Disciplinary Assumptions and Institutional Imperatives: Structural Tensions in the Pedagogy of Rhetoric

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No scholarly discipline can flourish without powerful institutional support. Yet the backing it receives is never unconditional: it is always balanced by some institutionally imposed constraints. Hence the relationship between any academic discipline and its institutional host is bound to be to some extent bittersweet. However, the effort to revive rhetoric as a modern academic discipline, largely on the basis of a fully developed classical art (Cohen 289 passim), or, to describe the process somewhat differently, the effort to transplant it from one institutional environment to another, has encountered unusual difficulties with this ambivalent relationship. Why that should be the case is not well understood. Before the difficulties can be addressed, they need to be identified and clarified, which is what we hope to do in the following discussion.

Modern universities are expected to be centers not only of learning but of new ideas (Pierson 92). Although higher education in the United States dates back to 1636, the year Harvard College was founded, 250 years would pass before universities as we think of them today, came into existence, namely, “institutions where teaching would reach the existing limits of knowledge, where future scholars could be formed and where contributions to the advancement of knowledge would be encouraged” (Geiger 200). The relatively recent conception of a modern university led to the establishment of research as the central concern of higher education, which in turn set in motion a relentless process of specialization.

In the eighteenth and through the first half of the nineteenth century, instruction in classical rhetoric, both written and oral (with strong emphasis on the latter), was central to a curriculum directed largely toward participation in public life. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, classical rhetoric found itself in a modern university environment characterized by an emphasis on formal research, increasing disciplinary specialization, and emphasis on the printed word (Halloran). In this new environment it has had a much less well-defined, more contested place than it enjoyed earlier. Throughout the twentieth century the history of rhetoric, classical and otherwise, has been one of constant adapting to, rebelling against, compromising with, and groping for a way to flourish in the new environment.
This tension between rhetoric and its institutional host is apparent in the way public speaking sought to establish itself as a full-fledged academic discipline worthy of embrace by the university community. The well-known walk-out at the 1914 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) meeting in Chicago and the subsequent founding of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking was, it is generally agreed, a rebellion against unacceptable constraints imposed by English departments within which the study of public speaking was situated at that time. While the speech teachers’ resentment against marginalization by the literary faculty and their desire to escape the constraints of English departments triggered the action, the walk-out can be seen as symbolizing a deeper and broader conflict between the oral- and performance-oriented tradition of a classical education these teachers represented and the text-based, hermeneutically-propelled, and cognitively-oriented practices of a modern university to which their literary colleagues were more attuned.

Speech communication owes the success of its pursuit of disciplinary status within the university—its institutionalization—not so much to the open gesture of its founding members at the Chicago meeting as to their subsequent negation of what the gesture purported to signify. Rather than strengthening their commitment to the art of oral performance, many speech teachers following the break began to consider how they could encourage formal research in their art. For example, volume I, number 1 (April, 1915) of The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking (later The Quarterly Journal of Speech, the flagship publication of speech communication) contains an article by James Winans entitled “The Need for Research.” In it, Winans, an evangelist for formal research, argues that research is the key to acceptance by the university community:

By the scholarship which is the product of research, the standing of our work in the academic world will be improved. It will make us orthodox. Research is the standard way into the sheepfold.

We have lacked scholarship. We complain of prejudice and unjust discrimination, and we have grounds; but we had best face the truth. In the long run men pass for what they are. We have lacked scientific foundation for our special work. (17)

C.H. Woolbert neatly summed up the arguments for research being made at the time: “No research; no favor in the eyes of educators” (Bochner and Eisenberg 305). The arguments reveal a disquieting awareness of a misfit between the classical tradition and the requirements of a modern university.

