

Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction

Edited by

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Response: Curricular Responsibilities and Professional Definition

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The essays in this volume pose three questions for the profession of writing. The first two are fully explicit, the last less so:

1. How should we understand writing?
2. Given our understanding of writing, should first-year writing courses continue in their current form or in any form?
3. Given an understanding of writing that extends far beyond the bounds of the first-year writing course, should the profession remain so tied to and defined by that curricular responsibility?

The first is, on the face of it, a typical and nondisruptive question, part of the regular debate of the profession. The conclusions from that debate might direct our thoughts and empirical investigations in one direction or another. Our conclusions may also lead us to new ways to organize the classroom and new things to do and say during class hours. Nonetheless, debate over our object of investigation and our consequent approach to the classroom does not on the face of it require major changes in the institutional arrangements of the profession or the curricular space where we meet students.

However, almost every essay in this volume argues that what we now understand compels us, if we are honest, to give up a curricular space that is not only grounded in a wrong set of concepts (here labeled as GWSI) that no matter how reconceived, is a curricular space that just will not work. A few of the authors offer less radical alternatives, but almost all say that first-year writing, in its current form, must go.

The last issue, of professional identity, although it arises explicitly in only a few of the essays, seems to permeate most, as first-year writing is treated as distracting us from the full range of our subject and denying us full citizenship as an academic discipline.

Professional identity, curricular space, and reigning beliefs about writing clearly are related. Although rhetoric has a long history that predates first-year writing courses or even the university by thousands of years, our current configuration of the profession has grown out of the pedagogic responsibilities of a particular curricular site invented in the 1890s and rapidly expanded in the middle of this century. Accordingly, much of our research and theory has been focused on first-year composition and its remedial extensions. However, recent developments in research and theory have reminded us to look beyond the first-year writing course to notice writing is pervasive in the academy and world beyond; moreover, in those manifold sites of writing we have seen practices and commitments that are not locatable within the specific curricular setting of first-year writing courses.

Although the distinction between writing in composition courses and writing at other sites in the academy has been recurrently observed and has inspired various reformist movements, as noted by Connors and Russell, in recent years research in disciplinary, professional and nonacademic settings has created a wider ranging intellectual and professional basis to reconsider writing. The new research and related theorizing have revived and reinterpreted classical rhetorical concepts such as rhetorical situation and genre, but have also reached toward new ideas from sociology, cognitive psychology, science studies, linguistics, organizational theory, and other disciplines that map the complexity of people's actions in the world.

This exploration of the meaning of writing in the world has gone hand in hand with a pedagogic reaching out through business, legal, technical, and other professional writing, as well as writing across the curriculum. When successful, the dynamics of that pedagogic reaching out become almost irresistible: As teachers and researchers we become more intimately aware of the specialized literacy practices; students seeking the tools of participation in their chosen disciplinary and professional fields are highly motivated, focused, and knowledgeable; the faculty members of those disciplines and professions we work with come to appreciate both the value of our teaching and the rhetorical expertise and perspective we bring to bear on the communicative workings of their profession and the development of their students. We find research projects that engage us as intellectual equals with colleagues in many departments. Institutional authority often increases with this heightened sense of reality and value. As teachers and researchers of writing we find a professional respect that has been hard to come by when we have been solely associated with a

required first-year course (such are the morals of Brannon's narrative.) It is hardly an accident that those writing programs that have achieved some degree of programmatic autonomy and institutional respect frequently have strong technical communication or writing across the curriculum components.

SITUATEDNESS AND ENGAGEMENT

So there are powerful and good reasons to want to define the research and pedagogic scope of our field broadly, reaching far beyond first-year writing courses. These powerful and good reasons are all built on a pair of observations hammered home in almost every one of the chapters in this volume: Effective writing speaks to its situation and effective writing is a deeply engaged form of participation. Petraglia sums these two up as a sense of the genuinely transactive—a sense that incorporates both the writer's perception of the consequentiality of the circumstances and the writer's commitment to influencing the unfolding events.

