students are not post-Shaughnessy phenomena. Ritter challenges common perception and poses thought-provoking questions about basic writing. But ultimately, I find Ritter’s discussions of “basic” and basic writing frustrating. Ritter explains that basic writers can and do exist across institutional types and student populations. She makes valid points about location and its effects on the student, teacher, and curriculum development. She highlights many issues within high schools that may create problems with writers entering the academy. My concern with Ritter’s discussions is her remedy to the problems associated with basic writing. She advocates change for a universal classification mechanism with a desire for a universal course system. This system does take into account the principals of “location” that Ritter outlined in the beginning of her book, but it does not mention how high school teachers can scaffold writing to fit basic writers’ needs within this system. Admittedly, Ritter does state that this system is a model, not standard curriculum. But I feel like this system would be replacing the social sorting of “basic” with the social sorting of “introductory.” Classifications between Course 1, Course 2, and Course 3 would still have to be made. Decisions regarding needs of the student writer based on her deficiencies as a writer would still need to be identified. Granted, these decisions would be decided by the students rather than the university, but, judgments between superior writing and “basic” writing would still exist. The concept of “remedial” or “basic” is ingrained in our students through their previous experiences in their education. Students will struggle to see courses within this structure as equals. They will and do assume that some courses have more weight or are more remedial than others. Overall, Ritter’s proposed system is a move in the right direction. However, it will not alleviate the hierarchical system that Ritter is trying to replace. In order to achieve Ritter’s aim we have to go much further than the development of writing courses at the university level. Ritter’s brief insights into high-school curriculum development may shed some light on how we can begin to break down these classification systems. But, it will not be as simple as adopting a Directed Self-Placement System.

Fresno, CA


Reviewed by Timothy Barnett, Northeastern Illinois University

While Tony Scott, in his important book Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition, does not state things so directly, one thrust of his argument is that Composition is complicit in what may be a large Ponzi scheme. As we know, students hand in papers to receive grades to pass classes to get degrees to . . . what? That’s what Scott pushes
us to consider as he suggests that Compositionists have willfully ignored the fact that globalism, technology, and the growth of a casualized, service labor economy have undermined liberal education and helped conceal the reality that higher education does not necessarily translate into a pass to the middle class. While an economically driven, bootstrap view of education has become the norm, it is increasingly based on a myth: our fast capitalist economy offers no guarantee of stability to great numbers of students currently attending universities.

The Ponzi scheme only grows when students realize that their part-time jobs at a big box store or a chain restaurant have not been replaced by anything remarkably different once they graduate college. So they return to school to brush up their skills, but the problem, Scott suggests, is that they cannot ‘brush up’ those skills fast enough to find stable, productive work in our ever shifting, profit-obsessed job market. Universities, instead of helping students analyze and imagine ways of changing this economy, instead profit from the student/worker’s dilemma. We advertise that education is the answer to economic woes—and are effective with this advertising precisely because growing numbers of people face job instability. We inspire student/workers (and Scott usefully insists that we cannot separate the two) to keep studying not so they can critique the political economy that threatens to rule us but so they can make it to the other side, even as it becomes clear that, for many, there may not be another side. And when they do not “make it,” we invite them back yet again because, really, what alternative exists?

Scott advocates that Composition Studies plays a critical role in investigating alternatives to this scenario. He begins by noting the many parallels between the lives of students working in the service economy and their instructors, typically non-tenured workers earning low wages, often without benefits or access to offices, professional development, etc. The similarities between students’ working lives and their writing instructors’ are notable, Scott suggests, both because they are dramatic and because they go unnoticed. Underlying this idea is Scott’s hope for a kind of solidarity among laborers (in this case, instructors and students) who separate themselves under false pretenses and to the disadvantage of both. Scott goes on to link this issue to Composition’s interest in contextualizing writing and to its productive, but limited, ‘social turn.’ Scott suggests that we have hidden behind an apolitical focus on ‘academic writing’ and inquiries more concerned with how we identify culturally than with the historical/material implications of such identities. Thus, we have failed to analyze the political economic implications of the academic writing context—leaving our understanding of the ‘social’ narrow indeed.

Scott explores these issues in an extended Introduction (which explore his critical stance), five chapters and two appendices. Chapter 1 looks at the relationship between the “professional” administrators of Composition and the “bureaucratic” instructors that they manage, while chapter 2 analyzes the textbook industry’s role in creating economic and pedagogical ways of knowing. Chapter 3 suggests the role class identifiers have played and should
play in Composition’s ongoing consideration of identity, and chapter 4 links Scott’s theoretical arguments to classroom practices. Scott closes with a brief but hopeful chapter on the potentials of writing ‘dangerously,’ or in ways that challenge the fast-capitalist economy seeking to rule our educational, working and personal lives.

