


Reviewed by Susan Malone Bunch, University of Southern Mississippi

In his introduction to this edited volume, Joseph Petraglia states that one of the primary aims of the collected essays is provocation. He and his contributors have certainly succeeded in achieving that aim: this is one of the most provocative, challenging, and disconcerting books I have read in a long time. Some of the chapters are more convincing than others; some are more accessible than others; but all call on the rhetoric and composition community to bring our practice in line with our theory and research. The contributors do not always agree on the best course of action, but they are loosely united in their challenge of what Petraglia labels “general writing skills instruction” (GWSI). GWSI is based on the idea that “writing is a set of rhetorical skills that can be mastered through formal instruction” and that “transcend any particular content and context.” This concept is at the heart of first-year composition courses, which are, in turn, at the heart of our disciplinary identity. These chapters challenge us to “consider the variety of ways in which the very idea of general writing skills instruction runs afoul of the discipline’s theory and research as well as our own common sense.” Doing so is an uncomfortable experience that prompts us, as such dissonance often does, towards a new way of constructing ourselves and our relationships within and beyond the academy.

The book contains thirteen chapters and is divided into four parts. Part I offers a consideration of the historical contexts of classroom writing instruction. Part II consists of five chapters devoted to examining this instruction within social and cognitive frameworks. Part III examines philosophical issues in writing instruction. And Part IV proposes alternative ways to conceive of writing instruction and includes Charles Bazerman’s response to the entire volume.
Robert J. Connors' essay opens the collection with a historical survey of the tensions between what he calls reformism and abolitionism. He sees the history of composition in American higher education as periods defined alternately by these two forces. Connors provides us with a thorough historical perspective, and the context he creates for the debates that follow is valuable. However, his argument that we are currently encountering a "new Abolitionism," which differs significantly from previous attempts to abolish GWSI and is more likely to succeed, is undermined somewhat by his own thorough historical perspective on the swinging pendulum. Historically, the reformists (those who would adjust GWSI to make it more effective) have consistently won out over the abolitionists. But even with moving the scene of the debate to within the discipline (rather than having attacks on GWSI come from outsiders) and even with the promising growth of writing-across-the-curriculum programs, the probability of the new abolitionists' winning the day seems slim. It seems more likely that the increased, more theoretically grounded debate will lead us to a new generation of reforms, such as those suggested by some of the contributors to this volume.

Connors' essay looks at the historical debate between the fields of literature and composition; however, Maureen Daly Goggin, in the second chapter, examines the historical tensions within our discipline between composition theory and rhetoric. She presents composition as concerned primarily with pedagogy, rhetoric as a more rigorous intellectual enterprise, and the first-year composition course as the setting for a war between the two. Thus far, composition/pedagogy has won the battle with the primacy of GWSI. However, Goggin argues, rhetoric is our true discipline, and the first-year course should be an introduction to the discipline, just as first-year biology is an introduction to biology. She also urges us to expand our professional identity beyond the college composition classroom by developing courses in "a broad range of literate practices."

In the first piece in Part II, David Russell provides an accessible explanation of activity theory as it relates to writing instruction. He follows it with a proposal similar to Goggin's: GWSI, which attempts unsuccessfully to teach students how to write, should be replaced by a course that teaches students about writing. He also advocates an increased commitment to writing across the curriculum. Both proposals address the problem illuminated by his discussion of Vygotsky: that writing is a tool to be used within an activity system and that GWSI has consistently failed because it assumes that it can separate the tool from the system.

Moving from social to cognitive psychology, the next chapter presents Joseph Petraglia's argument that a cognitive framework not only helps us understand why GWSI does not work but offers us suggestions on "how we might more closely integrate the nature of writing with the purposes of schooling." He argues that an honest examination of the nature of students' academic writing will lead us to abandon attempts to teach sophisticated rhetorical skills within artificial rhetorical contexts and will lead us to a renewed commitment to writing-across-the-curriculum programs in which students will teach themselves to write within the contexts of real rhetorical situations.
The remaining three chapters in this section look at literacy practices within and outside the academy. Cheryl Geisler argues that writing is a poor tool for learning extant knowledge, which she sees as the primary job of students and as necessary before students have the tools to engage in knowledge creation as experts in the disciplines do; therefore, writing and learning are at odds with each other as they are currently practiced. Her argument is elaborate and well constructed; however, she does not explain exactly how she proposes to “reinvent general education” to address this inconsistency, instead noting only that this project will be difficult but should be attempted.

