Generational Horizons in Composition Studies

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I remember thinking of the importance of generational horizons in composition studies as Lillian Bridwell-Bowles delivered the Chair's address at the CCCC convention in 1994. She made (entirely appropriate) autobiographical references to her "lily-white" upbringing in middle-class Florida, which had required her to enroll in a home economics course that she refused to take, and she referred to the influence of Joan Baez, who first taught her about an activist poetic discourse (47-49). She introduced these autobiographical references in order to explain her interest in "transformative" language, in writing classrooms that resist the conventionalizing of students' thinking and forms of discourse. Noting that it is important to "position oneself clearly," she identified herself particularly with "those who were in school during the late sixties or early seventies," a group of "youthful dreamers" with "visions of revolution," and she proposed bringing "the passions and the dreams of transformation to our classrooms" (46-47; emphasis added).

Explicitly situating a work in composition studies within a generational horizon furthers the aim of the work only if the horizon is attended to with circumspection; the application of the concept of "generation" to composition studies needs to be thematized. References to the formative events of 1968, for example, resonate deeply enough in an audience to inspire, to stir to action, only if the events were also formative for the audience or if the audience can associate them with events that were similarly formative at some other time. The project of transforming "our" classrooms might not be well supported by references to 1968 for those who were in that year eight years old or thirty-eight instead of, say, eighteen. We compositionists are situated in subjective and intersubjective horizons of generations as well as within the much more extensively explored horizons of race, class, and gender.

It was with this kind of thought on generational moments that I read with interest and pleasure Rebecca Brittenham's "You Say You Want a Revolution? The 'Happenings' and the Legacy of the 1960s for Composition Studies." Sniffing out in composition studies "the lingering patchouli scent of the social and cultural politics of the 1960s," Brittenham argues that "we are arguably haunted by a glorious past, one that really was glorious in its rekindled sense of possibility, the feeling that there was
something people could do—in the classroom, in the street...” (521, 534; emphasis added). More specifically, composition is haunted by a bifurcated mission, its energies since the 1960s divided between fostering social change and perpetuating existing discourses.

Notable in this part of Brittenham’s thesis is her use of the first-person plural pronoun, contrasted with the third-person: we are haunted by their past. Personal pronouns, of course, perform a deictic function, referring to the world with implicit reference to the utterer’s point of view, including and excluding people, making places and events more distant or more near. Brittenham liberally uses first-person pronouns as she draws conclusions from the wealth of academic and sociopolitical history that she amasses, organizes, and presents. One haunting spirit of the 1960s, for example, is “the role of the teacher-activist that was to become a nostalgic touchstone in our profession” (534). Here she includes me in a reference group that makes some use of an image from the 1960s, but she simultaneously distances the image, which is an object to which we long to return. Late in her essay, Brittenham distances the activist image further, noting that for her, at least, the radical compositionist becomes a “false” posture to the extent that the teacher, rather than responding to and participating in an ongoing revolution, aims “to inspire oppositional consciousness and action” (547). This falsity plagues us today as we try “to find an educational mission for our own time, one that emerges from the communities of our students rather than from our own liberal nostalgia for a radical past” (548).

In response to this fascinating array of deictic references, I would like to try to situate myself, Brittenham’s thesis, and her case in point—the happenings—in generational terms. Frankly, I am filled with questions that may well derive from a generational divide. Who is nostalgic about this activist teacher that Brittenham describes? For whom are the 1960s glorious? For whom might the 1960s be merely vainglorious, any nostalgia for the period doubly so? And for whom are the 1960s about as irrelevant as carbon paper? Brittenham details “the conflict between the radical and normative roles through which we continue to identify ourselves” (547–48), but do all of us really define ourselves—if we are capable of “defining ourselves”—in terms of this dichotomy?

