historicism. While genre theory acknowledges this point, it does not stop there; a text and its historical origin mutually circumscribe the other. A text is not just a mirror but also an agent. Just as a grocery list (a genre function made famous by David Russell) is, in Bawarshi’s terms, “functional and epistemological” (24), a romance novel or a love poem is also equally functional and epistemological. Both “high brow” and “low brow” texts respond to exigencies and help their users to conceptualize them and then act accordingly. But rather than dismiss given texts as circumscribed by the ideological dynamics of their contexts of origin or, by contrast, place texts in authority over the changing tides of public discourse, genre theory juxtaposes them, placing them in a dialogical relationship instead of a hierarchical one.

Moreover, these generic aspects of a given text never exist in isolation but always in relationship to other texts. If Charles Bazerman is valid in asserting that genres are “locations within which meaning is constructed” (19), then texts serve both ideational and pragmatic functions, often at the same time. The grocery list reminds us about what we need from the store, but it also verifies our participation in commerce and reveals our dependence upon the material world for sustenance. The love poem stirs emotions while enabling us to picture a meaningful relationship, reminding us of our desire for connection to others. Both texts are crucial for living, but in distinct ways, producing not stable hierarchies but mobile constellations of meaning. A genre course in the humanities will emphasize that the primary texts in question are meaningful in a classroom setting because they provide analyzable content. Outside the academy, their interaction with more obviously pragmatic texts is determined by their ability to serve shifting exigencies.
A course specifically designed as a genre-theory approach to the humanities would have a more distinctly interdisciplinary makeup. *Prima facie*, the course might look like a general education course in history, the humanities, or literature, albeit with longer, more focused units and readings in multiple genres. For instance, a unit focused on the risks and rewards of science might include editorials or articles from newspapers or popular magazines about specific issues such as cloning or stem-cell research along with an historical overview of the topic. The designated literature text in the unit would be a novel, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Attending to the historical context of Shelley’s novel would help the students understand both the exigencies that led her to write the novel and the genre specific means by which literature engages social anxieties about science. This text would also invite questions: how do Shelley’s more apparently creative means allow her to engage the complexities of scientific knowledge and public morality? How does the novel editorialize directly on its subject matter, and how do the more overtly pragmatic genres incorporate analogies and figurative language to forward their arguments? A specific writing assignment in the course might require students to compare and contrast how texts in two or three different genres (for example, a novel and an essay in the genre of popular science) address similar questions about science as a social practice and whether or not those genres serve complementary or contradictory rhetorical purposes in their cultural milieu.

In a more politically-focused example, a course about the ethics of the Iraq War might use the same offering of articles and editorials along with blog postings and a longer “canonical” text such as *The Red Badge of Courage* or, for a more contemporary take, Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead*. Where junior-level writing courses are part of the general studies curriculum, the humanities-based composition course could pursue even more sophisticated ends, such as in course offerings related to gender, philosophy, and religion. The key element at work here is the careful, recursive connection between analysis of assigned texts and the rhetorical, conversational engagement with those texts through the writing process. Students will apply genre theory by analyzing not only their own responses to and interpretations of the assigned texts but also how the various texts and genres engage and delimit one another. This writing course distinguishes itself by centering pedagogical focus on the interplay between assigned readings and student texts, the constellation of genres (ideational, aesthetic, pragmatic) providing a discursive point-of-entry for student writing that reveals genre hierarchies and genre boundaries as dynamic and inherently unstable.

The humanities-based writing course will not prepare students for disciplinary expectations in other courses, as it cannot be expected to account for nor solve the tensions of WAC that students face as they shift disciplinary contexts during their careers. In short, the specialist/neophyte
dichotomy of general education courses will likely remain, but the genre focus I describe may help us to follow the advice of Cheryl Geisler, who argues that “we need to use the curriculum to find a way to interact with those who are different from us and intend to stay that way . . . to acknowledge the difference between expert and amateur perspectives and give as much attention to educating the one as to the other” (225). My concern here is not with acclimating students to strict disciplinary assumptions so much as with helping them to challenge the Deweyian binary opposition between ideational or aesthetic genres (those most often found in humanities course reading lists) and pragmatic genres (the kind of writing performed by students in composition courses). Whereas writing assignments in the traditional humanities course tend to invite predictable appreciation of the text or some appraisal of its merits in isolation from other texts, the genre focus of the humanities-based writing course will foster what Gerald Graff and Andrew Hoberek have called the capacity for “metacommentary that relates [a text] to conversations in the field or the wider culture” (249). As students engage texts from multiple genres in assignments, they may grasp the tensions between genres and discover that challenging genre boundaries may provide for creative approaches to rhetorical problems often masked or ignored in curricular delineations.

