The Anthropological Sleep of Composition

ELLEN QUANDAHL

Over the past twenty years, one of the debates crisscrossing the variety of disciplinary, political and methodological approaches to teaching reading and writing has concerned views of the human subject, what it is to be a self. As Reed Dasenbrock has recently written, "Models of composing and writing depend in crucial ways upon models of the self" (23). Moreover, in order to teach effectively it has seemed necessary—for reasons that are central to this essay—not only to have a theory of the subject, but also to have knowledge about the student who writes. As a field of research, therefore, composition now very often takes student writers as its object of investigation. Studies have, for example, directed attention to understanding the thinking and background of the student writer (Hull and Rose), and research has been discussed in terms of its implied or explicit understandings of subjectivity (Berlin, "Ideology"). The production of subjectivity has also been proposed as the content of both introductory courses and graduate programs in literacy (Scholes; Horton; Berlin, "Poststructuralism"); the writing subject has been reclaimed from rhetorical histories focused on speaking (Miller); and the teacher's work has been defined as "attempts to intervene in the ongoing processes by which the subject is fashioned" (Finke 14). During the 1980s, a theme within these debates was the vulnerability of the autonomous or "Cartesian subject" to attack. To say that a study of composing reverted to Cartesianism was to deploy philosophical history, and to assert that even though Enlightenment language had fallen away, certain terms about the autonomous self still asserted their functions, or that scholars were using (albeit unawares) assumptions whose antecedents were discredited. Over and against such assumptions, the plural I, the dialogic and culturally contextualized self, the situated self has come to reign.

Prior to this reign, in texts that have received relatively little direct notice in composition journals, another kind of subject was born, flourished, and, it was already predicted, would be erased (Foucault, Order 387). This subject is one called "man," who was born, according to Heidegger and Foucault—when philosophy—and indeed all of the humanities and social sciences—became anthropology. That is, when they became studies that open...
up and make visible the systems that account for human subjects as selves who speak and work. "Man" is Foucault's shorthand term for beings who are investigated and described in order to be taught, cured, employed, or in general brought into productive life in democracy. He argues that the modern subject, the modern soul, what we are, is created by pervasive investigating, interpreting, enrolling, examining, interviewing and documenting. Composition, one might say, has participated in the anthropological theme and making of modern subjects by articulating accounts of the composition student, the subject who writes. I am construing Foucault's work as a window onto this body of composition research, in the sense that it frames and makes available for study the techniques that professionals use to get to know people in the attempt to aid those people in becoming productive. This window does not offer a view of how learning proceeds, or how teaching is best done; nor of the events of reading and writing, how texts are composed and meaning is made; nor of the processes and cultures that help or hinder students' literacy. But it looks onto the social practices, including teaching, that are designed for our common well-being and that now extend to so many aspects of us, in order to ask what are their effects. An important question of this kind, I propose, would ask what the effects are of turning students' lives into case studies.

I believe that composition teachers, in the sense that they not only teach reading and writing but struggle to change a highly administered and competitive society in which the majority of students will fail, may be said to be in the same camp with Foucault. But I realize that Foucault's work has been viewed as willfully obscure, and, while offering an engaging analysis of the nexus of knowledge and power, as unhelpful, because it offers no program to combat and replace the domination and social exclusion that he sees built into pedagogical practices. Toward the end of this piece, I want to comment on demands for action and alternative programs. But first, I want to consider Foucault's startling claim that the power to educate and the power to punish, that university disciplines and disciplinary practices, are interrelated, each involving, more than any other characteristic, procedures of access to and documentation of individuals. This claim gives me pause, in a time when we are witness to a great rage to describe students, to penetrate their language to deep meanings of which they are unaware, to gain access to their cultures and historical circumstances, and even to infiltrate their dormrooms, in order to develop, out of the documentary evidence, effective curricula.

Foucault on Modern Research
My remarks here are largely a response two texts, The Order of Things (1966) and Discipline and Punish (1975). By writing about them, I do not mean to suggest that composition teachers need an introduction to Foucault. Rather, I wish to offer some observations about the field of composition through my reading and construction of these texts. Too, I want to avoid a tendency to
caricature critical theory that I have observed in some composition pieces that discuss theoretical schools or movements without reference to texts.

