Literature Reviews Re-Viewed: 
Toward a Consequentialist Account 
of Surveys, Surveyors, and the Surveyed 

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Composition and rhetoric studies has not suffered from a lack of surveys and surveyors; and even though the drive to devise new taxonomies may not be as strong as it was during the 1980s and early 1990s, the consequences of those earlier taxonomies continue to propagate as their constructed categories ("expressivism" or "social constructionism" or "formalism," for example) are circulated and recirculated through publications (Brittenham; Connors, "Erasure"; Gere; Petraglia; and the like), student papers, class discussions, reading lists, PhD exams, and so on. The enormous effort put into repeatedly surveying the field—and disseminating and disciplining the consequences of such surveys—is entirely predictable if one thinks, as I do, of meaning, language, and discourse operating in consequentialist terms, in which the meaning of an utterance or text is its consequences; for without such sustained effort, there would be no "field" of composition and rhetoric studies at all.

It is not my purpose to explain in detail why I hold this consequentialist position about meaning and discourse and what its wider implications are or might be; such an explanation is far beyond the scope of this essay. What I propose to do here is more limited: to critique how taxonomies of the field of composition and rhetoric studies have been constructed (especially in terms of competing theoretical camps); to theorize the ways in which those constructions contribute to how a "field" is itself conceptualized; and, based upon these antecedent arguments, to illuminate an aspect of meaning consequentialism by proposing how such concepts as taxonomies, literature reviews, and fields would be treated differently from a consequentialist point of view.

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A "Digression" on the Treatment of Antecedent Research

The use of citations is intrinsic to scientists' story making because it contextualizes local (laboratory) knowledge within an ongoing history of disciplinary knowledge making. Such contextualization is essential because it is only when the scientist places his or her laboratory findings within a framework of accepted knowledge that a claim to have made a scientific discovery—and thereby to have contributed to the field's body of knowledge—can be made.

—Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin

Because of my commitment to notions of the temporality—especially the futurity—of meaning (that is, the necessarily temporally distended and futural consequences of utterances and texts), it would be ironic for me to begin this essay with an ordinary survey of antecedent surveys of composition and rhetoric studies. Such a survey—the ubiquitous literature review—is customary in contemporary scholarship, though hardly an essential feature of scholarly work (see Bazerman; Connors, "Rhetoric: Part 1" and "Rhetoric: Part 2"), which has no fixed essence. However, I find myself forced to theorize the "literature review" in terms that harmonize with my own advocacy of premises of meaning consequentialism before I can offer my own extended review of antecedent research—all the while conceding that, from the opening paragraph of this essay, I have already "cited" antecedent research. I begin, therefore, with a philosophical speculation about why an essay (or a book, or a dissertation, or a conference paper) without a literature review of some kind would likely be treated as inappropriate, if not outright transgressive.

Let me start with what we might consider a brief, "standard" reading of the purposes for a literature review: the literature review is primarily the vehicle through which authors acknowledge debts to their predecessors; demonstrate their familiarity with research on the topic, including the most "current" (thereby demonstrating that the researcher is "up to date"); place their work in relation to the work of others, thereby hoping to gain credibility and enhance relevance through association with work that was at least at some point in time deemed credible and relevant enough to be published or presented publicly; and offer evidence for the originality of their work, which fills a significant gap (not just any gap) within the existing (and usually contemporary) corpus of scholarly material.
But we might also consider another interconnected set of ulterior purposes for literature reviews. First, it is primarily the vehicle through which authors are required to submit to the priority of the past, acknowledging “predecessors” that occasionally, perhaps frequently, are known only after the fact; for example, a reviewer may demand the inclusion of a particular citation in a paper to be published that does not in any other way affect the development of the piece (see Berkenkotter and Huckin 119). In this way, the literature reviews act against the possibility of invention occurring more than once: priority is granted to the earliest inventor, and all others are mere copiers, even if they “copied” in complete ignorance of or possible connection to the “original” invention. According to Martin Rees, such a process occurs in the physical sciences, where the first “discoverer” of a phenomenon is always accorded the professional prestige, even if a second “discoverer” acts independently of the first.

Second, the literature review presents the illusion of a past that can be mastered, that is fully knowable if one has the requisite intelligence and perseverance. Although not every single work is—or is expected to be—cited, authors are presumed to be treating the most relevant work selected from the entire corpus; the criteria for relevance are not conceded to be works that the author and his or her audience are aware of, or prefer, or actively reject, but rather are somehow demanded by the subject matter itself. That is, relevance is presumed to be determined topically (by the text containing certain material), not socially (by the collective interests and knowledge of a group of researchers) or psychologically (by the idiosyncratic interests and knowledge of the author). For example, when raised by a reviewer, the question “Why isn’t X, which is highly relevant, included in this paper?” should not be taken as a criticism of the completeness of the research, for no literature review can be definitively complete (or, if it is, that fact cannot be empirically verified), but rather as a criticism that the author hasn’t properly acknowledged that bit of the past valued or at least recalled by the reviewer.

