The Things That Go Without Saying in Composition Studies: A Colloquy

LINDA K. SHAMOON AND BEVERLY WALL

Introduction

LINDA K. SHAMOON AND ROBERT A. SCHWEGLER

If anything about composition is overdetermined, it is the process paradigm, where every question can be answered and every problem makes sense. In the move to make composition studies a legitimate discipline, research on composing began to inform practice while it also drew for us portraits of 'typical' student writers that have influenced the ways we see our own students.

Nedra Reynolds

This statement by Nedra Reynolds, which opens the first position paper in this colloquy, identifies a number of the "things" which drive composition studies, including the process paradigm, the search for legitimacy, and our constructed pictures of "informed" practice. Other position papers identify additional elements: reading as interpretation, teachers' and students' authority in the classroom, ownership of texts, students as writers, and the belletristic tradition. These position papers, which were first aired at a conference entitled A Critique of the Things That Go Without Saying in Composition Studies, bring together in one conversation a challenge to the major interests, practices, and values that constitute and determine composition studies. In recapturing the provocative interactions of the conference, many of us started to think of composition studies as an "overdetermined system," a concept from the sciences and the social sciences with rich implications for our reading of composition studies as a set of hegemonic discourse practices that ties the field to the social formation of the professional middle class. From this perspective, we present this collection of position papers as a critical account of the discipline.

Viewing composition studies as an overdetermined system turns our attention to its complexity—to the relationships among its multiple entities,
to its inherent tensions and contradictions, to the internal changes and adaptations which allow overall survival of the system, to its manifestations at particular times and in specific contexts, and to its particular social formations. Reynolds, for example, lays bare the connections and contradictions among early process research, Romantic assumptions about writers and writing, and composition as a middle class enterprise. Linda K. Shamoon examines the connections between the assumptions of process researchers and the outcomes of their research, outcomes that, although contradictory, have entitled the behavioral model of process to be applied to any writing situation. Thus, these position papers begin to point out how our assumptions, practices, positions, theories, and research activities comprise an overdetermined system, one that is constituted by often contradictory elements which are nonetheless articulated and interlocked in ways that produce a recognizable effect and are in turn (re)constituted by that effect.

Of course, it makes no sense to talk about the elements of composition studies as an overdetermined system without talking about how these are both produced by and produce a specific social formation—that of the professional middle class—whose emergence has been traced by numerous studies of the rise of professionalism in American life, culture, and education. The position papers by Judith Goleman and John Trimbur suggest that a recognition of the emerging dominance of the professional middle class is central to an understanding of composition practices and ideologies, just as recognition of the dominance of corporate and industrial formations is important to an understanding of current-traditional practices, as Richard Ohmann has pointed out.

At the same time, while exploring this formation, all of the authors identify and critique unstated assumptions—principles and rules in composition studies that are so widely accepted they are in effect “invisible.” This invisibility is, in part, the result of hegemonic operations which, according to Gramsci, entail the permeation of an ideology or “vision of things as they are” into the way people perceive the events of their everyday lives. Robert A. Schwegler challenges the invisible notion that writing is synonymous with meaning-making. He argues that this unstated assumption is intertwined with values and practices that both come from and ensure the dominance of the professional middle class, while having the effect of devaluing many types of business and professional writing. Beverly Wall questions the classroom predilection for personal writing and suggests an alternative practice, one based in a wider appreciation of public discourse and rhetorical genres.

In order to examine composition studies, the authors found that they must examine it materially, as historically situated and as manifested in particular forms of research and practice serving to preserve the power relations of the system. Thus, the position papers presented here turn our attention to practice as constituted in particular places by “researched” findings and teaching methods. Roxanne Mountford, for example, looks at
the current emphasis on teaching "community" in composition studies and concludes that this method contradicts the democratic processes it is supposed to mimic. She illustrates the material result of this tension with examples from classes and suggests that an alternate pedagogy, the teaching of culture, breaks the cycle of masculine/professional hegemony.

In these ways, then, all of the position papers in this colloquy are theoretically informed, using theory to give a specific name and habitation to things we have felt about composition studies. At the same time, these position papers are the work of practitioners who want to alter and redirect practice, not the work of theorists for whom practice has a secondary value. Theory allows us to intervene in current practice with the aim of changing it, not simply critiquing it. We also want to confront contradictions in our notion of an overdetermined system, for we share the assumption of most critical theorists that by laying bare the things that go without saying in composition studies we can change our discourse/practices rather than contribute to the next adaptation. This collection, therefore, includes counterpoints, a series of statements from colleagues such as Marjorie Roemer, who warns us not to repudiate our recent history lest we repeat the kind of parochialism which is the target of our critique. Linda Peterson points out that in an earlier configuration of the system personal writing did form a public, marked practice. Lynn Z. Bloom explains that undergraduate education has always been affected by multiple agendas, especially in terms of the indoctrination of students. Finally, Robert J. Connors cautions us that theory and critique have not dramatically changed practice. With these counterpoints we remind ourselves of Ben Agger's insight that, "We have a long way to go before we can use a genuinely critical discourse unproblematically" (15).

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Process Research:
Portraits of Student Writers

NEDRA REYNOLDS

If anything about composition is overdetermined, it is the process paradigm, where every question can be answered and every problem makes sense. In the move to make composition studies a legitimate discipline, research on composing began to inform practice while it also drew for us portraits of "typical" student writers that have influenced the ways we see our own students.
A dominant question of process has been "How do writers write?" It is arguable that over the last three decades more research projects have been dedicated to answering that question than any other. The major assumption driving much of this research is that one can observe the composing process, to quote Sondra Perl, "as it unfolds"—that composing aloud to researchers externalizes an internal phenomenon (320). In the effort to make internal processes accessible, however, the external realities under which students compose were often ignored or overlooked. The writing self that emerges in two early process research studies reproduces composition's identity as a middle-class enterprise and leaves unexamined the function of difference.

Janet Emig's portrait of Lynn creates a compelling subjectivity of the student writer that served to condemn current-traditional practices while it also reproduced composition's own middle-class identity and affiliations. Because Lynn is a model student—in the top five percent of her class academically; in advanced placement as well as college courses; active in organizations; holding a part-time job—her case takes on a particular urgency (45). Here we have a wonderful, engaging student whose enthusiasm and creativity are about to be choked by rule-obsessed teachers, ignorant about how real writers work (98). It is precisely Lynn's position as the all-American high school student that makes this profile so powerful and enduring; educators are particularly alarmed that a student like Lynn—raised by a teacher and a lawyer—might not be ready for college writing or might actually have been harmed by her school instruction.

In keeping with the image of the good student, Lynn is cooperative and able to provide a thorough documentation of her past writing. Emig reports that Lynn proved an "exceptionally interesting subject because of her self-knowledge and her ability to verbalize the process of thinking and writing" (45-46). Emig further characterizes Lynn as "an extremely poised, assured, and open writer" with an "ego-strength" that allows Lynn to tackle any writing task with confidence and enough skill to please any evaluator (63-64). What writing teacher, in reading this profile, wouldn't long for more Lynns in her classes?

Emig presents Lynn consistently as an intelligent, perceptive, and articulate student whose concern with teacher-imposed rules and regulations has stunted her artistic growth. The writing self, in this view, is naturally creative; it comes out of a Romantic version of artistic production (Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*; Brodkey). Lynn could be an extremely gifted writer if it were not for the stultifying environment in which she is asked to produce texts. If she had been left alone to develop naturally as a writer, or, better yet, if she had been nurtured and supported and invited to write with emotion, Lynn would be a "healthier" person, not haunted by a humiliating spelling error (70). Institutionalized writing practices become the enemy, and Lynn is written as an heroic struggling artist.
Sondra Perl's "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" focuses on Tony, who provides a striking contrast to Lynn. Tony is a twenty-year-old first-generation college student, a high school dropout and ex-Marine, labeled a "non-traditional" student as Lynn never would have been. He is Puerto Rican, a native speaker of English, who also speaks Spanish though he does not read or write it. Above all, Tony is considered an unskilled writer whose "educational background is characterized by instability" (75): five different schools in the first four grades; he was held back one year, expelled another, and finally dropped out. Unlike Lynn, who sits on her basement floor surrounded by notebooks full of her writing, Tony has no written work from previous school days and "it is clear that he prefers not to recall academic experiences from those days in the past" (78-79). Also unlike Lynn, Tony cannot imagine writing about emotions or putting personal things on paper. Contrasted to Lynn's investment in writing as expression, Tony wants to improve his writing for utilitarian purposes: "Sometimes you can't talk, can't use the phone, so you have to write—like a businessman, you sound educated on paper" (78). Tony may not be in the middle class—his mother doesn't speak English and his father attended school only until the third grade—but he, along with Mina Shaughnessy's students, clearly recognizes the path to middle-class subjectivity through college writing skills.

Tony's ethnicity, bilingualism, and family background do not change Perl's diagnosis; in her concluding statements, Tony could be anybody, and teachers who intervene to untangle "the tangles in the process" need not acknowledge or struggle with the social and cultural factors that make him an "unskilled writer" (Perl 328). As Stephen North puts it, "who the subjects are finally tends to be treated as accidental: Emig's Lynn may be vivacious, Perl's Tony separated from his wife and child, and so on, but these properties of them as subjects end up not impinging on their composing processes" (217). By following a case study method borrowed from social science and by zeroing in on only a handful of writers, these studies delineate writing process, for any type of writing, as they also attempt to construct a writer, free from any specificities of gender, race, class, or material conditions.