In these two books, then, Foucault treats epistemological configurations and institutional practices as they are re-arranged when the Renaissance gives way to the Classical period, and again in the rupture between the Classical period and Modernity. As Berlin has shown, this work is useful for historians of rhetoric because it is about ways of writing history ("Revisionary"). But it is also written as a "history of the present" (Discipline 31), in the sense that it brings into relief the commonplaces of modern life that shape our understandings of knowledge, proof, and objects of study, but which are of course difficult to see from within our own era. I am not qualified to evaluate the work as history; yet I find in it a plausible description of major themes in modern research, a description that helps make sense of the many and conflicting approaches to understanding student writers that now dominate composition as a field of study. In general terms, Foucault has begun to describe historically the powerful link—which I believe has gone largely unexamined in composition studies—between teaching and "understanding the subject."

In the earlier book, rather than studying each individual discipline or area of study as descended from some earlier version of itself and marked by important moments, Foucault searches out themes and figures of thought that are shared among contemporaneous disciplines. He describes ways of thinking and researching shared, for example, in the Classical period, among natural history, the analysis of wealth, and general grammar; in the Modern period, among biology, economics and philology. The latter three, he insists, are not to be seen as the respective descendants of the former, but as disciplines that are related to one another, and also to the modern humanities and social sciences (he calls them the human sciences), in important ways. He asks, in effect, what are the tropes, the rhetorical figures, that are shared among many disciplines in modernity, shaping the anthropological project?

Generally speaking, his answer is that since the nineteenth century we have been most preoccupied with things that are unconscious and with history (Order 372). That is, first, we attend to systems that are not consciously held but that seem to organize us. A good example is the relatively recent discovery that nonstandard dialects are not irregularities but have grammars, grammars that speakers are not consciously aware of but which consistently inform their speaking and writing. This is but one of the many ways, when one is interested in the non-conscious, in which one can study what people say and what they mean as two different things. A similar disjunction and need for commentary may be observed in psychoanalytic discussions of dreams and neuroses, and in research on means of production, the systems of work and exchange that we are caught up in but don't really see. Even biology contributes to the parameters of this modern epistemology, in Foucault's
view, because it examines functions that are invisible (like respiration) and that may be carried out by things that do not look alike, such as gills and lungs. Here, as in psychoanalysis, identity seems to be deeply within, and life is characterized on the basis of forms that it conceals; at the same time, those forms are linked to their environments and conditions of existence. The point is that modern study generally involves the interpretive or hermeneutic work of bringing to light what is unseen or obscured, and translating it into language that is useful or instrumental.

Importantly, **history** is a concomitant preoccupation, because "multiple, intersecting and often mutually irreducible chronologies" for human subjects emerge with attention to these systems (*Order* 331). The means of production has its history; so does a language, since it is the locus of traditions and unspoken habits of thought (*Order* 297). So also does a biological function, evolving in a particular environment. Life must be described by incursions into the unseen within, as well as into the multiple environments outside.

These descriptions of the modern idiom of research are of course highly general. But I want to draw attention to the epistemology that they summarize, and then suggest a connection with composition studies, before moving on to the "disciplinary" side of research and teaching practices. I think that Foucault fruitfully describes a paradoxical quality in the modern humanities and social sciences. These disciplines show that people are shaped by events in systems of work and exchange, in evolution, in languages. But this view itself is a field of understanding, a clearing, that is opened and delimited by people themselves, in the language, practices and institutions through which they represent and reflect on their living, working, and so on. Thus there is a doubleness about the human sciences, which focus on human activity as humans represent it to themselves and attempt to recover the deep truths of those representations. In dealing with representations, Foucault suggests, the human sciences always involve the project of investigating and revealing non-conscious forms and processes, of showing how backgrounds, needs, conflicts and desires take form in representation and how these are organized by unthought systems and rules; of looking at the real conditions of consciousness, and uncovering the elusive powers that shape it (*Order* 362ff).