And finally (final in the sense that this is the last purpose I will discuss, not that could be discussed), when treated as an academic exercise, the literature review guarantees that students must confront antecedent research, which—along with the entire set of institutional apparatuses founded upon it—might otherwise slip into oblivion, just as classical languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and English literature in the twentieth slowly waned in prestige and faded from the memories of generations of students (Miller).
In sum: the literature review speaks of the past (it refers to and can only refer to antecedent work), by the past (antecedent work provides the launching point or germinating seed for all that follows), and for the past (it represents the claim of antecedent work on our present attention and demands that we do not forget). It is a past that is paradoxical in its ponderous weight and its crystalline fragility—deterministic, yet inefficacious. It is a past that fears for its existence if it is forgotten and clamors for us to feel obligated to it (Struever 268), even as it claims to be the inescapable foundation for the present and future.

But there is another way to view the literature review besides that of an account of the past on its own terms, hermetically sealed and hermeneutically alienated from the present (the past requires interpretation precisely because we are alienated from it), like looking through a fantastically acute telescope at a community on a distant planet beyond all possibility of contact because it has long since expired. We may conceive of the literature review not as a way to acknowledge an antecedent community, but as a way to constitute or inaugurate, through a re-viewing of the past, an “imagined community” (Anderson) or “world” (Heidegger, “Origins”), however fleeting. This re-viewing is enacted by stitching together and synchronizing particular texts and authors and then by inviting readers to pretend that that quilt is a reality, to act as if, for example, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Quine are (note the presence of presentness here) engaged in the, or at least a, “conversation of mankind” (Oakeshott). When that pretense is lost—when an author, in effect, claims that Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Quine belong to a discourse community and therefore are engaged in real “dialogue” with each other simply by having their texts juxtaposed—then the temporality of discourse has been effaced. The meaningfulness of the links made in a literature review does not extend into the past, but only into the future. To add Quine to the list has no consequences for Aristotle, but only for those of us who read that list and who may subsequently think about Aristotle differently as a result. What these consequences are or might be cannot be fully known or exhausted (though not because they possess “hidden,” unsuspected depths or a mysterious, imperishable vitality); in fact, at the time of writing, these consequences do not exist, nor can they be deterministically predicted. The text at the time of its inscription does not “contain” the seed of all that follows from it, even if all that follows would not have occurred had the text not been written.

The goal of a literature review, on this proposed alternative account, is not knowledge: one does not read a literature review in order to
comprehend the works-in-themselves, for although the citations in the review may stand in for the texts, they cannot substitute for them (the citation does not serve as a "microdot" of the cited text). Rather, it is edification (see Rorty): by juxtaposing and synchronizing texts in certain ways, can we say interesting—if not original—things about them?

John Muckelbauer is close to this position when he advocates "productive reading," a way of engaging texts that "demonstrates a greater concern for producing different concepts than for reproducing a preexisting program" (74). In fact, for Muckelbauer, "invention is the telos of an encounter with a text— invention of both concepts and subjects. To read productively means not only to attempt to alter the question, but to alter oneself through the question, to encounter a text hoping to think differently through an engagement with it" (92). In short, a reader’s encounter with a text should be consequential, transformative. Muckelbauer’s concept of productive reading is consonant with the premises of meaning consequentialism to the extent that he does not presume to understand or depict a true or essential Foucault, but only wants to construct an interesting and consequential way of talking about Foucault. However, notice that Muckelbauer hopes this way of talking will be interesting and consequential despite the following remarkable concession: "I need not claim a more accurate or complete understanding of Foucault than other readings. It would, no doubt, be relatively easy to produce elements of his corpus that contradict the claims I will advance" (73). In other words, Muckelbauer has himself encountered passages in Foucault’s texts the consequences of which for Muckelbauer contradict claims that he wants to make and subsequently does make despite his own experiences with the texts.

I suggest that Muckelbauer misses a key distinction between a true Foucault, who does not exist and never existed because what Foucault’s texts "mean" can never be definitively fixed, and a consequential Foucault, the manifold concrete ways in which Foucault’s texts have affected and presently affect readers, Muckelbauer included. Whether Foucault’s corpus would "really" or objectively yield these contradictions is besides the point: to intentionally set aside contradictions to one’s own preferred reading of a text is not reading productively—even on Muckelbauer’s own terms—for doing so entails that one is not open fully to thinking differently even if one does end up thinking differently about a text after engaging it (see Dasenbrock). Obviously, even the most programmatic reader must think differently about a text in some respects after reading it. If not, why read at all? But Muckelbauer rejects a priori certain
consequences of his engagement with Foucault’s texts, thereby attempting to make these consequences inconsequential, even non-consequential, in time, especially if Muckelbauer’s reading eventually “forgets” the Foucault who resists it. Any theory of reading in particular or of interpretation in general that suppresses certain “undesirable” consequences of an encounter with a text or utterance or sign misunderstands how texts and utterances are encountered, even if, as Jean-Paul Sartre might say, nothing can prevent Muckelbauer from doing what he does, certainly least of all the text, which, as we have seen, can be rendered almost inconsequential by a determined, “productive reader” like Muckelbauer.

Muckelbauer is entirely correct that there are different styles or strategies for engaging texts and that these methods will produce different effects or, as I prefer to say, consequences, in the course of reading. But the initial act of interpretation or understanding cannot discard the consequences of reading precisely because it is comprised of those consequences. However, our further assessment of and response to those consequences share no similar constraint. What this means is that Muckelbauer’s strategy of resisting some of the consequences of his encounter with Foucault’s work isn’t a method for reading Foucault (because resistance can emerge only in response to the consequences of what has been read), but of rewriting him after the fact of reading.

