

## Thinking Like a Program

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For the last quarter century, much of the political and intellectual debate in our field has been driven by an opposition between literature and composition. In the terms of this binary, literature is associated with the perks and privileges of disciplinary status, while composition is defined by their absence. So literature professors are imagined as holding tenure-stream positions, with modest teaching loads, graduate seminars, book-lined offices, and release time for research, all of this so they can focus on either the monuments of high culture or the abstractions of critical theory, while writing instructors are pictured as overworked and underpaid, their hopes of promotion buried under the piles of student papers and interoffice memos on their metallic desks, holding endless hours of meetings with freshmen in shared offices or downstairs coffee shops, their very dedication to teaching the means of their professional undoing. Given such a contrast, it is easy to see why the goal of so many of us working in composition has been to gain the status of a discipline, to bring the sad women and men of the writing program out of the basement and into the upstairs offices and lounges of academic respectability.

I have few quarrels with such aims. If undergraduates are to learn to write critically and well, then we need to find ways to better support their teachers. But I am not persuaded that the best way to do so is through building a discipline. I have two reasons for thinking this.

First, I see little evidence that the disciplinary apparatus we have constructed for composition over the past twenty years—with our presses and

journals and conferences and graduate programs—has had much impact on who actually teaches first-year and basic writers across the country or on how they do it. To the contrary, recent surveys by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce show that U.S. universities and colleges are growing steadily more reliant on a contingent labor force of underpaid and underqualified adjuncts and graduate students to do the actual work of teaching composition (“Statement” 1998). In some cases, the disciplining of composition may even encourage such a reliance, as it is now possible for departments to imagine that they can solve the problem of first-year writing, or at least contain it, by hiring a writing expert or two to supervise the TAs and part-timers. The better the comp boss does her or his job, the less regular-rank faculty have to worry about what is going on in the writing program.

These are familiar issues and arguments, and I do not intend to say much more here about them. My point is simply that problems of gaining disciplinary status and of improving first-year teaching are not the same. Adding one more discipline to the already cluttered roster of the academy has not solved—and will not solve—the crisis we face in teaching first-year writing.

My second worry has to do with what happens to our own work as teachers and writers when we imagine ourselves as the members of a discipline. For the most part in our discussions, becoming a discipline has been cast as an obvious good for composition—as a way of claiming needed respect, authority, and security. Certainly all of those things *are* good, but I am not convinced that we cannot also gain them outside the familiar structure of disciplines and departments. As their very name suggests, disciplines are conservative structures—both politically and intellectually. The point of a discipline is to define turf, to limit what can be said, to regulate the work of its members. The obeisances of graduate school, the anxious uncertainties of landing a job and earning tenure, the petty jealousies of advancement and the arrogance of rank—these are the defining emotions of disciplinary life. Add to these the isolating effects of hyperspecialization, which Gerald Graff (1987) has suggested is the very logic of disciplinarity—as what begins as a single field of study divides and expands into an inchoate array of competing methods and interests—and you begin to form a picture of intellectual work that is at once constrained and incoherent. I have heard many of my colleagues, for instance, complain that the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) has become a kind of sprawling intellectual bazaar, a dizzying and seemingly random string of panels and sessions sharing little more than a hotel lobby and a book exhibit. But the answer to that problem, it seems to me, is not to assert a particular

disciplinary identity for composition, but rather to revive a common sense of exigency, of a task or question that requires our collective response.

What is that question? I think it could still be the same one that occasioned the first meetings of CCCC back in the 1940s—which was how to meet the needs of students in the first-year writing course. John Heyda (1999) has shown how, by the 1950s, this sense of a common project devolved into a series of turf wars between English and communications over which discipline would own the rights to freshman composition, with its massive required enrollments and corresponding supply of graduate teaching assistantships—a rich colonial prize that English had claimed by the 1960s and that it has since proved happy to exploit as the economic mainstay of its graduate programs and majors. I think we can do better. Rather than imagining composition as the property of a single discipline, to be administered according to its particular needs and interests, we can instead position the first-year writing course as the focus of a multidisciplinary project, as a site of work that draws faculty with varied sorts of training and scholarly interests to a shared job of teaching.