These observations are not new to this decade, or this century, or even this millennium, as Goggin, Connors, and Russell remind us, but recent research and scholarship have given us many more reasons for believing them and much more detailed pictures of how these two principles of situatedness and engagement work themselves out in a wide and differentiated set of cases and circumstances. The analyses of this volume draw together much of this recent work and advance the investigation into the operations of engaged participation through literate interaction within concrete situations; particularly important in this regard are Hill and Resnick's invocation of the work in situated cognition, Petraglia's drawing on the resources of cognitive psychology, Russell's presentation of activity theory, Freedman's application of linguistics and genre theory, and Royer's explication of Whitehead's pragmatic phenomenology. Each of these extend our ability to look into situation and the engaged self in significant ways.

As we deepen our understanding of situated engagement, pedagogic practices based on a generalized model of writing skills seem increasingly thin and pale. The recurrent critique against generalized writing instruction, which, as Connors retells, is often directed against the first-year writing course gains a new force and credibility. The essays in this volume, following that tradition, both make the larger critique against the teaching of unsituated writing skills and call into question the viability of an across the board first-year course. First-year writing as currently designed, almost all the authors suggest, is neither sufficiently situated in meaningful and complex activities that provide the real challenges of writing (Hill & Resnick concentrate most fully on this argument) nor sufficiently engaging to evoke the deep commitment and creativity from which serious writing

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flows (Royer most fully articulates this). Although a few of the authors suggest ways to raise issues of located engagement (particularly Kaufer and Dunmire and Russell) in the first-year composition class or to restructure the classroom so as to increase the actual engagement (particularly Jolliffe and Kemp), current practices in first-year writing courses are largely dismissed as being versions of GWSI with the strong implication that any across-the-board course taught to all students will be enmeshed in GWSI. Several of the essays, including the introductory essay, explicitly raise arguments for the abolition of first-year composition (e.g., Connors, Brannon, Hill & Resnick, Petraglia, and Freedman).

THE CURRICULAR REALITY OF GWSI

Although I thoroughly agree that situatedness and engagement are central to all good writing and all effective writing pedagogy, I think we need to be much more careful about characterizing both the range of practices currently enacted in the composition classroom and the possibilities for situated engagement in writing as we come to understand the curricular space of the first-year class more fully. Composition encompasses a complex history and a wide range of current practices that need to be observed before we adopt totalizing rejections.

Certainly there are large and visible GWSI elements in the institutional mandate that has created the first-year writing course. Institutional motives for creating massive (although usually underfunded) compulsory writing courses for this past century are almost always based on something like a GWSI set of assumptions. Administration and faculty usually want their students able to write sufficiently well to participate competently in the undergraduate curriculum. The desired competence is often described in general writing skills terms, and the charge to those delegated to teach composition is to instruct students in these general skills.

This curricular charge of GWSI has created one of the central problems for the profession: to put meaning and life into an unpromising curricular space. Just because we have been funded with a reductionist notion of our task has not meant that we have been bound to follow through in a reductionist way. Over the years the pages of the composition journals have been filled with ways in which writing teachers have developed to turn their first-year writing classes into situated and meaningful occasions that engage students in motivated writing. As Freedman observes, situatedness and engagement cannot be made up out of whole cloth; students must feel the force of the situation and be drawn into it powerfully before they take seriously any explicit discussion of genres or any writing technique. As the writing begins to matter, the students implicitly orient to the situation, with focal attention on the statements they want to make rather than on the

techne by which they bring the statements into being. Nonetheless, as they are struggling with their implicit resources to bring the statement into being, they are most in need of, and receptive to, specific technical instruction that directly helps them. The writing must matter before the reflection on writing matters. This insight elaborates an insight gained by every generation of writing teachers. The problem has always been to bring some compelling sense of reality to the writing classroom.

Because the curricular charge has been so thin and unsatisfactory, successful writing teachers, the ones who stay with it, find their own *modus vivendi*—that is, their mode of bringing life to the tasks of writing. Writing teachers may build engagement around students' personal development—students' increasing self-consciousness and articulateness about themselves and their own histories, their entry into adulthood, and their career concerns. Writing teachers may build engagement around students' excitement over entering a university of ideas; their current concerns about war and peace and ecology and multiculturalism; the power of particular texts; the endless discoveries to be made through library research; reflection on language, culture, advertising, rhetoric, or semiotics; or any subject the teacher's enthusiasm could draw students into. Both Jolliffe and Kaufer and Dunmire's suggestions, despite being placed within the revolutionary context of this volume, fall well within this tradition of finding ways of increasing student involvement in writing.