The “review” of literature reviews that follows—and, indeed, all of the uses to which I put texts throughout this essay—will not be productive in Muckelbauer’s sense, though I suggest that they will not transmit incontestable a priori meanings either. Unlike Muckelbauer, I try to be faithful, if not to the texts-in-themselves, then to the consequences evoked in me during my encounters with these texts and with the texts of other researchers who have encountered them; and an assertion of such faith (that I find a particular text to be meaningful in such-and-such a way) does not require an assertion that such a text is only meaningful in that way. In short, I try to be sensitive to the effects that texts evoke within me—adhering to, as general principles of interpretation, C.S. Peirce’s pleas for sincerity in philosophical inquiry, “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts,” and for integrity in the response to his own work, “I require the reader to be candid; and if he becomes convinced of a conclusion, to admit it” (“Some” 56; “Grounds” 87). But I also try to be sensitive to the fact that texts may, and likely will be, diversely evocative.
Some Problematic Surveys of Composition and Rhetoric Studies

And now begins the literature review proper. . . .

Not quite. The disclaimer: this section will not survey treatments of meaning in the field of composition and rhetoric studies; rather, this section will review how the field has been surveyed (particularly in terms of underlying theories of meaning) and, consequently, how it has been configured and reconfigured. The justification: I contend that an examination of the ways in which the field has been taxonomized will not only help us (a) understand some of the consequences of these literature reviews for the imagining or inaugurating of the “field” of composition and rhetoric studies and (b) theorize from a consequentialist point of view exactly what a “field” might be, but it will also (c) highlight important problems that a consequentialist taxonomy of theories of meaning within and beyond composition and rhetoric studies would need to avoid and (d) offer some of the possible strategies it could use to avoid them.

So I begin, again, with questions, rather than exposition. What is a survey? How is it conducted? For what purposes? And is composition and rhetoric studies an object of some sort—a “field”—that is, in fact, surveyable? These are not unimportant questions for a project concerned with meaning because it may be that surveys bring into being/meaning what they purport to describe.

These questions are inseparable because one cannot separate the surveyor from the act of surveying—no more than one can separate, as William Butler Yeats put it, “the dancer from the dance” (123). What do surveyors do? They use instruments to determine distances, clarify boundaries, and map uncertain terrain; and they talk and write about the results of their work, objectifying, abstracting, and mastering space through what Ralph Cintron calls “discourses of measurement” (24). Surveys can be conducted on various scales, from the particulars of a single plot of land to the entire globe, with consequent losses in acuity as the ratio of scale expands. The lack of resolution of a survey is problematic if the purposes to which one puts the survey demand greater resolution (for example, I cannot use a map of the interstate system of the U.S. to travel through the back-roads of rural Wisconsin). It is also problematic if one believes and acts upon the belief that a survey is fine-grained despite its actually being fuzzy (I would be foolhardy to sail along the coastline of Norway trusting a pocket-sized globe for guidance in navigating the fjords, or to trust the apparent dimensions of countries on a Mercator map).
But it would be equally foolhardy to adhere without qualification to Augustine's claim that

the historian does not himself produce the sequence of events which he narrates, and the writer on topography or zoology or roots or stones does not present things instituted by humans, and the astronomer who points out the heavenly bodies and their movements does not point out something instituted by himself or any other person. . . . (II.121)

The historian may not produce the events that prompt his or her narrative, but the historian does produce the narrative that sets those events into language, that highlights particular elements at the expense of forgetting others, that perhaps even "depicts" as concrete facts events that never occurred (see also Barton and Barton). And land formations, animals, plants, rocks, and stars do not sort themselves into the categories of stable scientific taxonomies, but are sorted into categories of shifting stability by professionals in various disciplines (see Foucault; Goodwin; Journet). Surveys (maps, narratives, and so on) may even precede or constitute that which they purport to describe, what Jean Baudrillard has termed the "precession of simulacra" (2).

Surveying the Surveyors
I suggest that we are now positioned to survey the surveyors, and I begin with an article published during the formative years of composition and rhetoric studies as an independent academic discipline: Richard Fulkerson's "Four Philosophies of Composition." Fulkerson finds inspiration for his own taxonomy in M.H. Abrams' four-part schema of theories of literature and literary criticism. Abrams argued that each approach emphasizes "one of the four elements in the artistic transaction" (551): the pragmatic element focuses on the reader and evaluates literature according to its effects; the mimetic focuses on the shared universe (reality) and evaluates literature on its success in mirroring that reality; the expressive valorizes the subjective feelings of the artist; and the objective emphasizes the text as an object with internal properties (551). Fulkerson argues that Abrams' approach, suitably tweaked by changing pragmatic to rhetorical and objective to formalist, can highlight the differences in various approaches to the theory and praxis of composition and rhetoric studies. These competing approaches, according to Fulkerson, "give rise to vastly different ways of judging student writing, vastly different courses to lead students to produce such writing, vastly different
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textbooks and journal articles" (551–52). Fulkerson does not hesitate to name names, placing E.D. Hirsch in the formalist camp, Ken Macrorie and Donald Stewart in the expressivist camp, Monroe Beardsley in the mimetic camp, and Edward Corbett in the rhetorical camp. Fulkerson does not seem so much concerned with advancing a particular approach to composition, though he admits to using journal writing “in the service of a mimetic set of values,” as he is concerned with what he sees as the “mindlessness” of many instructors who “either fail to have a consistent value theory or fail to let that philosophy shape pedagogy” (554). For example, he excoriates instructors who assign what appear to be expressivist assignments (express your opinions on a subject) but who then evaluate them according to rhetorical criteria (would this paper persuade a reader?).