In the early days of The Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking most of its articles were devoted to teaching problems, forensics, play production, and “how we do it at our place” (Cohen 288). But rhetorical criticism and articles on Greek and Roman rhetorical history and theory began to appear as well as a few empirical studies. Although the sort of scholarly work Winans was arguing for gathered strength slowly, the new trend is apparent in the emergence of both the Cornell School of Rhetoric during the 1920s, which promoted rhetorical theory and classical rhetoric, and the Midwestern School of Speech, which promoted scientific research (Leff and Procario 8-11; Pearce 260-65). As the trend gained momentum and research became a major
concern in the speech community, a schism developed between those of a humanistic bent, who aligned rhetorical scholarship with the disciplines of history, philosophy, and English, and the advocates of scientific research, who aligned it with psychology and sociology. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* became the principal journal for humanistically-oriented research; *Speech Monographs*, established in 1934, was devoted to scientific and behavioral research on speech communication. Both of the approaches to scholarly work were responses to the problem of status in the university community.

The extent to which a methodological crack in public speaking had developed under institutional pressures is shown in the stance Winans took and the controversy it entailed. In comments on the rhetorical principle of brevity, Winans proclaims:

> I happen to believe there has been a deal of nonsense talked about the force of brevity in public speech, and I believe I can make a pretty good case for my contention. But it would be nonsense to claim that I have really investigated the subject. I have reflected and theorized on the basis of narrow observation.

> Now, is there any reason, in this age when every other branch of human knowledge is being ruthlessly pulled to pieces and tested, why our branch should be passed over? (18)

For Winans, it was necessary to follow the example of “every other branch” of a modern university and to treat traditional rhetoric as, in effect, a set of hypotheses that requires formal verification before they can be said to constitute knowledge; however, others in public address had misgivings about this argument. Many feared that an emphasis on research would draw rhetorical studies away from what they perceived as its primary mission of training students to be effective practitioners of the art of rhetoric. In reply to Winans, E. L. Hunt argued that “the function of teachers of public speaking is to produce public speakers, ridiculous as that may seem to university scholars…. Because of these fundamental differences between the work of the speaker and the work of the scientist, it seems to me both unnecessary and unwise to hold up the scientific ideal as our chief hope of salvation” (Bochner and Eisenberg 305). Even today speech communication remains at odds with itself over the question of whether its primary objective is to teach skills or advance scholarship (Cohen 288).

The persistence of the ambivalence is indicative of a recalcitrant underlying dilemma for all those in the discipline. Leff and Procario suggest the nature of the dilemma in their summary of the tension between public address as a practitioner’s art and the mission of the university:

> The very nature of public speaking as a discipline creates a serious tension between research and teaching. A similar tension exists in most other academic fields, but rarely is it located at the conceptual center of the discipline. Unlike most other disciplines in colleges of letters and science, speech (at least as conceived in 1915) is clearly a practical art; it culminates in a performance, not in the amassing of objective knowledge or in the generation of purely abstract theory. Hence, the received conventions governing research do not fit squarely with the mission of the speech teacher. (5)

The dilemma implicit in the tension is that to survive as an academic discipline, rhetoric must embrace the values of the institution; but to do so is to call into question
its identity as a practical art and its genealogical claim to being the contemporary incarnation of classical oratory, which is still central to its self-definition and disciplinary coherence.

We have been arguing that in its struggle to claim disciplinary status for rhetorical studies within the modern university, public address could not help but find its practices increasingly drawn away from its classical roots. The break with English in 1914 appears to be at once an affirmation of a time-honored tradition and an effort to come to terms with a new order of discourse by means inconsistent with that tradition. That the effort to create a modern discipline of rhetoric should have undergone such pains and perplexities during its early stages should surprise no one who is familiar with both the history of classical rhetoric and the concept of a modern university. For modern universities are founded on premises so different from and so frequently incompatible with those on which classical rhetoric is based that difficulties are only to be expected.

II

Teachers of written rhetoric, who stayed in English departments, found themselves subject to the same set of institutional constraints, yet they responded to the university environment quite differently than was the case with public address. For in addition to the distinctive features of the modern university we have been discussing—the central importance of formal research, increasing disciplinary specialization, the valorization of knowledge over performance—they had to confront values within the English department inharmonious with the rhetorical tradition. We cannot understand the relation of written rhetoric to its institutional context without understanding its relation to literary studies in departments of English. From their inception as academic subjects, at least in American universities, written rhetoric and the study of English literature have been linked with each other, in theory if not in practice, as components of a single discipline (Miller 47-56; Ohmann 88-105).

