Memory serves us, might continue to provide teachers of writing with a methodology and vocabulary for examining the current role of invention in an age of Facebook and distance learning.

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Works Cited


Reviewed by Tara Lockhart, San Francisco State University

In A Taste for Language, James Ray Watkins, Jr. challenges the traditional view of English studies as bifurcated along disciplinary lines by focusing on one particular narrative: his father’s attempts to gain and use language, literacy, and both material and cultural capital to enable class mobility. What enabled his father’s transition from working class to middle class, Watkins argues, was the complex accumulation of the often competing values and modes of composition and literary instruction. Watkins, following Bourdieu, delineates these competing epistemologies as the “popular ethos” and the “formalist aesthetic,” respectively. He argues that combining these ways of knowing—pairing pragmatism with aesthetics, skill with sensibility (or taste)—can help students to gain the cultural capital that promotes class mobility (5). Moreover, it is this combination that Watkins hopes will allow us to achieve two larger goals: first, to refigure English studies so that it more responsibly acknowledges (instead of ignores) our students’ relationship to class and, second, to correct our own inequitable labor practices.

The form of Watkins’s monograph is central to its methodology. Using the few remaining documents and texts from his father’s educational and professional lives, Watkins unfolds his literacy biography as a way of materializing what was at stake for many students mid-century—particularly those returning from the war, as his father did, or gaining access to the university for the first time via open admissions—and what continues to be at stake for many students today: coming to college in order to be able to live a life that is more prosperous than the previous generation. Watkins weaves the details of his father’s journey, including the effects it had on his own educational choices, alongside a class-based analysis of education, textbooks, disciplinary divisions, and the relation of class to culture throughout the first two chapters, “My Father’s Education” and “English Studies, Rhetoric, and Writing.” By focusing on the multigenerational role of class movement
within his own family, Watkins successfully situates and grounds his theoretical examination and his call for disciplinary reform.

Watkins’s nuanced examination of both the possibilities and the limits of the first generation’s class mobility made possible via education is one of the most interesting and useful claims of the book. Watkins illustrates the way that his father used the strategies of college-level reading and writing to secure a more firmly middle-class position, not only through acquiring skills he would later employ as an accountant, but also by gaining a new sensibility which opened up new ways of “understanding the world” (42).

Watkins argues that it is the next generation, however, who is often encouraged to pursue education for its own sake instead of primarily for means of class transformation, since they can build on the established capital gained by the first generation. Watkins thus reminds us why a first-generation college student might feel strongly compelled to pursue a professional or business degree, or why many students describe their educational goals primarily in instrumental terms. More importantly, Watkins’s analyses of class transformation complicate the teleological narrative of class mobility. More an ongoing process and evolution with mixed results than a sense of having “made it” once and for all, class mobility is also as much about a reimagined self as it is about reimagined employment possibilities.

Watkins maps this balance between professionally-oriented literacy and personally-oriented learning and growth onto the composition and literature classes, and their attendant values, that his father took at LSU. Illustrating how composition’s ideology was often underwritten by a transparent view of language and a popular ethos influenced by scientific positivism (or what James Berlin has called “objectivist rhetoric” [9]), while literary study was supported by a formalist aesthetic that conversely viewed language as problematic and open to interpretation, Watkins shows how each enabled his father’s move to the middle class. The implications of combining composition’s popular ethos with literature’s formal aesthetic are twofold. First, Watkins complicates each field’s too-narrow focus on disciplinarity, suggesting instead the dynamic interrelation of accumulated literacies that resulted as his father synthesized practices, habits, and values from each field in a negotiated and ongoing manner. Second, although he notes the ways that literary study provided a necessary model for how to aestheticize life in ways that enabled the adoption of middle-class values, Watkins ultimately wants to argue that despite its lower status, composition played a more central role in the creation of a middle-class in the U.S. Indeed, Watkins ultimately goes on to claim that separating the related and distributed literacy that occurs across both fields—valuing the transformative power of literature while denigrating the popular ethos and “instrumental language” often linked to composition—sustains the “adversarial relationship” between fields, resulting in the continued exploitation of workers in Composition and the continued alienation of students (120-4). As Watkins puts it, if we don’t acknowledge both the critical and vocational goals of our students, we risk “obscur[ing]
the messy business of class mobility, with its unstable mix of existential and material desire and individual and social aspirations” (120). We risk making class even more invisible.