In the eight years between these two studies, we can also see researchers moving away from Emig's brand of humanistic, literary interpretation and more towards Perl's type of coding and counting (see Miller, Textual Carnivals 119-20). However, it is not Perl's "objectivity" but our own subject positions that make Tony an unmemorable character compared to Lynn. Most writing teachers do not see themselves in Tony. Most of us are Lynns: successful in school, eager writers, classic teacher-pleasers, with lots of self-sponsored writing. Emig's construction of Lynn, therefore, reinscribes the class positions of her readers and perhaps tells some of our own stories—the frustration of having our writing appropriated or misinterpreted by teachers or the drudgery of school-sponsored writing. Open admissions students, basic writers, or first-generation college students are much harder to "cap-
ture” as Emig does so vividly with Lynn, in part because if we are not Puerto Rican, a high school dropout, or a first-generation college student, we may feel uneasy interpreting and assigning meaning or intent.

Tony’s differences, as well as his frank admission of his reasons for wanting to write better, make us uncomfortable. Composition is still reluctant to acknowledge the obvious reasons why students take writing courses: they want to get ahead, get a good job, be considered literate, be a middle-class member of society. Research has not responded adequately to this reality of teaching writing.

In early research on composing, the goal of discovering a lockstep, foolproof composing process subsumed other concerns and reduced difference to a limited set of categories—expert, novice, skilled, unskilled—with very little questioning of who might or might not belong to these categories, or where they might break down. This simplistic treatment of difference is particularly troubling from a poststructuralist view of subjectivity, which challenges us to concentrate precisely on gaps and contradictions and to resist the temptation to assign universality or find common ground everywhere we look. Until such scholars as Lester Faigley, Susan Miller, and John Clifford began to attend to issues of subjectivity and ideology in composition studies, the consequences of process research went without saying. These writers, however, are beginning to say something of crucial importance: that composition is invested in reproducing good little subjects of modernism and capitalism who know how to follow the rules. While it may be true, as Robert J. Connors points out, that process research has died out while process pedagogy lives on, I still believe that the landmark studies by early process researchers have shaped the ways we see our own students; it is easy to divide student writers into the Lynns (well-prepared and eager) and the Tonys (a challenge) without complicating those divisions or without, for example, seeing Tony as inexperienced but practical and realistic.

Alternative research methods—especially ethnographic—are undeniably more expensive and time-consuming, but we must identify different research questions that force us to confront the multiple, complex, and material realities of writing (who has access to computers? whose homes are not full of books?) while they would also elicit more voices like Tony’s, whose honesty illuminates composition’s investments in reproducing middle-class subjects. Instead of “how” writers write, better questions might arise from concentrating on writers’ locations and situatedness: Who writes? And when? What factors or conditions stimulate or shape the writing? Where do writers write—in terms of physical space—and where do they get their material? Perhaps most importantly, who doesn’t get to write—and why?

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Changing our Discipline by Challenging the Universality of the Behavioral Model of Process

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One thing that goes without saying in the process-oriented classroom is that the behavioral model of "explore—draft—revise" universally frames any writing task. Donald M. Murray puts it this way: "If we stand back to look at the writing process, we see the writer following the writing through the three stages of rehearsing, drafting, and revising as the piece of work—essay, story, article, poem, research paper, play, letter, scientific report, business memorandum, novel, television script—moves toward its own meaning" (4). By now, however, there has been a wide ranging critique of this model, from a thorough deconstruction of its underlying research methods (Cooper and Holzman; Dobrin; Pemberton; Geisler) to more theoretical attacks from numerous scholars representing, according to Lester Faigley, various formations of "the social view" ("Competing Theories" 534-37). In this short paper I intend to add to this critique by looking closely at a representative piece of process research to show that its ideological context completely constrains its conclusions. At the same time, I want to join Michael Pemberton in pleading not guilty to "carping at the cognitivists" as an end in itself (52). My purposes are to make a case for contextual rather than universal models of process and to argue that such a shift has the potential to create dramatic changes in the conduct of our discipline.

A close look at one example of a respected piece of process research demonstrates how the tacit agreement to abide by a set of research methods and assumptions ties the researcher into a web of interpretation that may have little to do with the empirical data found during the execution of the research process. In the landmark article, "The Composing Processes of an Engineer," Jack Selzer "adopted and adapted methods" of process research to lay bare the composing habits of a professional engineer (178). After assembling and examining in scrupulous detail an enormous amount of data, Selzer interprets and squeezes the data into the existing process paradigm by rationalizing both the internal inconsistencies of the data and their blatant contradictions with the process paradigm. For example, in one of his first conclusions, Selzer says the evidence shows that his subject "writes alone"; just two paragraphs later, however, Selzer reports that engineers do "group brainstorming," that their audiences have a constraining presence during invention and arrangement, and that the language, writings, and graphics of coworkers shape the emerging document (184-85). Clearly, only in the physical sense is Selzer's subject alone when he writes. Second, Selzer
observes that his subject composes sequentially, moving from invention to arrangement to drafting and then to editing in a *linear* fashion. This observation, however, contradicts the accepted process paradigm of *recursive* composing habits; Selzer works around this finding by calling for an adjustment of process teaching for engineering students (185). Finally, Selzer ignores his own empirical data which show that his subject does not revise (184-85). Even in the face of these “results,” which contradict the dominant process paradigm, Selzer concludes, “The most striking thing about Nelson’s composing habits is how closely they approximate the habits of professional writers and skilled academics whose composing processes have been studied by other researchers” (184). Prior belief in the paradigm rather than the data drives this conclusion.

By this analysis, I do not want to imply that Selzer conducted bad research or that his research was inconsequential. In fact, as Selzer pointed out in 1983, “Little work has been done on the composing strategies of people who call themselves engineers or scientists . . .” (178). Indeed, it was timely for Selzer to see technical writing through the lens of process; studies like his helped many of us more completely understand specific aspects of technical writing. At the same time, the contradictions in his research undermine his “striking” conclusion. In fact, an alternate paradigm, Faigley's social view, allows other explanations to emerge: “The focus of the social view of writing . . . is not on how the social situation influences the individual, but on how the individual is a constituent of culture” (“Competing Theories” 535). From this point of view, culture establishes a set of discursive practices which provide some options (fairly well-bounded options) for writers, speakers, and thinkers. Culture provides the language, the texts, the authorities and the framework for processing the world.2

The given language is the means of processing experience, recalling memories, communicating information, etc. If the culture does not provide a word for an experience or image, the image may go unseen.

The vehicles for teaching, reinforcing or extending the cultural vision of reality are chosen and privileged by the culture. Such vehicles include stories, lore, canonical texts, and doctrine, among many other things, which serve to confirm ways of seeing, to establish connections among experiences and concepts, to rehearse organizations of knowledge, and to affirm the bases of beliefs and values.

The members of the culture look to authorities whose statements shape the issues, and whose interpretations of accepted and new sources of information or knowledge either elaborate or extend this material in ways that protect the culture. Authorities may be particularly adept at resolving the contradictions to the cultural vision that arise from new sources of information or from the challenges of new material conditions.

The members of the culture “discourse” with each other (or even interiorly with themselves) when they write, speak, or think—setting limits on topics, discursive styles, and on accepted areas of agreements and disagreements. Such discourse may challenge aspects of the culture or even its overall behaviors and assumptions, but it also usually
reifies essential values of the culture itself, often by articulating the differences between
the members' cultural vision and others' ways of seeing and expression.

In this model, culture provides the language, the vehicles of discourse, and
the bounded possibilities for discursive practice. Any individual speaking,
writing, or thinking within the culture is, thus, constituted by it.

From this paradigm it is possible to build a different interpretation of the
meaning of Selzer's data. This alternative interpretation, first, might identify
the communally established discourse topics, roles, tasks and activities in
order to see how these situate Selzer's subject, the technical writer Nelson.
Within this construct, the alternative interpretation might list the actual
writing activities of this engineer at this firm, a list that includes referencing
previous documents, enumerating reader expectations, and engaging in
collegial conversation. In these ways, the alternative interpretation shows
how this engineer's discourse community constrains his writing process, and
it resolves troubling contradictions that are present in the research itself. As
an example, consider this excerpt from Selzer's original "Conclusions and
Discussion," followed by an alternative reading.

The most striking thing about Nelson's composing habits is how closely they approxi­
mate the habits of the professional writers and skilled academic writers whose composit­ing
processes have been studied by other researchers. Nelson writes alone, not as part
of a team. Except for the most common memos and correspondence, he spends as much
time planning as many professional writers, despite the pressures and time limitations
imposed on him at work. He invents content in detail and through various schemata of
invention. He arranges material carefully. He consciously shapes style. His composing
process always includes a distinct if brief revision stage. (Selzer 184)

Here is how an alternative interpretation might read:

The most striking thing about Nelson's composing habits is how thoroughly contextualized
they are by the given conditions, discourse, and language of his profession and company.
In a physical sense Nelson writes alone, but in every other way he writes as part of this
professional team. Even for the most common memos and correspondence, Nelson's
writing is in response to and constrained by his clients, by conversation with his
colleagues and other specialists, by the conventions of his company, and by the content
and structures of earlier reports. He draws on these conversations, expectations and
conventions to provide detail for prospectuses, technical reports, and other texts. Since
these documents have fairly predictable parts that Nelson knows very well, he is able to
establish detailed outlines before writing a draft. Thus the context, conventional
structures, and language of this writing are familiar enough to Nelson that he is able to
write linearly rather than recursively, and to produce text that is ready for editing rather
than for revising.

