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# Refiguring Composition Through Theory

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REFIGURING COMPOSITION  
THROUGH THEORY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2009

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In this dissertation, I argue that curricular choices in Composition are overdetermined by the academic labor system and its negative effect on the status of composition theory. Despite the growth of disciplinary knowledge, composition programs are still staffed largely with underpaid and under supported faculty and graduate students, many of whom have not studied composition theory in any depth. In some institutions, a single compositionist may act as Writing Program Administrator, supervising a temporary staff. While some colleges and universities have taken steps to reform the teaching and staffing of composition, too many have not.

I intertwine theory and narrative as a means of arguing my central premises. I contend that this combination 1) can make theory more accessible, 2) can encourage scholars to consider more carefully the effects of context on theorizing, and 3) can improve the status of teaching narratives.

I argue that, in the corporatized university, Composition studies and composition theory are devalued. In order to rationalize the wide use of contingent and graduate student labor and a renewed emphasis on assessment, administrators must treat composition theory as superfluous. Compositionists become token luxuries, unnecessary to the curriculum when persons with no

expertise in Composition can be hired to teach writing. Moreover, administrators maintain material circumstances for faculty that resist theory's incorporation into composition teaching and curricula.

Further, I contend that three models of composition teaching, which I believe can be used in reductive and theoretically weak ways—grammar study, focus on academic discourse, and assessment preparation—are perpetuated because they support the means and goals of the corporate university. This matters greatly, I will explain, because: 1.) the quality of composition teaching suffers; 2.) the largely untenured, under-prepared and underpaid workforce suffers; and 3.) the state of composition teaching will not change en masse unless we directly address the intersection of composition theory and composition labor. Finally, I describe the ways I employ composition theory in my pedagogical practice and in my public writing.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Writing on the Wall

I write on walls.

I remember sitting on the floor in my father's study, yellow Crayola in hand, writing on the paneling. It was faux white birch, filled with nooks and crannies to simulate the grain, and I enjoyed the sound and feeling of the colored wax running back and forth over it. My mother, of course, was not happy.

When I began school, I was surprised to discover that writing on walls was officially sanctioned—as long as one did not stray from the great slab of green chalkboard. This limited space contented me for a time, but by the ninth grade I had graduated to the doors of the Girls' Room stalls, writing snippets of song lyrics I thought others might enjoy during their visits. Neither good at hiding nor lying, I was always caught, always pleading guilty. I spent more than one afternoon scrubbing desks in reconciliation.

I learned to put my habit behind me for some time, until I was married, in fact, and moved into my new husband's home. Like many bachelors, he was not one to decorate, so in room after room the mismatched furniture was pressed against bare white walls. Canvas! I began in the over-sized bathroom. Sharpie in hand and book of Walt Whitman's poetry in front of me, I held my breath as I wrote on the wall: "What is the grass?" I couldn't help but pause and look behind me, waiting for a parent, a teacher, or a homeowners association to scold me

and tear the marker away. At once the realization set in: My house. I make the rules.

By the end of six months, the bathroom walls were covered. Reactions to my “little art project,” as my aghast mother-in-law called it, were mixed. My father quipped, “Hey, did someone break in and vandalize the place?” Several friends offered me slips of paper with suggestions for additions. (Most, notably, would not take pen in hand and write on my walls themselves; instead, they insisted I perpetrate the crime.) Whether approving or disapproving, however, observers used the same adjective to describe my decoration again and again: “Oh, Amy, you are so brave!”

Why brave? I wondered.

I considered, the new teacher in me asserting herself. The average person is rarely given the authority to choose what writing is publicly shared. The teacher chooses which students’ papers are hung on the bulletin board, for instance, and the editor says which readers’ letters will be printed in the newspaper. By writing on my walls, I was displaying a bit of power. Not any great power, perhaps, but enough to elicit emotional responses from guests. And I liked it.