Each of us might find some of these means of bringing life to the writing class preferable to others. Some we might argue are more important to students or more likely to serve the students' needs in the long run. All of these approaches can and have worked for teachers committed to them. If anything, the great variety of these approaches suggests something of the enormity of writing, that so many aspects of life can be enhanced through writing.

Until each instructor finds a vitality that activates the particular students gathered in each class, the writing course can indeed be lifeless. A writing class that does not elicit motivation, hard work, and attention does little for students' ability to write. At best, you get a coerced, transparent, and unsatisfying imitation of communication. Even when one locates the power, the power is not always with you. I have been there, and I have known, as all writing teachers have known, death at 8 a.m. on Wednesday morning.

STUDENTS' REALITY AND THE REALITY OF THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSE

I also know enough of the life of the first-year course to know the potential importance of the first-year course as a curricular site for writing. In particular, first-year students entering a university and marking a major transition in their life have needs the first-year writing courses can and often

do meet. First-year students, as novices in the complex literate environments of the university, are engaged in many transformations in their literacy practices; they can use curricular support.

Surviving and then thriving at the university shape the psychological habitat of students and can motivate writing that engages all that they are at that moment. First-year students are immediately concerned with defining who they are in their new situation, how they can participate successfully as students, and how their new competencies and identity change their view of the world they have just come from. The world of legal briefs or environmental impact statements or corporate reports that they may be writing 5 or 10 years from now may be pretty hazy, but the literature essay and the chemistry lab report due next week are about as real as you can get, followed closely by the sociology paper due the week after. Students reflect on themselves as students in the language of students, as they engage with disciplines in the role of students. Moreover, the tasks they are given as students are student tasks, not the tasks of professionals, even when the assignments consciously attempt to model professional practice. The students write student papers, even when those papers look like corporate reports. The freshman writing course is precisely an introduction into the literacy practices of being a university student.

Indeed to locate the students directly into the specialized discourses of advanced professionalism without giving them a chance to mediate those discourses with whatever discourses they use to contemplate their lives, values, and goals as students makes it difficult for them to locate themselves as anything but the most trivial actors in specialized discourses. As students they are necessarily only marginal figures, novices, within disciplines and professions. They cannot frame their own agendas for those disciplines, nor can they see the flexibility within the current literate practices that give them the opportunity to move professional discourses to new terrain. To jump directly into professional discourses without that kind of reflective discourse that is often developed in first-year writing may leave students alienated or cynical about discourses that they do not see the sense of. For those that survive and succeed within those discourses, their accomplishment and satisfaction are limited by passivity, unarticulated ambivalences, and inability to frame creative personally committed agendas. When they are cast in fully professional roles, only a few discover the means to address the full creative possibilities of their nominally empowered roles. A number of the difficulties in contemporary professional life are I believe traceable to the nonreflective and unempowered way many people are introduced to their disciplinary discourses.

If we start analyzing the first-year writing course we find it is a very real place. We need to look at the students, at the institution, at the

undergraduate curriculum, at the issues of the time and place, and a thousand other factors that might come to bear on locating the course. Every generation, every college, and every group of students gathered in the class is different, and we must attend to those differences. There is no simple prescription for locating where this class is, but with that analysis we can create the engaged situation that will make the writing real, important, and challenging.

WHERE ARE THE STUDENTS?

Given the concern of the authors in this volume for situatedness and engagement, and their obvious desire to engage students in more meaningful discourse, I would have hoped there would have been more concrete analysis of the situation and engagement of students, who they are, what drives them, what puzzles them, what they need, and what they perceive they need. Only Freedman and Geisler turn to those issues with energy, but still only from the perspective of locating the situations that discourage engagement.

Perhaps composition classes are everywhere unengaging and sterile, and it is not worth inquiring into what engagements students have found there. However, I doubt that, and I would want extensive wide-ranging empirical evidence before I would believe it. One of composition's continuing strengths, at times to a fault, has been its attention to the students. Often composition is the only course where students find any attention, the one course where they can start to reflect on who they are and how they can best participate in their new situation. In almost every institution I have been at, students have said that their first-year writing teacher is the only teacher that knew them. Moreover, because first-year students are so concerned about their new literate environment in the university, they are often more ready to work on developing their writing than institutionally savvy sophomores and juniors who have already settled on a way to deal with college writing requirements. Before we cast off or entirely redesign first-year writing, we have some obligation to understand the role of the course in the lives of first-year students and the kinds of successes it has had that have encouraged it to move in the directions it has.