To begin, here is my attenuated experience with happenings in composition. I have staged happenings in several writing courses—but not really. Randomly distributing to students index cards upon which they read a directive specifying that they perform some action, a method Brittenham describes, I have had students all at once tapping their heads,
twirling around, repeating words and sentences, waving their arms, and so on. Brittenham notes that removed from the context of the 1960s, this kind of happening in a composition class might appear "absurd," but at the time the event was designed to disturb in students "a prefabricated vision of education and of the world" (536). Taken out of the context of my writing classes in the 1990s, my happenings might have appeared absurd, but they were used in my syllabus to illustrate a primary point about the function of language to organize and interpret experience. After engaging in their happening—which they, of course, did not know to regard as a happening—my students were assigned to write about the event and then to read some James Britton on language and experience in light of what had gone on in the class and what they had written about it. The concept of a happening was appropriated for entirely different goals from those Brittenham describes, stripped of its original purpose: to stimulate students "to think—completely outside a cold war rationale and indeed outside any prevailing system" (538). On the contrary, my students shared and examined their writings in order to discover what prevailing mode of thinking they had employed to make sense of the admittedly absurd class period. Any mode of thinking, any kind of discourse, was acceptable, the assumption being that all language, whether meeting some normative standards or eschewing such standards, organizes experience in some way. Of course, students were ultimately supposed to become "better" writers, and some of them "better" teachers of writing, by learning this lesson.

This 1990s happening, then, might have managed to avoid the dichotomy of radical versus normative objectives in the composition class. If, as Brittenham puts it, I did not perceive "the very real sense in which we continue to feel compromised by what has become an institutionalized dichotomy" (548), then how is it that I have been happily employing happenings when we are so conflicted? The wearer of hip-hugging bell-bottoms in 2001 (born in 1978, for example) is—so far as I can tell—uncompromised by a dichotomy between radical versus normative taste, a dichotomy by which that person might have felt acutely compromised in 1968. Likewise, a writing teacher in the 1990s (I was born in 1960, in the last year of the baby boomer generation) might appropriate something like a happening and use it not to puncture accepted academic discourses, but to make the point that all language systematizes experience. The similarity between the two cases lies in the degree to which the dichotomy of radical versus normative does not act as a touchstone, a preoccupation.
The study of generations, like that found in William Strauss and Neil Howe’s *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584–2069*, might be likened by some, it is true, to astrology (or economics). Ironically, the preoccupation with generations is a characteristic of members of the generational group, or cohort, who find themselves in or entering midlife today, assuming leadership roles across the country: the baby boomer generation, aged forty-one to fifty-eight in 2001 (born 1943–1960). Strauss and Howe call our twenty-three-year-old bell-bottom wearer a “thirteener” (born 1961–1981), her cohort named for the thirteenth American generation since the first Revolutionary cohort. But what is to me most interesting in the analysis of American generations by Strauss and Howe is not the bare classification of cohorts or the description of each cohort’s “peer personality,” which the authors acknowledge to be “a caricature of its prototypical member” (63). Rather, what is most interesting is that Strauss and Howe analyze the impact of what they call “secular crises” (such as wars and depressions) and “spiritual awakenings” (such as the Boom Awakening, 1967–1980) on the biographies of cohorts as they move through youth, adulthood, midlife, and elderhood (71–74). There is no need to go into any detail here, so it will suffice to say that the boomer generation, and especially its oldest members (born 1943–1949)—everyone from William Bennett, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush to Angela Davis, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore—experienced the various aspects of the Boom Awakening in far different ways as young adults than did the thirteenth generation, for whom the “Consciousness Revolution” provided the environment of their youth. In short, the happening was part of a social moment, a time when people “perceive that historic events are radically altering their social environment.” As a cohort of young adults, the baby boomer generation (in)famously came of age reveling in the introspection and self-discovery of an idealistic moment, while the thirteenth generation, youth during the same period, typically “sensed that adults were simply not in control of themselves or the country” (Strauss and Howe 317). The thirteenth generation is now aged twenty to forty.