The structure that has most often supported this sort of ad hoc, activist, and multidisciplinary work in the academy has been not the discipline or department but the program. Women's studies, African American studies, working-class studies, gay studies, even cultural studies—all of these began less as attempts to found new disciplines than as efforts to break loose from the bounds of disciplinarity, to bring disparate faculty together to address issues of compelling and public interest. I don't know of any course that speaks more eloquently than first-year writing of the tangled hopes and contradictions of democratic higher education. The desire to open access to the academy drives the sort of work in composition that I most value; it is what gives our work its immediacy and impact.

Such a political and intellectual project should not be allowed to become the property of a particular discipline—whether English or communications or composition and rhetoric. Rather, I believe we need to situate the teaching of writing as a program that faculty from across the disciplines are invited to join. Let me briefly describe how we have tried to do so in the Duke University Writing Program (UWP), which I currently direct. The charge of the Duke UWP is to teach Writing 20, a required first-year seminar in academic writing, which is the only course taken by every undergraduate at Duke and which aims to ready them for the varied sorts of writing they will be asked to do in later disciplinary courses. Almost all of the sections of this first-year course are taught by twenty-six postdoctoral fellows whom

we have recruited across a wide range of disciplines. In the last five years our fellows have held PhDs in African American studies, architecture, biology, communications, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, economics, education, engineering, English, epidemiology, forestry, genetics, history, human environments, linguistics, philosophy, political science, psychology, queer studies, religion, rhetoric and composition, sociology, theology, and women's studies. Sections of Writing 20 are capped at twelve students, and fellows design and teach five such sections per year. Most design two different writing seminars each year—one for the fall semester and one for the spring.

Our fellowships are not tenure-track positions but neither are they dead-end jobs. Salaries are reasonable, the support for research strong, the environment for teaching excellent, and the collegial support of their colleagues extraordinary. Fellows join our program because they want to work intensely on their teaching before moving on to other academic positions. And indeed, in the past few years, several have landed tenure-track jobs at other colleges or universities. (Van Hillard and I offer a fuller account of our program in "Making Writing Visible at Duke" 2003.)

I like and admire our faculty immensely. While most have not taught first-year writing before coming to Duke, we tend to attract people who want to center their careers on teaching undergraduates and who are interested in working as part of a collective intellectual project. We tell prospective fellows that we don't want them to teach a staff course that we have composed for them but rather to draw on their interests as scholars to introduce students to the difficulties and pleasures of academic writing. And while we work closely with new fellows as they design their courses, there is no template or rubric for them to follow in doing so, no assumed pace or sequence of assignments or activities. We do spend a good deal of time talking with them, though, about how they phrase the writing projects they set for students and how they describe the aims and concerns of their courses. We represent our intellectual work as teachers in our course materials, and we thus feel that the same care that goes into our writing as scholars should also go into the creation of these materials.

Multidisciplinarity is thus not a theoretical ideal but a lived reality in the Duke UWP. Working in such a program has convinced me that scholars trained in English or composition studies have no unique skill in teaching students the moves and strategies of academic writing; rather, I have come to believe that close, generous, and assertive work with texts is a defining characteristic of intellectual work across a wide range of disciplines. What counts

in teaching writing is not disciplinary expertise but the ability to make visible to others one's own practices as a writer and intellectual.

Working in the Duke UWP has also offered me a very different sense of what it might mean to be “in” composition—and of what our field has most to offer to our colleagues in other disciplines, which is, in a word, *pedagogy*. The fellows in our program are ambitious and talented young scholars. They come to Duke with strong ideas about the sort of writing they would like to see undergraduates do but a less developed sense of how to help them learn to do so. They need help with things like figuring out how much reading to assign, how to help students use writing to come to terms with complex texts and ideas, how to compose writing projects that are well-defined yet open-ended, how to comment toward revision, how to structure a course to make room for drafting and revising, how to lead a strong class discussion of student texts, how to set up useful peer response groups, and so on.

Before I came to Duke, I directed the composition program in a large university English department. I experienced that job as an ongoing siege: How much training do TAs really need just to teach comp? Who gets to offer graduate courses and on what topics? Who directs dissertations? Why should research on teaching count toward tenure? A series of such questions and anxieties about the intellectual status of work in composition studies seemed to define everything I did and thought. It was not until about two years into my job at Duke that I realized I simply did not have those worries anymore. Our program is defined not by a set of disciplinary concerns but by a collective teaching project. We all teach the same course, albeit in very different ways. So that teaching is what we talk about—a sort of conversation that usually seems, at least to me, far more useful, collegial, focused, and sane than the agonistic displays of disciplinary argument.

