

Déjà Vu All Over Again

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The first CCCC I attended was in Minneapolis in 1985. I was a graduate student and unsure about what I wanted to do. I liked books and movies and ideas and teaching; I didn't much like what I knew of how intellectual life seemed constricted by the academy. Expecting no more than the usual encomia, I went that first morning to hear Maxine Hairston address the Opening General Session. As Susan McLeod reports, Hairston's call for a new discipline was "electric"—and so too were the responses it sparked. Eavesdropping on the conversations that buzzed through the hallways and lobbies and session rooms of that conference, I began to think this might be an academic group I wanted to be part of.

That hunch was confirmed three years later, as I listened to another remarkable address by a Chair of CCCC, this one from David Bartholomae. This was in 1988, the year after CCCC had approved the calls of the Wyoming Resolution for fair working conditions for all writing teachers. In that atmosphere of radical promise and demand, Bartholomae sounded an eloquent note of caution. Responding to Hairston's call to "break our bonds" with literature, he urged us instead to "acknowledge our roots" in English and to resist the impulse to create our own canons of research. I don't want to sound like one of those bores who's convinced that no one has really made any good music since Coltrane or Woodstock or the Clash or Cobain—but those were heady times for a young person to enter composition, as the titans of the field staked out their positions in open argument about the directions of our work. I was eager to join the controversy whose contours Hairston and Bartholomae had helped to define, and as improbable as it may now seem, I felt inspired by both: I loved Hairston's feisty impatience with those she called the "mandarins" of English at the same time that I was seduced by Bartholomae's generous sense of what it might still be possible to accomplish within that field. And I especially admired the conviction of both that the choices we make as teachers and researchers have consequences not only for ourselves but also for our schools and students. Rereading their essays now, I find myself once again persuaded in turn by each: Hairston is surely right to note that "our worst problems originate close to home" (273), that much of what still ties us to English is a yearning for validation by the senior professorate, a desire to have our work

recognized on their terms, just as Bartholomae is surely right to suggest that “most of the problems in academic life [. . .] come from disciplinary boundaries and disciplinary habits” (49).

But I also worry that an argument that once seemed urgent has now gone stale. For the last twenty years, during which time the IRA and the Ulsterites have managed to put away their arms in Northern Ireland, we have continued to fall into formation along the lines of battle drawn by Hairston and Bartholomae. The solution offered by each side is homeopathic—they propose to cure the problems of disciplinarity with a further dose of the same. The followers of Hairston argue that once we have a discipline—journals, presses, majors, graduate programs—of our own, we will finally be in a position to improve how writing is taught and how writing teachers are supported. The heirs of Bartholomae suggest that we ought instead to work within the structures we already have, to fix English so we can then better support student writers and their teachers. But the problem with such two-step theories of reform is that the first step can always be indefinitely prolonged. We’ve been building composition and fixing English for the last two decades, with no signs of stopping now. And as we’ve been doing so, we have also allowed, in those twenty years, literally hundreds of thousands of undergraduates under our collective charge to be passed through basic and first-year writing courses taught by underprepared adjuncts, part-timers, and graduate students. I say, let’s skip the verse and start with the refrain. The question to ask is not where we belong but what we can do now—in English, or in writing, or outside of both—to offer more students the sort of writing courses they deserve.

I don’t think this is a question we can answer simply by arguing for more research and tenure lines in composition. What we most need now are strong classroom teachers of writing, and plenty of them. I thus believe that we need to invite faculty from other fields to join us in the actual work of teaching writing. And I don’t see that this teaching needs to be sponsored by any particular program of research. On the contrary, I think we can make the best case for writing as a central aspect of liberal study by imagining its teaching as a multidisciplinary project.

I’m also aware that this view puts me at odds with everyone else in this discussion, regardless of any of their other disagreements. Hairston clearly felt that a disciplinary room of our own was key to any further reforms in teaching, and McLeod echoes and extends this position in her cogent argument here for a writing major. In the closing postscript to his recent collection of essays, *Writing on the Margins*, Bartholomae also returns to this issue, worry-

ing that the teaching of writing will become routinized outside of English, and warning that “the new wave of independent programs [. . .] will have to bear the test of time” (376). While I don’t see how such programs will have to put together much of a track record to rival the dismal treatment of writing by English, I share Bartholomae’s—and Hairston’s and McLeod’s—desire to connect the teaching of writing to broader intellectual concerns. Where we differ is that this impulse leads the three of them toward the idea of disciplinarity and me away from it.

