The Establishment of Rhetoric: Developing a Sense of Community

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As Winifred Horner observes in her introduction to *Composition and Literature*, rhetoric is in an era of fragmentation (2). One manifestation of this situation is that, as writing teachers, we are increasingly caught up in our own rather narrowly defined areas of specialization: writing centers, developmental writing, freshman composition, advanced composition, business writing, technical writing, writing across the curriculum, discourse theory, rhetorical theory, and history of rhetoric, to name just a few. This current fragmentation within rhetoric (Horner suggests it is cyclical) is apparent in our journals and newsletters, our books (both scholarly and text), our organizations, and our professional meetings. Individuals may move from one specialization to another, but the communities that constitute our specializations are becoming increasingly separate.

The increasing specialization partially responsible for this fragmentation can be a two-edged sword. Certainly, as Edward Corbett suggests, we gain from the greater knowledge, expertise, and professional recognition that such specialization encourages. For example, it is becoming especially difficult for English departments to appoint literature specialists to direct freshman composition when more and more people are not only specializing in rhetoric but specializing specifically in freshman composition. However, the fragmentation produced by specialization can cause us to fail to ask *global* questions important to us all; it may also cause us to lose (or fail to develop) the sense of common cause, overall mission, and group identity within our larger field that typically informs the most rewarding and productive academic communities, professional and pedagogical.

As co-authors, our purpose here is to explore two questions that extend beyond the boundaries of our individual specializations—global questions that the parochial nature of our specific concerns frequently obscures:

1) What is the best relationship among the various specializations within the field of rhetoric today?

2) Whose responsibility is the teaching of writing in colleges and universities, and whose should it be?
These questions are important not only for those of us who see ourselves as professional teachers of writing but also for the larger field of English studies in general.

Community: The Best Relationship among Specializations

What is the best relationship among our various specializations? We can begin to answer this question by considering both how colleagues perceive us and how we see ourselves. Consider how our colleagues in the field of literature perceive us. One of our own colleagues recently looked at a faculty group including a freshman composition director, a writing center director, and specialists in ESL, technical communication, rhetorical theory and creative writing, and he saw only one "rhetoric" specialist. Can you guess which it was? Another indication of how colleagues see us comes from the wording of the MLA job notices our departments publish: how well do those notices correspond with the actual jobs they describe? Does it matter whether a department's job opening is described as "rhetoric," "composition," "rhetoric/composition," "Director of Freshman Composition" or "Writing Center Director"? To writing teachers it does; to the literature establishment that writes most of these notices, it too often doesn't.

Although some literary colleagues may, in fact, see rhetoric faculty as a community, their impression of what we do does not often reflect the real substance of our common mission. Too often our colleagues view rhetorical studies as "mere" theory directed toward developmental skills—this as opposed to the concrete substance of their own work, which is working with "substantial" knowledge about "real" literary works. This perspective prevents everyone from developing a true community of English scholars—a community where new knowledge flourishes from the cross-pollination of rhetorical theory, literary criticism, and traditional genre and period studies in literature. If we in the field of English cannot communicate with one another, then we in rhetoric might be limited to teaching writing as a skill separated from social context, a necessary context if new knowledge about rhetoric is to flourish.

Today, even writing teachers themselves tend to look at each other across great distances. What are we doing to ourselves when we fail to see each other as specialists within the common field of rhetoric? Despite specializations, our search for a more sophisticated understanding of language, discourse, and social context makes us fellow pilgrims. But without a sense of community, we lose our spiritual guidance: the Platonic ideals behind our discipline are obscured when our knowledge is too specialized and fragmented. Yet, by uniting as a community of scholars embarking on a common mission—the search for knowledge within the field of rhetoric—we can discover new questions and new intellectual pathways for our research. Our unity as scholars can also allow us to shape national conferences and, thus, to spread our inquiry further, among ourselves and among our literary colleagues.
Fragmented Rhetoric: An Example

