Response Essays

Works Cited


What Should a Revisionist History Look Like?

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Chris Gallagher’s and Lee Campbell’s responses to my essay both raise (one explicitly, the other implicitly) the vexed question of how to write the history of our discipline. Gallagher takes exception to my plea for more revisionist histories by arguing that we have enough revisionist histories, good and bad, and that as a profession we lack “guidance” in how to enact revisionist historiography. Campbell proposes the analytic category “generational horizons” as a way to understand our professional past, but he does not, in my opinion, situate that term in enough of a researched epistemological context (beyond the example of his own classroom) for it to function as a viable historiographical model. The tenor of their responses suggests the need for me to address the question of methodology in more detail: what would good revisionist histories in
composition studies look like, and what kind of historiography would provide the guidance needed to write those histories?

Addressing the second half of that question involves venturing into a slightly more ambitious arena than I intended, since I was not attempting in my article to define a historiographical trajectory for the field so much as to enact in a small way the kind of revisionist history I was proposing. However, within the limits of this response, I am pleased to join with Gallagher and the other esteemed members of the “subfield” he names in the fascinating task of imagining what some good historiographical principles might be. Immediately, and without any originality, I would strongly subscribe to the methodology of “multidisciplinary inquiry” endorsed by that subfield, according to Gallagher. In simpler terms, I propose that we borrow methods and methodologies from other fields (history and anthropology, for example) that offer traditions both broad and deep for both, and that we learn what we can from their pursuit of these same questions, despite the very real labor involved in doing responsible interdisciplinary research.

Happily, that labor is already underway. For instance, the work of John Brereton and others has helped to establish an accessible archive of primary documents; we have already begun to define composition studies as more than the “bastard child” of rhetorical scholarship, as Robert Connors put it in his 1997 review of Brereton’s documentary history. It might be useful, then, for me to point to some of the methods and methodologies that we have begun to import from other disciplines and to characterize them as a set of prescriptives for future work, for more sophisticated revisionist histories of our field. The term “revisionist history,” itself an example of interdisciplinary borrowing, has been loosely and often pejoratively used to mean the manipulation of historical data to serve a particular political aim (as in Holocaust revisionism or—to cite one of the earliest mobilizations of the term—as in late nineteenth-century attacks by orthodox Marxists on those who attempted to produce accounts of socialism that abandoned the accepted trajectory of that data toward revolution). However, the discipline-specific meaning of the term comes from the 1960s when a group of historians led by William Appleman Williams began the work that has since been characterized as “revisionist history” by returning to the standard archives, the same sources used by traditional historians, and reading those documents from the fresh political perspective provided by the New Left. The result was an astoundingly new set of histories of American foreign policy that, among other things, countered the standard
rationale of communist aggression as the founding cause of the cold war and unmasked the expansionist, corporatist role played by U.S. policies stemming from as far back as the Open Door policies of the 1920s and the frontier ideology at work long before that (Qaimmaqami 168–69; Kimball).

In an article on the pervasive influence of the 1960s on our current methods, there is some irony in the fact that I invoked as a potential solution a historical approach that in effect arose from the 1960s, although the proposal of the article is exactly that we return to sift through the materials of our recent past in order to recognize the nature of their influence and to decide which aspects can be a positive foundation for the future and which have become delimiting paradigms. Of the revisionists I mentioned in our own field, Richard Ohmann (in English in America) provides the most obvious parallel to the work carried out by the historians of the New Left such as Williams. Ohmann retells the story of literary and composition studies' political and institutional trajectory and unmask some unpleasant truths along the way about our role in normalizing the cultural machinery of the cold war and the effects of our "rampant professionalism"; like Williams, he understands on some fundamental level the writing of history as a form of social activism. Also like Williams, Ohmann is not so much uncovering new sources as he is using familiar sources to tell a new and often unwelcome story. In its own way, Sharon Crowley's Composition in the University also undertakes the writing of history as a form of sociocultural intervention, but Crowley combines the spirit of fearless polemic with more detailed archival research (from the Daily Iowan, the papers of Norman Foerster, and interviews, for example) which help to thicken this history and give it a richer and broader cultural palette.