So let me quickly explain here my misgivings about disciplines. (I’ve tried to make the case for teaching writing as a university-wide project in the essays listed in the Works Cited.) Those speaking for composition have often sounded a curious note of ambivalence. For instance, in 1985, after beginning her Chair’s Address with praise for those “bright scholars who are generating theories and doing research that is accelerating change in the discipline” (273), Hairston still felt obliged to remind the field that “we also have to set high standards for our research” (279). Similarly, twenty years later, after surveying the diverse scholarly work going on in our field, McLeod closes her piece in this issue by arguing that “we need two things if we are to be truly independent,” the first of which turns out again to be “a strong research agenda” (531). In 1988, Bartholomae resisted this impulse to call for more and better research, instead suggesting that “we are so many, we offer such a rich variety of voices and projects, we have established our niche in the academy” (48). But by 2005 he had joined the chorus of not-quite-there-yet, closing the pages of *Writing on the Margins* by noting that “the other key problem of composition as a field will be to develop a robust and compelling research agenda” (378).

Will be to develop . . . I’m still with the Bartholomae of 1988. We don’t need to develop a strong research agenda, we have one right now. I edited *CCC* from 1994 to 1999. During those years we accepted a lower percentage of the articles sent to us than did *PMLA*. To my eyes, the essays we published were rigorous in scholarly terms and useful in pedagogical ones. This tradition of critical, nonspecialist writing continues to flower in our field. Work in composition ranges from the empirical studies of George Hillocks to the densely theorized histories of Susan Miller. Our articles appear in journals as varied as *Written Communication*, *RSQ*, and *JAC*, and our books are published by, among others, Boynton/Cook, Ablex, and the University of Pittsburgh Press. I know of few other fields whose scholarship is more diverse. And I know of none that can match our longstanding commitment to the close and sustained study of actual teaching practices.

We have a research program we should celebrate and sustain. If one of the goals of this research has been to rethink how writing should be taught, then we have now completed Step 1. We can move on. We don't know everything about teaching writing, nor ever will, but we have developed an expertise, a set of best practices, that we can share with our colleagues across the university as we together work to reform undergraduate education.

There are of course other goals to a research program. But these I suspect will always still "need to be developed." Hairston doubted that the mandarins of English would ever fully acknowledge our research. So do I. In 1988 Bartholomae warned us against "desperately trying to be respectable, [making] the mistakes of middle age" (49). In what I still find the most stirring peroration written in our field, his closing words to the field as Chair were:

To propose a unifying tradition, a canon, disciplinary boundaries—to do this is to turn our backs on our most precious legacy, which is a willed and courageous resistance to the luxury of order and tradition. The charge to this generation and the next is to keep the field open, not to close it; to provide occasions for talk, not lecture and silence; to acknowledge our roots in English, not deny them; to resist the temptations of rank and status; and to offer the invitation to others to find their work in CCCC. (49)

To resist the temptations of rank and status . . . It's hard for me not to hear a dissonant clang as I listen to Bartholomae work toward a much different kind of closing in the final paragraph of *Writing on the Margins*:

Without appropriate faculty status and the research support it brings, those writing the scholarship of composition will be working from a disadvantage. Without a record of substantial research, it will be hard to make the case for appropriate faculty status. (378–79)

This is no doubt sensible advice. But these are not terms that would either bring me into a field or keep me part of it. The gist of Bartholomae's argument in this postscript is that English still offers composition scholars a better chance of gaining "appropriate faculty status" than do most other academic units, and thus that English can provide writing programs with "a level of status within the institution to a degree not otherwise possible to programs outside of the departmental structure" (376).

But this seems more threat than promise. And, frankly, I'm not convinced it's true. As the director of an independent writing program, I report regularly to the dean and the provost of my university. I never met alone with either

when I directed composition in an English department. I've also been invited to represent writing on numerous university-wide committees and initiatives, and doing so has in turn allowed me to reach out to a wide range of faculty I'd never have had reason to meet if I had been a subofficer in the English Department. My experience thus suggests that the teaching of writing does not depend on the lukewarm support of English, that we have other and often more influential allies across the university.

In 1985 Maxine Hairston argued that the bonds that most tie us to English are psychological. Over the years I have come more and more to see her point, although I'd now extend it to suggest that our loyalty is not only to English but to the idea of disciplinarity itself. Here's how I'd put it: The institutional structures in which we work tend to give rise to corresponding *structures of feeling*, to draw on a term from Raymond Williams, and those feelings in turn have the effect of making our workplace structures seem natural and inevitable. To return to Hairston's pithier phrasing: Composition once set itself against the mandarins of English, the senior professors of literature. Twenty years later, I worry that we've begun to internalize the mandarins. I've attended recent CCCC sessions in which scholars like Robert Scholes and Thomas Miller have told listeners that independent programs promote a view of writing as a mechanical skill. Marc Bousquet was presented the 2003 Kinneavy Award for a strident attack in *JAC* on what he called the "managerial ethos of composition." And Bartholomae has warned that moves to employ full-time non-tenure-stream instructors to teach writing may well result in "routine engagement with accountability to nothing more than a registrar or an advisory committee" (378).