As an example of this fragmentation, consider the gulf between writing-across-the-curriculum and technical communication courses—how far apart they are professionally, how much they have in common, and what their relationship reveals about rhetorical studies as a whole. Two of the most popular designs for writing courses today come from these two areas. However, although their approaches often differ dramatically, the two are not static, distinct "fields" of specialty. On the contrary, when a technical writing specialist and a writing-across-the-curriculum theorist work together as a mini-community of rhetoricians (as this essay demonstrates), they discover that their separate areas have much to teach each other. Ultimately, the relationship between these two writing course designs reflects in miniature the relationships among the fragmented specialties within rhetoric. A better understanding of this particular relationship may move us toward answers to the second question: Whose responsibility is it to teach writing?

"Technical communication courses and programs" does not only mean those courses designed to train technical editors, technical writers, documentation designers, and publication managers. More often, such courses are more general advanced composition courses for juniors and seniors throughout the university: students majoring in business (accounting, finance, etc.), engineering, agriculture, human ecology, and many other areas. Among academics in technical communication, there is a traditional debate about whether these different students really belong in the same classroom. Perhaps the most compelling argument for mixing majors has to do with the sense of audience the class creates for students. If developing a sense of audience is critical to a writer's growth, then the mixed-major classroom has a clear advantage. Assuming that students read and critique one another's drafts and listen and respond to one another's oral presentations, a mix of majors assures stronger audience feedback than single-major classes can offer. For example, the kind of "reading into" text that one engineering student might do with another engineering student's draft—a "reading into" that silently interprets unclear language and clarifies muddy constructions—doesn't occur when the reader is from some other major. Thus, a mix of majors creates audience response that is clear and strong and a sense of audience that is tangible, lasting, and dynamically real. Also, the mixed-major technical communication class more closely reflects the communication situation characteristic of professional life, which frequently presents as many audiences outside of one's discipline as inside. From this perspective, technical communication becomes the study of the dynamic interchange of "information" shaped by—as it becomes assimilated into—culture.

Similarly, writing across the curriculum is a response to the academy's need to address the practical considerations of writing. For example, whether the program is housed within or outside of the English department, we must decide whether we are teaching students to write profes-
sional articles for fellow specialists or expository essays for popular audiences. Both types of programs can perpetuate the notion that writing is mere "information processing." The latter often extends writing assignments across the curriculum only to create another dimension for evaluating a student's command of discipline-specific knowledge; thus, writing is presented merely as a skill for communicating what has already been learned rather than as a way to create new knowledge. The other type of writing-across-the-curriculum program, which stresses writing for academic specialists, often views writing instruction as teaching a field's specific forms and conventions, the molds a student must fill with information in order to be accepted as a colleague in the field. Students still "process" information but in a more specialized way.

When we analyze these approaches in the light of new rhetorical theories, however, the definitions of "popular" and "specialist" writing change to include considerations of audience. As Perelman has defined the difference, the specialist has been "initiated" into a specific discipline by learning not only how to communicate its "rules, techniques, specific ideas, and presuppositions" but also how to criticize its results "in terms of the discipline's own requirements"; the popularizer, on the other hand, "aims at the public at large for the purpose of acquainting it, in nontechnical language, with certain interesting results" but does not reveal how those results were obtained and, hence, does not allow the audience to criticize them (99). From this perspective, a student (ideally) does not attempt popular expository prose until after he or she has become initiated: to use language responsibly, a student would not use writing to "process" information until he or she has learned how to use language to "produce" information.

To learn how to write to produce new information, students must learn how to engage in dialogues with their audiences. And students can best be introduced to writing as an audience-centered activity within an English department; only within this context (as with technical communication classes) can students learn to ask the questions that will help them understand the diverse rhetorical situations they will encounter throughout their academic and professional careers. The composition course can draw reading material from diverse subjects, develop an immediate community of readers and writers responding to the material, and focus students' attention on how their peers—as their audience—help shape their writing and understanding of what they discover together. This collaborative writing experience, which cannot be created in a discipline-specific course, is perhaps the only way a student can become conscious of the fundamentally rhetorical process by which one participates in making academic knowledge when becoming initiated into a field.