Even before the defection of public address from departments of English, a new rhetoric—today usually called "current-traditional rhetoric"—had already emerged that would shape the teaching of writing to the present day (Crowley, Miller). This newly emerged rhetoric, grounded in the theories of Descartes, the Scottish rhetoricians of the eighteenth century and Romantic literary theory rather than those of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, was entirely different from its classical counterpart. It complemented the study of literary texts in departments of English since it was exclusively a rhetoric of the printed word. Developing with the growth of the modern university and with the expansion of public literacy, it was designed to fit the needs of a highly diverse university community dedicated to the creation of knowledge and of a linguistically diverse and increasingly commercialized society in which the ability to read and write the vernacular was a growing necessity. The influence of classical rhetoric on writing instruction in English departments almost disappeared, though its role in literary criticism and theory was more substantial (Nelms and
Goggin 15-18). Not until after the Second World War did the classical principles that provided so many of the underpinnings of rhetorical performance in public address begin again to influence in a significant way the teaching of writing in departments of English (Goggin).

Compared to what it displaced, the rhetoric that began to dominate university instruction in the vernacular during the late nineteenth century is simple and reductive. Current-traditional rhetoric is designed principally for academic work rather than for the rough and tumble of civic life. The ability to write clear Standard Edited English is its chief educational goal. It tends to separate issues of theory (which came to be thought of as “rhetoric”) from issues of practice and classroom experience (i.e., from “composition”). Classical rhetoric, in contrast, links practice with theory, which is derived from successful practice and which in turn illuminates rhetorical processes. Composition textbooks emphasize a new formalism that focuses on the rules of English grammar and usage, sentence types, paragraph patterns, and a very limited range of non-fiction genres, all of which are expository or reportorial (e.g., the personal essay, the business letter, the library research paper). Argument in the interest of persuasion, central to classical rhetoric, is seldom treated in the textbooks. Typically, little attention is given to the audience as part of a rhetorical situation or to writing as a means of addressing actual people on a problem in a dynamic social context. The rise of the current-traditional rhetoric marks what Morris Croll characterized as “the triumph of grammatical over rhetorical ideas” (Patrick and Evans 232).

As a result of this “triumph,” the canon of rhetorical invention, which for more than two thousand years had been central to the discipline of rhetoric, all but disappears. The art of invention, which in classical rhetoric is characterized by discovered judgment grounded in the shared beliefs of the community, is replaced by a simple method designed to assist beginning students to make use of their own experience and what they can find that is relevant in their reading. For advanced students, current traditional rhetoric expects the various disciplines to supply the content of discourse and the methods of inquiry. Under this new paradigm, content is reported, not invented; it is a statement of what has been learned prior to rhetorical activity rather than created out of the rhetorical process. In an institution that valorizes the search for truth by specialists using methods distinctive to their disciplines, the atrophy of the art of invention has been, oddly enough, one of current traditional rhetoric’s unacknowledged strengths, for it offers only linguistic conventions, not a competing and, in most disciplines, inappropriate discovery procedure.

Another characteristic of this new rhetoric is a separation of linguistic choices in writing from the constraints of particular rhetorical situations. Such a separation leads to a single-minded pursuit of expressive transparency. What is sought in current-traditional rhetoric is a plain style—simple, clear, grammatical, and conventional. Slevin, Fort, and O’Connor observe that
In the eyes of many teachers, the ultimate goal for student writing is to make the writing, to some extent, "unimportant." What teachers want in "good" writing is unobtrusive, transparent prose that does not get in the way of the perception of the truths being written about. . . . Fundamental to this view is the separability of "writing" from content and the assumption that there is neutral prose. Such an attitude is common, perhaps a defining characteristic of most academics' views of writing. (11)