It is striking that despite their broad generality, Foucault's descriptions of the human sciences are illustrated so richly by composition today, with its sustained interest in penetrating to the unknown in students' work, to the deep meanings, intentions, grammars, politics, cognitive processes and habits, and social histories that are revealed though unspoken there, and its accompanying incursion into their cultural, familial and dormroom contexts. Whether seen as divided by "cognitive" and "social" approaches to the writing subject (Bizzell, "Cognition"; Berlin, "Ideology"), or healed by attention to the "situatedness" of cognitive habits (Berkenkotter, Flower, Hull et al.), composition has energetically moved to the exterior of the
student—to the unthought conditions that create and sustain his or her idioms—and penetrated to the interior—to cognitive and linguistic processes revealed in or belied by his or her texts, to what the student “really intends” to say or to what his or her text means apart from intentions. In other words, the fundamental notion that students can be studied, described or understood is thematic in a great variety of research: in examinations of processes (Flower and Hayes, Witte), contexts and cultural milieux (Heath, Herrington, Kantor et al, Odell and Goswami, Severino); in the idea that unconventional language may be understood as “logical” (Labov, Shaughnessy, Hull and Rose); in pedagogies designed to challenge ideological assumptions (Ohmann and Weston, Giroux, Shor); in studies of student journals and diaries (Finke, Sternglass and Pugh); and even in the idea that teachers should select texts that will mirror students’ experiences and interests. The conclusions, pedagogies and effects of these studies vary widely. Without diminishing significant differences, I want to suggest that as a field of study composition hyper-uses techniques of access to and documenting its objects—student writers—and thus slumbers very deeply in what Foucault calls an “anthropological sleep” (Order 341).

Documentary Writing

By suggesting that composition research is in someway sleeping, or that there is something it needs to open its eyes to, what I mean is this: while discussions of the interdependent processes of reading and writing, about theoretical frameworks and about research methodologies, have become increasingly sophisticated, there has been little critical reflection on the predominance of “anthropology”—the fact that composition very often takes the writing student as its object of knowledge. I suspect that recent claims for composition as a discipline in its own right are in a sense also claims to expertise about this object of knowledge. Concomitantly, I notice in important studies which describe student writers a resistance to examining pedagogy itself, the teacher’s work and language in the classroom.

I want to be very clear that I am not talking about the kind of fear of pedagogy or “antipedagogical indoctrination” that Jane Tompkins recently described in “Pedagogy of the Distressed.” The composition teachers that I know do not look down on pedagogy. Quite the contrary. Moreover, the profession has made important gains by attending to what students have to teach about how they read and what they need to know. But when researchers direct their primary attention to investigating and describing students, they tend not to focus on the work of critical reflection on language—work that goes on between teachers and students. In other words, researchers account for rather than respond to students’ composing, and rather than reflect on their own ways to describe reading and writing. Moreover, teachers may represent students in damaging ways by rewriting students in terms of
professional categories and by failing to explore and collect evidence about those very categories. This is the social conflict that I see embedded in many studies of student writers.

It was *Discipline and Punish* that first gave me a way to describe this conflict, and I will rely on it here. It is probably worth quoting the lines that ran through me like a jolt, during my initial struggles with the idea that so much writing about students was not, after all, pedagogy:

*The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a "case": a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power....* (Discipline 191-92)

Now, most good writing teachers use the examination infrequently. Rather, they often comment on student writing to get at meanings and intentions, habits of writing, or, in the pedagogies of the left, to uncover assumptions and cultural biases. These practices have required of students a great deal of personal, even "confessional" writing in response to texts, events, and their own experiences of writing (see Connors). Many writing teachers, both those who advocate subversive rhetorics and those who study the writing process, in effect invite students to confess—for their examination—at every step. Susan Miller describes these practices as they took shape in nineteenth century composition instruction. In language that recalls Foucault, she writes: "The course in composition made... formerly privatized experience visible to the institution. An isolated 'individual' became the imagined, but nonetheless 'real,' subject of this course" ("Colony" 6). I fear that when critical examinations are turned into documentary or professional writing by teachers, students are robbed of authorship. In other words, attention to researchers’ documentation displaces the fact that students have something to say. Counterefforts may be seen in recent essays composed collaboratively by students and their teachers (Clark and Wiedenhaupt, for example).