More than most books, Dangerous Writing is difficult to summarize because of its varied content and its complex mix of economic theory, composition theory and pedagogy. At times readers may find the scope too broad as it is sometimes difficult to connect the various threads of Scott’s argument into a cohesive whole. The effort, though, is worth it as I hope the following close look at some of the ideas in chapters 1 and 2 will demonstrate.

In these chapters, Scott unravels intricate relationships between tenure-line and non-tenure line faculty and the knowledges about writing that guide each group. One significant argument Scott makes is that, while Compositionists still focus on the Literature/Composition divide, we should be focused instead on the fact that Composition has achieved professional success by participating in the exploitation of an underclass of writing instructors who represent the core teaching faculty in writing. The implications for such a simple statement are wide indeed. Scott then describes the ways that instructors mirror students’ present (and maybe future) working lives, and these similarities come out in telling ways in chapter two as instructors explain that they choose writing texts primarily based on cost, so as to make the purchase more feasible for students—and this understanding of how difficult it can be to purchase expensive textbooks does, in fact, put instructors in solidarity with students here. At the same time, the concern with cost also affects how instructors use textbooks. Scott found that, in contrast to tenure-line instructors who often teach without books (because ‘watered-down’ process textbooks do not provide the theoretical frameworks most trained Compositionists advocate), the limited number of instructors he spoke to felt not only that a textbook was necessary but that, when one was chosen, it needed to be used extensively to justify its expense. Therefore, not only are many books potentially chosen less for content than for cost, but these same ‘watered-down’ textbooks often become the backbone, and as instructors’ comments suggest, the main source of authority for the class.

Scott’s survey of instructors and their use of textbooks in first-year writing is limited, as he admits, but he does offer important points to consider in this section and throughout his book. If textbooks are not responsive to scholarly theory (as has also been suggested by scholars such as Joseph Trimmer), and instructors are relying on textbooks (chosen mostly by cost) as primary teaching tools, what does this say about the relationship between scholarship and pedagogy in Composition, a relationship that many like to think is significant? Scott argues that scholarship among the ‘professional’ tenure-line class of Compositionists serves less as a way of making knowledge for the ‘working-class’ teachers in the field than as a way of cementing our own positions. Tenure-line faculty secure institutional prestige through such work, while textbooks that are unresponsive to scholarship and produced by
an industry interested in profit become the primary source of writing theory where it counts, in the classroom.

*Dangerous Writing* is a sobering read because it provides detailed analyses of these kinds of structural intersections between economics and knowledge production in Composition. Scott concludes his book, though, in a relatively hopeful way. In chapter 4, “Students Working,” he describes his own classroom practices and students’ critical and complicated responses to the subject of work and, in this section, he makes especially good use of genre theory and the idea of “figured worlds” to help us see how students’ multiple subject positions may play out in contradictory ways in the critical classroom. While Scott downplays his “success” with students, I found his detailed analysis of “Sophia,” a student writing about her educational aspirations in light of her work as a waitress, inspiring as this student ends Scott’s class with a much more nuanced and complex understanding of her role as a worker/student than she came in with.

Scott’s brief final chapter is dense but usefully juxtaposes Texas Tech’s introduction of the ICON program (which allows instructors to assess and “teach” thousands of student papers on-line) with a new kind of Composition, one that asks us to look at the real “location” of our work. Composition’s true context, Scott argues, is linked intimately to our fast capitalist, profit driven economy, but Scott believes this trend is reversible once we connect our administrative, pedagogical and scholarly work directly and consequentially to political economic issues.

Ultimately, Scott is concerned with the ‘utopian impulses’ in Composition in his conclusion—impulses he sees as undermined by the pragmatist ideas of Richard Miller and others—and suggests that such impulses are more in line with a humanistic education than our current impulse to simply accept models of “efficiency” as inevitable. Such impulses, though, will have to be paired with strong political and intellectual actions, perhaps the dismantling of first-year writing programs when universities refuse to staff them with trained, appropriately compensated specialists in writing. Scott’s intelligent call for a more radical sense of the social in Composition and for new ways of including students as critical participants in these work helps me imagine positive reasons why the discipline has been so devastated by the excesses of fast capitalism. Maybe Composition has been especially subject to economic ravages because of the utopian impulses important to many who teach and study writing. Is the ‘dangerousness’ of Composition the very reason it has been so marginalized? Is the political economy of Composition in such desperate shape because of the power and possibility of critical writing? Maybe thoughts such as these are naïve—or simply utopian—but they keep Scott, along with me and many others in Composition, going in these difficult times.

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**Works Cited**