And the assumption that language and content are separable is also instrumental in the way the English faculty and the rest of the university community have organized first-language instruction. Underlying the emphasis on writing as a content-neutral technique and on the cultivation of a plain style and simplified forms of arrangement is a belief about the position composition should occupy in the service of the university community. As David Russell remarks in his history of writing in the disciplines, when late-nineteenth century educators cast about for ways to solve the "problem" of student writing, they eventually settled on a single freshman course of about fifteen or thirty weeks (successor to a very different rhetoric course in the old liberal curriculum). Though it was taught in many ways to students of every kind, freshman composition almost always treated writing as a generalizable elementary skill, independent of disciplinary content. (7)

This highly reductive conception of rhetoric has proven to be enormously advantageous to English departments, though teaching it is generally regarded by the faculty as a burden. It has, for example, permitted those in English to claim a unique expertise in all rhetorical matters, which, in this conception, are essentially matters of linguistic convention. Even though faculty in the various disciplines must be rhetorically competent if they are to publish the results of their inquiries, their presumed and publicly avowed competence is solely in matters of content. Such specialization in the conventions of language also added weight to the claim that English is an important and viable discipline, a claim that a century ago was still being disputed. And it has also been economically advantageous. Teaching current-traditional rhetoric requires few qualifications other than the ability to read and write Standard Edited English. That being the case, English departments could use the freshman composition course as the principal means of financial support for graduate students specializing in literary studies; without this source of support, graduate programs in English literature would be quite different, certainly not nearly so large.

The split between language and content and the preoccupation with the surface features of discourse inevitably result in the diminishment of invention as a formal art and a serious devaluation of the study of written rhetoric. And they make it possible to limit university requirements in rhetoric to freshman English. The elementary nature of the course and its positioning in the college curriculum also lend a semblance of reasonableness to the familiar political configuration in English departments, with the literary faculty at the top of the departmental hierarchy and controlling the reward system. It is no wonder that rhetoric in the English department has offered little of interest to the serious scholar in English eager for advancement in the discipline. Dissatisfied with current-traditional rhetoric's lack of intellectual substance, the ineffectiveness of the freshman course, and the failure of administrative policies
regarding first-language instruction, those in English departments committed to 
composition began to speak out against established practice as early as the beginning 
of the century (Greenbaum).

Yet only after World War II was there a strong, concerted and continuing effort 
to address those issues. The newly created Conference on College Composition and 
Communication (CCCC), an affiliate of the NCTE, became a forum for those seeking 
more effective alternatives. The 1950 CCCC witnessed what Charles Roberts, the first 
editor of the College Composition and Communication, called “the most comprehensive 
and concerted frontal attack ever made on the problems of teaching college freshman 
English” (Young and Goggin 26). From this point on, the development of rhetoric 
in departments of English begins to look more like that in speech communication, 
although the effort to establish a discipline of rhetoric required dislodging an already 
well-established rhetoric in addition to developing an alternative rhetoric suited to 
different needs.

The leading possibility for a new and more sophisticated rhetoric was the old one, 
i.e., classical rhetoric, which had the great advantages of comprehensiveness, a 
tradition of use, availability (principally via scholarly work in speech communication 
and literary studies), and relative familiarity (i.e., it was more familiar or congenial to 
its potential users, whose training was literary, than the other possibilities at the time: 
linguistics, communications, General Semantics, and logic). However, classical 
rhetoric was perceived by many as having serious shortcomings. For classical rhetoric 
to be useful, Virginia Burke argued in the early 1960s, reinterpretation and reconsti-
tution would be necessary since we are worlds away from the ancient context (3). 
Pedantry was also a danger. That is, there was a danger that the past would be set up 
as a model for imitation or a storehouse from which to borrow uncritically. “Our 
aim,” Burke said, “should be to reconstruct a rhetorical theory suited to today’s needs” 
(5). Much of the history of rhetoric in departments of English since the 1950s can be 
seen as an effort to carry out this aim.

