

Where We Are: Intersections

“Where We Are” highlights where we are as a field on matters current and compelling. In these invited contributions, we bring together a small group of scholars at the forefront of a particular issue or practice, who together issue a progress report of sorts (in 800-1200 words). —*Editor’s Note*

The Underdog Disciplines: Comics Studies and Composition and Rhetoric

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I have always been drawn to the underdog, the scrappy survivor, and much as composition and rhetoric scholars have had to (and continue to) fight for legitimacy, so, too, do comics scholars. In fact, as fairly recent additions to the academy, comics studies and composition and rhetoric share many commonalities. Yet what might comics studies learn from the slightly older field of composition and rhetoric? I ask this question as a member of both fields. I have been a devoted reader of comics ever since a particularly unpleasant fifth grade classmate coldly informed me, “Girls don’t read comics.” I took this statement as a challenge and set out to read every comic I could get my hands on. However, it has only been in the past few years that my obsession with comics has made its way into my academic career; for most of my scholarly life I have worked, quite happily, in composition.

In search of guidance for a fledgling field, I look to the self-narratives of composition, and the 2010 special issue of *College Composition and Communication* provides an excellent starting place, as the journal reflects on its 60th anniversary, studying the past and looking to the future. In the issue, editor Kathleen Blake Yancey notes that composition was an “*intimate* group in the early years, one with a short modern history and fairly singular focus” (6), but over time “we have *expanded* and diversified; we have recovered not one history but several histories and narratives” (6). Thus, composition and rhetoric already maintains numerous origin stories. Comics studies, an even newer field with “a general start-date of the early 2000s” (Steirer 265), is still formulating its foundational narratives.

It is clear that both disciplines struggle for legitimacy within the academy. While comics studies strives for respectability given the popular nature of its research subject, composition and rhetoric struggles with its service reputation. Still, each field looks to find authority, acceptance, and a place within the academy. Philip Troutman contends that comics studies

sits somewhat uneasily within the academy, both because of the medium's image/text composition, which sets it outside traditional disciplinary purviews, and because of its popular nature, which has engendered both an ivory-tower skepticism on the one hand and an "anti-academic" response by some popular culture scholars on the other. (120)

Many compositionists similarly chafe at distinctions between high and low culture and reject the notion that only certain materials merit scholarly consideration, a perspective that may reinforce a feeling of being an outsider within the academy.

The two disciplines further share a focus on interdisciplinarity, which makes the fields exciting, innovative, and difficult to locate within institutions. Compositionists have long valued writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines movements, and comics studies, by nature, draws from numerous fields, including English, Art, History, American Studies, and many others. Unfortunately, while the benefits of interdisciplinarity are myriad, this multifaceted approach may cause challenges as the fields struggle to find an appropriate place within the academy. In 1970 Janice Lauer urged writing instructors to "break out of the ghetto" and "look beyond the field of English, beyond even the area of rhetorical studies for the solution" (396), and since that time many composition and rhetoric programs have split from English departments, forging a new path and a new place in the university. Nevertheless, in 2010 Greg Columb notes that composition and rhetoric still has "no optimal institutional home" (13). Some comics studies programs are developing within English departments, others in Art and additional areas, but as an interdisciplinary enterprise that challenges the structure of the university itself, comics studies may have trouble locating a firm footing within the academy. Gregory Steirer argues, "without the ability to position itself in relation to existing disciplinary formations, comics studies thus risks 'ghettoizing' itself within the academy" (263). Both areas, then, may find it difficult to lobby for resources without a stable foundation. Is the answer to cut ties with English or other sponsoring departments and establish a separate space as some composition and rhetoric departments have done? Or, alternately, is there a way to build an interdisciplinary space across boundaries? These will be key questions as comics studies continues to develop.

Comics studies and composition and rhetoric, as relatively new academic disciplines, share several important commonalities. Yet, as the somewhat more senior discipline, composition and rhetoric has the advantage of time and self-reflection in defining itself. In the article "Making the Case for Disciplinarity in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies: The Visibility Project," Louise Wetherbee Phelps and John M. Ackerman provide an exceptionally helpful

account of “The Visibility Project,” a focused effort to achieve validation for composition “by focusing on the ways that fields of instruction and research are identified, coded, and represented statistically and descriptively for the purposes of data collection, reports, records, comparison, analysis, and assessment of higher education” (184). The authors maintain that “external validation matters; disciplinary status can’t be willed from within, nor can it be solely written into existence” (182) and that “it is important as a field to generate and control our own data” (206-7). If comics studies is to thrive, scholars in the field must also gather evidence to support our endeavors. If we are to grow and expand, we must be able to make the case for additional resources with solid data and evidence, drawing inspiration from efforts such as “The Visibility Project.”

As comics studies develops it would be wise to remember that, as scholars Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington note of composition and rhetoric, “if we want to change stories...we must *reframe* those stories with alternative ones that revolve around what we *want*, not what we *do not want*” (86). Comics studies has the opportunity to write its origin story, charting a course for the future, and I would encourage comics scholars to look not just at what we *are not* and *do not want*, but rather, consider what it is we *do well*, and what we *want* for our students, our discipline, and ourselves. Personally, in the days to come I hope to see more fruitful collaborations between the fields of composition and rhetoric and comics studies, such as the work represented in this special issue, as these projects remain scarce at this time. There is so much more work to be done in both fields separately and in concert, and frankly, we underdogs need to stick together.

Works Cited

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