
Reviewed by Alexis E. Ramsey, Eckerd College

Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition seeks to “provide a diverse set of narratives, narratives that [are] thematically and historically connected” in order to “encourage a reexamination of prevailing ideas about disciplinary formation, development, and transmission” (221). Specifically, the text works to “extend, challenge, complicate, and thereby enrich the narrative” (3) of composition history within the American college and university system.

Patricia Donahue’s “Disciplinary Histories: A Meditation on Beginnings,” which acts as a kind of extended reflection on the reification of the Harvard narrative and the role of Albert Kitzhaber’s Rhetoric in American Colleges in expounding this narrative, also works to create another kind of beginning: a pedagogical beginning. The perspective this beginning enables “could ‘disturb’ discrete institutional narratives without having to wrestle with the unwieldy distinction drawn between rhetoric/composition” (234). In other words, a pedagogical perspective can help us speak of composition history not in terms of a decline, but in terms of mismatch between an “emerging subject with a preexisting methodology” (235). This perspective allows for a more positive approach to composition histories. Further, this perspective lets historians look at difficulties not as failures, but as moments to explore, question, and ultimately contend with amidst the multitude of expectations for those involved with composition—faculty, students, colleges and universities, and the larger community. While this chapter is the second to last chapter in the volume, it actually provides a lens through which to read the other chapters.

The ten chapters within the volume respond to the prevailing narrative that situates Harvard’s composition program as the starting place for the development of composition at colleges and universities throughout the United States, challenging the primacy of this narrative in light of normal
schools, liberal arts colleges, historically black colleges, and junior colleges. Indeed, nearly all the authors in this collection repeatedly point to the ways that composition at their subject school did not coincide with the Harvard model. For instance, in “A Chair ‘Perpetually Filled by a Female Professor’” Heidemarie Z. Weidner emphatically states that Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana created an educational environment radically different from that proffered by Harvard. Butler admitted all students, regardless of gender, class position, or race. Further, Butler created a learning environment that was “dynamic, community-centered” and that emphasized “practicality and utility” (60) in education. The aim of Butler’s curriculum was to prepare students for the “task of transforming a wilderness into civilization,” (61) as opposed to creating a new generation of gentlemen. The focus on practicality is a recurring theme among the colleges profiled in this volume, especially because many of the chapters discuss the evolution of Normal Schools and the writing programs therein.

Yet, as Kathleen Welsch reminds readers early in the volume, while students across the United States may have shared textbooks and topics of themes and while schools may have had similar purposes, students “did not write out of identical contexts” (15). Thus our histories of composition must account for the diversity of writing situations and writing pupils. Further, as Garbus points out in her history of writing curriculum at Wellesley College during the progressive era in “Vida Scudder in the Classroom and in the Archives,” histories of writing instruction need not be limited to the first-year writing classroom, but should examine how writing was taught and used throughout the other three years of college.

Another common thread in the book is the emphasis on female writers and female teachers. Chapters by Welsch, Weidner, and Garbus all discuss female teachers, while Lindblom, Banks, and Quay (“Mid-Nineteenth-Century Writing Instruction at Illinois State Normal University”), Fitzgerald (“The Platteville Papers Revisited”), Rothermel (“Our Life’s Work”), and Gray (“Life in the Margins”) rely heavily on themes and letters composed by female students. In particular, these chapters look at the relationship between women teachers and students and writing pedagogy during the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Of note, only one chapter—Jeffrey Hoogeveen’s “The Progressive Faculty/Students Discourse of 1969-1970 and the Emergence of Lincoln University’s Writing Program”—looks at writing during the latter half of the twentieth century. The number of chapters discussing women, as well as the single chapter looking at composition practices in the later twentieth century, suggests that there is still a myriad of research opportunities available for scholars interested in expanding composition history.