The most significant effect on student writing in a humanities-based writing course may be heightened awareness of the role of historical context in genre identifications and rhetorical purposes. Devitt has stressed the need to “include not only the present but the future” in gauging the impact of historical context on a genre's rhetorical effects (“Integrating” 711), but consideration of the context-of-origin will help readers to understand a text's initial historical and generic function. When students consider how Isocrates or Thucydides contended with the socio-political concerns and applied the epistemological assumptions of his day, they will ascertain how his writing responded to historical exigencies, exigencies often vastly different from those identified by contemporary audiences. By focusing squarely on the relationship between historical moment and rhetorical purpose, students will begin to realize the circumscribed nature of the genres in which they participate. The fostering of distanciation from their own cultural contexts may produce writing more humble and more expansive in its ethical, political, and epistemological assumptions. As is the case with the assigned readings, the questions they pose and the answers they proffer in their own writing will be guided by both genre participation and their own multi-layered contexts. David Russell and Arturo Yañez remind us that writing “tends to disappear into the activity it mediates” (358), but the dynamic described here will illuminate for students the activities they perform and the mediations they negotiate as they inhabit and deploy genres. Like many of the humanities-oriented genres that they will read, their own writing will conflate
more obviously utilitarian purposes with aesthetic ones and will reveal the synchronic play of genres as a web rather than a hierarchy.

This focus on the contextualized identities of genres might be understood best if we frame the humanities as an activity system in which texts operate together to become a set of objects that students engage through the mediating tool of writing. Rebecca Nowacek explains that “[d]isciplinary activity systems finally take their meaning and definition from . . . interrelation” (495). The principle of interrelation would then drive both the assignments and the class structure itself. For example, in juxtaposing Homer and Plato with Thucydides, students would see how more ideational genres are defined in relationship to more pragmatic genres. Their analytical essays might respond to the exigency of an assignment, but they will deploy that academy-borne genre not merely for its immediate use value but for its ability to interact meaningfully with the genres which it scrutinizes. Such interaction and resulting consubstantiation between the students’ writing and the texts they analyze would indicate a systemic relationship among the texts, a “genre set” that locates student essays alongside epic poetry within the larger umbrella of academic discourse. Assignments might call the student writer to deploy overtly multiple genres in a single piece of writing, but even if she did not literally combine, for example, poetry with expository prose in an assignment, she will begin to recognize that the instability of formal genres provides her own writing with the potential to take advantage of multiple genres at any given time. Instead of finding themselves treading the familiar ground of the formal academic essay, students may challenge generic boundaries, blending persuasion with narrative and analysis with figurative language. Simply asking students to use a central metaphor or analogy in creating an argumentative essay will cause their writing to meet divergent rhetorical exigencies, in this case, to please and to persuade their audience. As students fold use value into aesthetic value in their writing, they will increase their awareness of genre conventions as well as how the breaking of conventions can lead to writing that is multivalent in its rhetorical purposes and aesthetic effects.

The very idea of a composition course that gives prominence to poetry, history, or philosophy reminds us of the ongoing strain between Composition Studies and Literary Studies, a strain that might be abated by a more nuanced, discursively-focused (as opposed to discipline-focused) engagement of the long and complex history of rhetoric. We can now interpret the denunciatory narratives by Miller (Textual Carnivals), Crowley (Composition in the University), and Berlin (Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures) against the subservience of rhetoric-composition to literary studies as enthusiastic attempts to define the work and interests of composition as a burgeoning discipline wholly independent of literary studies. Even so, problematizing popular renderings of intellectual history reveals that rhetoric, hermeneutics,
and philosophy always already informed and defined one another. Dana Harrington describes how pedagogical praxis of the Early Modern period accounted for this dialogism:

Prior to the eighteenth century, literary texts and student texts were not treated as separate kinds of discourse in the grammar school classroom. Nor were literary texts conceived (as they often still are today) as aesthetic objects or products of superior genius whose mode of invention was deemed inaccessible to students. Instead, literary texts shared with student texts modes of invention and structural features based on a common rhetorical tradition. As such, students were taught to approach texts now categorized as "literature" as models that they could draw from when constructing their own discourse. (251-52)

Though ideas about models and imitation have changed since then, the interrelatedness of writing and reading practices taken for granted by a pedagogical scheme from centuries past remains a key point for composition scholars. Translated to pedagogy circa the twenty-first century, this relationship allows the composition teacher to minimize the distance between student texts and assigned texts and to exchange a passive model of the general education course with a discursively-focused, rhetorically-oriented pedagogy. This move places student writing neither above literary texts nor vice versa; rather, the task at hand focuses on building the conversation between them.

