wasn't satisfied with Matalene's arrangement of the essays; thus, when using the book this semester as the primary text for a graduate seminar, I juggled the order of readings to suit my needs. Students in my seminar reported that they found the contributors' Works Cited pages to be extremely helpful. And overall, like me, they liked this book a lot.


Reviewed by Stephen M. North, State University of New York, Albany

I floundered around a long time seeking just the right way to introduce this review of Louise Wetherbee Phelps' Composition as a Human Science. The truth is, I really like this book, with emphasis on that present tense; I find myself rereading it, pondering it, defending it, attacking it, recommending it to my students. But maybe for that reason—because, that is, I still have a "live" relationship with it—I am reluctant or unable to write the kind of review, make the kind of pronouncement, the genre seems to call for. You know: "This is one of the most important books ..." or "If I were stranded on a desert island . . ." I'm just not ready for that yet. I like the book a lot, and I've boiled my liking down to three reasons. Here they are.

The first—and I won't try to defend its rationality—is that it is a whole book written by one person. I've contributed to my share of essay collections, and I'll probably continue to do so; they seem to be the staple book-length genre in composition. But I really do prefer reading a single voice for longer periods of time. Composition as a Human Science isn't entirely satisfying in this respect. The "Contributions" in the subtitle indicates that this text consists of a series of essays written over a ten-year period, numbered as chapters, and arranged in three sections: "Constructing an Ecology of Composition" (defining composition as a system within larger systems); "The Process of Reconstruction" (that is, of rebuilding rhetoric/composition in a postmodern or post-critical world); and "Application" (which explores the relationship between theory and practice in the "reconstructed" composition of the previous section). But while there is a logic to this arrangement, a logic in the framework, the individual essays are not so fully integrated. And although Phelps does a good job of accounting for her approach in her Preface, it doesn't make synthesizing significantly easier.

Still, given the option, I would almost always choose to work at making sense of a range of utterances by a single voice than to read even a slick package of a dozen different voices on a given topic. And in this instance, my preference is made even stronger—and this is my second reason for liking the
book—by what I can only call the intensity, the passion, of Phelps' writing. I don't know how subjective an attribute that might be. Jasper Neel, reviewing the book in CCC, says it is characterized by "a plodding, dead-earnest seriousness... Nowhere is there a glimpse of play or humor or lightheartedness or joy." I know what he means—the book has an intensity which, in many contexts, we might find either frightening or embarrassing—but that's exactly why I didn't find it "plodding." There's too much at stake here for Phelps. In her Preface—and if you learn only one lesson from this review, please let it be that you cannot bypass the Preface—she says that to write theory is to write autobiography. In this book, she wants us to know that she is telling two "intricately tangled" stories at once: one about "the development of composition from an adolescent stage in the 1970s toward self-reflective maturity," and one about her "personal growth as a writer trying to help bring about that maturation. Both are searches for identity, for a place and a voice in an ongoing conversation." Neither story, I think she would agree, is finished. And so if there are places in the book where her voice is hard to follow—where it is swallowed up by the powerful voices from whom she has learned and against whom we now see her struggling to forge that identity—well, I think we need to understand, to salute her courage for speaking at all, and then maybe go back to reread this eloquent passage from the Preface to remind ourselves what she is about:

I have argued my positions, made my commitments, intellectual and ethical. They have changed, will change, being continually constructed and reconstructed by experience, by others. Something endures, in these and beyond these. I read what I read, notice what I notice, listen and respond, because of resonances with recurring life themes. Development as theme is a profound expression of my commitment to my children and my new understanding of myself, at forty-seven, as entering the life stage of disinterested mentorship to another generation. There is a sense in which this is what one's writing is really about: such consolidated commitments and emergent understandings and, even more deeply, the characteristic way a writer perceives problems and resolves them. For me, at that level, this book (and probably everything I write) plays out a fundamental tension that I experience in both self and world: the dialectical relation between yin and yang, feminine and masculine principles. (xii)

Finally, having gone on this long about how the book is written, I will offer my third reason for liking it: I admire what it says, what it tries to do. This is in part because I find in its writer a kindred spirit. Perhaps there are more compelling recommendations ("So North thinks Phelps a kindred spirit? I wonder what Phelps thinks of that?") but there it is. I met Louise Phelps only recently, after both of us had finished work on our respective books: her Composition as a Human Science and my own The Making of Knowledge in Composition. Considering that we worked independently, and taking into account our very different backgrounds, training, intellectual styles, and even (if ten years matter) ages, the parallels between our attempts to make sense of composition as a field seem simply uncanny. One I've already indicated:
we both frame our attempts autobiographically. But we share other things, too: a skepticism—in her case, despite an impressive depth and breadth of reading—concerning any composition "canon" ("In a postmodern culture," she writes bravely, "the writer reads what she needs in order to think, to make sense, not in order to know what is fashionable"); a consistent methodological role model (Paul Diesing for me, Paul Ricoeur for her); a preoccupation with what she calls the field's "incessant clash of methodologies"; a concern for the relationship between theory and practice.

But I wouldn't want to push this kindred spirit business too far. Whatever our commonalities, in this book Phelps leads us—leads me, anyway—to places where I can only, and sometimes just barely, follow. She is, for one thing, much better than I have been at articulating her own method—a "metamethod," she wants to call it—"as a systematic practice for rigorously characterizing, debating, coordinating, and judging the nature and value of particular working methods for composition studies." Her approach to relating theory and practice (a chapter entitled "Toward a Human Science Disciplined by Practical Wisdom") is, if often difficult reading, decidedly worth the work, terrifically provocative. More than anything, though—driving everything, you might say—she offers a compelling vision of how things might be. I'm not entirely sure about the political status of utopian visions these days, but there is at least nothing shy about this one. Most specifically in her first two chapters, but as a recurrent theme throughout the book, Phelps repeats the challenge implicit in her title: to think about composition as a "discipline among disciplines," "a human science within a philosophical anthropology" able, "by virtue of its new autonomy, to reconstruct its relationship with literature, reinterpret its sometimes parasitical relationships with other disciplines, and participate in complex networks of inquiry."

As I said at the beginning of this review, I'm not sure how I'll answer that challenge, and even less sure how the field/discipline as a whole will respond. But if you want to be in on the decision, you'll have to read this book. I did. It was worth it.


Reviewed by Alleen Pace Nilsen, Arizona State University

As I read chapter after chapter of Frank and Treichler's Language, Gender, and Professional Writing, I kept asking myself, "If people are commit-