Such an alternative conclusion springs just as easily from the data presented
in Selzer's journal article, especially from those data which seem to contra­
dict the recursive, revision-oriented activities in the behavioral process
model of the writer writing alone. For some readers, the alternative conclu­
sion may be as compelling as Selzer's conclusion.
From a broader perspective, the alternative interpretation reveals the extent to which Selzer's research—and all research, including empirical research—is based on acts of interpretation. In other words, the empirical research that produced the behavioral model of the writing process included acts of interpretation and narrative that could only have come from that community. Granted, these acts of interpretation and constructions of narrative were extremely important to all of us working in composition studies at that time; however, these acts of interpretation were representations of reality rather than reality itself, and they were determined by the context from which they emerged.

Our disciplinary task, then, is not to “unproblematically reject” process theory, research, and pedagogy, as Faigley warns us not to do (“Competing Theories” 537), but to understand that the act of composing is contextualized by the discourse community within which it occurs. The topics, roles, tasks, and activities of the writing process are not universal, unless we formulate the behavioral model in terms so generalized that the model is without applicable specificity. Instead, the topics, roles, tasks, and activities of the writer are given specific shape by the local discourse of which it is a part. Culture shapes the writing process.

Robert J. Connors asks how this central assertion of the social view alters what we do in our research and classrooms (Address). First, Carl G. Herndl points out, “There has been a great deal of work in the past few years devoted to the social and political nature of writing” by scholars such as Charles Bazerman, Greg Myers, Lucille McCarthy, Carolyn R. Miller and numerous others who already examine, “... the relationship between written discourse and the professional, organizational, or disciplinary communities established by discourse, which in turn give that discourse meaning and legitimacy” (350-51). Writers like Herndl, Patricia Bizzell, and John Trimbur are concerned with the ideological and political contexts of composing and the reproduction of cultural power. Thus, much writing research is already concerned with how specific academic and professional communities constitute themselves and how their writing specifically “enables and limits thinking” (Myers 597). Second, in the writing classroom many practitioners are experimenting and suggesting ways to drive a composition course based on this research and theory. James A. Berlin calls for the teaching of dialectical thinking (“Poststructuralism”); Roxanne Mountford (in one of the following position papers) and the numerous contributors to *Cultural Studies in the English Classroom* call for the teaching of culture (Berlin and Vivion); Herndl, drawing on Trimbur, advocates a pedagogy of resistance that takes shape in teaching a rhetoric of dissensus, and so on. All of these practitioners have changed the teaching of writing because of the social view.

We at the University of Rhode Island are experimenting with “topicalization” as a method by which a whole class *reenacts* how a discourse community claims its topic and establishes hegemony over content, process,
and product. In one class, for example, students are presented with a topic that is so normalized in our culture it appears on the surface to be a non-topic, as if there is no place or reason to take a stand. (The topic of "cosmetics" is one such topic.) Nevertheless, students are urged to raise questions about the topic and to search for answers. As they do so, students find they are immediately pulled into the various discourse communities that provide "interested" and contradictory answers. Furthermore, since each group of students has been pulled into a different discourse community, each uses different language and writes different kinds of papers about the topic. Thus, a class which started by speaking in one voice now becomes "multicultural" in terms of its varieties of topical discourse. (On the topic of cosmetics, one group wrote a marketing analysis, for example, another wrote a cultural critique of cosmetics advertising, while another wrote an argument against animal testing.) Predictably, these groups sometimes clash over their representations of the topic, but by tracking these clashes and contradictions throughout the semester, and by pointing out the distances created among the groups, students begin to understand how a discourse community claims a topic and specifies the roles, writing processes, and products of its members. Students also gain a wider critical perspective on our culture by seeing how a "rich" topic remains hidden as a non-topic, and by asking who and what are served by such invisibility. Thus, topicalization enables students to understand the "the ideological development of discourse" and "the cultural consequences of a dominant discourse or the alternate understandings it excludes" (Herndl 351).

What difference does this make to our discipline? The answer begins, first, with a reminder that although drafting continues in classrooms driven by the social view, this does not mean there has not been a paradigm shift. To the contrary, in our research and our classrooms the study of process emerges from an immersion in topics, content, and context, and the particular process studied depends upon that context. Second, and consequently, if topic, context, and content, followed by process, drive a writing class, then that class is a rhetoric class concerned with (as Nedra Reynolds points out) what is being written, by whom, for whom, and when as often as it is concerned with how. Third, and consequently, these kinds of rhetoric classes could constitute a rhetoric program (a program that was once a composition program) that offers basic and advanced courses in the study of public discourse in all areas. Finally, and consequently, such a rhetoric program would no longer be the stepchild of a department; it could be a program with its own place in the culture of the academy.

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Limits of a Postmodern Critique: We Too Are Situated (Counterpoint)

MARJORIE ROEMER

These position papers seem to analyze a field shaped by modernist thought from the vantage point of a later, postmodern perspective. Many of them fault a past history of individualism (with its Romantic emphasis on the self in isolation, on the personal) in light of the present ascendancy of social constructionism in contemporary thought. More specifically, Nedra Reynolds and Linda K. Shamoon, as well as Robert A. Schwegler and Beverly Wall (see position papers below), look at modernist attention to the development of the singular writer in isolation, the individual process of composing, the interpretation of intended, volitional meanings, the expressive voice of the personal essay, and find this attention limited, suspect, deficient in social and cultural awareness.

I understand the desire to amend this individualist past and to critique its complicity with the development of a capitalist middle class for whom individualism is a useful ideological tool (one that the middle class uses and is used by). But I question what seems to me to be naive: the idea that we might move into a realm where our philosophies and our commitments were not themselves overdetermined, a place from which we could launch an unproblematic critical discourse.

If we have learned to contextualize, to read others as situated readers and writers, we must never forget that we too are situated. One of the contemporary critiques of modernism is that the modernists tended to see themselves as the logical culmination of the progression of past ages; the humanist, universalizing impulse of the modernist program named itself the apogee of history. It is especially inappropriate for postmodernist thinkers to carry on this tradition, to fail to historicize ourselves and the subjects of our critique.

For theorists of postmodernism this is a central issue: the problematics of critique from within a system, the necessity to read ourselves into history, not out of it. We, too, act in an overdetermined system; we, too, are subject to and subjects of institutions within a cultural context. The problem for the postmodernist who believes in the social constructionist paradigm is to find the space for human agency within so determined a system. And if we wish to do this, we cannot dissolve entirely the personal voice, the transformative potential of individual consciousness. What this means in effect is that we must salvage certain elements of the modernist program in our new postmodern formulations. Henry Giroux puts it this way:

At stake here is the issue of retaining modernism's commitment to critical reason, agency, and the power of human beings to overcome human suffering. Modernism
reminds us of the importance of constructing a discourse that is ethical, historical, and political. At the same time postmodernism provides a powerful challenge to all totalizing discourses, places an important emphasis on the contingent and the specific, and provides a new theoretical language for developing a politics of difference. (73)

So, I am uncomfortable with a postmodern critique of the past of composition that fails to historicize that past and fails to understand its strengths and how we can build on them. The self-avowed postmodern author, John Barth, said, “My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century pre-modernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back” (52).

I would urge us to have our early history under our belts but not on our backs, to go forward without imagining that our present lenses for seeing invalidate entirely what was seen before or preclude new ways of seeing that will inevitably modify our present perceptions.

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Meaning and Interpretation

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For most of this century, the distinguishing activity of literary scholars and the basis for prestige and reward has been the production of critical texts that identify the meanings of other texts (literary and cultural). Despite changes in critical fashion, the practice of literary interpretation has remained both relatively stable and has dominated the study of literature. For traditional (or thematic-formalist) criticism, the central concern is the presentation or construction of textual meaning, defined broadly and loosely to include not only leading ideas (themes, perspective) but also a wide variety of relationships and responses—in short, meaning encompasses whatever intentions the writer has for a text or informed readers can discover in the text itself (Juhl 45-52). It is the task of critical reading and interpretation to make statements about such meaning (Juhl 3-15).

