What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Composition?

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What are we talking about when we talk about composition? Whatever else may be said about it, composition is certainly becoming an increasingly popular and prolific academic enterprise. More candidates from more doctoral programs in composition are seeking more jobs at national and regional conventions attended by more teachers, scholars, and gurus than ever before. Composition has become highly profitable for the publishing industry, and even in academe tenure committees are unprecedentedly obliged to consider candidates who, until a decade or so ago, were never offered tenure-track positions—much less tenure itself—by English department literaturists ranging from paternalistic to contemptuous in their views of composition as an intellectual field of study.

Such attitudes have not disappeared, but their purveyors have been forced into tight-lipped silence as the institutional balance of power slowly shifts. Yet this awakening giant—composition—has only begun to realize its true strength, for it has not yet wielded its power in any proportion to its size. Fed on a rich diet of "literacy crisis" rhetoric, the giant is only now testing its limbs and eyeing its proffered seat in the academic circle.

Like most adolescents, composition appears to be undergoing an identity crisis. Its identity is obscure, not because it doesn't know its parents, but because it has so many. With rhetoric as the progenitor, its forbears and siblings include cognitive psychology, behavioral psychology, text linguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse theory, phenomenology, ethnography, information theory, and, of course, educational theory and practice. Thus, for composition the process of self-discovery has been difficult because, unlike its departmental sibling literary study, it cannot claim clear title to a recognized name. An acutely self-reflexive mood has grown out of this identity crisis.

Three recent studies illustrate this mood clearly: Beach and Bridwell's New Directions in Composition (1984), Hillocks's Research on Written Composition (1986), and North's The Making of Knowledge in Composition (1987). The appearance of these texts suggests the need to address several important questions. What do we mean now by "composition"? What are its features as an area of inquiry? Do they cohere enough to make it a discipline? Can its governing paradigm be defined? In the process of exploring these questions, I would like to consider certain assumptions
informing these three works, the remarkable differences in some of their attitudes, and the portent of their conclusions for the future of composition.

Each of these books attempts a different task. Beach and Bridwell offer a collection of twenty essays by divers hands, a few describing the methodologies of protocol, clinical-case, and comparison-group studies, the majority summarizing actual research projects using these methodologies—which evidently comprise the editors' understanding of what composition "research" means. Apparently, these projects were undertaken specifically for this volume, but the editors make little effort to evaluate them or to show how they cohere to form a field of study. Hillocks similarly assumes an experimentalist basis for the term "research," summarizing hundreds of experiments conducted over the last twenty years, the great majority of them comparison-group studies which he assesses using the complex statistics of "meta-analysis." Hillocks's purpose is to evaluate this mass of composition research and to suggest methodological improvements which will give future research more validity. In contrast, distinction to these two volumes, North's book analyzes ways in which empirically based composition research (including case studies as well as statistics-driven comparison studies) differs from the scholarly dialectics of composition philosophers and historians. Only North makes a serious effort to characterize the variety of ways in which scholars and researchers have created new knowledge in composition in recent decades.

To begin with, these studies agree that composition is more than rhetoric's grandchild or literary study's half-wit sibling. They agree that composition is not a single entity with a distinct focus, methodology, or theoretical base; rather, it is a collection of perspectives and methodologies arising from vastly diverse sources. They disagree sharply, however, about the extent to which these influences cohere. Only one of the three (North's) explores the relationship between rhetoric and composition (as other, somewhat earlier studies have done in detail), and that only to suggest the stubborn separateness of the two fields of inquiry. Nor do the three studies make any effort to delineate composition's difference from literary study; indeed, they suggest that composition's focus on the nature and processes of discours should inform a study of all discourse forms, including the poetic. Interestingly, each study contains the words "new" or "emerging" in its title, signalling the authors' belief that whatever it is they're studying, its entelechy is incomplete as yet. Each study also conveys a sense of the dynamic, changing nature of "composition," a feeling that it is enlarging its boundaries faster than its mapmakers can chart it.