Works like Robin Varnum's Fencing with Words and Richard Miller's As If Learning Mattered seem similarly valuable because of their scrupulous use of previously overlooked archives, personal papers, interviews, syllabi, and other classroom materials. This quality of "thick description" as Thomas Miller calls it (drawing on Geertz who in turn borrowed it from Gilbert Ryle) seems a key element of historical and anthropological practice that may not be emphasized enough in our field. Geertz's discussion of the levels of ethnographic description seems particularly applicable to our field: the detailed notation of data situated within the interpretive social, cultural, and historical categories that give that data meaning, and the conveying of that data with a theoretical grasp of the conceptual structures through which those interpretive categories are assembled, applied, and reconsidered over time. Analogously, we
must look not only at the archival materials themselves, but also at the interpretive structures through which those documents signify—the social, cultural, and political contexts that give them meaning. In attempting this work, composition studies should look beyond its own archives as well to the sources that have provided historians and anthropologists with such a complexly sedimented basis for study, and it should analyze the interpretive categories that have been applied to those materials over time.

In this sense, I would like to use the term “revisionist” in its broader, positive connotation of bringing fresh perspectives to bear on the writing of history. For instance, social historians in the post-World War II era began charting the largely unstudied history of African Americans and, in doing so, revised the larger, “Whiggish account of national progress” that had hitherto been the accepted narrative of that period (Appleby et al. 299). Women’s history has also been revisionist in this sense in that it returned to much-studied time periods and retold the story of the past from perspectives provided by non-elites. In other words—to borrow from Myra Jehlen’s influential essay—by positioning their Archimedean lever in this marginal ground, women’s historians dislodged the world of the past ever so slightly from its reliable orbit and, in doing so, revealed a new universe. I do not think we have yet accomplished the same task in composition studies.

Finally, we might draw on (and move beyond) other fields in broadening the theoretical models through which we constitute and interpret our archives and chart our own epistemological trajectory. Stephen North’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition and Lester Faigley’s Fragments of Rationality (not to mention works by Susan Jarratt, Steven Mailloux, Susan Miller, and many others) are both valuable models for this endeavor because of the systematic ordering of knowledge provided by the first and the energizing frame of postmodern theory provided by the second. At the same time, these two books, and I hope the entire body of historical work in this field so far, will provide the traditions against which further histories will be written.

In short, my prescription for revisionist histories in composition would be politically aware and polemically fearless “thick descriptions” grounded in broad-based archival work and enlightened by an honest and deeply considered study of the theoretical and epistemological shifts in methodology made possible by the passage of time. And if that seems like too tall an order, consider how such work has already begun to broaden the scope encompassed by that “we” of professional identity and to
expand the range of people who might willingly be included in it.

This brings me to a final note of response to Campbell's sense of discomfort at being included in the "we" of professional identity constituted by my article. In fact, I share his uneasiness about the precarious occupancy implied by this usage, which at best names the slippage between "our" various characterizations of professional identity. Yet, I chose that "we" with great deliberation, first, to demonstrate that needed critiques must come from inside the field and, second, to mark the extent to which I (the author of that article) am implicated in that critique through my involvement in the profession and through my characterization of it—a characterization that has little or nothing to do with my (or his) personal past. I hope that my "we" continues to be troubling to many readers of this article. Campbell's point about the use of happenings and other pedagogical methods initiated in the 1960s for "entirely different goals" is perfectly well taken—it is the less conscious adoption of political and social goals from the 1960s as accepted practice, not the deliberately reconstituted use of methods from the past, that worries me.

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Works Cited


“Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film,” Henry Giroux persuasively argues that film not only entertains but also teaches subjectivity. He writes that film in particular “does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously, and helps to construct the landscape of American culture.... Put simply, films both entertain and educate” (585). In Giroux’s view, films not only provide us with representations of particular subject positions, they also teach us what the available subject positions are. That is, films teach us how to be gendered, raced, classed, and sexed subjects, and even what genders, races, classes, and sexualities are available. Giroux provides the term “public pedagogy” to describe the kind of teaching that film and other forms of popular entertainment perform and tells us that as