Nor do the essays in this volume provide much analysis of the situation of higher education, which they, for the most part, dissolve simply into preprofessionalism. Although the authors in this volume, if asked directly, would likely assert their belief in the importance of the university as a formative experience for each student and as an important institution in contemporary life and would likely deny any simplistic distinction between the real world outside the university walls and an insubstantial unreality

within, the discursive priorities expressed in some of these essays would seem to indicate otherwise. Where preferences are expressed, the language of the workplace is preferred to any personal, developmental, educational, reflective, philosophical, cultural, or other discourse usually associated with the university experience. I certainly believe the discourses of the disciplines and professions are extremely important and not adequately understood. I have devoted much of my research career to explicating them and much of my pedagogic career in advancing their teaching at all levels. I do not, however, believe they simply ought to displace all the other discourses in which we engage.

The failure to analyze concretely the wide range of discourses that make up university life is especially disappointing given the deep historical and institutional understanding of the university that several of the authors in this volume have expressed elsewhere. The undergraduate years are a time of moving from prior assumptions into a broader, more reflective view of life and a growing commitment to particular ways of being and acting in world, integrating greater learning and literacy. Geisler points to the absence of this reflective literate activity in secondary education. The first-year writing course has often served as precisely a place that introduces students to the critical reflective discourse that provides the medium for the undergraduate experience.

The university is a real and special place. It is one of the most influential of institutions in the modern world in defining substantial parts of our culture and in producing knowledge and opinions that shape public, cultural, and technological agendas. Moreover, it increasingly provides a compulsory passage for those who will participate most fully and powerfully in our society. In the past the culture of the university may have reflected a class ideal and a university education served as a class marker, but in this half century the university has increasingly formed the cultural engine for all of society. (This I take as the ultimate consequence of Russell's observation about the appropriation of academic discourses in public discourse.) Students standing at the front door of this unusual culture can use some early guidance to its literate practices and in finding their individual ways to find engagement in this important life passage. They need to take part fully in the literate activities of the university before they can take part fully in the activities of any profession or discipline.

DISCURSIVE DIFFERENCES, TRANSFERABILITY, AND FLEXIBILITY

In setting out this argument for the value of a first-year writing course I need to take up one final point: the transferability of literate practices (raised most explicitly by Petraglia and Russell). If, as I agree with the authors,

discourses vary one from another and competence in one is no guarantee of competence in another, of what value is a writing course not geared directly to the practices the student will ultimately participate in? A student may have the most engaged and exciting time writing papers on the social psychology of being a Generation X unemployable, but how much will that help to write the architectural proposal that will get him or her a job and will have an impact on society? In fact, becoming skilled in such a culturally critical discourse may teach counterproductive habits and commit students to discursive styles that will be inappropriate in their later professional encounters. The student may come to believe that there is only one valued way of writing and their entire identity may become bound up with it, so that they would spurn other discourses. Although this scenario may sound far fetched, we have all observed discursive chauvinism among some of our colleagues and their students.

The answer, however, is not to avoid teaching any discourse that may not ultimately be useful. After all, how can we know which practice or practices will be most essential 5 or 10 years from now for an 18-year-old? Even if we could know, how good is it to be able to write only legal briefs and nothing else? In any event, how can we restrain our own impulses to urge those discourses each of us may individually value?

The answer cannot be to shelter students from discourses and limit their experience to what we imagine might be useful to them. The answer is to make visible and real over the period of a student's education a variety of discourses, so that the students can reorient to and evaluate new discourses as they become visible and relevant. A course that spans boundaries and sits precisely at a juncture in the discursive lives of students, as the first-year course does, is a place that can effectively make that point. Moreover, if the first-year course is combined with upper division writing instruction in relation to the major, students can experience and reflect on the multiplicity of discourse.