Certainly, the most problematic issue posed by these three studies (as in several recent essays I will mention) is the question of composition's status as a discipline; this question has generated endless, inconclusive argument. Composition has been called a "field," a "discipline," and a "domain"; at the very least, the term "composition" has emerged as a
highly useful enthymeme, whatever label is attached to it. Louise Wetherbee Phelps argues that "composition" is a unique mixture of theory and practice characterized by its "integrative" power to blend diverse methodologies. But here is the crux of the disciplinary question: if composition studies integrate well enough to achieve some degree of coherence, what is the nature of the "field" or "discipline" or "domain" thereby formed? The way this question is answered determines what Janet Emig calls the "governing gaze" which shapes composition as an area of inquiry.

For Beach and Bridwell as well as for Hillocks, composition studies do indeed cohere—as scientific endeavors. For them, empirical research informs theory which, in turn, speaks to practice in the language of scientific knowledge. The authors of these two studies define composition research in unreservedly scientific terms. They present comparison studies with a full panoply of statistical analyses, case-study protocols with detailed taxonomies, and summaries. The assumption informing both books is this: composition is an empirically verifiable field of knowledge which, under the right conditions, can grow through hypothesis and experiment toward a true picture of what teachers must know to nurture literacy. For example, here is Hillocks praising certain lines of inquiry in composition: "The fact that [some] questions exist is in no sense an indictment of the research and theory available. On the contrary, what has been done already allows the specification of new hypotheses and suggests methods for testing them. It holds great promise" (49). Later in the same chapter, summarizing research on composing, Hillocks adopts the same hopeful tone: "Research on composing has developed many other important ideas, most of which must still be regarded as hypotheses—but hypotheses worthy of further exploration and testing" (60). This is the heraldry of the scientific advancement of learning: experiments will test and correct hypotheses which, in turn, will form more truthful knowledge. Ignorance yields to knowledge because, finally, composition inquiry has adopted the scientific methodology that will allow it to make defensible truth-claims.

Such a view received a major boost from Maxine Hairston's well-received article, which presents recent developments in composition inquiry as an instance of what Thomas Kuhn calls a "paradigm shift." Admitting that Kuhn's model is science-based, Hairston nonetheless argues that "composition theorists ... can learn from Thomas Kuhn if they see his theory of scientific revolutions as an analogy that can illuminate developments ... in our profession" (77). The primary indication of the paradigm shift in composition, she suggests, can be found in a certain new mode of "research": "For the first time in the history of teaching writing we have specialists who are doing controlled and directed research on writers' composing processes" in order to "find out something about how people's minds work as they write" (85). As with Hillocks, Hairston's sense of a knowledge revolution generates a subtle but distinct hyperbole: we are at
the dawn of a new age; "for the first time" we will have real knowledge, thanks to protocol research which enables us to "infer much about what is going on beneath the surface" of the composing activity (85). At last, we can penetrate the ultimate mystery—how the mind produces written language.

This is heady stuff indeed. But what is overlooked here is that psychological researchers use the insights produced by protocol study—and by other empirical forms of psychological research—to build models of cognitive processes, not to document veritable interior events. This distinction is important. Precisely because thoughts cannot be observed and measured like the particles and waves of matter can, a strategy to track them based on the assumption of verifiability can create unrealistic and exaggerated expectations. To mistake for science that inquiry which is only pseudo-scientific, warns Robert Connors, leads to "scientistic fallacies" which, in turn, produce only "a blindered pseudo-certainty" (18). Certainly, protocol research and comparison studies have much to offer, as Beach and Bridwell's and Hillocks's volumes make clear, but the implication that they can produce something like scientific "truth" derives from rather perilous assumptions.

The most important of these assumptions forms the very basis of the Western concept of science: the belief that behind all phenomena are natural laws which can be known by theorizing from patient, self-correcting experimentation. This belief assumes an order of things which can be perceived and codified (in different measurements by different sciences) as a series of causes and effects whose continuity can explain the phenomena of the world we experience. Science's ultimate promise, as exemplified in various "unified-field" proposals, is to show us (in Alfred North Whitehead's words) "a secret which can be unveiled" (19). To Western minds, this has seemed a perfectly rational assumption ever since the beginnings of modern science, which relies upon theories inferred from observed phenomena and hails these theories as the "reality" or "truth" behind them. Applied to composition, this powerful idea requires us to believe that beneath the activities collectively called "writing" are inherent laws which, when discovered, will permit us to understand, predict, and even control such activities.