In addition to opening the history of composition practices, a major contribution of the book is the expansion of what counts as evidence in the creating of these histories. As Patricia Donahue and Bianco Falbo note in “(The
Teaching of Reading and Writing at Lafayette College: “significant curricular and pedagogical innovation in composition can occur anywhere reading and writing are taught and practiced, but only if our assumptions about what constitutes proper evidence for such innovation are reexamined” (52). Thus, the authors in the collection use a variety of source material to reconstruct histories. These materials include: course catalogs, student papers, lecture notes, grade books, and letters. These sources point to the gaps in the historical record, particularly related to women’s history. Beth Ann Rothermel notes that “in trying to build a complex picture of Westfield [Normal School she] consulted a range of texts... [considering both] the extra-curriculum as well as the curriculum” (136). Even as authors uncover a wealth of new source material, thereby reconstituting what counts as legitimate documentary evidence, they also return to and re-read other sources. For example, many chapters reference John Brereton’s *The Origin of Composition Studies in the American College* and James Berlin’s *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth Century American Colleges*. By combining readings of more widely known texts with readings of newly uncovered texts the authors help to trace the rise of the Harvard narrative, as well as offer modifications to our perceived understanding of composition history.

For historians of composition practices, among the most valuable additions to the book are detailed discussions of archival research methodologies alongside works cited lists that focus on archival sources. Archival research methodologies are often underrepresented in histories and thus these research narratives are perhaps as illuminating as the histories they help to produce. Kathryn Fitzgerald in “The Platteville Papers-Revisited” writes that her chapter, as well as another piece written from material collected at the University, is the result of “a serendipitous, layered, recursive process” (116). Fitzgerald acknowledges the importance of the archivist in helping her find material, but also asserts that even after finding a set of papers, she still had to learn how to approach these papers as source material. She read through each of the papers several times until she understood the papers as a unified set created in a particular historical context, providing answers to questions concerning genre and the consequences of specific genre expectations for writers. These questions remain relevant for current composition teachers. These self-reflective sections will also be helpful for novice archival researchers who may be unfamiliar with the demands of finding and analyzing archival sources.

The narratives also highlight the role of serendipity in archival research—the finding of a particular source or the opening of a specific box that shapes or redefines the course of research. Serendipity also depends upon the knowledge to recognize this find as vital and the patience to keep searching for that next document. This is a common theme used in the discussion of archival research because, as Jean Ferguson Carr notes in the closing paragraphs of the book, serendipity, the thrill of discovery, urges researchers to return to the
archive with different questions and different interests that compel a search for the next discovery.

As Fitzgerald does, Lindblom, Banks, and Quay create a link between current composition pedagogies and those used in nineteenth-century classrooms. In “Writing Instruction at Illinois State Normal School” the authors use letters from student Abbie Reynolds as evidence of the pedagogy of Dr. Albert Stetson. The pedagogy, though progressive, over-emphasized surface correctness, leading to problems for students of lower socio-economic status, such as Reynolds. At the close of the chapter, the authors note that teachers still look for surface correctness, thereby “holding students to discriminating, socially unfair standards” (113). They list other similarities between current composition contexts and nineteenth-century classrooms: standardization, patriotism based upon militarism, and the rise of first-generation college students in the classroom.

As the title of the text suggests, histories of composition must be discovered at the local level—both at the level of the single college or university and at the level of the individual classroom. These histories remain relevant for today’s composition instructors because they trace a myriad of situated pupils, instructors, and learning environments, inviting current instructors to question and analyze their own pedagogical practices and conditions within a historical context.

St. Petersburg, Florida


Reviewed by Lance Massey, Bowling Green State University

You can’t throw a rock at a CCCC convention these days without hitting somebody who thinks—probably rightly—that Rhetoric and Composition is in crisis, that it is at risk of losing its identity as a field devoted exclusively to the teaching of writing on one hand, or to the study of writing in all its manifestations, unfettered by a pedagogical imperative, on the other. It is ultimately to such concerns that Helen Foster articulates *Networked Process: Dissolving Boundaries of Process and Post-Process*. Foster, however, mercifully eschews alarmist rhetoric. She is less concerned with saving a dying field than with articulating a theory of writers and writing that can help rhetoric and composition take the best advantage of this unique time in our institutional and cultural history.