The dependent status of composition in departments of English did not free 
those teaching it from the institutional demand for research. As a reflection of that 
status, however, the demand had been met in a schizophrenic manner. Members of 
the English faculty involved primarily in the teaching of composition did their 
research in literature—if they wanted to advance in the profession. But after the 1950s 
the situation began slowly to change with the teaching of writing becoming the subject 
of serious research. Like their colleagues in public address, teachers of composition 
in English departments began what was for them an unprecedented program of 
research on written communication and on the history of rhetorical theory and 
practice. What has to be regarded as a revolution in rhetorical research is readily 
apparent if Research in Written Composition, a 1963 study by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and 
Schoer, is compared with George Hillocks' 1986 study, which bears nearly the same 
title. Both survey empirical research on writing and the teaching of writing. Out of 
an original list of over 1,000 titles written before 1960, Braddock and his colleagues 
identified approximately 500 studies that could be regarded as examples of scientific 
research, about half of which were unpublished dissertations, most in schools of
education. They also selected five studies for close scrutiny that were in their opinion not reliable but the "most soundly based of all those studies available" (55). In contrast, Hillocks originally identified over 6,000 titles published between 1963 and 1982, which were then screened using a much more rigorous set of criteria than was used in the earlier study; the result was a list of over 2,000 titles. Hillocks remarks that Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer felt that few studies were exemplary:

"It is an unusual study," they wrote, "which does not leave several important variables uncontrolled or undescribed..." While many studies included in the bibliography of this report suffer from similar flaws, there are also other studies which are, I believe, exemplary and which contribute to our knowledge of composition. (1986 XVI)

In the twenty-five years between the two works, the number and quality of studies and the variety of research methods used increased remarkably.

Similarly, historical studies increased dramatically. Prior to the mid-1970s, historical studies of rhetoric and composition were seldom seen in professional journals. They are now common. Such articles have been instrumental in shaping a self-consciousness about the discipline and its place in the English department and the university. And as was the case in speech communication, researchers have divided themselves into scientific and humanistic camps. The humanists argue that the empiricists have abandoned the humanities and are really doing social science; the empiricists advocate a more ecumenical approach to research, arguing that at least some of the problems of the discipline are best solved by the methods of the social sciences. Whatever their differences, the efforts of both groups can be seen as responsive to the university’s mission of knowledge creation.

While the development of research has been followed, quite predictably, by an increasing recognition of “rhetoric and composition” as an academic discipline in its own right, many English department rhetoricians remain skeptical about the new direction. They find themselves beset with what Richard Marius calls “contradictions” between the institutionally imposed demand for formal research and their own traditional commitment to performance. Scholarship in composition studies, Marius maintains, “is overshadowed by the overwhelmingly practical nature” of the discipline (466) and "the crushingly inferior status that composition occupies in academe" (477). As a result, “all the research going on in composition and rhetoric matters not at all,” and “the most important books” in this field continue to be “textbooks” rather than those about “theory or research” (466).

While this assessment is not wholly supported by the facts, it is clear that the field has been troubled by deep-seated self-doubts, and that the origin of these uncertainties is institutional in nature. Marius’s comments imply that there is a relationship between the “practical nature” of the discipline and the inferior status it has had in the university. More directly to this point, Ross Winterowd compares English department rhetoricians to denizens of a “ghetto,” and observes that “for historical reasons, the humanities have placed a high value on literary scholarship and a low value on any [practical] work in literacy.” Such an axiological hierarchy causes a continuing tension between the teaching of reading/writing and humanistic studies. The incompatibility
between the two is so acute that "the more powerful the work in literacy becomes, the more it will tend to undermine the humanities simply by its failure to proceed within the frame of reference and value system of that field" (325-29). Rather than being specific only to the humanities, however, the "frame of reference and value system" Winterowd mentions are characteristic of the modern university as a whole. Since the modern university's culturally prescribed mission is to produce new knowledge through research, it is difficult for any discipline of an overwhelmingly practical nature to develop within its framework without posing a threat to its institutional coherence.

