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**Questioning the Cultural Discourse of Composition**

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When I began studying rhetoric and composition, I was hungry for scholarship that challenged orthodoxies and for pedagogies that didn’t
shy away from the inevitable politics that shape classrooms. I was fortunate, then, that Alan France’s “Assigning Places: The Function of Introductory Composition as a Cultural Discourse” appeared in *College English* in my first semester of doctoral work. In this article, France forthrightly declares his hope to construct a “rhetorical position from which writing might become an active means to transform the existing social inequities of commodity capitalism” (593). In order to work toward such a position, France critically examines the limitations of the dominant expressivist and constructivist pedagogies, arguing that even the most “progressive” examples tend to ignore the social positioning of the student writer. But perhaps even more than his specific argument, France’s refusal to hedge on his commitment to social justice and social change immediately stood out to me, and it was important for me in those early days of graduate study to see that such a strong commitment could be articulated in the pages of one of the field’s flagship journals.

Over the years, I continued to benefit from this commitment as France extended his materialist pedagogy from the composition classroom to the business and technical writing classroom and to the English department curriculum. His work has consistently asked that writing teachers—and, in fact, all English teachers—examine their own positioning as they ask students to do the same. His frank acknowledgment of his politics, drawn from Marxism and materialist feminism, seemed to alarm some in the field—as seen in at least one prominent response to *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*, the book he and Karen Fitts edited in 1995. But France’s position was, to paraphrase Terry Eagleton, like all good radical positions, also a traditionalist one. As France himself put it in “Assigning Places,” he was dedicated to advancing “the traditional role of rhetoric in enabling participatory democracy” (594–95). Far from setting out to alienate his fellow writing teachers, he appealed in his book *Composition as a Cultural Practice* to “principled traditionalists across the political spectrum,” hoping that “those genuinely concerned with teaching the venerable practice of rhetoric as the basis for a liberating and humane education” would take his arguments seriously (xx). France saw this venerable practice as necessarily material, concerned not simply with the formal means of persuasion but with the constraints and possibilities of the rhetorical situation itself. Moreover, he reminded us in his most recent *College English* article, “Dialectics of Self: Structure and Agency as the Subject of English,” that “the purpose of rhetorical education has been since antiquity . . . learning the practices of personal agency in their relevant social contexts” (149). Because
agency proceeds out of material situations, the rehabilitation of rhetoric demands a commitment to dialectic, a commitment to critique.

One of France's major contributions was his constant critical examination of his own rhetorical situation as a teacher of writing at the turn of the millennium. In Composition as a Cultural Practice, for example, he demonstrates the limits of the then-dominant social-constructionist pedagogies. Although such approaches might seem "cutting edge," France argues, many pedagogies based on collaboration and "real world" applications do little more than reproduce the status quo; they fail to provide students with the critical tools to intervene in the world. This attention to the material rhetorics that construct subjects—both students as writing subjects and the field of composition studies itself—has been a central focus in France's work. He has called not only for composition studies but for all of English studies to "work towards a post-Foucauldian 'technology of the self' by developing a theoretically informed, metadiscursive writing pedagogy . . . that focuses on students' understanding of the dialectic between self and culture" ("Dialectics" 149).

France's commitment to social change has meant that he has remained open to "new critical methods, new research, new pedagogies" that might challenge current structural inequities ("Theory" 288). Because his commitment to social change has thus never petrified into an orthodoxy, he has remained able simultaneously to appreciate and critically interrogate scholarship that other leftist scholars might simply dismiss. In a recent JAC response to a cluster of articles on the "posthuman," for example, France says that he appreciates the "pleasure in contemplating this escape from the limits of corporeality," but he asks why technology is treated so "unproblematically" in these essays, what their status as "texts inhabiting a shared historical moment" might tell us about our material present. And, after offering a compelling materialist reading of some aspects of technology, he manages to extend the idea of the "posthuman" into a materialist pedagogy: "[T]he posthuman condition [these essays] help us imagine underscores the need for a posthumanist pedagogy. In a culture as saturated with technology as ours is, it is no longer possible (if it ever was) to determine whether a certain sequence of information is 'software' that we produced or 'conditioning' that produced us" (175, 182).

This kind of critical generosity that seeks to question and to extend but not to obliterate has always characterized France's scholarship. In the "Assigning Places" article, for example, France examines the way in which David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's innovative and popu-
lar composition anthology, *Ways of Reading*, constructs the student. His analysis is thoroughly dialectical, articulating both what is, materially, and what could be. He credits *Ways of Reading* with extending "the range of rhetorical options for student-writers," but he finds that it continues to privatize rhetoric. He makes clear, however, that he considers the text to offer the *possibility* of a more thoroughly materialist rhetoric, and thus he calls for "extending—but not eschewing—the critical textual practices exemplified by *Ways of Reading*" (601, 607).

With his passing, France has left us with questions still essential to pursue—in particular, questions concerning the continued relevance of cultural materialism in the wake of a professional "backlash," and questions concerning the function and possibilities of the composition class. His own pursuit of such questions—built on a base of rigorous inquiry and ethical commitment—never waned. France's critical questioning of the cultural contexts of composition teaching, together with his intellectual generosity, remain a model that scholars committed to the radical possibilities of rhetoric would do well to follow.

**Works Cited**


