What’s in a Coauthor?: (Re)Locating Joseph Denney in Composition History

Ivan Davis

This article reassesses the Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villiers Denney collaborative textbook authorship by emphasizing Denney’s generally overlooked contributions to that coauthorship and to the field of composition generally. Through an examination of Denney’s scholarly work and his personal correspondence with Scott during the period marking their collaborative textbook writing, this article asserts that Denney, like Scott, was an innovative theorist and practitioner in his own right, and that the effectiveness of the Scott-Denney textbooks owes much to Denney’s role as coauthor.

Most of Fred Newton Scott’s important textbooks were the result of collaborations, and arguably Scott’s most important collaborator was Joseph Villiers Denney. Scott and Denney collaborated on four significant textbooks on English, including Paragraph Writing (1893), Composition-Rhetoric (1897), Elementary English Composition (1900), and Composition-Literature (1902). Albert R. Kitzhaber, James Berlin, Donald C. and Patricia L. Stewart, Robert J. Connors and others have acknowledged the distinctiveness of Scott and Denney’s textbooks, particularly as they provide a less mechanistic approach to writing instruction than the work of their competitors. Nearly all such discussions of Scott and Denney’s textbooks emerge from attempts to illuminate Scott’s contributions to composition and rhetorical theory, while Denney’s contributions and involvement are at best secondary considerations.

The regrettable implication in these discussions is that Denney was not a dynamic, equal partner in his collaborations with Scott, that Denney did not bring particular insights, interests and expertise to their textbook production or that these contributions cannot be distinguished from Scott’s. Over time, this view has coalesced into something Lisa Mastrangelo has recently termed the discipline’s “grand narrative” of Scott, an appreciation of Scott as a singular hero, which regrettably overlooks the fact that he was “part of the larger, organic movement in education, a networked group of teachers and scholars with shared goals and teaching practices” (251). As a result, this “grand narrative” conspires to make Denney a minor character in the story, if you will, effectively discounting his substantial work in the discipline of English and in higher education generally, while all but ignoring his writing on rhetoric and composition pedagogy. The conventional view also ignores
Scott's own estimation of Denney, for unquestionably, Scott had the highest regard for Denney, his longtime collaborator, colleague, and friend.

This article attempts a reassessment of the Scott-Denney collaboration by highlighting Denney's contributions to the partnership. Denney's role in the development of the coauthored textbooks and his treatment of composition pedagogy will be emphasized through an examination of his letters to Scott, which reveal the extent to which the two men collaborated in their textbook writing, and through an investigation of three significant articles on composition instruction that Denney wrote during the 1890s, the same period that saw the very productive Scott-Denney partnership begin. These articles are suggestive of Denney's particular interests in writing instruction. Among them, we find Denney emphasizing the relationship between reading and writing, particularly through the use of models for student writers, the fundamental importance of actual practice as the centerpiece of the composition class, and the instructional necessity of creating meaningful writing experiences for students. The articles prompt a reconsideration of the Scott-Denney textbook collaboration as they demonstrate the extent to which Denney's influence and thinking pervade those works.

Perhaps most intriguing, given Scott's reputation as a practitioner, is the extent to which Denney's expertise repeatedly targets the realm of classroom pedagogy or instructional methods. Throughout Denney's scholarly writing, we find him dealing with the practical concerns of the writing class in his attempt to produce a “systematic methodology” (“College Rhetoric” 39). His work in composition attempts to provide that framework, a three-part approach integrating the use of models for writing, actual practice in composing, and regular instructor feedback (40). This reassessment of Denney's contributions to the field concludes with a brief discussion of the least known Scott-Denney collaboration, Aphorisms for Writing Teachers, a short book distilling the fundamental tenets of their approach to teaching writing. Again, Denney’s practical influence and contribution to the Scott-Denney collaboration can be seen in its pages, particularly in the section entitled “The Class Hour in English Composition.”

**Casting His Own Shadow**

Both Scott’s and Denney’s roots were well established in the Midwest, roots that would only deepen during their long careers at the University of Michigan and the Ohio State University respectively. The two men likely met while pursuing undergraduate degrees in English at the University of Michigan in 1881; Denney graduated one year after Scott in 1885 (“Denney” 285). The two served as colleagues in the English department there during the 1890-91 school year, when Denney taught as an instructor while taking graduate courses (285). Scott, having been appointed as a faculty member only one year earlier, must have received Denney's arrival as a co-worker in the department with real enthusiasm.
However, Denney left the University of Michigan following the 1890-91 school year, not having completed the requirements for his master’s degree (he was later awarded an honorary master’s and an honorary doctorate degree), and, in 1891, began his long and distinguished career at Ohio State (285).