The need to maintain a global coherence often preempts locally generated demands. One would expect, for example, that current-traditional rhetoric would have long since succumbed to the devastating critiques it had received from English department rhetoricians. Yet as Sharon Crowley observes, it continues to "exert a potent influence on writing instruction in American colleges and universities" (xii). Current-traditional rhetoric has been presented for so long as the "natural way to do things in a writing classroom" that a genuine analysis of its theory and its application in rhetorical pedagogy is particularly difficult (xii). However, its seeming naturalness results not so much from its intrinsic features as from its comfortable fit with its institutional context. And its durability in the face of a consensus about its theoretical invalidity and practical ineffectiveness may be a sign of its consistency with what we have identified as the cultural values of its institutional sponsors, and of the power of these sponsors to set the general agenda and direction for rhetoric and composition against the belief and will of its practitioners.

III

Our brief institutional histories of speech communication and composition studies call attention to a tension-filled relationship between contemporary rhetoric and the modern university. As we hope the discussion has shown so far, the tensions are structural in nature. In addition to being oriented toward performance (in contrast to the creation of knowledge), classical rhetoric has been a general art (in contrast to specialized studies). It is concerned, Aristotle says, with "such things as are ... within the knowledge of all people and belong to no separately defined science" (Rhetoric 13 54a). And Cicero elaborates: "Whereas in all other arts that is most excellent which is farthest removed from the understanding and mental capacity of the untrained, in oratory the very cardinal sin is to depart from the language of everyday life, and the usage approved by the sense of the community" (De Oratory I.iii.12). Such a presumption dictates that the commonplaces should be a major if not the overriding concern of rhetorical art and that their study must necessarily be central to rhetorical inquiry and pedagogy ("commonplaces" here referring to the shared beliefs of the community and those more or less systematic ways of accessing them which provide a basis for making probabilistic judgments and building arguments).

The modern university, in contrast, is primarily committed to the production of new knowledge that is by definition different from whatever commonplaces happen to prevail at the time. The focused pursuit of specialized knowledge has enabled the modern university to play an increasingly crucial role externally in shaping and
reshaping the social, cultural and material landscapes of our times. Providing society with new ideas, it creates much of the technological and ideological infrastructure needed for the functioning and transformation of modern society. Internally, however, it has given rise to problems well-known to the academic community. “University students lost communion with each other and with their inheritance. The teachers became separated and overdepartmentalized.” And the graduate schools turned themselves into “factories for ... specialists” (Pierson 92). The physical fragmentation of the departmental system, moreover, has encouraged a concurrent fragmentation of knowledge. As Samuel Lubell observes, “higher education remains structured to fragment the knowledge, thinking, and teaching of the arts of self-government into separatisms and specialties” (93). No “Joshua-like trumpet,” he says, can be expected to “bring down the feudal walls of academia” (95). There is something in the nature of a modern university that does in fact like a wall, especially an elaborate system of walls.

In seeking to survive and flourish within such a system, modern rhetorical studies have been fragmented to an extreme degree. Oral and written rhetoric have been separated from and developed independent of each other. Written rhetoric is itself divided into composition, technical and scientific writing, legal writing, business writing, each with its own discourse community, journals and conferences, each meeting specific needs of the academic community and society at large. Often the distinctiveness of the specializations is buttressed by their having different departmental affiliations. A similar proliferation and separation of specialties is apparent in speech communication: public address, drama, speech correction, organizational communication, small group communication, broadcasting, and so on. Indeed, classical rhetoric itself has become a specialization, a specialty among other rhetorical specialties, even though it may be seen as prior and in one way or another fundamental to the rest.