Although Fulkerson does not appear to have a particular axe to grind—or, at least on my reading of his essay, is successful enough at concealing it—Martin Nystrand, Stuart Greene, and Jeffrey Wiemelt correctly point out that the field of composition and rhetoric studies has frequently been sketched in terms of competing theoretical factions with an explicit “hero” lauded by the author (268). If this is an offense, then one of the chief offenders is James Berlin. Like Fulkerson, Berlin uses the four-part schema of elements frequently identified in the rhetorical situation (writer, reality, audience, and language), but he disagrees with Fulkerson that differences in approaches to teaching writing can be explained by attending to the degree of emphasis given to universally defined elements of a universally defined composing process. The differences in these teaching approaches should instead be located in diverging definitions of the composing process itself—that is, in the way the elements make up the process—writer, reality, audience, and language—are envisioned. (“Contemporary” 556)

The four factions of composition and rhetoric studies, according to Berlin, are the Neo-Aristotelians or classicists (Corbett, for example), who hold that there is a “happy correspondence” between the structure of the mind and the universe, with “language serving as the unproblematic medium of discourse” to communicate preexisting truths about reality; the positivists or current-traditionalists (authors of standard composition textbooks), who maintain that the universe is knowable, but only through a rigorous, scientific method of inductive reasoning, with language used
to adapt "what has been discovered outside the rhetorical enterprise to the minds of the hearers"; the platonists or expressionists (Coles), who believe that truth is incommunicable, a property of individuals who can only approximate—because language "can only deal with the realm of error, the world of flux, and act"—this personal truth through writing that channels the writer's unique voice; and the new rhetoricians or epistemic rhetoricians (Berthoff), who posit truth not outside of or antecedent to language, but constituted by it, with rhetoric serving "as a means of arriving at truth" and as a means of creating meaning and shaping reality (557–64). Berlin announces his preference for the fourth approach, though, like Fulkerson, he is especially concerned about the confusion caused in the composition classroom when instructors fail to have an articulated and consistent praxis.

Six years later, Berlin ("Rhetoric") revised his map of the field, reducing it to three dominant factions: cognitive rhetoric (Emig, for example), the "heir apparent of current-traditional rhetoric" grounded in the methods of individualistic cognitive psychology and built upon the premise that "the structures of mind correspond in perfect harmony with the structures of the material world, the minds of the audience, and the units of language"; expressionist rhetoric (Elbow), with its focus on the authentic "experience of the self, an experience which transcends ordinary non-metaphoric language but can be suggested through original figures and tropes"; and, again the hero of the narrative, social-epistemic rhetoric (Bartholomae), which holds that knowledge comes into existence through discursive interactions comprised of "social constructions . . . inscribed in the very language we are given to inhabit in responding to our experience" (480, 485, 488). The motivation for Berlin's taxonomy is not simply descriptive, but political: he faults both cognitive rhetoric and expressionist rhetoric for their failure to provide effective critiques of what he portrays as the dominant, oppressive ideology of Western capitalism; in fact, he finds these rhetorics to be complicit with the status quo.

Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt, in their rigorous "intellectual history" of the field, discern only four major categories as well: formalism, in which language is an objective, static system and meanings are encoded within the formal properties of texts; constructivist structuralism, in which language operates in accordance to underlying mental structures and in which meaning emerges through the cognitive processes of individuals; social constructionist structuralism, in which these underlying structures and meanings are removed from individual minds and
located in shared social practices; and dialogism, in which language and meaning emerge through the collisions between "the forces of individual cognition, on the one hand, and social ideology and convention, on the other," found in concrete communicative interactions (295).

Other important taxonomies of the field overlap comfortably, if not precisely, with the schemas already discussed. For example, C.H. Knoblauch offers four rhetorical approaches underlying writing instruction: the ontological, whose clear-cut distinction between language and reality resembles Fulkerson’s mimetic and Berlin’s Neo-Aristotelian approaches; the objectivist, which "locates knowledge in human intellectual activity as it acts upon experiential information," corresponds to positivism, current-traditional rhetoric, cognitive rhetoric, and strong versions of social constructionism; the expressionist, which claims that knowledge is constituted by the imagination rather than given by sense data, is analogous to the expressive and the platonic; and the sociological or dialogical, with its focus on language as a social practice "rooted, as are all social practices, in material and historical processes," corresponds to the epistemic or social-epistemic approaches (586, 589). And so on: there are Patricia Bizzell’s inner-directed and outer-directed approaches; Lester Faigley’s categories of the textual, the individual, and the social; Stuart Greene’s call for a dialectical interplay between the social and the cognitive trends in writing research, forming a socio-cognitive approach; and Thomas Kent’s expressivism, cognitivism, and social constructionism.

Categorization and Its Discontents

The mind is fond of starting off to generalities, that it may avoid labor, and after dwelling a little on a subject is fatigued by experiment.