Now let me try to put these ideas in the context of Foucault’s larger argument: *Discipline and Punish* and Foucault’s later work suggest that modern people’s relationship to power is not so much about the rule of law or force of governments as about the many techniques concerned with “normalizing” us, keeping us healthy, functioning, and productive. These are the “disciplinary methods” of the quotation above. Foucault claims that as
punishment for crimes became less gruesome and more humane in the modern era, its powers were in effect displaced and dispersed to many small and detailed techniques that prisons shared with other sites. These are techniques for arranging bodies and making them productive, and they are observable in prisons, factories, military sites, hospitals and schools. In general, they involve uses of time and space, the relating of individuals to one another by rank, and the methods of observation and documentation that such sites both borrow from and contribute to the human sciences. Foucault's studies of these methods are encyclopedic. Without attempting to summarize them, I want to suggest the surprise and interest for compositionists in Foucault's history of the practices used to get people organized to work.

This history is, one might say, a story of emerging meticulousness in observation, supervision, regulation, and division of tasks. Educational practices that now go without saying, like the sequencing of exercises, are here shown to emerge in the late seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries. For example, it became possible for the first time to characterize people (workers, prisoners, students) in relation to a particular task, in relation to other individuals and in relation to a whole temporal plan. Temporal sequencing represented both a "code for educative procedures" and the "natural progress of the mind" (Discipline 160), so that it became possible to supervise the individual by means of statements about human mental functioning and development—an anthropological theme. Generally, the seriation of activities, Foucault claims, infuses time with power because it makes possible regular interventions into people's activities, in the form of guiding and correcting. This work provides a kind of pre-history of the tropes of analysis that have been used almost hyperbolically in "process pedagogy." Consider, for example, how the writing processes of students have been detailed, documented, and subdivided into the recursive movement of their many parts. Or how writing assignments are often designed either to reflect mental activity, reinterpreted as "strategic knowledge" that may be learned (Flower 308), or to "assist [the] natural process of growth" (Harris 642). Here, too, the instructional merges with the anthropological, and teachers are able to infiltrate each step of the writing process from discovery to revision in regular interventions. As these "fine-grained" studies are fused with "macro-perspectives" on the context of writing, the net of language closing around the student becomes ever more elaborate. I believe that some kinds of composition instruction and research thus illustrate very thoroughly what Foucault calls "disciplinary techniques," which shape modern subjects by subjecting them to countless investigative and normalizing practices. Yet, I recognize that these practices are designed as a critique of and improvement upon earlier methods that merely judged students by their writing without attempting to help them improve, and I too believe that any teaching worthy of the name has as its goal for students not the successful examination, but learning how to learn.
Foucault has insisted, as Nancy Fraser has rightly shown, that his work is not about evaluating the content, uses or goals of systems of knowledge and research (19), but rather about how such systems and the people who deploy them are produced. It follows that this descriptive work, called genealogy, should not be helpful in evaluating and choosing among pedagogical regimes, arguing as it does that these cannot exist apart from disciplinary techniques. Nevertheless, Foucault’s work suggests that the modern concern for the dignity of life and efforts to bring about well being, and learning, may be shot through with surveillance and mortification, by means of which people internalize “normal” ways of living and working. Words like surveillance, carceral continuum, and domination give Foucault’s work a political and evaluative quality. And in Discipline and Punish Foucault argues quite clearly that the effect of the prison system is not to deter crime or rehabilitate inmates, but to sustain the supply of prisoners. I think we might ask, analogously, whether there are instances in which professional studies of student writers help to sustain the supply of failures. R.P. McDermott has made such a suggestion: “We help to make failure possible by our presence, by our explanations, and by our successes; similarly, those who fail in school, by their presence, by their being explained, by their failures, make our successes possible” (362). Similarly, David Bartholomae, thinking against the grain of narratives about basic writing, suggests that “The basic writing program . . . can be seen simultaneously as an attempt to bridge AND preserve cultural differences, to enable students to enter the ‘normal’ curriculum but to insure, at the same time, that there are basic writers.” (“Tidy House” 8).