Another sort of fragmentation further complicates the situation. Rhetoricians are becoming increasingly sensitive to the fact that each academic discipline has its own discourse community, forums for publication, distinctive stylistic practices, special lexicon, specialized ways of conducting inquiries and building arguments (Kinneavy 369-71; Madigan; Nelson, Megill and McCloskey). We now speak of the rhetoric of the human sciences and the rhetoric of the natural sciences, and we have begun to analyze their distinctive features and to theorize their rhetorical practices. The term “rhetoric” is becoming so elastic that anyone discussing it is constantly faced with the necessity of stipulative definitions; indeed it is a constant problem in this paper. But what happens to rhetoric as a discrete field of study when every discipline has its own distinctive rhetorical practices? Does rhetoric as it is traditionally constituted provide an adequate basis for understanding and entering into useful relationships with such a diversity of specialized modes of communication? Why does the field of rhetorical studies seem to lack the intellectual authority and cultural relevancy found in other academic disciplines? At the root of such questioning is the persistent issue of what it means to practice rhetoric in our time. James Crosswhite remarks that
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The current organization of universities makes recovery of the rhetorical tradition a near impossibility. The responsibility of sustaining a memory of rhetoric and keeping it in a productive relationship with contemporary thought has been fragmented among several disciplines—none of which seems up to the task. In addition, popular conceptions of writing as a "basic skill" (or as Plato would say, as a "preliminary") are widespread and entrenched—not only among the many groups which make up the funding and service constituencies of the university but also among professors and administrators themselves. (268)

Crosswhite's description of the present situation of rhetoric in universities seems to us to be too pessimistic, principally because the situation is unstable. Rhetorical studies are changing constantly. And as a cultural institution, the university changes with ever-changing cultural conditions, under pressure both from within and without. Few would have predicted a generation ago that the result of the persistent efforts and initiatives by English department rhetoricians would be that the relationship of rhetoric/composition to literary studies would change so significantly that today it is perfectly normal for English scholars to specialize either in rhetorical or in literary studies and expect to be rewarded for exceptional effort with promotion and tenure. And the change is more far-reaching than it may appear, since it implies changes in what constitutes an education in English, changes in graduate education, changes in departmental organization and politics; it suggests that a redefinition of the discipline of English is taking place—not literary studies and composition yoked and ranked, as was the case in the past, but separate and, more and more often today, equal.

The present situation is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies that tend to provoke new ways of thinking about established practices. Consider again the rhetorical practices of the various discourse communities mentioned earlier. Linguist James Gee, on the basis of his broadly based redefinition of Discourse as the totality of socially and culturally situated practices, has identified the "paradox that even though Discourses cannot be overtly taught ..., and cannot readily be mastered late in the game, the University wants teachers to overtly teach and wants students to demonstrate mastery" (12). Gee is arguing that rhetorical practice in the disciplines is essentially monistic: Context, content and language are bound up with each other. This view contrasts sharply with the dualism implicit in traditional English department practices. Acquiring a Discourse entails informal learning through practice and imitation; the value of analytical instruction is limited, even by a member of the discourse community. For someone trained only in English the task is even less hopeful. Yet, as Gee says, there is a widespread expectation in the university community that students will be taught to be effective rhetoricians in their own disciplines, and in a short time. The writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines movements of the last twenty-five years can be seen in this context, as being responses to the contradictions inherent in the present situation.

Gerald Graff has identified a paradox at the heart of the university's mission: "The modern university has from the beginning rested on a deeply contradictory mission," he observes. "The university is expected to preserve, transmit, and honor our traditions, yet at the same time it is supposed to produce new knowledge, which means questioning received ideas and perpetually revising traditional ways of
thinking" (7). The structure of the university is never fixed. Since the tensions between rhetoric and the university are rooted in or linked with the sort of incompatibilities we have been discussing (between the general and the specialized, knowledge and practice, the traditional and the new, situated Discourse and abstracted metadiscourse, etc.), there will be recurrent opportunities for rhetoricians to rethink their position in the university and to argue for constructive change, not only in their discipline but in the institutional context as well. We believe that doing this effectively requires an understanding of not only the discipline of rhetoric but the institutional framework within which it functions. If it is to sustain itself and play a productive role in the institution, rhetoric must continue to adapt to the culturally imposed fundamentals of the university with its entrenched assumptions. But these are not necessarily static, and adaptation does not mean uncritical compliance.

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