Watkins understandably turns to Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to theorize the development of the tastes and habits that make class transformation possible, however I found his examination of cultural values as they play out in textbooks to be more illuminating. Watkins first analyzes his father’s composition textbook (*Unified English Composition*, 1946), tracing how the values of meritocracy and objective rhetoric enabled the expansion of the middle-class by “giving everyone a shot,” while simultaneously “managing the costs” of democratized education by regulating the distribution of economic and cultural capital. Watkins builds on this reading by arguing that the New Critical textbooks that followed this period, particularly those written by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, attempted to balance those overriding narratives of meritocracy and objectivity by developing traits of skepticism, interpretation, and contemplation for the widest number of students possible. In this way, Brooks and Warren faced head-on the challenges of diversifying students’ sensibilities with regard to language by supplementing their epistemology of the everyday, popular ethos with an aesthetically-attuned epistemology. Watkins concludes, then, that unlike his father’s earlier textbook which valued ethos over aesthetic, the Brooks and Warren textbooks value both ethos and aesthetic—exactly the combination needed to translate education into increased class privilege. Having worked on these textbooks in my own research, I fully concurred. Moreover, I appreciated this textual example that demonstrated how practices of composition and literature might combine to help students achieve the cultural capital that Watkins endorses.

The final chapters of *Taste* attempt to situate the preceding analysis of class in terms of contemporary critiques of English studies and calls for its reform, as well as to suggest what a contemporary, integrated pedagogy of skills and sensibility might look like. Watkins shares the elements of his version of this pedagogy—“writing in the wild”—which uses ethnography to stress the overlap between school and outside-of-school projects and goals (130-4). Although I admired his willingness to offer a practical version of his theoretical argument, I anticipated that Watkins might take up this work—perhaps bridging academic texts with “wild” or worldly texts to suggest what he and his students found each might offer the other—and I was thus disappointed when this opportunity was missed. Nonetheless, by the end of the book I was on board with Watkins’s ultimate recommendation: we must rewrite the project of English studies to include—once, again—the work of enabling class mobility (160-1). And we must practice what we preach. In one of the most striking lines of the book, Watkins writes: “To the extent that we accept exploitation of labor in our own departments, we promote it in the culture at large” (162). Despite the challenges in righting our unbalanced and inequitable workforce, this understanding must guide us.
Beyond this crucial message, *A Taste for Language* is important in the model it offers for combining the ethnographic details of literacy with a theorized understanding of how specific, material realities provide a richer picture of literacy education, one that can hopefully feed back into our work with both programs and individual students. Although *A Taste for Language* will probably not persuade non-believers of the importance of a unionized, self-governing workforce and revamped (non-positivistic) models of assessment for both teachers and students, it does provide a usefully situated, historical understanding of why composition and literature too often seem fundamentally invested in different goals due to the types of capital they aim to instill. Watkins persuades us that the very differences which have led to division and hierarchy might actually join together in an enriched version of English studies that takes seriously the intersections of both material and cultural capital. As a field becoming more comfortable with mixed methodologies such as Watkins provides, I hope that we can continue to populate our scholarship not only with the experiences and voices of our past and present students, but also with a closer examination of their written texts—artifacts that make visible the contradictory, striated, and recursive nature of literacy and the (classed) desires that motivate education.

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**Works Cited**


Reviewed by Kathleen Mollick, Tarleton State University

First-year writing courses are meant to introduce novice writers into academic discourse in various ways and to serve as a gateway to research in their major and possibly at the graduate level. For writing program administrators, trying to implement change to one’s own courses, let alone guiding fellow faculty through the evolution of the profession, can be daunting. In many colleges and universities, the added demand that undergraduate writing courses focus on teaching students how to engage in research can be particularly stressful, when some faculty members either lack the time to produce research due to increased teaching loads and increasing departmental service, or that the demands of research keep faculty from devoting much time to incorporating that into first-year writing courses. And yet despite the demands on one’s time and the ever-growing list of what