A less dramatic but equally important way in which Foucault’s method of study is useful for composition teachers is that it suggests attending to ordinary ways of operating used in classrooms. In a sense, Foucault’s work loosens the grip of theory. I believe, as it has often been said, that theory, or sometimes a silent but “always already” theorized pedagogy, animates teaching. But Foucault offers another dimension for study, which he calls the “ignoble archives” of daily practices. For example, he looks at emergent clinical sciences in the nineteenth century not in terms of scientific advances, things discovered through improved research that outdid old inaccuracies, but rather in objects lacking in nobility, such as methods of notation used to register patients, or procedures of keeping files. By analogy, the gradebook, the language of assignments, and methods of documenting student work, are also significant archival records. Foucault suggests, “one should look into these procedures for writing” (Discipline 191).

Foucault’s argument, as I have already suggested, is that the techniques of the ignoble archives are always addressed to individuals, individuals who are “the reference of a certain type of knowledge” (Discipline 29), usually truths beneath surface behavior that are uncoverable and interpretable. The prison sentence, for example, is addressed to prisoners as the reference of
questions about correction—what are their mental states, drives and desires, potentials for violence or repeated crime, indications of change of heart and so on. Thus, in modernity, we no longer have executioners, but specialists of another sort: prison psychologists and social workers, clinicians, doctors, expert witnesses, and so on. Schooling, similarly, is addressed to students as they are the reference of questions about learning—what are their aptitudes, levels and abilities and how might these best be used (Discipline 189). Such references are to what is abstract and folded deeply within “man,” and they are what the judge or educator works with and transforms. Ways of addressing and understanding individuals thus comprise what Foucault calls the “carceral continuum”—the network of techniques that instruct, supervise, correct, transform, and cure. In other words, the core of practices for helping people into the mainstream has required theorizing the subject and understanding individuals.

This claim about the link between understanding subjects and teaching is paradoxically related to values that are generally embraced by educators today: that each individual’s dignity matters, that all must have access to opportunities, that education is the pathway into the fulfillments of ordinary life and productive membership in the society. Hubert Dreyfus, writing on Foucault, has suggested that disciplinary practices are designed “with no other goal than ever-greater welfare for all. It has become self-evident to us that everyone should get the most out of his or her possibilities, and that the human sciences show us the way to do this” (90). However, knowable “man,” to the extent that “his” private motives may be transformed into public text, is an arena for the operation of power.

This word power requires comment. Dreyfus has observed that “Many of Foucault’s difficult remarks concerning power make sense if we take him to be getting at a . . . social clearing with an emphasis on the way embodied, everyday practices produce, perpetuate and delimit what people can think and do” (81). In other words, power is not something intentionally wielded, some instrument that “has fallen into the wrong hands” (88). Rather, power consists in the practices that open up and delimit what can be done; therefore, it is not prohibitive or repressive but productive. This is not to suggest that power, because productive, is benign, but rather to offer a model of power as a structure of actions within the social body, the effects of which we all are. In Foucault’s words, power is “guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. . . . The exercise of power [is] a way in which certain actions may structure the field of other possible actions” (“Subject” 221-22). Composition also guides conduct and puts in order possible outcomes. As David Bartholomae has recently suggested, “composition is the organized attempt to produce readers and writers” (Colloquium). Similarly, Kathleen Welch, describing the university writing program as factory, writes, “The product of the factory writing system is the student writer” (82).
In his late work, Heidegger, who influenced Foucault, characterized modern life or being as fully permeated by such organized attempts to produce. He called this situation *technological* and argued that technology sets upon nature and challenges it to yield materials and energy for use. So also, technology sets upon people to make them productive; they become "human resources" (296-99). Foucault called such technological practices "disciplinary techniques" (with all the various senses of discipline intended), and argued that they turn people into aptitudes and capacities. But he cautions that "disciplinary practices" produce "man," only to make the person disappear.