—Francis Bacon

There can be no doubt that these surveys perform useful tasks, not the least of which is the disciplining of the limitless heterogeneity of the past into the finite span and duration of an essay or book for pedagogical purposes: imagine the promise of over 2,000 years of thought about truth, language, and meaning condensed into an easily digested form! Who wouldn’t prefer that to the impossible task of reading through that entire corpus? W.V. Quine, then, might call surveys such as these "useful myths"—narratives or theories that work well enough pragmatically to
navigate or manage reality even if they do not actually describe it. But at what cost are these myths told and retold and these maps drawn and redrawn? What errors do they commit that we should try to avoid? I suggest that these surveys are problematic in five ways: (a) they conceive of the field of composition and rhetoric largely in terms of theories; (b) they sort theories and theorists into discrete, atemporal categories; (c) they fail to provide a larger context for the operative ideas within the field; (d) they mistake their work in constituting and maintaining “the field” as an imagined community with which readers are invited to identify and perpetuate for work, instead describing a unified, stable entity that exists apart from the spatially and temporally dispersed people and texts who comprise “it”; and (e) they are all vested in the notion that meaning must have some definable “locus,” even if the specific locus to be privileged is contested.

As Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt argue, while surveys of the field such as those discussed above “usefully contrast various conceptions of writing,” they nevertheless “neglect the emergence of scholarly thinking and empirical research about writing qua writing, the emergence of a writing research community, and the question of why composition studies started when they did” (270). In short, surveys of the field are too focused on published research, overlooking the impact of newly founded PhD programs, open admissions policies, and empirical research methods. The latter two neglected influences are indisputable: the surveys discussed above describe a field already assembled into opposed camps, and they have little, if anything, to say about how composition and rhetoric was institutionalized in higher education in the early 1970s. The first point about the neglect of “the emergence of scholarly thinking and empirical research about writing qua writing,” however, seems on shakier ground. Perhaps Fulkerson can be faulted for neglecting the formative empirical dimension of composition research, but the other surveys all include references to some version of cognitive research into writing processes. None of the authors would dispute that empirical research has been an influential paradigm for scholars within the field or that this kind of research program was helpful in establishing composition and rhetoric as a respectable discipline within higher education—even if their depictions of empirical research lack breadth and even if some authors, Berlin especially, would ultimately reject it.

A second objection is the tendency for surveys to “treat each of these phases [theoretical approaches] discretely and atomistically,” rendering them unable to account for “important connections between evolving
trends—that is, how one builds on another, at once responding to and conditioning the positions of those who come both before and after” (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 271). It is easy to criticize as simplistic these four-part schemas, but it is more difficult to escape the urge to simplify complexity (the urge to offer a complete picture) via categorization. Just how difficult is exemplified by the fact that Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt retain the impulse to taxonomize trends in composition studies into discrete categories, though in this case the components are distributed across five decades, with formalism (1940s to mid-1960s) slowly replaced as a dominant school of thought by constructivism (late-1960s to early 1980s), which is in turn replaced by social constructionism (1980s), which is in its turn challenged and enriched by dialogism (late 1980s)—forming a progression that, as Phelps warns us about in relation to Berlin’s work, too easily allows for the subsumption of theoretical differences into “successive moments in the inevitable march toward an intellectually and morally superior stance” (42).

The irony of this resemblance between their approach and that of their predecessors is not lost on Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt, yet they contend that “it is only through an articulation of differences in formalist, structuralist, and dialogical approaches that we can begin to see important connections among them” (274). However, the clearest connections defined by Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt are those between the structuralisms of constructivism and social constructionism, with formalism and dialogism standing at either end as incommensurable approaches to language and meaning. There is no discussion of how formalism might be operative in dialogism, or how particular underlying principles might be operative in both of them. Thus, possible similarities remain obscured, tending to (re)produce the impression of conceptual atomism.

Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt state that their intention is not to “define hard boundaries or set strict chronologies between the evolving intellectual positions” (274), but Knoblauch hedges his own schema in the same way (584), and I’m certain that surveyors of the field would agree with James Britton and his colleagues’ maxim, “We classify at our peril” (1), and would distance themselves from a reification of their categories to the extent that particular scholars need not occupy only a single category. And no doubt readers, too, would, if directly asked, reject reified categories as well. But with what conceptual tools would they replace them? It seems to me inevitable that these subtleties and hedges are lost as these surveys are read, taught, and cited—that is, as their meanings propagate and refract through time—to the point that certain
researchers become exemplars (even caricatures) of particular, separate, and pure approaches (Linda Flower as cognitivist, Peter Elbow as expressivist, David Bartholomae as social constructionist, and so on). These surveys provide little sense of tensions, contradictions, and "contaminations" from other perspectives within the thinking of individual researchers, precisely because acknowledging them would of necessity disrupt the neatness—however carefully hedged—of the pre-fabricated, oppositional categories that the surveys construct.

A third problem—again, presciently noted by Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt—is the failure of surveys to "situate the evolution of these debates [between theoretical approaches] in an ongoing, general intellectual context" (271–72). This provincialism, they suggest, prevents a proper understanding of "where" composition and rhetoric has come from: "the advent of composition studies needs to be understood less as a local weather disturbance in departments of English and more as part of a fundamental climate change involving the evolution of general epistemologies animating thought about discourse" (273). This is a powerful criticism, and it is precisely the substance of this objection that prompts the interdisciplinary approach of my own research. However, the "wider historical context" offered by Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt is not wide enough (nor could it possibly be wide enough) to meet their ambitious goal, for what scholarship it cites beyond the field of composition and rhetoric—aside from the work of Austin, Bakhtin, Durkheim, and a few others—is from twentieth-century work within linguistics or sociolinguistics. If Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt ask how we arrived at dialogism from formalism, they do not ask how we "started" from formalism. The nets they use simply aren't large enough to answer that question.