Drawing inferences in order to know is in our grain; it is a habit of our Western minds to make judgments and generalizations from the particulars of our sensory world. It is not this experiential orientation of scientific knowing that poses a problem for composition inquiry but, rather, the urge to over-define composition study in terms of the conditions of knowing which attend scientific inquiry. Connors offers a helpful summary of these conditions: that such inquiry is objective, that its hypotheses are falsifiable (that is, they can be demonstrated to be wrong), that its knowledge-producing experiments are decontextualized enough to be replicated (and therefore are generalizable), and that the knowledge produced by such inquiry is cumulative and progressive (5-7).
The last of these assumptions, for example, is evident not only in Hillocks's book and in Hairston's important article, but—early and emphatically—in the Beach and Bridwell volume as well. Explaining the purpose of their book, Beach and Bridwell hail the accumulation of knowledge evidenced in the studies they are publishing: "As information about written language production accumulates, perhaps there will be fewer premature applications of emerging theory" (6). Even as they exhort composition specialists to avoid a spurious objectivity by recognizing the wide range of contextual variables in composing, Beach and Bridwell fall into the language of science: "Researchers must therefore study ... the full range of variables that can be derived from the writer, the reader, and the contexts" (6). While their intent is rightly to emphasize the global dimensions of composition, their language—"researchers" obliged to consider a "range of variables," for instance—is drawn from the experimentalist cast of psychological and educational research. It suggests the methodology of science investigating the "phenomenon" of composition—a matter of accounting for its causal factors ("variables"), tracing their connections, and accumulating knowledge about them in order to unlock composition's secrets.

A commitment to the testing-and-hypothesizing pattern of scientific inquiry thus dominates both volumes. But can scientific knowledge be a real foundation for teaching discourse? Can that most complex, unpredictable, and ambiguous of human activities be furthered by a method which inherently seeks to regularize and codify its subject matter? Troubled by the scientistic tone of much current composition inquiry, some composition scholars have resisted the effort to characterize all "important" new inquiry in composition as scientific in goal and method. Perhaps precisely because composition is a hybrid entity embracing contrarieties, the scientific emphasis has generated forceful opposition from those who believe that much important knowledge in composition is not and cannot be scientific. These scholars argue that the true conditions of science do not obtain in composition inquiry because much of what is important in composition cannot be measured or verified, and knowledge not "verifiable" in the scientific sense cannot accumulate.

Their opposition focuses on what they perceive as the experimentalists' untenable methodological assumptions: that composition experiments involving either comparison groups or case studies can really be decontextualized sufficiently to allow replication, that the success of teaching methods can legitimately be inferred from empirical research, and that knowledge about composition is truly cumulative. For example, Janet Emig cites disapprovingly the narrow "gaze" of the "positivist" as lacking any "consideration or acknowledgement of setting" (66), a criticism extended by Connors, who argues that experimentalists' attempts to "disembed" subjects "from their naturally-occurring context" have "not ... resulted in much genuinely cumulative knowledge" (12). Invoking the relationalist turn of current discourse theory, Phelps further suggests
that a close research focus on "the problems of producing text" ignores the larger context of discourse as "a complex social process by which discoursers co-construct meaning" (183). These critiques all express skepticism about attempts to objectify composition as a phenomenon to be observed and measured by ostensibly scientific means.

Critics also oppose the idea that knowledge about writing can be cumulative. Connors flatly denies that writing pedagogy and cumulative scientific knowledge are "commensurable." Because the cognitive psychology upon which much current composition research is based has been declared "noncumulative" by its own practitioners, asserts Connors, "psychologically-based research into composition" cannot claim the supposed validity of cumulative, tested "scientific" knowledge (17). North's critique of the claims of empirical researchers in composition goes far beyond such principled objection by deconstructing some typical composition experiments on their own terms (see Chapter 6, "The Experimentalists"). Having analyzed the contradictions in several recent, prominent experimental studies, North concludes that the researcher's "idealized self-image of cumulative, multi-methodological 'progress' . . . becomes harder and harder to maintain" (352) in view of the oversimplifying and reductive impact of much empirical research upon the obdurate complexities of composition.