Though they present significant challenges to such a view, poststructuralism and postmodernism also operate within frameworks that specify processes of meaning making and interpretation. For many poststructuralists, texts, acts of reading, and discursive practices in general are characterized by their interpretive possibilities, by the range they give to the construction of multiple (often indeterminate) readings. In theoretical formulations, words like “interpretative possibilities” and “interpretive perspective” often take the place of traditional terms like “meaning,” “theme,”
or "organizing principle." As Stanley Fish explains, "communications of every kind are characterized by exactly the same conditions—the necessity of interpretive work, the unavoidability of perspective, and the construction by acts of interpretation of that which supposedly grounds interpretation, intentions, characters, and pieces of the world" ("Conformists" 43-44). A similar substitution takes place in postmodernism where "representation," "strategies of representation," and related terms are used to identify the significant features or relationships of texts and cultures and to define the space or difference that makes interpretation a necessary act. Jon Stratton tells us that:

In representation we understand that something stands in for something else. The idea of representation, for us, is founded on the inability of the two somethings to be the same, to be identical. ... The problem of representation is best understood in terms of the 'standing in,' the 'sending'. It is the moment between the two entities, the presence and the representation, which allows us to talk of presence and representation. (10)

Though these theoretical formulations differ, all the approaches have in common a reliance on reductive strategies of interpretation. In each, to "read" or to "interpret" is, generally, to produce statements epitomizing the propositional content of a work, its theme, perspective, focus, intent, design, discontinuities, or representational practices; or it is to create parallel accounts that highlight the system of ideas, relationships, interpretive strategies, or representations organizing a work by assigning equivalencies between it and some other system of thought—in effect allegorizing a work and producing, for example, a Marxist reading or a Lacanian reading. The prevalence of these reductive practices is evident in the ubiquitous paraphrases that reduce a work to its propositional content, as in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reading of Willa Cather's "Paul's Secret": "Paul's teachers feel humiliated because they have found themselves momentarily unified in a ritual of scapegoating, without being at all clear what it is in the scapegoat that deserves torment or even what provokes this sudden communcal structuration" (168). It is evident, too, in the repetition of verbal formulas like "What X is saying is . . ." and "In the case of X . . ." that announce an interpretive "translation": "By this Derrida means that, even in the original moment of production, his is an interpreted presence . . ." (Fish, "Conformists" 46); "In 'The Secret Agent' the truth is guaranteed by the state and its power. In the postmodern spy novel, however—some of Le Carr's later novels such as A Perfect Spy, are moving towards this position—the state no longer guarantees truth although it may claim to" (Stratton 288). Allegorical readings generally use phrases that identify parallels, "in the same way," or that announce restatements, "that is," as in the following passage by Ronald Schleifer:
Heart of Darkness enacts the act of signification in Marlow's understanding—his interpretation—of Kurtz's last works: it enacts meaning in relation to death. In the same way, the therapist faces the patient with death—with silence, like the silence of Marlow's Africa, "great, expectant mute, while the man jabbered about himself" . . . That is, the therapist, as Lacan says, "cadaverizes" his position, and in the analytic situation "he makes death present" . . . (195)

To suggest that in practice literary interpretation produces statements of propositional content or assigns equivalent meanings seems to undermine the often lofty claims made for literary scholarship. But the contradiction between broad claims about meaning or representation and specific, reductive practices can be seen as part of an overdetermined system, one that highlights the contribution of specific interpreters while disguising the reductive nature of their practices with broad claims for the value of interpretive practice in general. The growth of professionalism over the last century and the emergence of academics, lawyers, and other intellectuals as a dominant social formation has led to the increasing economic and social importance of people whose work is the production of knowledge and who are concerned with "the discursive rules that safeguard the property value of their knowledge-power" (Ross 123). In a scholarly work, a phrase like "what Eliot is conveying here is . . . " not only points to the text being interpreted but also highlights the interpretation itself, identifying it as a commodity produced by the work of the interpreter.

I want to suggest that similar forces are at play in composition scholarship and pedagogy. While this is not to argue that the close institutional and disciplinary relationships of literary and composition studies cause these similarities, it is to point out the likelihood of significant influence from literary study to composition—an ongoing influence maintained by contemporary scholarship (see Sotirou). With literary scholarship, composition (as presently constituted) shares a belief in the centrality of meaning and in the close association of reading, interpretation, and meaning. What I argue is that in limiting the range and nature of meaning-making and interpretive activities in writing, these and other corollaries encourage the development of discursive strategies, relationships, and subject positions associated with a particular social formation. In addition, I suggest that the apparent contradictions between the broad principles and the restrictive practices are one of the clues to understanding the operation of composition as an overdetermined, socially formative (or reproductive) system.

Viewing writing and reading as meaning-centered, interpretive activities seems natural for composition teachers and scholars. We ground discussions of composition instruction in theory that, as Edward White puts it, "brings reading and writing together as parallel acts, both of them consisting of the making of meaning: the writer seeks to make meaning out of experience, while the readers seeks to make meaning out of a text" (97). We design empirical research to isolate meaning-making and meaning-constructing
behaviors (Greece). We create composition pedagogies that encourage interpretive exploration of experience, knowledge, and others’ texts (see, for example, Elbow and Belanoff 107-09, 160-64, 286-99).

Despite challenges to other “givens” of composition like definitions of selfhood, patterns of gendering, and a heavily academic focus (see Lunsford, Gere), assumptions about the meaning-making, interpretive character of writing continue to be treated as simple and obvious principles for composition research, theory, and pedagogy (see Flower, Geisler). Their obviousness and simplicity are deceptive, however. In practice, the broad view of composing as an interpretation of experience and a construction of meaning comes with a complex set of corollaries—an entailed cluster of concepts and practices. For the most part, these corollaries privilege specific, even propositional meaning in texts; they foreground the writer's perspective, interpretations, and control over textual meaning, and they give precedence to genres and composing practices that highlight the writer's role as interpreter.

Often, even in progressive pedagogies, broad conceptions of writing as the discovery of insight (“When we write we compose meanings. . . . we become more potent thinkers and active learners” [Axelrod and Cooper 2, 3]) surface in more restricted form in traditional categories of textual meaning like “focus” or “development” or in specific textual strategies that emphasize the writer’s contribution to the ideas and information in a text: “Although they may have a variety of forms and purposes, all essays are essentially assertive. That is, they assert or put forward the writer’s point of view on a particular subject. We call this point of view the essay’s thesis, or main idea” (Axelrod and Cooper 400).

Likewise, discussions of writing as the discovery of personal meaning (“Because stories, or narratives, are reconstructions of experience, they enable you to reflect on your experiences and thus to make some meaning of your life” [Harris and Cunningham 58]) are frequently linked with views of writing as the communication of specific, author-centered meaning: “In reading reconstructions of experience, be aware that writers usually have a purpose beyond simply telling a good story. Although they may not state a thesis explicitly, a controlling idea usually shapes their story and the way they tell it. They are, in a sense, trying to convince readers of something they believe is important” (Harris and Cunningham 62).

Even views of writing as process and empowerment, including those influenced by poststructuralism, frequently end up encouraging display of the writer’s discovery of and control over specific ideas and perspectives. As Randall Knoper puts it,
idea attractive enough (to us all) to make even crusading poststructuralists drop their notions that the writing "I" is always in process, always modifying and modified, continuously dislocated. (134)

Admittedly, some composition scholarship consistently views meaning-making in its general and most creative senses, and some pedagogies encourage composing practices that lead to significant formulations of experience while avoiding reductive practices for the most part (Kutz; Elbow and Belanoff in many places). Yet quite often, many composition theorists, researchers, and teachers are concerned primarily with those essays that display the specific writer's insights, conclusions, perspectives, and knowledge in ways that focus on the writer's own contributions, highlighting the products of his or her efforts in much the same way that texts of literary interpretation (and other kinds of academic analysis, too) highlight the professional contribution of the writer. Admittedly, some composition research implements a broad concept of "meaning-making," applying it to the construction and reception of informative and other texts in which the interpretive or argumentative content provided by the writer does not receive special attention. In addition, some pedagogies treat notions of meaning-making and interpretation broadly, to cover representative practices that create and convey significant formulations of experience without attempting to reduce them to specific propositional content (see Kutz).

For the most part, however, composition's attention rests squarely on the writer's specific insights and meanings as well as on textual strategies, genres, and composing practices that emphasize their presence. With a few exceptions (Hairston and Ruszkiewicz, for example) discussions of the composing process specify operations leading to the discovery, embodiment, and communication of meaning, generally defined as fresh or personal insight rather than as known information being communicated for purposes other than embodiment of the writer's personal perspective. Composition scholarship draws from discourse analysis a concern with the centrality of macro- and micropropositions and from functional sentence perspective a focus on the clarity and emphasis with which assertions are conveyed (see Vande Koppel). As Brannon and Knoblauch point out, our ideal acts of teacher response focus on the writer's personal intentions and meanings and regard revision as a way of clarifying and conveying them.

Texts, discursive practices, and composing acts tend to be devalued or redefined when their meanings are derived primarily from the culture or situation, or when their effects depend not so much on propositional content as on informational content and social relationships. For example, many written texts in professional or business settings are formulaic (letters, recordings of data, proposals) or present information gathered from secondary sources without significant new data or reformulations on the part of the writer. Other texts (including letters and reports) serve not so much to convey specific meanings (except at a secondary level) but to create and
sustain relationships, to provide records of data or agreements, or to transmit detailed information (such as product specifications). Although such highly contextualized and "unoriginal" texts are essential in a highly technical society and may require considerable writing skill, imagination, and awareness of audience, composition instructors often criticize them as dull and formulaic, asking for originality and voice and encouraging students to employ writing and revising processes more appropriate for expressive or analytical texts (see Hairston and Ruszkiewicz).

Frances Harrington has shown that memoranda that display little propositional coherence frequently succeed because they grow out of, maintain, or realign social relationship. I have demonstrated elsewhere that magazine feature articles generally lack high-level propositional structures and are instead organized as informational clusters around topics such as background, features, good/bad, procedures, and applications. Even news articles drawn explicitly from a reporter's observations usually avoid devices such as thesis statements that call attention to the writer's contributions; such devices are most often reserved for the editorial page and for columns. It may likewise be tempting to transform the genre of the informative research report into that of documented essays that record a personal search for knowledge (see Fulwiler 182-98, 243-49). While such a transformation can be portrayed as a move to writing that is more real and engaging, there is little evidence that this form of expression is inherently better. Instead, the movement likely indicates a preference among composition instructors for writing that serves to display an individual's insights and perspective.