I am suggesting, then, that rather than thinking of first-year writing as disciplinary turf, we might instead view it as the site of a strategic response to an ongoing—and frustratingly complex—problem in American higher education. We need to learn how to think like a program—to worry less about disciplinary canons and majors and standards and more about the usefulness and interest of the work that goes on in first-year writing classrooms. Certainly, for me, working in an independent and multidisciplinary program has been a more rewarding experience than trying to fit a dissenting set of intellectual interests into the disciplinary framework of an English department.

But let me also be clear about what I am *not* arguing here: Perhaps the most eloquent case I have heard made against the allure of disciplinarity

was offered by David Bartholomae (1989) in his 1988 CCCC chair's address, "Freshman English, Composition, and CCCC." But while I share Bartholomae's suspicion of disciplinary borders, canons, and god figures, I am less taken by his easygoing willingness to allow composition to continue on as an ancillary project of English departments. I think we need to contest that status quo, to argue for the teaching of writing to become the charge of the entire university faculty and for first-year writing programs to be independent, multidisciplinary, and directed by persons whose first concern is with the quality of work in them—and not with the support of the undergraduate major or graduate program in English or any other department.

This is not an argument against the value of scholarship in composition or against the establishment of rhetoric and composition as an academic discipline. All of my own writing as a scholar has been in composition, and I think that the best recent work in our field—of Marilyn Sternglass, Deborah Brandt, Jackie Royster, Richard Miller, Linda Flower, Tom Fox, Bruce Horner, Mary Soliday, Suresh Canagarajah, and others—is clearly as rigorous as most of what I now read in literary or cultural studies while at the same time far more lucid and useful. And I am glad that graduate programs in rhetoric and composition like those at Syracuse, Southern Florida, Purdue, Texas, and Rensselaer now exist to promote such work. But I don't believe that first-year writing programs should belong to the discipline of composition studies any more than they should be owned by English or communications. The teaching of writing should be a multidisciplinary project, not a disciplinary fiefdom.

The most worrisome question about programs has to do with sustainability, for the faculty in academic programs usually hold tenure, if they do hold tenure, in other departments. So it seems fair to ask how the faculty working in independent writing programs will gain job security outside the protection of a discipline. I am not sure that I have a confident answer to that question. But I don't think that the advocates of disciplinarity for composition do either. Certainly the current system of tenure and disciplinarity has done very little to secure the work of most teachers of writing. If I thought that more than a few American universities were willing to support the work of first-year writing teachers as a separate discipline, with the protections and privileges of departmental status and tenure, then I would gladly sign on to the cause. But that is not a choice most of us have been offered, and I don't see how accepting a subordinate status in an existing discipline is preferable to working as a valued member of a multidisciplinary program.

The past few years have seen an increasingly acerbic series of exchanges between the advocates of theory and of teaching in composition—kind of an internecine continuance of the old struggles between lit and comp. The theorists do not want their emerging discipline to be tarnished by association with the service work of the first-year course, and the teachers and administrators resent what they feel is the academic elitism of the theorists. I think a way out of this corrosive debate is to distinguish two kinds of work that now both go under the rubric of “composition”: The first is *disciplinary* in its focus on rhetorical theory, on the analysis of cultural discourses, on the practices and processes of literacy, and on the history of teaching writing. The second is *programmatic* in its ambition to improve the teaching of first-year and basic writing. As someone with a foot in both camps, here is what I propose: We ought to promote rhetoric and composition as a scholarly field much like that of literature or cultural studies. But we also need to identify the teaching of basic and academic writing as a university-wide concern. And so, while we should push for more tenure lines and graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, to make our work as scholars more valued and visible, we also need to find ways of making the first-year writing course a more vibrant site of teaching and learning. But we do not have to imagine that these two goals are intrinsically connected. To become a discipline, rhetoric and composition does not need to colonize and administer first-year writing; to teach writing well, one does not need to be a compositionist. Once we distinguish between these two kinds of composition, between the disciplinary and the programmatic, I think we will find that we can support both.

### Works Cited

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