Indeed, we must turn to North's thorough, deliberate anatomizing of all the major modes of inquiry in composition to get anything like a satisfying picture of the competing ideologies in current composition study. For North not only summarizes composition's various lines of endeavor; he makes a serious effort to tell us why they often push against one another so forcefully. It is his thesis (a convincing one in my view) that such conflict is mostly politically generated. Experimentalists bask in the reflected glow of the social sciences, seeking a share of their institutional currency; formalists (for example, those who infer cognitive models from protocol analysis) draw legitmacy from psychology and information theory; scholars—rhetorical theorists and historians—perceive themselves as defenders of humanism.

In North's volume also appears the clearest statement of the fundamental difference between composition as a "science" and composition as a "humanistic" field. Science attempts to build knowledge cumulatively by drawing new understandings out of earlier, disproven understandings; the familiar example of a disproven Copernicanism illustrates this aspect of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, as North cogently argues, humanistic study—philosophy, theology, theories of the arts, even history—flourishes through dialectic, in which one mode of thinking draws life in response to all other major modes of thought, none ever permanently "disproved" or abandoned. The role of dialectic is crucial to this distinction. Antitheses and syntheses emerge, polarities shift, modes pass in and out of fashion, but nothing is lost. The ideas of Plato, Aquinas, and Vico are as vital as ever to the dialectics of their thought-fields. For science,
old knowledge is disproven error, retaining only historical interest (the Ancients' pneuma, for example), no longer deserving debate. For humanists, no good idea ever dies; it only puts on new clothes for new times.

North's distinction is quite right; indeed, I wish he had expanded his argument with a fuller consideration of rhetoric's impact on composition inquiry. For rhetoric's understandings are not cumulative but dialectical; the concerns of the major classical rhetoricians—the discoursers's situation and intent, the audience, invention, form—remain crucial to and are constantly reformulated by modern rhetorical thought. The classical rhetorical tradition continues to offer a powerful source of insight for modern composition inquiry, as the volumes I have cited testify. Classical insights provide points of opposition and departure, as well as sources of confirmation, for positions taken by modern rhetorical theorists. These insights are not hypotheses confirmed by testing, but elements of thought deepened by centuries of dispute.

An example of rhetoric's continuing impact on composition can be found in rhetorical studies which emphasize the interactive or "relational" character of discourse. One provocative article called "The Rhetorical Situation," familiar to all rhetoricians, was published by Lloyd Bitzer in the first issue (1968) of Philosophy and Rhetoric. This article spurred debate by arguing that discourse is essentially situational, generated not by a rhetor's specific intent but by the situation of the rhetor and the audience. The range of freedom to shape discourse attributed to the speaker by traditional rhetoric shrank in Bitzer's model, which named "exigence," "audience" and "constraints" as the forces that shape the rhetor's activities. Besides Bitzer's work, the massive The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, by Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, and Perelman's shorter The Realm of Rhetoric have also made a case for the power of audience and situation to shape discourse. Literary theorists in recent decades have likewise proposed a relational perspective for understanding and accounting for literary discourse. Of particular importance for composition inquiry have been Stanley Fish's and David Bleich's formulations of the idea of interpretive communities, discussions which have influenced recent studies of discourse communities in composition.

Overlapping and reinforcing one another, these humanistic perspectives have challenged us to see the traditional elements of discourse in a fresh way—as vectors (writer, text, reader, culture) which converge to create discourse meaning. These perspectives have shaped the thinking of inquirers in several important areas of composition, as evidenced by studies of discourse communities by Brodkey, Cooper, Heath, and Porter; studies in social construction by Bruffee, LeFevre, Myers, and Petersen; and work in audience analysis by Alcorn, Berkenkotter, Ede and Lunsford, Long, and Park. All these studies address—and in some cases directly respond to—that fruitful, provocative debate about the relational nature of discourse. They are dialectical reformulations, revisions of our way of seeing discourse; they are not new hypotheses developed to chase away old error.
Perhaps, then, the question we must finally come to is whether the tension between composition knowledge as science and as dialectic suggests the growing pains of a young discipline, or the dangerous symptoms of a life-threatening autoimmune deficiency. North concludes pessimistically that unless something "radical" happens, composition will disintegrate centrifugally under the force of its internal conflicts. I do not share North's pessimism; indeed, I believe it is composition's strength to be composed of two profoundly different ways of seeing, neither of which can ultimately damage the other because each is independently rooted in our thinking. The "problem" in composition today is not that it embodies contradictory modes of inquiry; other flourishing disciplines exhibit this characteristic, too—linguistics, history, economics, for instance. Rather, the difficulty comes in the way we, the students of composition, approach the immense range of inquiries available to us today. Let me suggest what I mean.