Probably more than his lack of earned advanced degrees, Denney’s forays into administrative work at Ohio State—where notably he served as Dean of the College of Arts and in various other posts in addition to those in the English department—may have helped to diminish the perception of his role in coauthorship with Scott. As one of Denney’s famous students, author and humorist James Thurber, notes, Denney “took on almost every administrative job in the university, … [including] Acting President, Chairman of the Entrance Board, Secretary of the Faculty, and Director of the Summer Session” (202). While these duties doubtlessly contributed to Denney’s reputation at Ohio State, his administrative work and increasing renown as a Shakespeare scholar, which Thurber also notes (204), may have increasingly overshadowed his research on composition and awareness of his textbook coauthorship with Scott. Additionally, Denney increasingly pursued other publication interests: textbooks on speech and debate, English programs at the elementary and high school levels, grammar instruction, as well as a number of edited collections of famous speeches and speakers.

However, Denney’s legacy as an educator continues to be shaped primarily through his relationship to Scott via their coauthored textbooks on English. Although generally regarded as inventive and unconventional, there is an underlying disappointment in the inability of the Scott-Denney textbooks to embody Scott’s richest theoretical ideas on rhetoric and composition. Denney’s scholarly work in composition mostly overlooked, his enduring reputation rests on this somewhat mixed appreciation for the Scott-Denney textbooks. On the one hand, it is the association and the work he is known for; on the other, because the textbooks are perhaps the least regarded in the Scott corpus, Denney’s overall contribution to the field is diminished.

Though widely seen as the most innovative textbook, Paragraph Writing, for example, has been criticized for lacking “originality” and for being derivative of Genung and Bain (Stewart and Stewart 41; Kitzhaber 162). Similarly, Composition-Rhetoric has been called “mechanical” (Berlin, Writing Instruction 84), Elementary English Composition is criticized for devoting “two-thirds of its content to the four modes” (82), and Composition-Literature has been largely ignored or dismissed as “an anthology” rather than “a rhetoric” (Kitzhaber 218).

While praise for their textbook collaborations is tempered by this sort of criticism—that Scott and Denney should have gone further in implementing more of their advanced theoretical ideas—these same historians maintain that the textbooks stand out from other offerings of the time period. In assessing the impact of Scott and Denney’s textbooks, Kitzhaber notes their influence on composition instruction, believing they helped to direct “the
reform movement of the nineties” (71). Likewise, Berlin says the textbooks were able to offset the effects of “current-traditional” ideas by focusing “on the rhetorical context, a context that is always social and transactional in nature” (*Rhetoric* 49). These estimates suggest that Scott and Denney’s textbooks initiated an alternative route to composition instruction at the time, affording teachers strategies to make learning to write an engaging and relevant endeavor. With their emphasis on student interests and knowledge, the social context of writing, and an approach to form grounded in psychology, Scott and Denney’s textbooks were also popular because they were practical-minded. And perhaps that practical-mindedness determined the extent to which their more radical ideas could be included.

For various reasons, from publisher consideration of the marketplace to the belief that practicing teachers would find such textbooks too esoteric, scholars have tried to reconcile their disappointment in the textbooks with their high estimation of Scott’s own scholarship. Again, by implication, this somewhat negative assessment of Scott and Denney’s partnership contributes to diminishing Denney’s relevance and reputation today. Taken further, these negative appraisals might also call into question Scott’s decision to collaborate with Denney in the first place. The implications are unfortunate, for as we shall see, Denney was no tag-along in their coauthorship, nor was he unable to offer innovative and progressive thinking on composition instruction himself.

**Navigating Coauthor(Ship)**

A review of Denney’s correspondence with Scott on the development of their textbooks illustrates the fully collaborative nature of their writing and rewriting process. The letters which specifically reference the production of revised editions of their popular textbooks often show Denney as the catalyst: dividing up responsibilities, suggesting ideas concerning form or subject matter, and initiating possible alterations. In one dated September 12, 1907, Denney recounts for Scott the expectations of their publisher Mr. Allyn (of Allyn and Bacon) that new editions of *Elementary English Composition* and *Paragraph Writing* be completed. Denney himself promises Scott “a formidable list of suggestions” for revising *Elementary English Composition* and believes that for *Paragraph Writing*, “we should make a new book throughout.” A subsequent letter from January 10, 1910, shows Denney again instigating revision plans. After noting the publisher’s request that *Composition-Literature* be revised, Denney asks Scott, “Shall I tackle the job and also make a teachers’ manual as I go along, submitting the result piece-meal to you with large, yawning gaps at various places, to be filled by you?” Further, Denney charts the course for the new edition, observing that there are “a good many chances for improvement, none, however, involving radical changes in the text.” Even concerning issues nonessential to textbook content, Denney is not above prompting the course of action. In the same letter, Denney mentions the pressing deadline publishers are
asking them to meet for the reprinting of *Composition-Literature*, and offers the hope that he and Scott might push the deadline back “a few weeks if we promised a revision and a manual.”