In general, technical communication and writing across the curriculum operate as separate specializations today. Yet the problems they face and the students they serve are similar. Considering how audience functions in the two classrooms shows how closely their approaches are re-
lated and how clearly problems and solutions in one area shed light on the other. Clearly, our various specializations need to remain closely tied, linked not just by occasional movements of people from one area to another but by common journals, common professional meetings, and—where possible—common administrative structures within the university. Such interaction will sharpen our awareness of shared concerns such as the social nature of audience. And as we become more aware of the usefulness of such concepts as *discourse communities*, our own discourse community will become stronger and more self-aware.

The issues of audience and community point to at least a partial answer to the question of the most productive relationship among our specializations. The concept of creating a community of writers among our students is equally compelling when we turn our attention to the second question with which we began: whose responsibility should it be to teach writing?

**The Responsibility for Teaching Writing**

The second question, that of whose responsibility it is (or should be) to teach writing, is politically one of the most controversial in our profession today. In print, the answer seems more and more to be "not necessarily the English Department" (Hairston 281-82). At too many universities, Continuing Education inherits the freshman composition program by default when the Department of English abandons it; at others, the writing-across-the-curriculum program is housed in the dean's, provost's, or chancellor's office. At still others, the College of Engineering or the College of Agriculture teaches more writing than the Department of English does. Is teaching writing too important, too big a job, or too different from the study of literature to be trusted to English departments? (Or is the field of rhetoric so superficial that anyone can become an expert with minimal study and research?)

The trend to move writing instruction out of English departments is accelerating. For writing teachers especially, operating outside of their traditional English-department home may mean leaving behind a relatively secure (albeit emphatically working-class) home for an unknown future. For English departments, losing writing specialists—whether piece by piece (first ESL, then business and technical writing, then writing across the curriculum) or all at once—may not prove to be the uplifting jettisoning of ballast or liberating simplification of task it might appear to be (Adams 31). And for writing programs housed outside of traditional academic departments, the future can still be insecure (Russell).

A recent "opinion" exchange in *College English* (April 1988) offers arguments for and against housing writing-across-the-curriculum programs within English departments; ironically, even the argument for doing so does not acknowledge that we in English study anything but a particular literary criticism. When even professed composition experts do not acknowledge the distinctive quality of rhetorical theory as, in the words of Aristotle, the study of "the faculty of discovering the possible
means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever"—that is, as the study of how discourse commands the inquiry that makes knowledge in every subject—then something is seriously wrong with the communication within our own discipline. When even we as rhetoric scholars (not to mention our literary colleagues) fail to acknowledge an alive and growing community of "writing people," we encourage by default the attitude that although writing differs with each discipline it has no foundation in a theory that controls its cultural and ethical application. This attitude threatens to create what John Gage has aptly described as a "new sophism" (qtd. in Chapman 44).

The tragic result of these trends, of course, is not only what happens to us politically within (or without) our own departments, but what happens to our students. The belief that ours is merely a service profession and that we teach a skill that anyone in any setting could teach ignores the value of research being conducted in the field of rhetoric today. At a time when many professional writing teachers are studying other discourse communities and the role language and communication play in shaping the communities themselves and the realities they experience (Bruffee), we are beginning to recognize that writing not merely expresses but is instrumental in creating academic knowledge. The "skill," then, that everyone feels he or she can teach (but perhaps is reluctant to), should embody more than how to avoid subject-verb agreement problems, more even than how to organize a discipline's accepted "truths" into conventional forms. Instead of mere "idea management" (as Berlin describes this approach to writing), writing—or rhetoric—should be taught, in the words of Wayne Booth, as a "process of inquiry," a process that will forever transform how students view—and achieve—knowledge. Hence, how we teach writing and whom we choose to do it have serious implications for how our students will learn, for how aware they will become of the ways they learn, and for how readily they will develop a sense of the ethical relationships among the bodies of knowledge they construct for disparate fields of study.

