Perspectives on Writing: Theory, Research, Practice
Kathleen Blake Yancey and Brian Huot, Series Editors

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History, Reflection, and Narrative:
The Professionalization of
Composition, 1963–1983

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Mary Rosner
Beth Boehm
Debra Journet
University of Louisville

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Charles Bazerman, Charles Cooper, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lee Odell

Randy Cauthen, interviewer
edited by Pamela Takayoshi

Randy Cauthen: There has been an argument about the professionalization of the discipline as a whole that it was better being on the outside looking in as far as intellectual purity and so on. Would any of you care to comment on that?

Lee Odell: I think maybe the price composition studies and rhetoric has paid to get in has been too high. I have reservations about how far post-structuralism or critical theories are going to take us. There is a kind of comfort in saying “Oh, well we are doing some of the same things that the literature people, the big boys, are doing,” and this may be taking away from the sorts of things that composition studies and rhetoric should
really be doing. You’re more likely to see studies that involve critical theory now rather than studies of the composing process, but there is also an awful lot we don’t know about writing outside of school. I hate to see us give that up just to get on the inside.

Charles Bazerman: There is an awful lot that people in other fields are learning about discursive practices that should be of great interest to people who are concerned with writing. Linguistics have changed, at least in some quarters, a great deal, and there is a return to some of the issues that were excluded by Chomsky-ism. So part of the question is—inside and outside of what. There were enormous motivations for some of us while we were on the outside (and we’re still in many ways on the outside) to get inside and to do things we thought were important. There are many benefits for being on various kinds of inside. The one place that composition and rhetoric hasn’t cracked yet at all is elite institutions—these are places of privilege, and these are places where composition and rhetoric could enter into a variety of conversations that are intellectually and socially very important. Getting inside of that is important, although I have very mixed feelings about the prices to be paid. On the other hand, maybe now that we are comfortably in, we can get more courage to assert where our own work leads us.

Charles Cooper: Of course, once you are brought in with tenure at an elite university, as both Chuck and I were, then you really can do anything you want and nobody seems to mind. I was very comfortable for nearly 20 years in the UCSD literature department, but I actually had very little interaction with most of my colleagues, and yet they were entirely supportive of what I was doing. I’m sure it struck most of them as a little weird, but I was productive and professionally involved and carried out my administrative assignment responsibly. My work was accepted and credited for what it was, including a textbook and a long period of consulting with the state Department of Education to develop a writing assessment. I don’t know where we would go if not to English departments. We could go back to schools of education. That’s where I started out, and I was very comfortable there. My interests, research, graduate courses—they were all encouraged. I don’t know where the outside is. It must be different places at different campuses. The fundamental problem in research universities is bringing assistant professors of composition studies into English departments and getting them tenured.

Richard Lloyd-Jones: What characterizes English departments is the isolation of specialists in the programs. Medievalists barely talk to the Renaissance people, and so on. Furthermore, only people over 50 distinguish themselves as being Victorian or Romantic; others distinguish themselves by the kind of criticism they do, and they stand in isolation. When we stand in isolation, we are just like them. We are not an isolated subgroup. Noncomposition people pay us the courtesy of noninvolvement. They treat us the same way they would treat someone in chemistry or political science. We have our place, but it is not their place. They are only vaguely interested in what we are doing. We have a cadre of people who train the graduate students and supervise them to teach the freshmen and sophomores. But the regular English faculty don’t really want to know anything about it because they are pretty sure it involves more work than they want to do. Mutual toleration is what I would say rather than really having a heart.

LO: How long can English departments flourish as English departments with that kind of isolation and with being able to say “I am sticking out this tiny little bit of turf and I am not going to have it include anything larger”? That seems to me deadly.
RLJ: I think it is deadly, but I think it applies to the whole institution. I don’t think it applies to just English. I think it applies to almost all the big institutions in one way or another.

RC: What do you think can be done, or is there anything that can be done? I see it as part of the increasing atomization of the modern world. There is a huge degree of overspecialization of society as a whole.

RLJ: It’s not going to be solved by English departments alone. The specialization is seen most dramatically in English, math, and foreign languages, where at the big schools you have two or three tiers of faculty. You have the TA, who is malleable and supervisible. You have the adjunct, who is very temporary, often a semester at a time, quite unsupervised, and often given very little support. Then you have the tenured faculty. Those three tiers are all labeled with an institutional name, and they are like the two worlds that Disraeli talks about—the rich and the poor. They never talk to each other. If the graduate faculty talks to grad students, they talk about dissertations, they don’t talk about teaching titles. We have created this monster, which seems to be the lighter view of mass education at the post-secondary level. But it is headed for collapse. We have made a compromise with the schools. We haven’t figured out how to deal with the problems yet, and I think somewhere in the next decade or decade and a half, there is going to be a big national explosion deciding how higher institutions are going to operate.

RC: The CCCC declaration on students’ rights about language came out of the large social movements of the ’60s. I wonder about the place of the profession now, given the fact that the country seems to be lurching fairly consistently toward the right.

RLJ: I think that the lurching to the right is a temporary situation, such as censorship. You always have it—we have a periodical battle about books. What we teach about language is always potentially subversive. As soon as you start saying that language adapts to different situations, it defines the audience, it defines reality, you’re bound to get at our real human differences and therefore, it is always potentially going to irritate one group or another—right, left, middle, whatever.