Other comments from Denney indicate the extent to which he and Scott shared the responsibilities of textbook writing. Their authorship followed a standard pattern. Initially, Denney and Scott appear to have divided the textbook chores into large sections that each would be responsible for. Although this division of duties meant that they each wrote independently, the two carefully read each other’s work, making suggestions for the other to consider while preparing the contribution for publication. Denney’s comments in a letter dated February 17, 1908, illustrate how he and Scott coordinated their efforts. Denney tells Scott, “as to *P-W* [Paragraph Writing] I will try to close up my work on it before leaving here and will send it on to you with such suggestions as I have at hand for your part of it as soon as it is ready.” Denney’s work, it would appear, involved revamping the first half of *Paragraph Writing* for its reprinting, while the last half was Scott’s responsibility. Later that same year, Denney writes to Scott that “it might be well for you to send me the copy for the last half of [Paragraph Writing] before you leave, so that I shall not repeat, in what I say in the first half” (Denney to Scott, May 28, 1908). In another example of their collaboration process, Denney discusses the revision of *Elementary English Composition* in a letter on June 30, 1915. After describing his own progress, Denney tells Scott, “Let me hear from you if you have any suggestions for the revision. My idea is not to alter much of the book after the first fifty pages.” On another occasion, Denney tries to save Scott from additional obligations with their publishers. Denney tells Scott that the publishing company is demanding a teacher’s manual for *Composition-Literature* and that he “will agree to do this for them, if … [Scott] will sign in blank anything that I may say in the manual” (Denney to Scott, May 28, 1908). This sort of give-and-take between the two men, presumably prompted by Denney as often as by Scott, seems to be entirely ordinary when it comes to their textbook production.

As productive and cooperative as their professional relationship was, Scott and Denney were equally close on a personal level, a fact that plays out repeatedly in Denney’s letters to Scott. There is little question that each man held the other in high esteem. Their Midwestern backgrounds, shared experiences at the University of Michigan, intellectual pursuits, and professional activities all contributed to this friendship. Similarly, their academic and professional alliances against the eastern schools’ approaches to uniform reading lists, among other things, and, to a lesser degree, the demands of their publishers, must have strengthened their mutual bond.

Not surprisingly, then, Denney’s letters digress into good-natured banter directed at his coauthor. In a letter from February 23, 1910, Denney writes Scott indicating that their publisher needs to know the sources for two quotations contained in *Composition-Literature*, and that Denney has been “baffled” in his attempts to locate them. Recognizing a mischievous impulse in Scott,
Denney slyly tells his collaborator, “I am compelled to believe that you wrote these yourself, expecting them to be attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes or to Edward Everett Hale; but I will not ask you to confess it, if you will send on plausible references” to the publisher. In another instance, Denney equates his relationship to Scott with that portrayed in the “Alphonse and Gaston” comic strip, whose main characters continually and politely defer to one another. He tells Scott, “we are both perfect in persuasion or else rivals of Alphonse and Gaston in the determination to yield to one another … but should you decide otherwise I will not be slow to change my otherwise inflexible determination. [signed] Gaston” (Letter to Scott, June 3, 1919).

**A Disciplinary Center—Composition**

As in his letters to Scott, Denney’s writing on rhetoric and composition during the 1890s, the same period during which he and Scott were conceiving the material for their textbooks, suggests he was a capable and productive collaborator. Like Scott, Denney is not only interested in the state of composition instruction in the colleges, but also instruction at the elementary and secondary levels. Among the topics he treats, Denney addresses the relationship between reading and composition, the effects of uniform reading lists on the English curriculum in the schools, the design of effective topics and assignments for student composition, and the necessary components of college writing instruction. It may be surprising to discover that Denney treats all of these vital and yet problematic areas within composition, but Denney, like Scott, also has the ability to make astute observations about then-current teaching practices, while offering theoretically-sound strategies for their improvement.

Frequently, however, Denney’s writing on composition turns to the very practical concerns of classroom instruction. This is particularly interesting to note, as Scott typically has been regarded as the innovative practitioner. Yet a compelling picture develops from Denney’s work, suggesting he played a major role in the formulation of the composition pedagogy that the Scott-Denney collaboration produced. Evidence from his articles combined with his probable authorship of the “The Class Hour” section in *Aphorisms* indicate that Denney’s special interest and his contribution to their partnership came through this emphasis on practical classroom methods and concerns. It appears to have been his focus early on.