Nor can there be an exhaustive answer. The dangers of conceptual holism—the attempt to link in a single, coherent, albeit unimaginably complex, atemporal (because panchronic) intertextual web—are as perilous as conceptual atomism. We must resist the temptation to think of the field (or the supposed factions of the field—constructivism, constructionism, and so on)—as a unified entity (as a term with a determinate extension) composed of a completely interlocking, seamless web of researchers who read the same texts (presumably, all of them) at the same time (presumably, immediately after they are published), who discern the same meanings (presumably, stable) and subsequently replicate and retain them with the same fidelity (presumably, perfect). We must question our tendency to conceive of "the field" at all as something that
exists apart from the fragile—and therefore necessarily continuous—efforts through literature reviews, taxonomies, citations, classroom instruction, doctoral programs, and so on, to manufacture and sustain links between researchers and texts and thereby to (re)constitute “the field” as a normative ideal or a myth, something we are continually hailed to identify with (see Barthes; Burke). We must allow for readers who read differently, apply differently, and forget; for texts that are lost, delayed, dormant, or deliberately ignored; for authors who make similar claims that do not share common origins; for a past littered with “conflicting elements, multiple causes, and loose ends” (Phelps 52).13

In short, we must acknowledge—despite our sense of the continuity of past research and its connections to an interlocking body of current work—the inherently aporetic nature of both; and we must abandon, with Einstein (Meaning), the notion of instantaneous effects—in this case, that consequences of texts are immediately felt by everyone—as an atemporal fiction. I prefer to think of “the field” as a convenient fiction, a shorthand for the multitude of ephemeral and always partial clusters of synchronized researchers, practitioners, students, texts, and utterances—with each individual (human or nonhuman) a focal point of transient links that vary in scope but that do not extend into infinity, either spatially or temporally. That is, by knowing person X, I am not necessarily connected to every person that X knows, has known, or will ever know, ad infinitum: meaning consequentialism does not subscribe to a “small world” or “six degrees of separation” theory of social connections.14

Perhaps a visual metaphor will help: instead of a single grid in which all objects are situated and interconnected, think of “the field” as a colloidal lamination, each separate layer of which is solid enough to map a particular cluster of synchronized people and utterances that extends through time, yet which is fluid enough to change shape as the cluster changes (like the image on a liquid crystal display screen) or evaporate entirely if it loses its members.15 The field is a non-totality because, although it is comprised of a finite number of finite consequential networks of people, utterances, and texts, each network is not composed of selections from the same total number of objects (that is, there is not a single, master-set from which each network chooses particular elements), precisely because how the field is defined changes its shape (extension is not separable from intension). In this way, the field should not be considered as a set of layers of equal size extending over the same
surface. Adding to the instability of the field, the boundaries of the networks are continuously changing as people come and go and as utterances and texts are produced and forgotten and as their meanings propagate and fragment.

A person, utterance, or text will occupy points in multiple layers, but membership in one layer does not extend to membership in others (two people connected in one layer are not necessarily connected in any other, though they may be), preventing the laminate from being a thoroughly interconnected totality, even if one could view the laminate with a panoptic gaze that compresses—like the final product of an overlay of successive sheets on an overhead projector—the multiplicity of patterns into a single constellation, an illusion of thorough interconnection. Invocations of “the field,” then, can be used to produce that illusion of interconnection, to persuade us that only particular layers legitimately constitute it, to invite us to widen our memberships to other layers, or to prompt us to rethink our notions of the ways in which composition and rhetoric studies is configured.

As I mentioned earlier, the various “factions” within composition and rhetoric studies have been portrayed as antagonistic; and certainly some advocates of particular “camps” have been rather dismissive, even caustic, in their treatment of the ideas of standard bearers of other “camps.” But if each camp actually overlaps with its presumed competitors, what commonalities do they share? One crucial area of agreement is the claim that meaning has a particular locus, even if there is much disagreement about which locus should be privileged (implicitly or explicitly) as foundational—or antifoundational, as the case may be—from the set of all possible loci (for example, formal properties of texts, logical structures of propositions, intentions, social practices, cognitive processes, physical objects and properties, and so on, or perhaps even located only in intersections between two or more of these loci). I call the general proposition that meaning has a particular locus or set of loci “meaning apriorism,” and the particular loci themselves “principles of meaning apriorism.”

None of these loci, I suggest, even when combined in subtle ways, can provide a suitable location for the grounding of meaning—not because meaning lacks a place (that is, meaning does not occur apart from space), but because it resists placement (a settling or grounding in a particular location or kind of location). To try to freeze meaning in this way is to do violence to its temporality.
Toward a Consequentialist Conception of the Survey

What, then, would a consequentialist survey of theorizations of meaning within composition and rhetoric studies and beyond look like? I cannot provide an example of one here, but I can propose four of its underlying strategies. First, theorists and their theories should not be "sorted" into discrete, impermeable categories. No argument should be made or implied that the theorists and their theories fall within only the single principle or set of principles of meaning apriorism to which they are explicitly connected; that the theorists and their theories are in perfect conformity to that principle (that there are no tensions, contradictions, or gaps in their theories); and that the principles of meaning apriorism are mutually exclusive. The goal of proposing an interlocking set of principles for meaning apriorism is not differentiation per se (though I do not deny substantive differences between theories), but integration: to see, despite these substantive differences, the fundamental—and quite problematic—commonalities between these otherwise competing theories of meaning.17