But this pedagogy may have implications beyond the classroom. As university writing programs have come of age, they have also struggled to maintain disciplinary autonomy and institutional self-actualization. Rejuvenated interest in general education programs among administrators has often frustrated already tenuous attempts to define programmatic goals and teacher practices. As Chris Fosen demonstrates in his narrative of the hierarchical relationship between general education and Composition at Chico State, the latter often finds itself constrained by the former. In Fosen's case, the discourse of general education can overrun the particularities of Composition's goals and pedagogies so that "institutional models for assessment may insist that faculty use language they don't recognize to justify teaching a class they don't own" (28). Though it challenges our instincts for specialization and autonomy, the application of genre theory as I describe here would locate Composition in a cooperative, potentially interdependent relationship with other non-scientific disciplines. Specifically, genre theory could help produce a theoretical base for linked courses in a core curriculum sequence and could help faculty to create learning outcomes reflective of praxis. In keeping with genre theory's focus on the user of discourse, such praxis might resemble what Michael Carter has identified as a postdisciplinary model of inquiry that is "inquirer-based rather than
object-based, meaning that knowledge is local and dynamic rather than universal and incremental [and] that scholars work in temporary alliances at the intersection of disciplines rather than in disciplines themselves” (409-10). As students in composition classes incorporate genre theory into their understanding of themselves as both receivers and producers of texts, they will then be prepared to engage the genres of other academic disciplines, including literature, history, sociology, and the varied, complex discourses of their chosen pre-professional fields of study.

Perhaps the most tendentious issue in this conversation relates, at a foundational level, to the idea of the canon. Fitts and Lalicker warn against “reproducing the ideology of humanism” (434) as a byproduct of teaching the humanities in academic contexts. The tradition under scrutiny here belies such notions of a stable “ideology of humanism” and, by its variety and breadth, combines both dominant and subversive discourses. As Proctor explains, the texts should stand out to us as significant culturally, historically, and ideologically, but by no means should they hold the sacrosanct position afforded them by so many in the Great Books movements of the last few decades. Alasdair MacIntyre explains the bind in which we find ourselves when we would discard the past: “For if the genealogist is inescapably one who disowns part of his or her own past, then the genealogist's narrative presupposes enough of unity, continuity, and identity to make such disowning possible” (214). It is the interaction and incompleteness of tradition that makes it inhabitable at all; tradition by definition must change, and often in radical ways, in order to have continued relevance. Bruce Horner has argued for the use of tradition as “an active, activating process and force for counter-hegemonic work” (368), exemplifying the plasticity of rhetorical purposes in the humanities tradition.

The greater problem may not lie with fears of exclusion but with anxieties of definition. Proctor offers a relatively narrow possibility in identifying the humanities as the works of the Greco-Roman period followed by their intellectual descendents in the Italian Renaissance and ending with modern philosophy. We would amend this view of the canon by adding the standard bearers of the rhetorical tradition as exemplified in the collection by Bizzell and Herzberg and the tradition in English, American, and world literatures. Going further, with the inclusion of non-Western literatures such as those covered in the Norton editions of recent years, we would provide faculty of different inclinations with various points of entry into the conversation. In brief, a definition of the humanities informed by genre theory would include all aesthetic and/or ideational discourse as opposed to overtly pragmatic discourse, accounting for literature in all of its genre manifestations as well as history, philosophy, rhetoric, and discourses associated with popular culture (i.e., film, television, music, etc.). A course unit would draw upon these genres to “reconstruct” a historical milieu through the juxtaposition of...
different kinds of texts, offering students a synchronic glimpse of the complex interactions among written discourses in a given historical moment. This organization of readings and the concomitant assignments will reveal the texts in question as mediating artifacts that both act and are acted upon by various cultural forces and readers. While the mapping of genre distinctions might begin with the formal and the syntactic character of the examples, these investigations would move quickly to the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the texts in question. Diachronic analysis enables the writing instructor and her students to attend to historical idiosyncrasies and to the potential incommensurability of historical comparison. Such a construct need not be seen as, in the words of Louis Menand, “the cultural past read as a ratification of the political present” (16), but rather as a means of conversing with the past as a potential rejoinder to the present.