Writing in 1894, Denney bemoans the lack of a “systematic methodology” for teachers of writing, noting that “[i]t has been so much easier to compound a little psychology, logic, and philology, and to prescribe this compound under the name of Rhetoric, than to teach how to write, with all the drudgery of essay-correcting that is implied” (“College Rhetoric” 39). In contrast, Denney’s own work posits an approach that views writing as an art. Were this view kept in mind, Denney argues, “how much text-book work, how much dawdling with manufactured errors, how much theoretical vaporing would disappear!” (39).
Building on this teaching-an-art vision of writing instruction, Denney advocates a threefold approach to classroom activities, including: “the study of models, practice in composing, and helpful criticism” (40). This paradigm predicts “clearly how the limited time usually allotted to Rhetoric in the college course should be occupied” (40). And it is through these touchstones—writing models, actual practice and teacher response—that Denney’s theorizing on composition instruction, as well as his contributions to the Scott-Denney textbooks, can best be understood.

The implications of Denney’s methods for writing instruction are perhaps more far-reaching than what one might expect. Throughout, his general procedure is to integrate—to incorporate literature with composition, to use oral exercises to facilitate composing, and to draw attention to meaning when addressing grammar and correctness in writing. As a result, the generic writing class one might associate with Denney’s approach—and I think even the coursework Denney describes under the rubric “college rhetoric” would demonstrate this—emphasizes composition as an important means of developing better readers and users of language. Both implicitly and explicitly then, Denney argues that composition should play a central and unifying role in all English studies, promoting and integrating reading, grammar, literary study, rhetoric, and speech. His advocating of these connections in English education further demonstrates Denney’s innovative theoretical and practical awareness, and provides additional evidence for his contribution to the Scott-Denney collaboration.

Perhaps the most consistent theme in Denney’s work is the importance he places on reading and the use of models in writing instruction. Generally, Denney describes reading as functioning in two ways in the writing classroom: to broaden students’ intellectual perspectives and to facilitate rhetorical analysis. And though an emphasis on models is featured in his work, Denney is adamant that reading play a secondary role to actual production in the writing classroom: “Neither interpretative reading nor any other kind of reading can take the place of practice in writing, for writing requires the exercise of certain powers which reading does not effectively compel to action when action is demanded of them” (“Two Problems” 4).

Denney advocates a familiar liberal arts orientation for the use of reading in the writing and English classroom. Reading the classics, according to Denney, can provide the benefit of “enlarging the sympathies, widening the intellectual horizon, and informing the spirit” (3). As a result, one of his goals when considering models in the writing class is for the instructor to emphasize “the thought and meaning to be found in them” (“English Requirements” 342). Reading also serves a second function in Denney’s writing classroom, as the material and substance for guided rhetorical analysis, which has more “modest aims” and yet significantly “contributes directly to power in composition” (“Two Problems” 3). Rhetorical analysis in Denney’s plan “points out the relations of part to part, it detects the literary expedients and devices that are common property. … [and is] an aid in teaching how
the difficulties of writing have been met and overcome” (3). And while this use of models for rhetorical analysis is more immediately practical for writing instruction than for the broadening of students’ intellectual horizons, Denney indicates that its benefits “would not pay unless accompanied by [writing] practice at every step” (3).

Even when Denney’s focus turns more exclusively to the study of literature and reading instruction, he includes a prominent place for writing. In his paper “English Requirements,” which was shared at the meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools in 1898 (later published in the *School Review*), Denney proposes a revamped approach to uniform reading lists for college admissions. Denney argues that secondary schools ought to reassess the way they meet these requirements, replacing the concentrated study of literature, a “minute and fidgety work” that “kills interest in the subject-matter” according to Denney (341), with instruction that would situate composition practice at the center of the English program.

Put the work of the minimum requirement on the composition basis. … [L]et all of the reading be utilized in daily composition work, oral and written, in reproduction of the reading, and on themes suggested by the reading, based on the observations and experience of the pupil. In this way we shall secure what is most needed in the schools: practice in writing, talking, and reading aloud. (341)

Denney’s apparently radical proposal places “proficiency in composition” as the main objective, while still providing students the opportunity to cover the uniform reading requirements (342). Most significantly, Denney believes this realignment of composition and literary study could serve a vital role in helping students become more engaged readers with wider reading interests.