Second, although a much wider context for the variations of meaning apriorism manifested in composition and rhetoric should be supplied by a consequentialist taxonomy, there should be no attempt to provide a neat chronology that traces causal connections from, for example, philosopher X to compositionist Y, or to describe how compositionist Z responds to Y. There are attempted borrowings, to be sure—and disagreements, as well, that should be noted—but the purpose should not be to trace the influences of particular thinkers, as if the "origin" of meaning apriorism could be found in a single text or set of texts whose meanings have been faithfully transmitted reader to reader, generation to generation; rather, the purpose should be to grasp as far as possible in a project of necessarily limited scope the dispersion and ubiquity of meaning apriorism within thought about meaning, language, and discourse.18

Third, there should be no pretense of fully describing already existing fields or disciplines—that is, of providing a panoptic gaze that compresses and freezes the laminates of philosophy, rhetoric, linguistics, and so on. On the contrary, by discussing particular texts, this essay—even as it is being written, read, revised—alters the non-totality of these fields by changing the ways in which people and texts are situated, by creating new layers of the laminates, and by widening the memberships of old ones—even though these fields also in an infinite number of respects remain totally unchanged because what happens in one or even several networks need not affect all of the others. It is in this sense that all description of
fields is constitutive—in the same way, to invoke Heidegger ("Origin") once more, that a work of art inaugurates a world. One of the ways that the collectivity of a field is enacted, not found, is through researchers "hailing" other researchers as "fellow travelers with separate itineraries who stop to meet common needs"—in this case, the need to theorize meaning (Clark 14).

And finally, there should be no attempt to treat meaning apriorism as a Procrustean bed onto which every aspect of theories of meaning must fit; on the contrary, if, as I believe, meaning consequentialism represents a more adequate theorization of meaning than meaning apriorism, then it would be quite surprising indeed if no other thinkers in their deliberations on meaning had ever struck upon at least some of its tenets. And it does more harm than good to treat theorists and their theoretical systems—both of which are necessarily temporally distended—as internally coherent (even if only ideally), for such treatments deprive us of the complexity of theorists and theories. In short, we should not replace caricatures with other caricatures, but resist our impulse to caricaturize.

Envoy
C.S. Peirce once wrote that "if disciplined and candid minds carefully examine a theory and refuse to accept it, this ought to create doubts in the mind of the author of the theory itself" ("Some" 56). Of course, whether my own efforts to theorize meaning consequentialism, or at least even the small aspect of it advanced in this essay, will persuade disciplined and careful minds is yet to be determined (and, because not fully determinable, will not ever really be determined at all). I write knowing full well that if meaning consequentialism is a viable account of meaning, this essay may be rendered inconsequential, even utterly forgotten, finding no readers and appearing in no literature reviews. My essay is a dispatch without a known or knowable destination. But I write also with the hope that my words will in some way resonate beyond me, for in an important sense the consequences that my essay propagates in readers form as much a part of its meaning as do my own contributions to it.

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Notes
1. An observation made by an anonymous reviewer of this essay.
2. Consider, for example, the contested invention of the calculus, with Newton eventually victorious over Leibniz (see Kramer 171–72).
3. It should be noted that my claim about the literature acting against invention occurring more than once precludes neither the citation of a single, collaboratively written work (that is, an invention can be the result of a collaboration, yet still be treated as having a single source), nor the citation of multiple works in relation to the development of a particular concept. But notice that, in the latter case, the point of the citations is to give credit where credit is due for the stages of development of that concept (for example, source $Y$ would not be credited at all if it simply reiterated source $X$, but only if it differentiated itself from $X$ in some significant way).

4. Symptomatic of this omission is Muckelbauer’s attempt to separate what a text means from what a text does, with the latter being of much more interest to him. In my view, the text’s meaning is what it does, so there is no such distinction to be made. To deny what a text or utterance does in certain cases is to deny its meaning in certain cases.

5. Note that Muckelbauer cannot entirely escape these contradictions, which remain consequential enough for him to mention them in his essay—even if only to discount them—perhaps because he recognizes that these contradictions may be much more consequential for at least some of the potential readers of his article than for him. (Perhaps his “concession” was added as a result of reviewers’ demands for such a concession.)

6. The political dimension of a performative survey, whether map or narrative, should not be ignored either. For example, Simon Ryan argues that “the cartographic practice of representing the unknown as a blank does not simply or innocently reflect gaps in European knowledge but actively erases (and legitimizes the erasure of) existing social and geo-cultural formations in preparation for the projection and subsequent emplacement of a new order” (116). For Ryan, the survey of an explorer, “by recording and imposing reality, is not merely reflecting a material arrangement, but enabling it.”

7. Although the researchers discussed demarcate no more than four categories, their categories are not perfectly isomorphic (especially those covering the social dimension of discourse), which explains the omissions and overlaps. In fact, because scholars must make a case for the originality—however slight—of their work, it would be quite surprising for essays whose main contribution is surveying the field to be in perfect agreement about how to divide up the field.

8. For Knoblauch, strong versions of social constructionism—alluded to in terms of genres that determine in precise ways their use by speakers and listeners—fit into the objectivist category; but it seems strange to trace (at least without a much more careful argument) strong versions of social constructionism to Locke or Descartes.