While I argue for balance in our current tendencies toward hyper-pragmatism, I do not call for a naïve return to the literary or the aesthetic. Nor should this essay be interpreted as a surreptitious return to consilience, for as Proctor has demonstrated, the history of the humanities cannot be captured in a simplistic unity, certainly not in deprecatory “university of reason” so termed by Dominick LaCapra (38). LaCapra argues that “the challenge for those concerned about a broad, liberal arts education is to work through the existing parts in order to elaborate a significantly different, more interactive relationship among them and perhaps a different configuration of the fields of knowledge” (45). In order to make such interactions tangible, we would do well to follow Bawarshi’s call to “make these ‘genred’ discursive spaces . . . visible to students” (18) so as to give them a means of understanding not only how they may participate in genres but how genres inform their own response to rhetorical situations and exigencies. In the issue of Profession mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes that the work of humanists may not after all lose the public argument with science:

[T]here is good reason to think that all these [humanist] forms of cognitive encounter and knowledge construction, with all their internal differences and mutual frictions, are required for the maintenance and flourishing of our natural—which is also to say cultural, which is also to say ethical, aesthetic, and reflective—relation to our environments, including one another and that which we have created. (26)

Smith’s admission that the humanities may prove indispensable to humanity after all offers a succinct counterbalance to Yancey and Spellmeyer. By embracing idealism as a necessary counterpart to science once again, we may yet find that the results of our labor will impact the here-and-now, pragmatic methodology that contemporary scholarship holds so dear.

24 Composition Studies
Engaging the humanities through the lens of genre theory means refusing to relativize the past, either in its many tragic errors or its enduring benefits for the present. K. Anthony Appiah articulates the mission of the humanities as follows: “to provide each new generation with the frameworks of understanding that will allow them to interpret a significant number of the many particulars that are our human heritage” (45). Regardless of the bias against tradition in many academic quarters, its ongoing contextual and epistemic functions allow us to make statements that have any meaning at all. Peter Brooks magnifies this point: “Respect for tradition means an awareness that you speak with words and concepts that have been used by others before you, that they are not yours alone but instead come freighted with prior implications, that your originality is always tempered by the weight of an otherness” (520). Pace Burke and Bakhtin, we find that these words and concepts are both restrictive and emancipatory, ultimately serving productive functions as they morph and act in various discursive formations. When translated pedagogically, then, this dynamic allows for what Fitts and Lalicker identify as a “genuinely rhetorical education. English studies should teach students in the largest comprehensible context how words produce worlds (in Freire’s formulation), how language and other signifying systems are used—and can be used by them—to produce culture” (448). Our willingness to reconsider disciplinary boundaries allows student to understand the discourses of the humanities in context, not as isolated great books but as part of the larger cultural systems that circumscribe their semantic purposes and use value. Bawarshi explains: “Putting literary and rhetorical theories of genre in dialogue with one another will allow us to see how all genres, far from being transparent lenses for identifying and organizing texts, indeed function as sites in which communicants use language to make certain situated activities possible” (19). With a pedagogical focus that is analytical, pragmatic, and interdependent with other disciplines, compositions scholars may join forces with English Studies and with the liberal arts more generally to strengthen our students’ understanding of and participation in both intellectual and pragmatic genres. In such a project committed to relating the present to the past, we would carve out for ourselves a meaningful future, bolstering our mutual autonomy and fostering common ground among readers and writers both within and without the academy.
Notes

1. One might contend that the reality of a “crisis in the humanities,” though we rarely discuss it in such stark terms, is validated by our scholarly penchant for ruminating over the issue. Two influential studies that have drawn interest to scholars in English Studies are Scholes’s *The Rise and Fall of English Studies* and Readings’s *The University in Ruins*. For a study that specifically investigates the prospects for reform, see Miller’s *As If Learning Mattered*.

2. Yancey places herself in context to recent studies that relate digital technologies to literacy, including Faigley’s “Material Literacy and Visual Design” and Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*. She also highlights Brandt’s book and Deibert’s *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia* as connecting the two aforementioned subjects to contemporary politics in particular.

3. The key term in the title to Spellmeyer’s book is found in the subtitle, *Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century*. Spellmeyer distances himself from both right-wing outsiders to the academic debate and the left-wing theorists who have generally dominated the debate for the last few decades, arguing that the humanities must indeed be invented all over again. Such an attempt to separate oneself from either the ancient history of the discourse on the right or the recent history of the discourse on the left marks an admirable attempt to come to terms with the past but may not be realistic.