On still another level, Denney’s ideas reflect a fairly modern understanding of the similarities and differences between the activities of reading and writing. For Denney, both reading and writing involve the activities of “abstraction,” “selection,” and “imagination” (“Two Problems” 5). In this respect, Denney’s ideas point to our contemporary notion regarding the active role readers play as they engage texts—a foreshadowing of the work of Louise Rosenblatt and others who would highlight the transactional nature of reading. But Denney is also clear about the differences between writing and reading, and why reading must not supplant actual writing practice as the primary activity in the writing classroom.

The application of selection, abstraction and imagination to elements already selected, abstracted and imagined by another is a very different thing from their application to a subject, thought, or set of circumstances which must be confronted for the first time. The reproductive process falls short of the creative process. (5)
The second of Denny's three pillars for classroom activities, actual practice in composing, is centered on the idea of providing meaningful writing assignments for students. Denney argues that only through meaningful writing—assignments that draw on students' individual observations and experiences—can composition instruction help students realize the full power of writing:

The power to organize his own ideas, in written or oral speech, the power to deal with situations of which he is himself a vital part,—this is the power which composition-training seeks to develop in the pupil, and which practice in writing and speaking on subjects within the range of his own observation and experience can alone adequately call into activity. (5)

Initially, actual practice should focus on the level of the paragraph—the discourse unit of choice for Denney and Scott (a fact highlighted by their most popular textbook, *Paragraph Writing*). Yet at any level of discourse, whether a sentence or complete essay, Denney believes that the thought of the student, and the clear expression of that thought, should be the foremost concern.

Denney's primary method for making writing meaningful for students is through writing assignment design, a topic he takes up in “Two Problems in Composition-Teaching.” In the article, Denney provides some clear principles about how teachers of writing should design topics for student writing assignments. Denney proposes that topics be drawn from student interests and connected with observations and experiences in their lives. In fact, one of the striking features of Denney and Scott's textbooks is their insistence on these same sorts of topics for writing. First, Denney asserts that essay topics must prompt “real life” situations, where the subject matter “suggest[s] a personal relationship to the situation” for the writer, and “a particular reader or set of readers” to be addressed (7). One of the best ways of proceeding, according to Denney, is by formulating topics that “suggest a problem for solution,” because these sorts of assignments require “all of the resources of the pupil” (7).

As examples, Denney cites vague writing prompts like “a description of this city,” “foreign missions,” and “bee-keeping” (7), noting that each does little in shaping a sense of audience or purpose for student writers. Denney revises each to emphasize rhetorical constraints that can generate something closer to “real life” communication (7). For the city description, Denney asks students to compose “a description of this city written by a property-owner to induce a retired farmer to take up his abode among us, with some account of our superior educational advantages” (7). “Foreign missions” becomes “an attempt to induce a business man who has never given foreign missions any consideration, to contribute to their support,” and “bee-keeping” is revamped to “would bee-keeping be profitable to the farmers of this county?—written for the Farmer's Institute by a student of the Agricultural College” (7). At stake in such topic design is the heightening of the social context of writing.
and communicating. Topics must “present a real social situation to be attacked,” because these will offer the student the best preparation for “what he will have to do every day of his life in his dealing with men” (7-8). This is a highly pragmatic goal, and suggests that Denney sees all instruction in composition leading toward the effective communication of thought, not the mere exercise of correctness in grammatical form or generic structure.

It seems Denney felt strongly that, for beginning writers, composing at the level of the paragraph provides the best opportunity for immediate practice and growth. In fact, paragraph instruction is at the heart of the first term writing course Denney describes in his article “College Rhetoric.” Like the position he and Scott take in Paragraph Writing, the theoretical justification for teaching the paragraph at this stage is compelling, as Denney believes the paragraph is a “miniature essay,” which, because it is longer than the sentence, allows instructors to focus on expressive modes (“College Rhetoric” 43). Such “tools of expression” that include “comparison and analogy,” “contrast and negation,” “repetition” and other types Denney mentions can all be practiced effectively in composing paragraphs (44-5). Through practice and study, the student comes to see the value of these tools, particularly, and importantly, when “it is one of his own ideas that is calling for development” (44) through these tools. Denney also notes how careful study of the paragraph and practice in paragraph composition teach students more traditional rhetorical concepts. This focus on the paragraph, according to Denney, illustrates “in concrete form the general laws of composition—unity, selection, proportion, sequence, and variety” (46).