Aviva Freedman discusses the writing program at her Canadian institution in light of theoretical constructs from genre studies, situated cognition, language acquisition, and a phenomenological model of composing processes. She argues in favor of teaching writing in ways that supplement disciplinary classes, such as writing centers, sheltered courses, and writing-intensive courses co-taught with composition specialists.

In the final chapter in this section, Charles A. Hill and Lauren Resnick examine the effectiveness of college writing instruction for preparing students to write in workplace contexts. They argue for an apprenticeship model acknowledging that workplace writing instruction is a form of socialization into a specific, context-bound community and that writing skills taught outside of such community contexts do not transfer to them. They offer one of the volume's more innovative suggestions: that we try to extend our writing instruction into the workplace rather than simply creating artificial rhetorical situations in the classroom that pretend to reflect workplace writing.

Part III is the most challenging because of its philosophical focus. Daniel Royer's ideas seem much more accessible when Petraglia discusses them in the introduction than they do in the essay itself. Basically, Royer rejects the vision of invention offered by both modernism and postmodernism in favor of a Whiteheadian metaphysic that he claims is more adequate. Whitehead's position, he suggests, captures the aspects of invention recognized by the other two views in a more satisfactory synthesis: the modern recognition of the subjective and the postmodern recognition of cultural and linguistic contexts are combined in an account giving centrality to the notion of experience. While Royer is thorough in dismantling both modern and postmodern teaching techniques, he is remarkably vague about what the alternative teaching mode, “guided phenomenology,” is. Apparently, we are to teach students to trust their experiences. This strikes me as a naive and simplistic view of education.

The atmosphere of the second essay in this section is not quite so rarefied. Fred Kemp discusses how the development of computer technology has changed the nature of writing and the nature of texts. Instead of supporting a modern view of writing and texts as capturing an a priori reality, electronic text reflects the postmodern perspective of writing as social construction of knowledge and texts as unstable and dynamic. He uses the metaphor of a “written conversation” to describe how he engages students in “dialogic” writing and offers it as an alternative to GWSI.
While all of the essays in this collection propose some alternative to GWSI, Part IV is dedicated explicitly to this exploration. In his discussion of interdiscursivity, David Jolliffe advocates an “inquiry contract” as a way to move students beyond writing simply about what they know or simply in response to others’ ideas and towards an understanding of writing’s constitutive powers. David S. Kaufer and Patricia Dunmire discuss the freshman writing program at Carnegie Mellon University and propose “integrating cultural reflection and [text] production in college writing curricula.” Lil Brannon tells the story of how the University at Albany, SUNY replaced the required freshman writing course with a minimum of two writing-intensive disciplinary courses informed by the critical literacy perspective.

The final chapter in the volume is Charles Bazerman’s critical response to the collection. While he acknowledges the validity of the contributors’ criticism of GWSI, he does not agree that the ground gained by the profession and represented by the first-year composition course should be given up. Rather, he argues that the course should be one of the many sites where students encounter writing experiences. He voices the strongest argument against the likelihood of the abolition or radical reformation of GWSI courses: the political and economic realities of our professional dependence on them. While I agree with Bazerman that we are not likely to “wish away the base on which the profession has been built,” I consider this collection an important, though uncomfortable, contribution to the professional conversation.


Reviewed by Andrea Greenbaum, University of South Florida

Xin Liu Gale relates that although she had been an English teacher in China for ten years, as a new teaching assistant she was nervous as she stood ready to teach her first American English class. She wondered what entitled her, a Chinese native, to teach English speakers their native tongue. Watching those twenty-five students staring at her in expectation, she feared that they would walk out of the classroom as soon as she spoke in her conspicuously foreign accent—and she was genuinely surprised when they did not. “These *American* students,” she reflected, “have granted me their consent to be *my* students; what can I do to be worthy of their trust?” (153). While this anecdote appears at the conclusion of Gale’s *Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom*, I envision this pivotal moment in Gale’s pedagogical life as the point of departure for her intellectual journey, since her text illuminates how, as teachers, we can reponsibly use our authority to work toward creating an environment of trust—the kind that Gale experienced that first day—and generate reciprocity between the domain of the academy and students’ home cultures.