If, in Research in the Teaching of English, we read of a successful teaching method that helps us understand our own practices better and encourages us to try a new approach, we act under a vital persuasion—the power of someone's direct, measured empirical experience. On the other hand, if we read an analysis in College English of the history of a nineteenth-century rhetorical strategy that clarifies the tradition within which a current strategy of our own operates, we have an equally vital perspective on the transformation of an idea and its potential for our teaching. In either case, we are offered a way of seeing which we may build into knowledge. The scientific and the humanistic ways of knowing can carry equal power for the knower, provided he or she understands the different processes of knowledge upon which each depends. We know some things as humanists, some things as scientists, and we can accommodate each way of knowing into our total field of awareness—so that we prevent ourselves from being trapped into dualistic either-or thinking.

We can do this, that is, if we stay informed of the various lines of knowledge-making in composition, and look beyond one truth-claim to other, perhaps different, types of inquiry into the same topic. It is in constricting our view of the real richness of composition inquiry, omitting all study not "research"-based, that Hillocks and Beach and Bridwell err. A striking omission in Hillocks's study exemplifies this error in vision. Hillocks identifies one area of research interest as "the role of audience in written communication," which, he says, "only a few studies have examined." He finds this "particularly surprising in light of the emphasis contemporary rhetorical theory places on the role of audience in the communication process" (84). Indeed, it would be surprising if there were not some recent rhetorically-based inquiries into the question of audience in writing, given the new developments in discourse theory I suggested earlier. Unfortunately for the unwary reader, Hillocks attempts to "prove" his claim by summarizing—as if they were the only audience-studies available—a number of experiment-based, comparison-group studies of
the effects of young writers' audience consciousness upon their writing.

Nowhere does Hillocks mention several recent non-experimental audience inquiries which have helped shape the way we think about audience awareness in composing. By lamenting their scarcity and omitting all but empirically-based studies, Hillocks leaves the impression that other kinds of audience studies do not exist. Fortunately for the present state of composition scholarship, such studies not only exist but have exerted great influence. All readers of composition's principal journals have had the opportunity to become aware of them. For example, Douglas Park's "The Meanings of Audience," a probing study of the cognitive and situational dimensions of audience, has been cited frequently in more recent studies. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's equally influential "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked" (1984), which won the 1985 CCC award for the best essay in an NCTE journal, proposes a convincing set of concepts differentiating between actual readers and the readers writers must hypothesize ('invoke') as they shape their discourse. Both of these essays arise from a blend of rhetoric and literary theory; neither uses—nor requires—an experimentalist way of knowing to develop generative concepts about writer-audience relationships.

As informed readers and deliberately inclusive thinkers, we must be the measure of our discipline. Science cannot claim ascendancy in any area of human knowledge, particularly in that complex blend of knowledge-streams we call composition. We must be wary of those who, uncomfortable with the ambiguities of discourse and complacent with the quantitative, empirical perspective, would have us assume that perspective alone. As informed readers, we must juggle and juxtapose the claims of different modes of inquiry, recognizing what each contributes and what each lacks. To refuse this invitation to an intellectual pluralism, to settle in its place for a single perspective, is to invite the punishment we all hated in grade school: having to write the same sentence one hundred times. In this case, it would be "I will not know. I will not know. I will not know..."

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Notes

1 See North 63-65. The connection between contemporary writing and a classical rhetorical tradition is examined by various scholars in Murphy, in Horner, and in Connors, Ede, and Lunsford.

2 Beach and Bridwell call composition a "hybrid of disciplines" (1); North urges that we give it respect by calling it a "legitimate academic discipline" (364); Hillocks simply calls all composition inquiry "research" without suggesting whether it serves a discipline or not; Phelps calls it a "domain of inquiry and action" (182); Connors calls it a "field" (19).
Works Cited


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