When Brittenham chooses to consider the happenings as a site of conflict between radical and normative, she locates them in generational terms, selecting what has been a preoccupation of the baby boomer generation beginning from their childhood— influenced by (the too permissive?) Dr. Spock—and extending to their adulthood, marked by both spiritualism (New Age Philosophy, evangelistic Christianity) and conspicuous consumption (Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, BMW sports cars).
Brittenham is correct to note the continuing influence of the dichotomous legacy of the Boom Awakening. I posit, however, that the influence cuts across composition studies differentially, what Strauss and Howe term “the generational diagonal” (57). Thus, when Brittenham notes that she wants to “bring into fresh consideration” composition’s dichotomous past, I understand her to mean particularly the baby boomer angle on composition (522). When she observes, concerning the 1960s, that “as a profession composition studies seems to retain a core memory of this revolutionary spirit rather than being willing to return to it as a reality from which we can learn,” I take the unwillingness (or inability) to be a consequence of generational life cycles (534). Because of these life cycles, I was able, or so it seems to me, to appropriate happenings for ends that did not foreground the prototypical baby boomer dichotomy.

Many of us in the last years of the baby boomer generation and the first years of the thirteenth generation appropriated all kinds of boomer paraphernalia—dress, music, drugs—without much of the previously concomitant idealism. Late in the 1970s, then, something called punk was born. My record collection contained Woodstock, on which I heard Joan Baez sing about the labor organizer Joe Hill, and Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols, on which I heard Johnny Rotten revel in the fact that we were all “pretty vacant.” Thirteeners had come to relish the disapproval of their idealistic next-elders. Certainly, my three older brothers never understood punk. Geoffrey Sirc points out that composition in the late 1970s and 1980s just could not access punk, which was neither idealistically radical nor idealistically normative, but anarchic (17–18). The baby boomer generation in the 1980s fanned out into myriad avenues of self-realization, from extreme political action (Oliver North) to extreme capital formation (Donald Trump, Bill Gates). Strauss and Howe note, “Boomers have always seen their mission not as constructing a society, but of justifying, purifying, even sanctifying it” (301). In the “confrontation between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae,” they are still trying to justify, purify, and sanctify composition studies (Brittenham 547). The Sex Pistols might ask, “You got a problem? The problem is you. What you gonna do with your problem?”

So has composition failed to develop pedagogical and research missions that do not founder on baby boomer preoccupations? I honestly thought that we were already in possession of directions that had put the 1960s to rest. For example, in terms of what George Hillocks calls “modes of instruction” in writing classrooms, “environmental” methods have proven to be the best performers measured by empirical means (122–26).
Environmental instruction—which engages students in concrete, collaborative tasks designed to teach clearly identified writing abilities—can be employed by the activist teacher to promote social critique or by the normative teacher to reinforce traditionally prized competencies in the American workplace. The "focus of instruction" that Hillocks identifies as most empirically beneficial, "inquiry," can take place, again, as students inquire into forms of oppression or into the most successful strategies of Internet marketing (211–14). With the environmental mode of instruction and a focus on inquiry, students in my (and I know others') classrooms have produced fact sheets on domestic violence, brochures for women's shelters, proposals designed to increase corporate profits, and revisions of poor sales letters. Personal and social, radical and normative can coincide rather than knock each other out when students, as W. Ross Winterowd has never tired of pointing out, are doing something—almost anything—with writing.

At this point, I fear that what Strauss and Howe would call my more "reactive" rather than my more idealistic peer personality is beginning to show all too clearly. I am reacting to what I take to be the regrettable slash-and-burn, either/or legacy that Brittenham describes in excellent detail. As scholarship in all of English studies continues to examine our recent past and continues to admit personal indulgences, as I have been indulged here, we need to become circumspect about our situatedness in generational horizons. Our generational horizons need not be attended to with the serious reflection we devote to other subjective and intersubjective horizons, and I admit that the whole subject is irrelevant in the eyes of some. However, it needs to be acknowledged that "we" have very different institutional memories and touchstones. In contrast to the happenings, one of my earliest institutional memories, for example, involves—of all things—sentence combining exercises. It may be hard for many to imagine, but some of us are still haunted by those dreams of increasing syntactic maturity, as measured by the telltale T-unit. If sentence combining participated in a dichotomy during its time, perhaps it was simply linguistic versus non-linguistic focuses of instruction. The legacy of that dichotomy might be the erasure of language-based instruction altogether as linguistics jettisoned successive stages of its transformational theory. Our discipline's debates have created any number of spirits. Our places in the field are defined in part by which spirits happen to haunt us.

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What Should a Revisionist History Look Like?

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