From paragraph instruction, Denney envisions a relatively uncomplicated shift to full essay writing within the first-year course. In fact, teaching the paragraph enables students to see “the pleasing functional analogy that exists between sentences in the paragraph and paragraphs in the essay” (46). Expressive modes evolve in similar fashions in both the paragraph and essay, with the only new aspects being “the forming of transitions, introductions, conclusions, the application of the laws of association to the order of topics in the outline, and the consideration of proportion of parts” (47). It is the focus on the essay that completes the first-year writing course, which Denney calls “Practical Rhetoric,” because of its emphasis on practice in “writing, personal consultation [with the instructor], revising, and re-writing—all with a view to clear thinking and clear expression” (47).

Moving beyond the paragraph and the first term course, Denney’s approach to advanced work in writing at the university level reiterates his desire to create meaningful writing experiences for students. In the advanced course, Denney proposes a more sophisticated and yet highly practical orientation for writing instruction that would reflect the student’s major area or professional goals. “The ideal,” Denney says, “would be individual instruction having reference to individual needs, tastes, lines of work, and purposes” (48). Denney separates the program into two large divisions: the academic course and the technical course. Students in the academic course
receive more traditional rhetorical training, including “studies in style,” “investigation of technical questions in style,” “principles of criticism,” and “the development of rhetorical theory” (48-9). Rhetorical analysis becomes a major part of the academic course, as students produce numerous reports examining various writers and models.

Denney’s technical course, however, is more forward-thinking, and undoubtedly reflects his experience with Ohio State students who were studying in the agriculture department and brought with them varying backgrounds and professional goals. For models, Denney envisions writing instructors making use of various professional journals and magazines as practical and realistic examples of style. As part of actual practice, writing tasks in the technical course include magazine articles, memoranda, laboratory reports, “brief-making,” “story-writing, newspaper forms and correspondence” (51). Denney is insistent about the reasons that should prompt student production, not only in the technical course, but throughout the writing curriculum. Denney cautions that “in these as in the earlier courses the idea of writing with a purpose and an occasion in view is kept prominent” (51). A recurring theme in his and Scott’s work is the belief that when composition is “connected with reality at every step, the study can not fail to be of great value” (52).

Perhaps surprisingly, Denney says the least about “helpful criticism,” third in his pedagogical framework, although one certainly recognizes the program he has in mind when he uses the term. Importantly, instructor feedback comes within the context of the first of Denney’s three-part approach to the writing classroom: the rhetorical analysis of models. So part of “helpful criticism” begins with the instructor’s role in leading students through an examination of writing models. Left at that, however, such analysis might be limited to merely “detect[ing] and nam[ing] figures of speech” (43). What Denney means by “helpful criticism,” however, proposes that instructors utilize analysis so as to produce an understanding of students’ work within the rhetorical constraints of subject matter, form, audience, etc. One senses that Denney’s “helpful criticism” consists primarily of turning the teacher’s rhetorical analysis toward the work of his or her students in an attempt to improve their writing. Additionally, Denney’s reliance on speaking, talking and formal activities like “oral composition” in the writing classroom suggests that students can provide each other with at least some limited version of this “helpful criticism” focusing on rhetorical issues (“Two Problems” 6). The teacher and other students are involved. Primarily, however, Denney’s concept of criticism involves instructor feedback and guidance within the process of students writing. In full, such criticism, “under wise and inspiring direction,” aims “to help … pupils to a better self-expression” (6). And it is an approach that Denney believes should go beyond the writing classroom to be “part of the business of every teacher, whatever his subject” (6).

Still further, and building on Denney’s notion of crafting meaningful, “real life” writing assignments, effective instructor feedback fosters more than
just students’ ability to “identify structural forms of good prose” (8). Through practice and criticism, students will “identify the structural forms selected as functions of the situation to be attacked,” to see that the structure they use in a particular case must be used advisedly, its choice or rejection being determined by the function it is expected to fulfill. The grammatical, rhetorical, and logical forms of expression employed would thus demand, in any given case, their full explanation in the use to which they were to be put. (8)

Helpful instructor criticism, it would appear, functions in the writing class to demand that “full explanation” from students. And it is here that Denney ultimately locates a standard for instructor feedback and response:

The minutest criticism made would find its sufficient reason in a better statement of the thought in view of the particular situation presented and the particular reader and writer designated; and even questions of punctuation would acquire importance as thought-questions, rather than as form questions. The whole system of criticism would become more helpful to the pupil because it would rest on a more reasonable foundation. (8)

“Chicken Soup” for Writing Instructors

Probably Scott and Denney’s least known collaborative effort, Aphorisms for Teachers of English Composition (1905), provides the most revealing overview of their approach to teaching composition. Although not receiving much critical attention, Aphorisms has been called “one of the friendliest and most inspirational books” Scott ever wrote (Stewart and Stewart 73). Only twenty three pages, the book condenses Scott and Denney’s fundamental beliefs concerning teachers, students, theory and practice in the teaching of composition. The book accomplishes this through its collage-like form; picture a book of proverbs, only loosely arranged around subheadings, written for composition instructors. These short passages, some only a sentence or two long, reveal highly concentrated ideas that have multiple levels of significance. Aphorisms illustrates how popular Scott and Denney’s other textbooks had become by this time, as it likely filled a desire on the part of teachers to have further guidance from the two prominent textbook authors. Remarkably, and in spite of its small size, the book packs quite a punch.