Maintaining the integrity of discourse as the instrument by which our culture survives or deteriorates, as the only way we as symbol-using animals can make and increase knowledge (Booth 137; Gage 153), should be our raison d'être. If we continue to allow writing instruction to move out of the English department, soon we may no longer have the means or the power to prevent a new sophistry. Only by continuing to explore—and encouraging our students to recognize—the sociopolitical, cultural, ethical, and epistemic dimensions of the languages of inquiry can we hope to perpetuate a responsible use of discourse "as a means of discovering and validating knowledge" (Gage 153).

Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg echo Thomas Kuhn's theory on how we structure knowledge within academic fields: writing across the curriculum is best introduced as "the study of how the academic community constitutes and legitimates its knowledge through its discourse" (345). This kind of study necessitates a time and place for reflection not pro-
vided within discipline-specific courses. Unless students are introduced, through English studies, to the epistemic nature of language itself, the question of what we know too often cannot also address how we have come to know it. "English studies" is perhaps most aptly described as the study of how we construct reality—or, in Bruner's phrase, "possible worlds"—through language. The classical notion that rhetoric is at the heart of all education is founded on this premise: that we need to study how we know what we know (as much as how we express it) before we can build upon this knowledge constructively and, perhaps most importantly, before we can apply our learning responsibly as modern "citizen-orators."

**Relationships and Responsibilities**

While everyone within English departments could benefit from changes in the way the relationships among the various specializations within rhetoric are perceived, we in the field of rhetoric are responsible for bringing about these changes by establishing ourselves as serious scholars united by a common mission. It doesn't matter how many new books and journals devoted to composition are published each year, or how many job notices come from departments seeking writing specialists. To see how well we have established ourselves, consider the number of sessions we have at regional or national MLA conventions, or consider how well (or poorly) things rhetorical are represented in the Ph.D. qualifying, comprehensive, or preliminary exams in your own department.

The issue involves more than just ensuring that the people who teach writing know each other: the people who teach writing need to be part of the same community—ideally a campus-wide writing community (Fulwiler). And students need to see that writing is integral to the learning they do at college and the success they hope to achieve after they graduate. They need to find in each writing classroom—whether freshman writing, advanced technical communication, or a writing-emphasis biology course—a similar pedagogy and a focus on creating communities of writers as a way to advance knowledge in the "real" world.

Turning the classroom into a community of writers means much more than seeing that each student knows the others' names, and turning the university into a community of writers means more than becoming aware that other writing teachers on campus exist. A campus-wide writing program housed in one department has the kind of built-in infrastructure that encourages sharing of methodologies and goals, that facilitates the creation of community among all of rhetoric's many specializations. The disadvantage of a decentered program—or of fragmented rhetoric—is that it does not encourage us to create and develop a sense of community.

Assuming that the responsibility for teaching writing—and for carrying out all the necessary related activities—should be placed in one department, should it be the Department of English? It has to be a department where the members who do not teach writing do not feel threatened by the growth of this community, where the paths to rewards
are open to people in the most rapidly growing field of English studies. Where an English department has those qualities of openness and willingness to change, writing will find a comfortable home. But it has to be a department where the established members are confident and secure in their own places. When those of us who teach writing experience the sense of community that our common goals and methods make possible, some of our other colleagues may well begin to feel uncomfortable. For them, our achieving community may look as though the suburb is swallowing the city; for us, it represents the establishment of rhetoric (or, perhaps, its re-establishment) as central to higher education.

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Works Cited


M.A. and Ph.D. in English with Specialization in Rhetoric and Composition

The University of South Florida offers a specialization in rhetoric and composition at both the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. Students can choose this specialization to prepare themselves to conduct research into rhetorical history, theory, and practice, and to teach composition and literature at the college and secondary levels.

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