This philosophical and historical work on modern research practices is, I believe, useful for the composition teacher and researcher in two ways. First, it provides a model for investigating an archive of our history and present that often goes unnoticed. This archive is the collection of practices used to get students organized to read and write, including the ways in which teachers describe the tasks of reading and writing to students in assignments and discussion. While significant archival work is already being done, there has been more attention to theoretical claims and policy statements, which are readily available, than to actual classroom practices, such as the language of specific assignments. In looking at this archive, one might ask (paraphrasing Foucault), what are the rules that professional writing teachers establish that govern the construction of the student author? What views of reading and writing do we offer? Which of our ways of handling texts do we designate as indicating the successful student author ("Author?" 127)? Are we prepared to recognize, as Kurt Spellmeyer has pointed out, that the "normative stability" of what we call academic discourse may be illusory (76)?

Second, the work on disciplinary pedagogy suggests a hypothetical conclusion that I believe must be taken seriously. Strongly stated, it is that writing teachers sometimes are involved, though with the best of intentions, in practices designed to produce student authors only to eliminate them. The documenting of failure may sustain the roles of those who fail. Writing teachers have, it must be said, been aware of the relations of power between teachers and students, and have attempted to relinquish authority and make students interlocutors in the enterprise of finding ways to learn (Neuleib). However, As Edward Said has suggested of the subjects of anthropology (usually subaltern figures—Orientals, blacks, women—and one could add student writers to the list of native informants), "To convert them into topics of discussion or fields of research is necessarily to change them into something fundamentally and constitutively different," perhaps even to falsify "connections to the urgent situation of crisis and conflict that brought [them] to attention in the first place" (210).

Is it not also possible that the rage to describe the subject of composition effects such conversions, rewritings that are unhelpful, invasive, or even damaging? Some researchers have already argued a version of this claim,
showing, for example, how research on "cultural and class differences" can result in "harmful explanations" (Hull et al. 324), even as they search for more thorough or accurate descriptors. Ray McDermott, considering minority students in particular, urges teachers to ask:

how it is a part of the situation of every minority group that it has had to be explained, or about the degradation that every minority group has had to suffer from our explanations. . . . We must be wary of our powers of articulation and explanation when they can keep us systematically dumb about ourselves. . . . By making believe that failure is something that kids do, as different from how it is something that is done to them, and then by explaining their failure in terms of other things they do, we likely contribute to the maintenance of school failure. (362-63; emphasis added)6

I believe that McDermott's question might well be asked, for example, about efforts in the history of composition studies to explain the "logic" of unfamiliar idioms and unconventional observations in student texts. Such studies valorize student texts and take them seriously because they "make sense," but they sometimes also treat that "sense" as a deficit or as inferior nevertheless. Min Zhan Lu has recently looked at this theme, showing, for example, how the work of Mina Shaughnessy, groundbreaking though it was, treated students' ambiguity and conflict about education as things that required cure or release, rather than as constructive sources of arguments, values, and points of view (889). Work of this kind suggests that the field of composition and especially the reading and writing classrooms themselves are deeply important sites for responding to research questions that are now pressing in cultural and textual studies. Following Said, I would group these questions under a banner or heading that says "Who speaks? For what, and for whom?" Under this banner, cultural critics have provided variants of the conclusion I worried over a moment ago: that textual commentary, thick description, reading student culture textually—that all of these forms of professional writing may have the effect of the disciplinary technologies: they colonize and renarrativize their subjects, who emerge as speakers and writers not simply because they have spoken, but because abstractions are made about them externally. And for Foucault, who consistently refused to offer a program for change, such claims must be accompanied by the idea that articulating models of resistance quickly becomes a new kind of disenfranchising. This is the "anthropological" dilemma.

Responses to "Discipline"
As I mentioned at the outset, Foucault's readers have often demanded models of resistance, change and action. In closing, I want to consider generally calls for programs of action in American education today, beginning with the call to convention by the CCCC this year:

What is different for 1993 . . . is an emphasis on answers and actions. We especially invite proposals that attempt to do three things: (1) define a single issue or related set of issues; (2) propose responses or answers to particular problems embedded in the issue(s); (3) include an agenda for action. (NCTE)
In another kind of context, a journal article responding to "anti-foundationalist" thinking in composition studies, Patricia Bizzell has recently argued that without a "positive program," critics "may end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural status quo" ("Anti-Foundationalism" 667). In yet another context, Linda Flower, arguing for an interactive theory of cognition and situation, has written: "For me the greatest challenge would be to construct a theory of interaction that could itself support action.... The ultimate reason for my research is intervention" (295).