9. Kent both accepts and surpasses earlier characterizations of composition and rhetoric studies. He accepts three of the standard divisions: expressivism, which holds that “inmate mental categories function as a scheme either to represent reality or to frame reality”; cognitivism, which “claims that the mind can be reduced to physical components or psychological states that account for
human action," so that writing processes can be reduced to "mental activity"; and social constructionism, which assumes that "we manufacture our subjectivity through the social conventions we share with fellow human beings" (59, 60). His innovation, however, is his contention that these three approaches fall under a common category: internalism. According to Kent,

The internalist imagines that a conceptual scheme or internal realm of mental states—beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth—exists anterior to an external realm of objects and objects. In relation to meaning and language, the internalist thinks that we have ideas in our head, a kind of private language, and then we find a public language to help us communicate these ideas. Because meaning and language are located within our conceptual schemes—within the wiring of our brains, or within the transcendental categories of our thought, or within our communal social conventions—human subjectivity becomes, for the internalist, the starting place for every investigation of meaning and language use. (57–58)

Kent rejects internalism in favor of externalism, which maintains "that no split exists between an inner and outer world and claims that our sense of an inner world actually derives from our rapport with other language users, people we interpret during the give and take of communicative interaction" (62). But where Kent sees only a profound disjunction between theories of externalism and internalism, I perceive an otherwise unsuspected commonality: they both manifest premises of meaning apriorism.

10. Essentially, Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt are complaining about the lack of a historical sense in their predecessors. But we might wonder why it is possible for people not to have a historical sense—that is, why it is possible to engage texts as if they were without history, or at least as contemporaneous (see Eckford-Prossor and Clifford's discussion of the anachronistic dimension of language use). Part of the answer lies, I think, in the fact that each taxonomizer, through his or her essay, attempts to synchronize for readers the texts he or she cites, and can cite only those texts with which he or she is synchronized at the time of writing. Another part of the answer lies in the preservation and resulting accumulation of texts, texts that do not have to be read in chronological order. No one reads this way, nor do texts carry their history in ways that ensure they can only be meaningful if read chronologically. For example, despite the antecedence of the latter before the former, I may read Derrida before Descartes, Putnam before Plato, and synchronize through juxtaposition (as I have just done) all of them in a single footnote; and it seems to make little difference from the vantage point of thirteen years after the fact whether Knoblauch's essay appeared in 1988 or 1992. Derrida, Descartes, Putnam, Plato, and Knoblauch alike belong to the vastness of the already written, and alike they remain meaningful only to the extent that they remain consequential in the finitude of the present (cf. West and Olson on the question of our sense of the weight of anteriority and the paradoxically continual effort to recreate the "pre-given").
11. I’m not certain that this is true: it may be one way to see or highlight these connections, but I doubt it is the only way; and it is certainly not the route that I will take.

12. We should not be tricked into thinking that “the field” describes even a single, unified normative ideal; the meaning of “the field” is no more stable, unified, and consistent than the meaning of any other term. There are as many meanings for a particular use of “the field” as there are consequences evoked by that use. And when we consider the number of times that that term has been used, the proliferation of meanings involved becomes staggering to contemplate.

13. But, pace Phelps, the past is not an “inexhaustible . . . source of alternate futures”; meaning consequentialism rejects her claim that “in principle nothing can finally be lost from history as a path to an alternate future” (52). Of course, my claim cannot be empirically demonstrated, for the desire to prove something in particular is permanently lost requires that that something cannot be “lost”; otherwise, we would not know what to look for. But the lack of empirical confirmation does not embarrass me, for Phelps’ claim is no more demonstrable than my own. Consequently, whichever claim one chooses, then, must be determined by how likely or reasonable one finds the respective claims. (See Heidegger’s position, in Being and Time, on the interconnections between questions/questioning and answers/answering.)

14. The notion of a “small world” was first proposed by sociologist Stanley Milgram in 1967 and was immediately embraced by researchers and people at large, despite, as Judith Kleinfeld observes, (a) Milgram’s limited data set, (b) his questionable methods of analyzing and reporting that data (for example, ignoring disconfirming findings and calculating links between individuals in ways skewed toward finding or manufacturing those links), (c) his easy assumption that the fact that a person may be “connected” to another person through a few acquaintances is a significant connection, (d) the non-randomness of Milgram’s sample, (e) the relative dearth of replication studies—and the poor quality of what studies have been conducted—with findings that support the hypothesis (see Pool and Kochen 4). Kleinfeld suggests that the “astonishing degree of acceptance of the notion that we are interconnected is in itself a phenomenon important to investigate.”

15. See Paul Prior, who, following Erving Goffman, argues that activities are always already “laminated”: “multiple activities co-exist, are immanent, in any situation” (24), although some activities will be foregrounded and others backgrounded.

16. That is, the opposition between meaning apriorism and meaning consequentialism is not merely another way of (re)labeling the tensions between foundational and antifoundational theories of language.

17. A cautionary note: no theory labels itself “meaning apriorism,” and I make no claims that any particular theory is a “pure” articulation of meaning apriorism. Rather, meaning apriorism is an analytic construct or useful myth that is intended to illuminate important similarities in the consequences of
classical, modern, and contemporary treatments of the relations between meaning and time.

18. I do not suggest that such ubiquity signifies that meaning apriorism has a peculiar vitality or power of self-preservation. Meaning apriorism is not some Hegelian Spirit with an independent existence seeking self-actualization throughout the history of theorizing about meaning and time; its manifestations were and are never inevitable, its features never uncontestable, its continuation never assured.

Works Cited