CB: No matter the politics or configurations of a society, literacy is at the heart of the organization of society, and it is something that needs to be understood, needs to be supported to make the society work well, to give people the ability to change and participate. So that’s a permanent charge we have, no matter what the politics are of instruction, scholarship, or research. Literacy is an enormous aspect of human life. English departments have historically varying rationales, which they have been willing to articulate or not articulate and which the public either supports or not supports. For a long time, that rationale was the maintenance of a cultural heritage. With the separation of church and state, it took on many of the values and traditions that might have been done with religion. In recent years, it’s taken on several different functions, and it has rejected that role. One of those functions has been as an agent of cultural change. This is a role which has not made it popular with the public in the way that the maintenance of the heritage and the great books was a popular role. English departments were also places where oppositional and leftist forces could flourish. That works a little bit with cultural change, but it is slightly different. Given the political moves of the country and the fads and interests coming out of English departments, it may or may not be possible to find a rationale that would maintain large public funding and large interest in majors. That is a very complicated issue. Their maintenance is
different from our maintenance unless we attach ourselves to their issues. I'm very much for those issues which the English department becomes a depository for—cultural concerns, justice, and contemplation. If we perceive composition only in terms of cultural change and cultural critique issues, though, I think we are missing the boat of our larger charge.

LO: I think we do miss that boat, and I understand the larger charge to be an understanding of literacy and the development of literacy so that people cannot simply adapt to our society but flourish in it, change it, work with it. I see that as our charge. But increasingly, composition studies is moving away from that charge. A couple of years ago at MLA, I argued that college English department faculty ought to have a view of literacy that would let them think about what happens in second grade classrooms, and people in the audience said: “I don’t know what happens in a second grade classroom. Who am I to presume or tell second grade teachers?” They are no one to presume, and the reason they cannot presume is they don’t have a comprehensive view of literacy that includes second graders, that includes people outside the academy. We are moving away from a comprehensive view toward a more narrow view that defines us and establishes a platform of ourselves in a scholarly way. Whatever we may think of the larger society, if we cannot develop any of the literacy in the larger society and make it coherent, then those platforms are worthless. I see us moving away from that charge...and I think that's terrible.

RLJ: The things that you were talking about this morning—the emphasis on an alternate language for visual rhetoric—indicates the degree to which some people in the field are immediately concerned with how you shape and embody knowledge for a larger public. But the other side is...when you commit yourself to academic language, you have already made a statement about who's in and who's out. Seeking a sort of professional identity status is a way of isolating ourselves. The very movement toward professionalization is a movement which draws from the larger responsibilities of society.

LO: It's going to take courage to think in some very different ways. We are being pressed to get into distance language at my university, and I'm going to teach a satellite writing course next fall. I have no idea how I am going to do it, and I certainly don't share my president's view that this is the panacea that this is going to save higher education. But it is clear that we cannot live in the 1950s. I think English departments are peculiarly likely to want to live in the 1950s.

RLJ: The nature of their studies is to look backward.

CC: My son-in-law consults with a state university system in getting the process of distance education moving along. And there will be no turning back, I'm sure of that. The focus is on developing courses that stand on their own, bringing together into a neat package whatever e-mail, Web, video, or text resources are required. You can do your coursework at home, in your car, or wherever you can plug in. You can complete a degree from Peoria—or Paraguay—if you can pay for the courses.

LO: But the irony is that this technological advance is an intellectual retreat. Once again, people are talking about delivery content as a synonym for education. A couple of friends are teaching a satellite course to 80 people. Because they are trying not to just deliver content, the work load is staggering for them. Eighty papers just came in the other day...80 papers...long papers...hypertext papers!

CB: In a competitive market, the possibility of serious interactivity is becoming very technologically supported and in ways that make it less of a burden...not just the papers that get mailed and you have to grade more papers, but there
are more possibilities. It seems to me that any institution with the technical know-how, working together with faculty, can develop more interesting products than canned lectures. That may be too hard to do, too much of an up-front commitment.

LO: The technology exists so that classrooms can be expanded. People in this classroom can see people in other classrooms 1,000 miles away. But try interacting among not 30 people, but 80 or 100 people, and you can no longer think of it as a system for delivery content. But what people want most to see is the expansion of the delivery of content. The people who see the technology as solutions oversimplify the conceptual problems—it is going to be an enormous amount of work to bring that off and there still has to be a human being who does a lot to the conceptual work.

RC: Well, we have switched gears a little bit. What is your perspective on the internal conflicts within the field of composition—current traditional to expressionist to cognitivist to social movement? Do you think that those kinds of conflicts, which have occasionally gotten extraordinarily heated, are inevitable as part of professionalization?

LO: A little conflict can heighten or clarify in some way, but finally, I think it is very sad because we lose something in these battles. In looking vigorously at what this will do and what it won’t do, we simply reject this as positivist or as expressivist. In place of thinking where that expressive element might fit in some larger scheme, we deny it, and I think that is just destructive to the profession. But we try to act as though things are wholly included or excluded.

CB: I agree very much with what Lee is saying about the range of validity and intersections. Situating cognitive studies and the relationship between cognition and social practices is very big right now. I know several projects that are at

that intersection now. So that’s to the good. But certain publications get more cited and more read than others—for example, those things of mine that are clearly identifiable within some category get read and cited. The work I’ve been doing, which is trying to create integrations, by and large goes unnoticed. The disparity has been quite amazing to me about the difference, and in fact, I don’t see issues I could pursue in isolation—I have to move to these integrated accounts of what I want to grasp. But, the integrative accounts are just not of interest...are hard for people to read...

RLJ: They’re hard for people to quote.

CC: I think these camps or divisions produced a lot of posturing, meanness, and friction, but I think we have to live with that. As literacy specialists especially, we have to embrace any new theory of language at least to figure out what it has to offer, no matter how outlying or threatening it may be. I have always believed that the more theories and methods you know, the greater number of choices you have as a mentor and researcher and curriculum specialist.