The contradictions between broad principles and reductive practices that elevate some meaning-making activities over others are marks of an overdetermined system similar to that of literary studies. More importantly, the production of texts highlighting the writer's contribution is a vital activity for the professional middle class, a social group that includes scholars, teachers, and other professionals. This is a social formation whose continued stability and success depends on its expertise and originality. Academics, engineers, doctors, and lawyers are paid for their opinions; their originality (real or not) earns wages and status (Ehrenreich, "Fear"; Ross). The overdetermined system that currently shapes our discipline works ideologically to encourage the production of texts that reproduce professional values and goals and to mask the importance of discourse practices that further the interests of other social formations (see Gere). Because of our identities as teachers and scholars, it may often be difficult for us to recognize the importance of discourse practices that center on anything else but meaning in a restricted, propositional sense—difficult, but worth trying if we are to uphold the lofty goals we profess for reading and writing.

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The Personal Essay as Unmarked Genre

Beverly Wall

In an amusing piece in *The New York Times Magazine*, Deborah Tannen uses the linguistic concept of "markedness" to contrast gender differences in choices of dress. In linguistics, Tannen explains, the "unmarked form of a word carries the meaning that goes without saying—what you think of when you're not thinking anything special" (18). Not surprisingly, the unmarked case is masculine not only in language but in everyday social options set by gender. Men can choose to be "unmarked" in their dress if they wish, Tannen argues, but women are always "marked," or interpreted, whether they choose to wear suits or jeans, heels or sneakers. For the majority of college composition classrooms, the personal essay functions in much the same way as Tannen's description of generic pronouns and men's brown or blue slacks. The personal essay is our unmarked genre in late twentieth-century America, the kind of writing that goes without saying—no matter how heated the professional debate—when textbooks are designed and syllabi constructed for first-year writing courses. If we were to consult Walter Beale's *A Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric*, we would find a rich range and depth of rhetorical genres available to us. Yet, with hundreds of contemporary, mainstream *de facto* genres of writing to choose from and over two thousand years of rhetorical education in the West, why has this particular genre, the personal essay, become our implied premise, our unstated assumption, in composition instruction?

The personal essay has, to be sure, been a topic of considerable discussion and questioning in recent years by scholars and theorists interested in philosophical issues related to subjectivity, authorial position, the construction of self and community, and the nature of expressive discourse. As is all too often the case, however, such debates have had little effect on actual classroom practices for the vast number of sections of composition taught each year. Even when composition instructors talk about teaching the civic value of public argument, or the academic empowerment of writing across the curriculum, or the playful, creative ironies of postmodern discourse, the personal essay is almost always there, sitting imperceptibly in the corner ("just a warm-up exercise") or perhaps hiding behind the curtain ("an alternative for when the abortion debate fails").

Instructors' reasons for assigning the personal essay have usually fallen into one of two categories: (1) an argument from necessity, which assumes that students can't write anything else, at least not at the beginning of a course, because they are too young or unsophisticated to know things beyond their own personal experiences; or (2) a strongly held belief that the personal essay is the touchstone genre of "good writing" (in the composition classroom, that is) with its belletristic promises of an authentic voice, rich
detailing of individual experience, and epiphanic moments. The first line of reasoning is particularly weak, offering a rationale that is profoundly arhetorical in its conception of writers and writing and in its Ramist dichotomy of *res et verba*. The second line of reasoning makes a stronger case, but it is also disappointing. It is more understandable, given the dynamics of English Studies and the institutional placement of composition instruction. Most composition courses are taught, of course, by adjuncts with degrees in literature or graduate students who are apprentices in English departments.

Two important considerations derive from this primary allegiance to the culture of English Studies. First, like other humanistic disciplines, English Studies has always begged the question of why its texts should be taught, a version of what Richard Lanham calls the “Q” question. Lanham cites Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, who argue that humanistic disciplines have promoted an ideal of humanism as “training for life,” but have actually practiced “the humanities—a curriculum training a social elite to fulfil its predetermined social role” (xvi). Lester Faigley, in his discussion of autobiographical essays and the ways in which we evaluate “good writing,” claims that “writing teachers have been as much or more interested in who they want their students to be as in what they want their students to write” (“Judging Writing” 396). If this is true, the personal essay becomes the perfect vehicle for identifying and nurturing those who will be allowed to join the club and separating out those who won’t.

Second, the discipline of English Studies has tended to beg the question of how literary texts should be taught. (I don’t mean here how they should be interpreted.) Lanham sees this as a sub-issue of his “Q” question. Lanham draws on Gerald Graff, who argues that the traditional pedagogy for a training in English Studies is based on the assumption that “literature teaches itself” (9). In the Great Books version of this pedagogy, for example, students need simply to be exposed to “great” literary texts, and the rest will happen naturally. The postmodern version is different, but not as different as some would like to think. To the composition instructor who feels exiled from this literary Garden of Eden, and who may feel that simply “exposing” students to good writing will go a long way towards teaching them how to write, the personal essay is an obvious choice as a model for reading and writing, especially with its strong literary qualities and the preferences of its best practitioners for narrative structures and private insights.

If all of these assumptions and attitudes are transported into the composition classroom, the lowest place in both the departmental and institutional hierarchy, then we can understand the unmarked status of the personal essay. It is the genre that goes without saying in composition instruction. Even to argue over the inclusion of personal essays seems natural, comfortable territory for most composition instructors. But to propose that a composition course use legal briefs or judicial opinions, for example, is to “mark” it as a specialized endeavor, as something to be interpreted, like wearing heels
or sneakers. But then again, why should we be surprised, since we long ago relinquished our rhetorical tradition and the teaching of composition to the arhetorical guardianship of English Studies?

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Historical Perspectives, or Things that Might Also Be Said (Counterpoint)

Linda Peterson

For those of us responding to these position papers, some of the analyses hit close to home; others seem mere matters of intellectual contemplation. For example, I read (and still read) with a smile and with a nod of the head, John Trimbur's analysis (see below) of re- and de-oedipalizing the classroom and Nedra Reynolds' history of the process paradigm; perhaps blindly, I did not (and still don't) see myself engaged in oedipal struggles within the classroom or find myself caught in that necessary, if bygone era of scientific research on composing. I did wince, however, when I read Beverly Wall's "The Personal Essay as Unmarked Genre," particularly in the context of Robert A. Schwegler's comments on our socialization within literature departments and Judith Goleman's statements (see below) about composition studies as complicitous with the desires and insecurities of the middle class. What made me wince especially were their uses of history, and to these uses I want to respond.

Wall points out, quite rightly, that the personal essay has become the assumed, "unmarked" genre of the composition classroom and that we often teach it for weak reasons—for example, because we believe students can't write anything else or because it represents a cherished, belletristic "touchstone" of "good writing." Contextualizing our practice historically and socially, as Schwegler and Goleman do, we might add that we teach it because we're the sons and daughters of literary critics and because we share the values of the middle-class of which we are a part. Wall would add that our over-reliance on the personal essay ignores "two thousand years of rhetorical education in the West." Such insights would seem to suggest that we should abandon the personal essay as a genre, now too "tainted" by a dubious past and politically incorrect class associations, and turn instead to other rhetorical forms.
I cannot engage here in a full-scale defense of the personal essay, which I think should be one of several genres taught in composition courses. (What genre, I wonder, will Roxanne Mountford teach when she teaches “culture, not community”? [see below]) But I do want to remove a bit of the taint by correcting mistaken assumptions about the personal essay and its generic history (not all necessarily Wall’s mistaken assumptions). The current rap against the personal essay tends to suggest that it’s a white, middle-class, masculine, or (worst of all) literary genre. It’s easy to trot out the usual suspects: Montaigne and Bacon, Lamb and Hazlitt, Arnold and Newman. For avid readers of the genre, however, it is just as easy to provide counter evidence: the essays of Victorian women who used the personal essay to gain access to formal education and the professions (see Morgan); the collective writings of Working Women’s Co-Operative Guild, who composed personal accounts to win maternity rights; or, more recently, the personal essays of American women of color like Jewelle Gomez, June Jordan, Maxine Hong Kingston, or Judith Ortiz Cofer who recall personal memories to raise public issues. My point is that no genre is, by and of itself, singly-gendered or politically-marked or socially-exclusive. It all depends on how it is used—by whom? for what? and why?—in a historical context. My point is also that the personal essay is not a univocal, univalent form. Viewed historically, the personal essay has appeared in many places for many purposes.

A more general point might be made about the history in these position papers: the histories reported or constructed are strangely negative ones. It is good to see historical evidence being brought to bear on current issues in composition studies; for me, one of the exciting trends within the profession has been the return to historical research on rhetoric, composition, and pedagogy. But it is disconcerting to discover history used primarily, almost exclusively, in a critical mode—for example, to show composition studies as a class-driven narrative (Goleman, below), or our interest in “clarifying and conveying intention and meaning” as deriving mostly from our origins in literary study (Schwegler), or our interest in “the behavioral model of process” as reflecting an outmoded individualism (Shamoon). Like my counter-examples for the personal essay, other versions of history might be constructed—for example, to show composition studies as responsive to newly-enfranchised classes or ethnic groups, or to show our interest in clarifying intention and conveying meaning as deriving from habits of biblical reading in the Judaic and Christian traditions, or to suggest, following Jerome Bruner, that an individual self cannot be dispensed with when we are discussing written “acts of meaning.” Perhaps progressive intentions tend to minimize the historical past, but a little more balance—a both/and rather than an either/or—might get nearer the truth. Perhaps we should also remember that histories of the profession cited here are constructions, not raw facts; like personal essays, they represent one view of the past—and the present. When we say “things that go without saying,” we unavoidably say
only some of the things, leaving just as many other, equally true things, unsaid.