How people who've never worked outside of an English department can speak with such dire certainty about the ways writing is taught elsewhere, I'm not sure. But what I can say is this: I taught in a large university English department for eleven years, serving the last five as director of its composition program. I left that job seven years ago to direct an independent multidisciplinary writing program at Duke University. I don't think I've become a less interesting person in that time. CCCC and WPA have continued to provide me with a home for my research interests in writing, but I've also been pushed to read more widely by my colleagues at Duke—who run the gamut from archeologists, engineers, and epidemiologists to political scientists, cultural anthropologists, and theologians—than I ever felt the need to do while working within the narrower disciplinary confines of English. Teaching in a multidisciplinary

program has also spurred me to design first-year courses that are more varied in the texts and issues I ask students to consider and more ambitious in the writing projects I ask them to take on. And so I invite anyone concerned that the teaching of writing outside of English will devolve into a mechanized routine to test that view against the evidence of the hundreds of courses developed by the faculty in our program—or those in other independent writing programs at schools like Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, Stanford, George Washington, and Haverford.

But the point I most want to make is how an ideology, a structure of feeling, continues to hamper our attempts to find new ways to support teachers of writing. We are used to thinking in terms of disciplines, and so even when we've tried to think outside of English, we've usually ended up trying to imagine some other discipline instead, with the same sort of pecking order. The disdain long expressed by literary scholars for teaching writing has been matched by the eagerness of many current composition theorists to distance themselves from the service mission of the first-year course. It's *déjà vu* all over again.

This is a mistake with consequences. The 1999 Survey by the Coalition for the Academic Workforce (in which both the MLA and CCCC participated) shows that few full-time faculty now regularly teach basic or first-year writing courses. This is grim news—since it suggests that although during the same years we have claimed disciplinary status for composition we have struggled to put well-qualified and well-supported teachers in writing classrooms, things are not going according to plan. It is irresponsible to argue that we need a discipline in order to improve the teaching of first-year writing when the data suggest almost the reverse—that we have now built a discipline and yet are worse off in terms of staffing than we were before we began.

This is not at all an argument against scholarship in writing. My position is this: Work in composition has strong intellectual interest in its own right. We ought to support it, and indeed we've now done a remarkable job of creating the disciplinary apparatus—presses, journals, conferences, and graduate programs—needed to do so. But I think we are fooling ourselves and disserving undergraduates if we imagine that in doing so we are somehow transforming our workplaces. Creating new subfields of advanced study is business as usual in the academy. If we want to change how undergraduates actually learn writing, we have to put better-qualified and better-supported teachers in classrooms with them. We can do this in two ways: by reinvolving as many full-time

faculty as we can in teaching first-year writing, and by building stronger forms of support not only for the work of such faculty but also for that of the adjuncts, part-timers, and TAs who teach the bulk of courses in so many of our programs. Those are not disciplinary problems, to be solved by further research. They are programmatic ones, which we need to address with all the political wisdom and courage we can muster.

To return, then, to the question that triggered the debate between Hairston and Bartholomae twenty years ago, and from which we have since failed to escape: Where does writing belong? I believe this is a question better answered in practice than in principle. I remain as uneasy as ever with the ways disciplines constrain intellectual work, and my first goal continues to be to improve the actual teaching of basic and first-year writing. If that teaching project is well supported in a particular department—of English, or writing, or whatever—then my view is that writing belongs there. But the support needs to be both strong and wide. What I object to is the sort of triage that many composition directors are routinely required to engage in. So it's become clear that several of the graduate students placed under your charge are either unready to teach writing or cynically indifferent to the work? Too bad, you're stuck with them for the remaining years of their fellowships. Those part-timers still xeroxing course materials composed on manual typewriters? Or the perpetual ABDs? Well, they've all been around so long they've accrued a kind of *de facto* tenure, so there's not much you can do about them, either. And the same goes for the spouse of that powerful faculty member, and the really good local poet who needs health insurance, and the technical writer who's an awfully nice person and really not such a bad teacher, and of course all those recent PhDs produced by the graduate program who didn't find jobs in their fields but who are willing to take on a couple of sections of comp while they work on their manuscripts and look for something better. Any time a writing director is asked to hire someone for such reasons—that is, for any reason other than that she or he is a good teacher—then she or he is being urged to set some other set of interests above those of undergraduates. If a department chair (or college dean) can assure you that there will be no need for such concessions, then there is a place for writing. If the chair can't, then it's time to get out.

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