As I consider these similar challenges issuing from radically differing projects and begin to index the term action in composition journals and work on education in general, I see that urgency about programs is thematic, perhaps overdetermined. It seems that when people believe that truth is situated (or, in Foucault's terms, that we are the effects of multiple and conflicting systems and chronologies), and also that all deserve opportunity and self-fulfillment, they also often become bound to a sense of practical obligation, to the tendency to rearticulate social conflicts in terms of problems and solutions. Charles Taylor, in his important book Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity, has charted the historical emergence of obligatory action as the primary concern of moral theory, suggesting that questions about what we ought to do are among the important commonplaces of modern life (79, 85). The book is useful in part because it shows that calls for action are an integral part of modern subjectivity, indeed part and parcel of the "technological" understanding of being. But Taylor is also responding eloquently and critically to Foucault. He does this not with calls for further or more humane practices for helping people, but by showing that it is possible to give independent significance to our modern humanitarian belief that education and opportunity must be for all, even though the working out of this belief has threatened us with burdens and sacrifices (519, and "Foucault" 165). But we will need to say what sustains our sense that we can meet the demands of our belief, in part by saying what we are doing when we teach.

When I suggest that one threat in composition today is the tendency to sacrifice student authors in the attempt to get to know them and help them (through professional vocabularies and documentation), I see in composition at the same time much reflection (although in other directions) on the very problem of "disciplining" students, and a kind of refusal, on the part of both teachers and students, to become "productive." I'm recalling, here, that Heidegger calls those who explicitly see and reflect on the technological dilemma thinkers, and the refusal of things and people to become productive a source of other ways of seeing. What I have in mind is that the reading and writing teacher is, and should be, a thinker precisely in this sense, because of the conflicting demands to which he or she must respond: to the paper so disciplined by commonplaces about writing that it is hard to tell if there is a person behind it, to colleagues who demand disciplined writers, and to policy makers, who, in the interest of increasing our students' competitive capaci-
ties, call for new and more thorough examinations. I'm trying to get at the sense I share with many writing teachers that what we do in the classroom is different from what students expect, what colleagues ask for, and what the national agendas now require. To consider these differences as responses to disciplinary technologies is instructive.

Foucault, turning to ethics in his later work, links the ethical to the "way people begin to take care of something, of the way they become anxious about this or that"—and of course his examples are about madness, crime, sex and "the truth," those areas in which he has studied disciplinary mechanisms most thoroughly (Bernauer 270). But this notion seems to me to open onto the peculiar ethics of teaching reading and writing because pedagogical thought is about the way people take care of something, the way they are anxious about precisely those methods, rules, bits of syntax, academic vocabulary, genres and generally accepted doxa that they faithfully deploy in order to be successful but which do not serve them. A student at USC recently wrote, "I am interested in learning structure or what is acceptable. I want to be able to write freely and with no nets. That is, I do not want to worry about going wrong or falling off the trapeze into the net." Another said, "Basically I want to write to where people understand me, but even where I think I recognize the style that is necessary for the assignment, I do not get good grades."