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The Great American Freshman English Course: Initiation and Indoctrination in the Composition Curriculum (Counterpoint)

LYNN Z. BLOOM

What do we want students to know and be able to do at what stage of their academic careers? In what ways do we want them to learn and how do we want that learning to be reinforced? Any curriculum, any time, any place, has varied and competing, sometimes conflicting agendas. Any institution's composition curriculum incorporates its own multiple agendas, overt and covert. The composition curriculum also, perforce, accommodates the agendas of the constituents who pay its bills—tuition-paying parents, religious and corporate sponsors, taxpayers, state legislatures, the federal government. Moreover, the composition agenda is freighted with whatever political, social, and cultural concerns are paramount at any given time. Specialized agendas of the field of composition itself are likely to come second-to-last on this list. Dead last are the goals of the students, who conventionally have very little to say about either the theoretical or practical components of this introductory hurdle to what they really came to college to study. Everybody but the students gets to determine the curriculum that is, of course, all for the students' own good.

My sense of the field, reinforced by the colloquy in these pages, is that there remains a chasm between the voices in the professional discourse of conferences and journals, and what actually goes on in freshman composition. The normative agenda of the introductory writing course is tangential to whatever contemporary theory and research may tell us about anything—whatever the perspective, for example feminist, Marxist, social constructionist; whatever the ideals and aims of a Freirean (or other) liberatory pedagogy; however explicit the NCTE statement of the "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (still on the books a quarter century after its proclamation). For to justify the inclusion—and funding—of freshman composition as often the only course required of all students throughout the university, the course's fundamental purpose remains by and large what it has been for the past century: to socialize, initiate, and indoctrinate its students into the white middle-class, even "elite" community of language and values
in which they are expected to function throughout the rest of their college courses and after they graduate.

Thus, as Mike Rose points out, the critical literacy that we expect of our students, the ability to frame an argument or take "someone else's argument apart, systematically inspecting a document, an issue, or an event, synthesizing different points of view, applying a theory to disparate phenomena" has traditionally "only been developed in an elite" (188). Harkin makes a similar point in analyzing critiques of Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations: "No discipline can deal theoretically"—and she might also have said pragmatically—"with the paradox that 'improving' basic writers' syntax (or other features of their writing) may violate their right to their own language" (132). Among the things that go without saying is the elitist underpinning of The Great American Freshman Composition Course: standard English is its lingua franca, critical literacy is its overriding aim. As Harkin says, "There can be no generalized theory of writing capable of serving as foundation for an ideologically neutral way of teaching that improves both students' practice and their political position." These goals, and their attendant problems and conflicts, "arise from different belief systems" (133). The belief that a metatheory, or metapractice, can reconcile or even amalgamate the disparate burdens and baggage that colleges (read society at large) freight freshman composition courses with is what Stanley Fish calls "theory hope" ("Antifoundationalism").

Astute writing directors don't need to be weathermen to know that they're caught in crosswinds blowing with gale force. Their jobs—and thus whatever influence they wield—may depend on their success in accommodating the actual elitist curricular goals of freshman composition, all the while reaffirming their faith in the theoretical agendas of a democratic society, a politically sensitive university, and a theoretically sophisticated profession. And believing in them all.

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Classrooms as Communities: At What Cost?

Roxanne Mountford

To what end do we teach writing? This question, which has not gone without saying in the teaching of writing, was perhaps best debated at the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication by Peter Elbow ("Problematics of Discourse") and David Bartholomae ("Response"). Elbow advocated the writing classroom as a place to develop students' life-long
writing skills, while Bartholomae advocated the writing classroom as a place to develop students' writing and thinking skills as defined by the university. Recently, the debate has shifted to the question of ideology. On the one hand, Maxine Hairston argues that we should not be about the business of challenging the ideologies of our students ("Diversity"). It is not our job. On the other hand, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Linda Brodkey, Susan Jarratt, Mary Louise Pratt and others suggest that one of the roles of the writing instructor is to bring issues of difference into the classroom, especially as they affect students' ways of reading and standards for writing. Bartholomae appears to be moving in this direction as well, suggesting that we rethink the ideologies implicit in the university by allowing our students' home cultures to challenge our perspectives of "good writing" ("The Tidy House").

However, throughout these important debates, the concept of the classroom as a kind of "community" has gone without saying. Elbow offered the teacherless classroom, in which students wrote for each other and responded to each other's writing (Writing Without Teachers). Bartholomae and Petrosky popularized a thematic approach to writing that creates a community of writers thinking and writing about a particular problem. In the social constructionist turn of the 1980's, Lunsford, Bruffee, and others championed collaborative writing and learning in the composition classroom. In offering their critical pedagogies, Jarratt and Pratt suggest a classroom that becomes a "contact zone" for student differences, differences students draw from the media and from their own experiences. Puzzling through the problem that communities by definition include some while excluding others, Greg Clark suggests that communities, broadly defined, can learn to converse together productively without the patterns of dominance and exclusion that have marked the failure of democratic processes in this country. He suggests that we should encourage our writing students to see themselves as a "community of differing equals" by practicing their listening skills—as Clark puts it, by "deferring conviction in [their] own assertions until [they] have considered the assertions of others made in response" (72). For Clark, the composition classroom should be a place where students learn "the practice of democratic citizenship" (72)—that is, a sense of membership and responsibility to a group.

In all these pedagogies, the idea of the classroom as a community—a democratic oasis in which confrontation leads to growth and collaboration leads to greater justice for all—is a liberal narrative that we need to reconsider. In the classroom, students see themselves not as "joining" a cause or group or community but rather as joining a coincidental grouping of individuals who are developing skills for future employment or self-interest. Even in the best of circumstances, students are resistant to the idea of investing in fellow classmates, since the investment one makes in a community generally is long-lived, and classes, by definition, are brief. In addition, students are understandably anxious about showing their differences—revealing one's
identity politics in the classroom still means risking lowered grades or even physical harm. At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, one woman student who spoke out in a class about being sexually harassed by fellow students found her tires slashed at the end of the day, a note on the window warning her against becoming one of the "damned feminists." In the feminism and composition workshop at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Sarah Sloane talked about a gay student she interviewed who carefully masked his identity in his composition classes, going so far as to write about being involved in heterosexual relationships to ensure he was not discovered. When his advanced composition class voted to study and write about AIDS, he stopped going to class and ultimately failed the course. In this class, the instructor's goal was to build a community by allowing students to agree on a topic of study. Sloane suggests we cannot be sure our students are safe to engage in an "authentic" discussion of their own differences, a discussion that is necessary, according to Clark, to create a classroom community. And their fears may be well-founded.

It is time to dissociate the goal of introducing students to cultural difference in the composition classroom and the goal of creating a classroom community (or, as Clark puts it, "democratic citizenship"). Students' own differences are overdetermined and often politically explosive. With the issue of teacher authority and evaluation hovering as a backdrop in the classroom, class discussions tend to move toward the teacher's interests rather than the class's; we all learn in school to perform our differences in such a way that we find teacher approval. The classroom is not an oasis. It is not neutral territory. To accept this characterization of the classroom, however, is not to agree with Maxine Hairston that teaching cultural difference is not our job. It is, rather, an invitation to find a way for students to reframe "difference" without risking too much self-revelation.

One place to find that framework is in anthropology and cultural studies, where the central concept is "culture." A class that reads, writes, and thinks about culture is not necessarily becoming a community itself, but learns how to learn about other communities, including the communities represented by individual students. Teaching students to become experts in language and culture can provide them with a way to understand not only the immutable differences brought about by cultural immersion, political identity, and disciplinary boundaries, but also ways to bridge those differences. In addition, by focusing on instances of difference that occur beyond the classroom, students can engage in analysis of language and culture without necessarily revealing their own tribal affiliations. Finally, in a school like Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in which introductory writing courses are populated by students who are 80 percent white and 90 percent male, teaching the broader concept of cultural difference avoids the tokenism that necessarily occurs when students' own backgrounds become the source of the differences on which the class discussions turn.
In such a classroom, the readings could focus on the way in which communication patterns develop within distinct cultures. Part of the nature of communication, whether within an electrical engineering program or within a gay, lesbian, and bisexual Student Alliance is to include some members and to exclude others. The language shared within these groups is a pleasurable code, the knowledge of which marks its members. However, language practices are often the source of conflict and misunderstanding among groups. Students could be asked to analyze such conflicts that turn on differences in language use, power, and cultural orientation. In their papers students could analyze the communication patterns of groups they have been a part of the professional writing in their chosen fields. In addition, they could conduct ethnographic-type research about the language used by groups, either groups on campus or groups in their local town. Some of the reading for the class could focus on the problems and issues associated with communication among groups. For instance, one might attempt to show them how patterns in writing differ cross-culturally (for example, according to Kant di Lima, Americans prefer "points," Brazilians prefer "subtlety"). All these exercises are designed to give students a framework for analyzing communication as a product of culture.