4. The reference here is to Bellah’s influential *Habits of the Heart*, a sociological study of American life in context to various religious faiths and moral values in the 1980’s. Spellmeyer’s use of Bellah here appears to connect middle-class America’s ideals of the humanities as a term connected to the moral values that Bellah et al. investigate in the book.

5. Spellmeyer’s position in *Arts of Living* joins a group of prominent figures in English Studies since the canon wars of the 1980s who have articulated suspicion toward or outright rejection of “canonized” texts. Scholes offers a way out of the conservative tradition in *The Rise and Fall of English Studies*, wherein he calls for a new focus on discourse and textuality to replace a curriculum broken down into historical eras and literary movements (i.e., the coverage model). In moving toward the concept of “dialogue,” then, Spellmeyer places his vision even farther away from a text-based curriculum, a popular move by many in Composition Studies these days.

6. Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* is aptly titled, for it connects literary study, and by extension, the humanities, to the Western university of the last hundred years. Like the older, wide-ranging *The Emergence of the American University* by Veysey, Graff’s book never strays from its narrative that disciplinary practices are tied exclusively to institutional practices and contexts. Veysey was probably accurate in connecting modern science to the university, but the humanities tradition goes back much farther, both to the Renaissance and to its own tortured relationship with the Greco-Roman era. Because these studies only go back so far, their narratives often eschew more complex perspectives and discursive interactions both inside and outside traditional academic settings.

7. Spellmeyer’s argument aligns him with Cultural Studies, at least ostensibly. Though the relationship between Cultural Studies and Composition might be
traced back to Richard Ohmann's *English in America*, Richard Fulkerson finds the more "foundational publication" of this movement to be *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom*, a collection of articles edited by James Berlin and Michael Vivion in 1992 (Fulkerson 659).

8. Some reviewers of Proctor's text have hastened to group him with the likes of Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, but this characterization does not do justice to Proctor's own complaints about the Great Books movement, nor does it account for his own refusal to bemoan the loss of some golden age in humanities education. For two fair but critical reviews of Proctor's book, see those by John Paul Russo (*South Atlantic Review*) and Judith de Luce (*Journal of Higher Education*). Both reviews address some of the major problems with Proctor's argument but highlight its distinctions from many similar studies.

9. Kimball also explains that this basic conflict of assumptions about education has ensured a critical conversation that is "confounded" (9), thus explaining the wildly divergent pedagogical practices associated with instruction in the humanities in modern higher education.

10. One notable exception to the undertheorized character of textual reception in Composition Studies is the increasing attention given to uptake. For a good overview, see Freedman.

11. For more developed historical and theoretical analyses of this issue, see Crowley, Berlin (*Rhetoric and Reality*), Miller, and Fitts and Lalicker.

12. For a thorough history of the debate over literature in the composition classroom, see Richardson.

13. In this connection, Russell identifies activity theory as a means of connecting "the ways that writing links school and society." He also calls for diachronic analysis as a means of moving beyond the tendency to see texts as fixed objects: "I am suggesting that system or network metaphors . . . can perhaps facilitate analysis of writing and learning by allowing us to theorize and trace the interactions among people and the inscriptions called texts . . . without separating either from collective, ongoing motivated action over time" (509-10).

14. Foster provides a solid ethnographic study on the results of deliberately relating the genres and rhetorical objectives of student writing in context to assigned readings in "Reading(s) in the Composition Classroom."

15. Guillery has offered a lengthy critique of the political assumptions behind canon rejection and/or canon revisionism in *Cultural Capital*. With Guillery in mind, I would assert that anxieties over hegemonic discourse underestimate the always already politically, rhetorically, and culturally heteroglossic context of any given "great text." Furthermore, a hermeneutics of critique should help to alleviate some legitimate fears about this matter.

16. For an inclusive perspective on the humanities tradition vis-à-vis Composition, see Horner, Elbow, Richardson, and Tate.

17. This concept of the humanities as unproblematically wedded to the Enlightenment project has been developed by Bizzell vis-à-vis the academy more generally (see *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*) and Crowley vis-à-vis Literary Studies more particularly (see *Composition in the University*).
Works Cited


Fosen, Chris. “University Courses, Not Department Courses': Composition and General Education." Composition Studies 34.1 (2006): 11-34.


Nowacek, Rebecca S. “Why is Being Interdisciplinary So Very Hard to Do? Thoughts on the Perils and Promise of Interdisciplinary Pedagogy.” *Composition and Communication* 60.3 (2009): 493-516.