The conception of composition instruction that evolves from a reading of Aphorisms is striking for a number of reasons, not the least of which is Scott and Denney’s obvious conviction about composition’s value and importance. In Aphorisms, Scott and Denney outline composition’s practical value to the individual student and to society at large; they carefully examine the necessary qualifications and personal traits of the model composition teacher; they provide clear guidance for approaching students as developing humans who are capable of clear thinking and expression if given proper instruction; and
they discuss classroom methods ranging from assignment design to in-class composing to peer review workshops. Indeed, through all that it covers, *Aphorisms* provides the most concise and yet comprehensive statement of Scott and Denney’s beliefs about the entire project of teaching composition.

The content divisions in *Aphorisms* suggest an arrangement between Scott and Denney that is similar to the division of writing duties in their other textbooks. It appears that Denney was largely responsible for the final section, “The Class Hour in English Composition,” and that Scott—and Denney, to a lesser extent—developed material for the preceding sections. “The Class Hour in English Composition” covers so many of the same concerns that Denney highlights in his own writing, that his influence on the section is unmistakable. Such items as writing with a purpose, prewriting and planning strategies, reading and analyzing models, teacher response, connections between speaking, reading, and writing, outlets for student publication—all of these items bear Denney’s influence.

Although it is impossible to know definitively who wrote what, given the precedent set in earlier collaborations, there is little doubt that Scott and Denney shared the writing responsibilities of *Aphorisms* as well.

One of the most pronounced impressions that *Aphorisms* leaves is its focus on students’ needs and abilities. Regularly drawing on disciplines outside of English to inform their teaching of writing, Scott and Denney’s approach is often associated with advancements in psychology, particularly developmental psychology. But Scott and Denney describe the teacher’s need for a psychological understanding of their students in much more personal tones. Teachers must have “a deeper knowledge of the capacity, tastes, and interests of the individual pupils. Psychology at large is interesting; but the psychology of young Tommy Smith, as discovered in his themes, is much more interesting” (8). In fact, “every interest which pupils can have, the teacher of composition must have also. He must be able to say truthfully: Nothing in student humanity do I consider foreign to myself” (8). For Scott and Denney, this knowledge of, and sensitivity to, student interests distinguishes the teacher of writing. In sum, the writing teacher’s philosophy must be a “philosophy of adolescence” (9).

That approximately a third of *Aphorisms* is given over to teaching methods under the subheading, “The Class Hour in English Composition” (17-23), is perhaps unremarkable. In fact, it may have been the most anticipated portion of the booklet for readers interested in pragmatic concerns. The ultimate irony, however, is that Denney authors the very section of *Aphorisms* on which Scott’s legacy is generally built: pedagogical innovation. Once more, the divisions of their shared authorship suggests the importance of Denney’s contributions.

In “The Class Hour,” we find Scott and Denney’s pedagogical formula: writing is best learned through practice, and students must write with a sense of purpose, seek self-expression in their writing, and envision a particular reader or audience. Because Scott and Denney believe writing is an art, they
insist that composition class time should “find the class in the practice of the art” (18). Further, class time must present students with “a sharply defined object, that the pupil may learn, whenever he writes, to write with a purpose in mind” (19). The teacher must coordinate practice and purpose through instructional methods. Scott and Denney summarize their approach this way:

Though we are thinking all the time of the purpose and of the subject matter, we are also raising questions of art and are teaching the laws and principles of art,—unity, selection, proportion, variety, method, and the rest. These questions are more easily answered when a particular reader is named beforehand. (20)

Scott and Denney provide even more striking suggestions concerning the teacher’s role in stimulating prewriting, in correcting themes, and in publishing student essays. *Aphorisms* includes a number of strategies for prewriting and invention. The authors suggest that “observation,” “reading,” and “note-taking” all play a role in preparation for writing, and that an entire class benefits from individual students sharing their ideas with the larger group (19). Similarly, *Aphorisms* champions the regular use of writing models in the writing course. With models, the authors maintain, mechanical issues such as sentence structure, precise phrasing, punctuation, “and the simpler procedures of rhetoric” can be taught effectively and provide students with options they can employ in their own writing (20-1). Scott and Denney also believe that speaking and speech-making should be given “a larger place” in the composition class, so that students may receive additional composing practice (21). In fact, Scott and Denney feel so strongly about actual writing practice being at the center of composition instruction that they say “the class hour should be occupied more than half the time in writing or in oral composition” (23). Each of these ideas, as we have seen, has been previously asserted by Denney in his own scholarship on composition, lending further credence to his influence here in “The Class Hour” section of *Aphorisms*.