Through such a course, students learn a kind of expertise, which could be defined simply as an ethnographer's perspective on communication. Through such a course, they learn that cultural difference is inevitable but that stereotypes are usually wrong. They learn that ritual acts of orality and literacy, including the academic and professional prose they are expected to write throughout their lives, are deeply ingrained with cultural values, politics, and power. Teaching culture, not community, is, I think, a way to be responsible to the deep differences represented by the gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation of our students without placing individual students at risk. There is nothing original about this syllabus: feminists in several disciplines have discovered that students cannot be expected to critically evaluate the cultural ground on which they stand without pedagogical intervention (see especially Eichhorn et al.). Adopting a critical pedagogy does not require us to turn our students' own lives into the subject of the class. What goes without saying in the rhetoric of democratization represented by Clark and others is that our students come to our classrooms sifted according to relative cultural worth. Thrown together under the presumption of equality, our students will sift themselves accordingly, with affluent white European-American males glistening on top like fool's gold.

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In Loco Parentis: Teachers' Authority in the Writing Classroom

JOHN TRIMBUR

In a lecture titled "The Idea of an Educated Public," Alasdair MacIntyre refers to teachers as the "forlorn hope of Western modernity." What makes the hope invested in teachers so forlorn, MacIntyre explains, is that teachers are charged with a mission that is both "essential" and "impossible." Teachers are presented with the apparently contradictory task of teaching young people how to fit into a social role or vocation and at the same time how to think for themselves. Teachers, in MacIntyre's view, are pulled between the competing goals of socialization and individuation, domestication and emancipation.

According to MacIntyre, these competing demands can be reconciled only through the creation of an educated public, where critical discussion of shared terms and social purposes are understood to be features of the roles to which students are socialized. MacIntyre believes such a public sphere did in fact exist at one time, though on a limited basis, during the Scottish Enlightenment, when ministers, lawyers, schoolmasters, merchants, and others understood their social roles, enacted in forums such as town councils, presbyteries, bank board of directors, law courts, and so on, to look beyond immediate interests to the common good.

The notion of a public sphere, of course, is a problematical one. Inflected with nostalgia for an idealized historic moment when the formation of the middle classes appears to be inseparable from a sense of civic responsibility and moral authority, the public sphere of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be no more, as Terry Eagleton argues, than a necessary fiction to imagine how private and public interests can correspond to each other. Moreover, even such a utopian vision carries with it exclusions—of women, children, workers, ethnic and racial minorities, "illegal aliens," and so on. It may be better, as Nancy Fraser suggests, to think in terms of "subaltern counterpublics." But a politics of difference, identity, and location make it difficult to conceive of how a civic discourse might take place across pluralized spheres of life, even when their boundaries are blurred and mobile.

In other words, one might say that the "dilemma" MacIntyre identifies in Western modernity has been constituted as a condition of postmodern existence. If anything, the terms MacIntyre wants to hold in tension have become increasingly polarized so that to speak for one is to speak against the other. This is certainly the case in writing instruction, where oppositions such as "academic discourse" vs. "personal voice," "social construction" vs. "expressivism," and "vocationalism" vs. "liberal arts" have become predictable and formulaic.
One of the difficulties in thinking clearly about the "essential" but "impossible" task of forming public spheres where individuation and socialization might be complementary rather than polarized objectives is the fact that teachers confront students in loco parentis, in the domestic space of classrooms, in the role of surrogate parents. Teaching is based on relations of age-dependency that charge classrooms in powerful ways. Pedagogy, that is, teaches not only meanings but also acceptable structures of feeling and orientations toward authority. It organizes students' affective lives and reproduces complex and contradictory ideologies of the emotions. Furthermore, what complicates this pedagogy of the emotions at the present moment is that oedipalization—the internalization and identification with authority figures characteristic of earlier stages of capitalist schooling and family life—has been disrupted and no longer operates simply as the "goes without saying" that determines gender roles and identities within patriarchal social formations. Instead, I want to suggest here, the pedagogy of the emotions veers back and forth between de-oedipalization and re-oedipalization, revealing in the process deep-seated ambivalences about the authority ascribed to and enacted by teachers.

For convenience, I will give these two alternating moments familiar names—Peter Elbow and Kenneth A. Bruffee. (I am conscious that such nominalization reveals the oedipal drama in my own formation as a teacher through relations with esteemed mentors.) Elbow seeks to distance the teacher-figure, at least temporarily, from the position of the stern father, thereby invoking a fantasy of de-oedipalizing the classroom so that subjects can emerge without guilt and shame. This, it seems to me, is at least one of the meanings of "writing without teachers," writing without the debilitating influences of internalized authority figures. On the other hand, facing the same crisis of authority that leads Elbow toward de-oedipalization, Bruffee seeks to re-oedipalize the classroom by organizing students into social groups that will give them the collective strength to confront the authority of the teacher. His is a fantasy not of evading authority but of encountering it directly, through re-oedipalized fraternity, where the association of peers can behead the king and kill the father within.

Now, the point I wish to make is that both versions of the oedipal drama are distinctly middle-class ones that reveal contradictions in styles of parenting in the postwar family. From this perspective, it seems to me, Elbow and Bruffee recapitulate—and are locked in a compulsive repetition of—the alternation between the desire of the 1950s and 1960s to domesticate Dad the authority-figure as pal, advisor, and companion and the reaction against such suburban permissiveness and the "waning of affect" that followed in 1970s and 1980s youth culture, when there was nothing left to rebel against. Elbow's strategy is one of seduction and the promise of intimacy—a feminization of the patriarchal teacher and his transformation into the "new male," where a community of readers and writers substitutes for the family. In this
sense, Elbow represents a version of the "abdication of authority" and "cult of authenticity" Christopher Lasch writes about in *The Culture of Narcissism*, revealing traces at the level of postsecondary writing instruction of the child-centeredness and the emotional investments in youth characteristic of the post-World War II middle class family. Bruffee's strategy, on the other hand, attempts to fill the void left by the death of the stern and distant father, not to restore him but to pose his authority in institutional rather than personal and familial terms as a socially constructed artifact. Bruffee's point, not always fully grasped in social constructionist circles, is that collaborative learning involves not just organizing students to emulate the social processes of intellectual work in order to induct them into an academic discourse community. It also involves precipitating a crisis of authority—a re-oedipalizing the classroom—so that they can encounter and experience institutional socialization in a more transparent, self conscious way. Here a community of "knowledgeable peers" and the authority of knowledge and its institutions substitutes for the family as sites of affective investment.

This oscillation between individuation and socialization, de-oedipalization and re-oedipalization, that I have attributed, eponymically, to Elbow and Bruffee continues to play in middle class life, linked inescapably to contradictions in the domestic and social reproduction of the professional managerial classes. It is marked, among other places, by employer surveys that routinely indicate the desire for graduates who show initiative, think critically, and work independently *and* who follow directions, cooperate with organizational goals, and work well with others. Now, on the one hand, such surveys recast the "dilemma" of modernity, as MacIntyre poses it, only at the more banal level of the bottom line in business and industry. On the other hand, one could pry these desires apart and say that employers have conflated two kinds of recruiting goals—for high-power creative leadership types (typically educated at elite liberal arts colleges and universities) and compliant mid-level management types (more likely educated at state universities and colleges).

To say as much, however, would miss in at least one important respect how MacIntyre's "dilemma" is rooted in the contradictions of contemporary class society. The polarization of individuation and socialization is not simply a descriptive marker of social, economic, and cultural differences in the formation of the middle classes, whether in families or in schools. This polarization rather emerges from the contradictory, relatively autonomous, and overdetermined practices enacted in child-raising, schooling, and the division of labor. The oscillation back and forth in styles of parenting, teaching, and corporate recruiting reveal the persistently unstable reproduction of capitalist social relations and the variable acquisition by the middle classes of credentials and cultural capital.

To imagine, as MacIntyre does, an educated public—a public sphere of civic discourse and personal participation that can reconcile individuation
and socialization—we will need to address what Marx saw as the “mystery” of the commodity form of production, namely the contradiction between the use value and the exchange value of production. This is the contradiction the middle classes experience in everyday life, the conflict between a desire to perform socially useful intellectual and professional work and the imperative to build a career, credentials, personal and financial standing. And this is the contradiction, I argue, that is persistently figured in a displaced and refracted way in the polarities of writing instruction.

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Composition and Social Class:
The Things That Go Without Saying

JUDITH GOLEMAN

The unstated effects of social class relations on the organization and mission of composition constitute such a large and important area for research and action that at least one leading scholar has suggested that the entire field be reconstituted as a “site for dismantling [these] particularly troublesome versions of . . . hegemonic . . . ‘common sense’” (Miller, “The Feminization” 52). In this brief statement, I will discuss two versions of hegemonic common sense that I consider to be particularly troublesome to composition. And while these versions of common-sense have not exactly “gone without saying,” their critique has not yet been assimilated into our thinking in ways that have led to consistent, large-scale action.