The best way to learn the power of writing is to write and become engaged in a compelling discourse. Then you learn that the hard work of writing well is worth it. The best way to learn flexibility in writing is to become engaged in a second discourse, and perhaps a third. When you experience the rewards of writing well in one domain, you are likely to demand of yourself that same high level of participation in any discourse you will engage in the future. The lesson that it is worth working hard at writing is perhaps the most important lesson, and it is the one most transferable. The lesson only goes wrong if you cannot differentiate the nature of the second discourse and keep trying to reassert the strategies of the first. More integrations, more fully, into more discursive systems is the answer, not fewer. Rhetorical flexibility is further increased if students are given the tools of rhetorical analysis that allow them to explicitly recognize,

analyze, and respond to the particularities of the discursive systems and situations that they may move into, as Russell suggests. Although as Petraglia notes, cognitive studies indicate that transferability is hardly to be taken for granted, studies also suggest that transferability is increased when specific skills of recognizing and comparing situations are taught along with criteria for adapting procedures to meet the new situation.

ONE SITE AMONG MANY, BUT NOT ONE TO BE AVOIDED

Seeing the activities of composition courses within the complex of all the writings of the academy and the world reveals the first-year course as a major site of instruction and support, but not the only site. Moreover, the kinds of writing appropriate to the first-year course are particular, and do not define good writing in other situations. I agree with many of the contributors that our understanding of writing has been held back by too close an association with issues framed around the first year course, only the more basic forms of writing, and the earlier stages of writing development. If we wish to understand writing and support practices at all levels, we need to take a broad view of writing in all locations of society, from the earliest developmental practices through the most skilled and specialized writings in philosophy, the law, international negotiations, corporate management, political journalism, or literature.

However, taking this broad view still allows us to remain responsible to a major social need that provides much of the social and institutional support for the profession. Because law is now engaged in complex corporate dealings and regulation of many aspects of government and society, this does not mean lawyers have stopped basic criminal and contract practice. Because medicine is developing a complex understanding of the human organism in biological, genetic, environmental, social, and psychological contexts and is learning to deal with complex and rare conditions this does not mean that it can disown family medicine, as it has discovered to its chagrin. Rather, the knowledge that both fields have developed in the more esoteric parts of their practice provide new resources and contexts for the traditional points of contact with most people.

The base of the writing profession in first-year composition has proven remarkably productive in the last 25 years, reinvigorating writing instruction at all levels, from kindergarten to graduate school. Knowledge of writing processes, journals, invention, and drafting techniques has pervaded almost every primary and secondary school in this country and is influencing educational practice around the world. Collaborative learning, although starting in writing laboratories, proved so successful when brought to the freshman writing course, that it is now found at all levels of education in a wide range of disciplines. Writing across the

curriculum, with all its multiple impacts, was born as an extension of the first-year writing program. As we now begin to learn more of the specialized nature of writing practices that lead us to see limitations to these pedagogical developments, it would be short-sighted to ignore the tremendous educational accomplishment built on freshman writing. How much more productive a pedagogical site will it be as we develop more sophisticated analyses of the situatedness, activities, and local engagement to be found there?

Recognizing the particularity of this site of instruction is part of redefining the profession to be greater than that one site. Drawing first-year writing as part of a much larger picture may grant some dignity to that location, a dignity that will help lift it out of some of the exploitations and oppressions that have regularly meant we have had too many students for not enough trained (or even untrained) staff, who are paid too little.

On the other hand, denying just that site where students, faculty, and administrations recognize and accept a need may remove the basis for the profession. If there were no first-year writing programs to be taught and overseen, how many writing professionals would most English departments support? If there were no first-year writing course, how many of the now-autonomous writing programs could avoid being folded back into other units? If there were no strong first-year writing program, how many writing across the curriculum programs could resist the drift of loosely monitored writing-intensive requirements and the habit of disciplines to make their rhetoric invisible in the service of epistemic authority? If there were no highly visible writing program, how many institutions (other than technical universities) would recognize more advanced writing courses as appropriate college work and how many nominally advanced courses would reformulate to pick up the needs no longer served by the vanished first-year course? If the first-year course did not keep literacy on the university agenda, how much research into issues of literacy would be supported except in colleges of education, and what would happen then to research on the advanced literacy practices of disciplines, professions, and the workplace?

It is not easy to wish away the base on which the profession has been built, just because that base is troublesome, not always well conceived, limiting, and overburdened with too many needs to address simply and with inadequate resources. Nor is it necessarily wise to wish it away; nor right. With our new understandings of writing as they are presented here, let us address the troubles, reconceive the course, place it in relation to our broader view, and find intelligent ways to meet the needs and gather the resources. That is the right thing to do. That will provide the continuing support for our much broader inquiry into the literate workings of all aspects of contemporary social life.