In spite of its brief form, *Aphorisms* highlights many of Scott and Denney’s concerns about composition instruction, and in doing so, demonstrates how they believe some of the more significant practical issues teachers and students face should be addressed. Their approach is a practical merger between student-centered and skill-centered pedagogies, where teachers attempt to connect and adapt increasingly mature concepts and ideas with students’ curiosities, desires and capabilities—themes that have long been associated with Scott’s work, and, should now be noted, evidenced in the work of his longtime collaborator as well.

**Epilogue**

As the decades passed, although Denney’s career moved increasingly into literary study and administrative duties at the Ohio State University—as in fact Scott’s career became similarly more concerned with journalism at the University of Michigan—there are indications of Denney’s continued...
interest in composition. Notably, in 1918, Denney published “Preparation of College Teachers of English” in *English Journal*, where he takes up the issue of preparing graduate students to teach introductory composition and literature courses, which then, as now, were typically geared to “freshman” undergraduate students. According to Denney, it is these courses that present a particular set of issues, problems that “older heads have failed thus far to solve” (326). In spite of his changing priorities and duties, and probably because of his role as chair of the English department at Ohio State, Denney had undoubtedly continued to consider the best methods for training instructors to implement the sort of pedagogical practices he and Scott had championed.

Denney's proposal for teacher training is a distinctly modern-sounding seminar course in teaching composition. Among those topics to be covered, Denney lists

> The specific aims of the elementary [freshman] courses; the necessity for such courses; the bearings of psychology on current practice; the proper content of such courses; the order of topics; the best basis of differentiating students into groups for instruction; the use of the conference period; co-operative schemes among departments; the grammar question; oral composition; [and] the measurement of results. (326)

Additionally as part of the program, Denney anticipates class “visitation” and “a little practice teaching,” which would be overseen by “experienced members of the department” and include observations and “reports” that are assessed department-wide (326). Like the introduction to composition theory courses now found in most universities offering graduate degrees in English, Denney’s model seeks to provide students with a broad initiation into the practices of teaching writing.

Here, as in his earlier scholarship and collaborative textbooks with Scott, Denney’s conception brings together the practical and theoretical, and emphasizes the value that should be attached to composition instruction by recognizing that it is a vocation not only worthy of but necessitating rigorous preparation—an idea that was not terribly in vogue during the period in which he writes. Indeed, with the obvious exception of Denney’s longtime collaborator at the University of Michigan, there seems to be little evidence of intentional and well-conceived programs for training teachers of composition at this time. Still, Denney’s innovative approach to teacher preparation suggests we would continue to benefit by probing and questioning the discipline’s “grand narrative” concerning the work and contributions of Fred Newton Scott.

**Notes**

1. While Scott had been born and raised in Indiana, Denney was born in Aurora, Illinois, in 1862, making him Scott’s junior by less than a year-and-a-half. Whereas Scott’s father was a judge and politician, Denney’s father had been a
recent immigrant from England, making his living as a furniture manufacturer ("Denney" 285). Presumably, their Midwestern upbringings contributed to the mutual affection each had for the other.

2. Following graduation, and work as a newspaper reporter and editor, Denney taught at East High School in Aurora, Illinois, and served as principal there from 1888-1890 (Thurber 201; "Denney" 285).

3. This reputation also ignores other textbooks Denney wrote, coauthored and edited.

4. Although no comparable collection of letters from Scott to Denney is available to examine, we can assume that Scott’s letters to Denney contained the same sort of directives. That their relationship allowed for this type of give-and-take is implied in Denney’s letters to Scott.

5. “Alphonse and Gaston” was written and illustrated by Frederick Burr Opper. The strip satirically treated two overly polite Frenchmen.

6. In fact, the complete title of the booklet appears to be Aphorisms for Teachers of English Composition and The Class Hour in English Composition—perhaps further evidence of Scott and Denney’s likely division of labor.

7. Sections in the first part of Aphorisms, particularly “Of Sympathy” and “Living to Teach,” seem more in line with Scott’s work, especially ideas he advanced in The Teaching of English in the Elementary and the Secondary School in 1903.

8. The article was originally presented in November of 1916 to the college section at the National Council of Teachers of English in New York.

Works Cited