If I can engage in a dialogue with these students about their writing about difficult texts, I must, as Mariolina Salvatori has urged, recognize students' work "as a form of knowledge in the process of formation" (30), and, I would add, without attempting to explain it. Our work will have to be counterproductive; that is, it will have to respect anxiety about learned forms and locutions as an important source of questions and knowledge, even as we figure out ways to diminish confusion about the reading and find something meaningful to say in the context of our texts and classroom. We will need to re-position ourselves toward, rather than explain, whatever shuts down the interpretive work or prevents us from returning to texts and composing readings. As a teacher, not only must I grasp what is now a commonplace, that "there is, of course, no transcendental subject, but that every event of language reconstitutes a speaking self as 'I'" (Spellmeyer 78). Thus, I cannot know what the students will make of my remarks, and I can never have sufficient "knowledge" about them and the ways in which they are already literate, disciplined by schooling and other processes, to predict what it is they need; this is what I must keep in view if I am to think with them about their writing. I will often sense, as Patrick McGee has put it, that students fail "to grasp the full implication of their words... and often appear not to know what their language knows." I will "hear the voice of others in their writing and speech" (669). But the task of pedagogical interaction, for me, is not to explain the truth (ideological, cognitive, and so on) of those words, but to return them to students in ways that allow students to take up a different
relationship to them. We need, I think, more language about what such an interaction is like, more language about what we teachers are doing when we teach reading through writing and writing through reading.

Finally, then, I am arguing for a shift in emphasis from anthropology—the subject of composition, the writing student—to the work of reading and writing itself. At present, there is powerful but relatively little language about this work in the pedagogical scene, a notable absence of such a "discourse" in the community of composition. I think that the most difficult and important work for researchers now will be to say with specificity what it means to work on reading and writing in the classroom once they leave the field of language about the "other" subject, which has so often been an unexamined space.

Irvine, California

Notes

1In 1987, College English devoted two volumes to psychoanalysis and pedagogy. The guest editor, Robert Con Davis, defined the subject as "effects or aspects of 'language'" (750), providing a more thorough reevaluation of the subject as a self than that which is popularly indicated by the terms situated or contextualized in composition literature. More recently, Berlin has commented on the special connotation of the word subject: "Signifying practices . . . are at the center of the formation of the 'subject' and of 'subjectivities'—terms made necessary to avoid all the liberal humanist implications of talking about the 'individual'" ("Poststructuralism" 18).

2Important archival work on heuristic categories in the teaching of writing has been done, and more work of this kind is needed. Consider Rose, Harris, Lu.

3Donahue presented work that she and I did collaboratively on these techniques in relation to recent detailed descriptions of the writing process and sequentialized writing pedagogies at the 1990 New Hampshire Conference on Politics and Pedagogy. Dreyfus and Rabinow offer a more thorough overview of Foucault's work on disciplinary technologies (153-60). Snyder offers a very brief but useful summary of how methods "meant to allow the efficient supervision of workers and the production process, also occasioned the recording and distilling of information about both laborers and processes" (211).

4Miller shows, for example, that the composition teacher, as well as the student, is an identity shaped by composition courses and the larger institution ("Colony" 8).

5Said is talking about anthropology as the department of study, not the theme seen by Foucault in modern research. They are, needless to say, related.

6McDermott's work was brought to my attention by Hull et al., who cite much of this passage.

7Crosswhite has used Heidegger to explore this anxiousness as "an experience of the difference between ourselves and the available author-functions" (100). In related work on Foucault, Spellmeyer recognizes uncertainty as a "precondition for thought" and for the possibility that knowledge will be "something more than an endless repetition of unchanging paradigms and practices" (71).

8Costello, De, and Gregory show, for example, the stunning complexity of cultural background, "a heteroglossic pastiche with fast-changing components," which defies descriptive knowledge. They write, "We see in our students' texts an interplay of class, gender, geographic region, nationality, urban or rural affiliation, and major socializing forces like popular culture, politics, and religion. Importantly, we find these determinants to be relevant whether the student is American or foreign born."
I am partly paraphrasing here, McGee's discussion of Lacan (670-71). To illustrate this re-positioning must be the topic of another article, and the topic of my future work in composition.

I would like to thank Patricia Donahue for our ongoing dialogue about pedagogy, and Michelle de la Rosa for many careful discussions of Foucault and curriculum, conversations which helped shape this essay. A short version of this essay was presented as a talk at the CCCC Convention in 1992 and printed in *The Iowa English Bulletin*, Vol 41, 1993.

**Works Cited**


Hull, Glynda, and Mike Rose. "'This Wooden Shack Place': The Logic of an Unconventional Reading." *College Composition and Communication* 41 (1990): 287-98.