(1) Institutional and Curricular Common-Sense
Institutional common sense seems to dictate that because composition is so large—approximately 70 percent of all English classes taught—that it must also be cheap (see Slevin 5). Staffed largely by part-time women and graduate students, composition depends on an underpaid faculty to perpetuate it, a faculty who receive neither benefits nor job security. Along with exploitative hiring practices, the history of tenure and promotion difficulties among those who do hold full-time positions in composition attests to the subordinate position of composition in the academic hierarchy.

These hiring practices and promotion procedures are related to common-sense assumptions about the fundamental differences between literature and composition. Where literature is perceived as providing the
booklist for humanism and the reading methods for becoming humanized, composition is perceived as struggling with the specific texts of students not yet ready for universal discourse. "Stained by their immersion in history," writes James F. Slevin, compositionists are relegated to marginal status (6). So fundamental to the economic structure of English is this dichotomy between literature and composition that Slevin notes, "If we didn't have it, we'd have to invent it" (6).

(2) Pedagogical Common Sense: Good Writing
Recent research has suggested that while English studies benefited greatly from the rise of the American university, rhetoric did not. For one thing, rhetoric had no place within the German model upon which the graduate degree system of the American university was based (see Connors, "Rhetoric" 61). Lacking an empirical basis for research, rhetoric steadily lost its place in English departments once departments began granting the Ph.D. (Connors, "Rhetoric" 63). At the same time, however, that rhetoric faculty declined in numbers and status, the demand for their services as writing instructors rose. In short, the increasingly important humanistic mission of English studies within a less exclusive American university system created the conditions for the recycling of rhetoric as freshman composition. First at Harvard and then elsewhere, freshman composition was developed to filter a new social class of students in order, writes Susan Miller, to "assure the worthiness, moral probity, and fitness of those who might otherwise slip through the newly woven net that would now take in additional, but only tentatively entitled, students" ("The Feminization" 44). In due course, the all-too-familiar situation developed whereby the most tentative faculty taught the most tentative students those social, moral, and grammatical skills of "good writing" that they needed for entry into the real university.

Even this brief review of composition in terms of institutional and curricular relations should suggest the extent to which the things that go without saying about the teaching of good writing derive from a complex of hegemonic relations within the academy and between the academy and society-at-large. In "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis," John Trimbur deepens this understanding. He traces the ways we have come to define schooled literacy by following the displacement of middle-class anxieties about its slipping status onto issues of language and schooling (280). What Trimbur finds when he looks at a number of American literacy crises is that the middle class has been looking to education to guarantee its status and prerogatives at those times when larger economic and global forces threatened them. One particularly important consequence has been the persistent narrowing of the notion of literacy to schooled literacy. A condensed and thoroughly institutionalized meaning has taken hold, giving public schooling great power as the moral and intellectual arbiter of individual success and failure (Trimbur, "Literacy" 280). Looking to education to secure its future,
the middle class has also used the educational apparatus to justify the social and economic inequality of individuals from subordinate groups.

In short, the history of composition is inseparable from the desires and insecurities of the middle class and its displacement of these thwarted desires and mounting insecurities onto the teaching of literacy. As a tool for guaranteeing upward mobility, literacy has become the imaginary marker of an individual's social viability even as its decontextualized schooled version has made it increasingly unrelated to social life. Assumptions about the universal nature of "good writing" have resulted in methods which emphasize writing for personal correctness at the expense of writing for popular use, and to the equation of such correctness with moral virtue and social viability. As these disciplinary standards and pacifying methods have tended to disentitle students from writing in public and transactional ways, there is reason to question their function as a driving force of composition. There is simply no getting around the fact that the academy's privileging of "good writing" has been at the expense of allowing students to develop a sense of authorship and a capacity to participate in public discourse (Miller, Textual Carnivals 55). (Similarly, the faculties who teach writing are themselves un-authorized as "staff" and disallowed participation in academic decision-making.) In light of these institutional, curricular, and pedagogical contradictions, I suggest that we need to shift our attention from how to teach students to write to what students write.

Educated to revere the importance of surface correctness and to accept huge amounts of decontextualized work toward their credentialing, both current and future generations of composition students need to be invited, slowly, into a new counter-hegemonic writing project. The purposes, broadly speaking, are dual: to analyze the social functions of their current reading and writing practices; to reconstruct these practices for different social functions and subject positions, as they can and as they choose. By using writing to discern the lineaments of their "situations," composition students would not be subjected to lessons in "how to write"; instead, they would be working the writing that has been working them: studying in various contexts what this writing does, how it does it, and what the available or yet-to-be imagined alternatives might be.

In brief, the discourse of composition—what we teach students to write—is a painfully important effect of our history, all too subject to common-sense thinking. Students who learn composition from us, I am suggesting, should learn that we cannot offer them technical procedures or interesting processes alone; rather, students should learn that these processes can be mastered only in conjunction with the world views, subject positions, and regimes of truth of which they are a part.

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The Morning and the Afternoon (Counterpoint)

ROBERT J. CONNORS

Although I know that this is supposed to be a collection of position papers, it is impossible for me to relate to it as such, because I experienced it as a day, a specific day, a hot and somewhat sticky day spent at the University of Rhode Island's beautiful W. Alton Jones Campus in June of 1994. We were there to discuss The Things that Go Without Saying in Composition Studies. During that day, seven papers on this topic were presented and discussed in the morning inside one of the sybaritic conference lodges at Alton Jones. After lunch, groups were formed to discuss the conference themes while on a long walk through the nature preserve and then to return and report on their discussions.

I was struck by the bifurcated nature of the day's works and talk, which seemed to evidence some kind of multiple-personality disorder among the assembled composition folks. The morning and afternoon seemed conducted from divergent worlds of experience and diverse tacit assumptions, and very different things seemed to "go without saying" before lunch and after lunch. I tried to define these late in the afternoon, jotting down notes on how the day divided up. Here are my notes.

Morning. After muffins and coffee in the cool of the air-conditioning, we listen to and talk with many noted and brilliant composition specialists. Among all of us, on the basis of our discussion, it goes without saying that:

1. Our most central task as literacy educators is understanding and acting on issues of the cultural and ideological contexts of writing.

2. The "process" (expressivist/cognitivist) paradigm of teaching and research is naive and outmoded, and we have to move beyond it.

3. Individualism and concepts of personal agency are delusions, and we must avoid being trapped by them as we consider issues of literacy education.

4. All meaning is constructed socially, and our choice as educators involved working to further that construction with or striving to further that construction against the grain of the larger culture's ideologies.

5. The goals of literacy pedagogies should thus be to assist adaptation to existing academic realities through teaching conventions or to work for social change through analyses of economic and cultural forces.

6. For either of these purposes, the personal essay is a questionable form and is proof of the low status of composition.

7. Being middle class is a somewhat ignoble status and an unsophisticated goal to wish for our students.

8. Most composition teaching is naive if not destructive.
Afternoon. After lunch we walk through the park-like preserve in self-selected clumps. Another male and I attach ourselves to the “all-women” group and promenade with them, talking. These people are mostly teachers. The air is still and hot, and we walk slowly. We find goose quills by the pond. After we return and hear reports from other walking groups, it seems to go without saying that:

1. Our most central task as literacy educators is teaching students to write more effectively for themselves and for their other classes.

2. Students are genuine individuals who have real needs, desires, and agency. So are we.

3. The process paradigm of teaching is a kind of default setting for us, what we all naturally assume and use, the methodological sine qua non underlying all other pedagogies we try out.

4. Meaning inheres in feelings and emotions, which may be constructed socially but which are felt, acted on, and written about individually.

5. The personal essay is a central genre from which many others can grow.

6. Being middle class is a reasonable thing to want or to propose for our students, and most of us are and always will be inescapably middle class.

7. Most composition teaching does help students, if the teacher truly cares about helping students.

How are we to meld these multiple personalities? Perhaps we do not need to worry about it too much. They are our heads and our hearts, and they do not work well apart from each other. As long as the morning is there to prod the afternoon out of complacency and self-satisfaction and the afternoon is there to anchor the morning to our job of doing real work with real students in real classrooms, our days will pass peacefully. Though we may argue about how best to accomplish things, what goes without saying all day is that we have not lost sight of the necessity of our doing good in the world.

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Notes

1 The conference, A Critique of the Things That Go Without Saying in Composition Studies, co-sponsored by the University of Rhode Island and Trinity College (Connecticut), was held on June 16, 1994, at the W. Alton Jones Campus of the University of Rhode Island.

2 Here, I describe a “strong” version of the relationship between culture, expression, and language; not all discourse communities are this tightly bounded.

3 This discussion of how culture and context constrain expression is often criticized as being too determinist and depressing, because it seems to imprison expression and to deny room for individuality and creativity. On the contrary, however, the existence of a strong set of discourse practices creates legitimate, even protected spaces for a full exploration of the ideas and concerns that are of interest to the members of that discourse community. Composition studies,
example, created and maintained legitimate space for interested members, such as Selzer, to explore and express themselves. Composition studies grew by determining its own way of seeing and talking about writing (the process paradigm); by establishing its own pantheon of authorities (Emig, Murray, Elbow, Flower and Hayes, Sommers, and Selzer, among others); and by providing innumerable opportunities for members to discourse with each other, especially in order to clarify their differences from other determining visions (especially the "current-traditional" vision which John Trimbur maintains was an invented opposition). The twenty-five year outpouring of articles, texts, syllabuses, and classroom practices enlarged and helped to legitimate the community's own methodological assumptions and its own compilation of compelling data and texts. These are part of the things that "prove" that composition studies exists.

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