I felt this same power thirteen years ago when I began teaching high school English. Students dutifully copied whatever I wrote on the blackboard. What’s more, I dictated what students could write in essays—both topic and form—thereby controlling both the display and production of words in my classroom. I soon discovered the complicated repercussions of this control, thanks to a determined young man in my very first freshman writing class whom I

will give the pseudonym Robby. I had assigned a summary of “The Most Dangerous Game” to be written in an objective five-paragraph essay. As I had been taught in my education classes, I prepared a grading rubric, clearly outlining my expectations for their drafts, and shared it with the students. Robby, however, ignored my rubric, and instead created a newspaper, complete with pictures, headlines, and flashy descriptions of the exotic locales. I liked it. His recounting of the plot, through interviews and “eye witness” accounts, was mostly accurate, taking a few liberties with the story in order to facilitate his newspaper format. Yet, I did not know what to do with it. His style, format, and play with the details rendered my careful plan for assessment obsolete. I floundered for a sense of how to grade it unbound from the rows and columns of my rubric. I wrestled with issues of fairness if I did not hold him to the same standards as his classmates. I wondered if he should be made to learn a lesson in “following directions.” Finally, I gave him a C. I still recall my marginal note to him: “While creative and fun, this paper does not conform to the assignment directions. Please rewrite ASAP.”

This student defied directions. He stepped outside the bounds of my rules. He followed his own creative whim. He had, in a sense, written on the walls, made the classroom his own canvas.

In retrospect, I see my resistance to his actions as reflective of the theoretical stance behind my teaching at that time. George Hillocks’s study of writing teachers demonstrated that they are always operating from a theory, even if not always consciously. Even among those who claim no pedagogical theory, “it is clear that underlying their work are what amount to relatively simple,

practical theories that enable teachers to order activities . . .” (*Ways of Thinking* 113). That is, while a teacher may not consciously reflect on theory, there is nonetheless a set of beliefs about the nature of learning and of writing serving as the foundation for instruction. Furthermore, Hillocks notes that “the assumptions we make and the theories we hold have a powerful effect on what and how we teach” (*Teaching Writing* 28). In my case, I was practicing a mode of education that Paulo Freire criticizes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, one which, Freire claims, transforms teachers into oppressors and students into “‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (72). I did not invite students to discuss what constitutes “good writing,” or collaborate with them in deciding acceptable formats or styles for communicating information in particular contexts. Instead, I instituted nonnegotiable definitions and approaches. Students were not architects of their educations, thinking critically about the subject of writing. Rather, functioning from what Freire terms the banking concept of education, I positioned the student as “spectator” (75), one who is “passively open to the reception of deposits of a reality from the world outside” (75).

While I would not have claimed any theory at the time, I was working under the premise that my job was the authoritarian transfer of knowledge. Freire describes this common teaching stance thus: “The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (72). A part of me felt that my treatment of Robby was unfair, believed as Freire did that “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention . . .” (72). Nevertheless, I see

now that I was also offended by the boy's unwillingness to be meekly filled, by his attempt to usurp some of the power I had myself only recently been given. The classroom walls were mine. Similarly, Claude Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz in "Resisting Composure" describe a student named Jerri who wrote a research paper in a non-traditional form, shunning the structure most English teachers would insist she conform to. "The strangeness of her paper's form requires serious, creative work from her readers," they explain, "effort that composition teachers too often are discouraged from, unwilling to, or incapable of giving" (4). The investment of time required to grade such work might elude the writing teacher faced with stacks of essays to grade from several course sections and other professional duties. Moreover, untraditional or unexpected genres might prove difficult to assess using task-oriented, standardized methods that administrators and governing bodies favor for their ability to quantify student progress. In my case, not only was I resistant to investing the thought and effort to assess Robby differently, but I was also protective of my fledgling power over student writing. I punished what might have been rewarded.

The persistent audacity of that same student, long ago, was the spark that eventually led me to the burning concerns I explore in this dissertation. For the entire school year, Robby handed in interesting, funny, and engaging work—none of which I had assigned. I began then to question what the field of English required of me and why, what sort of teacher I wanted to be, and, not least of all, what my students should expect from me. I have come to believe that careful reflection on composition theories is the best vehicle for finding my answers.

## My Position on Composition Teaching

As my dissertation grows out of my personal theoretical positions on the teaching of writing, an overview of my ideology is necessary to foreground my subsequent arguments. My intent is not to insist that all composition teachers should share my philosophy or mimic my practices. Rather, an understanding of my scholarly and teacherly biases provides a context for the critique in this project.

After sixteen years of working in composition, I have adopted a stance quite different from the one I held in my first high school classroom. I encourage students to engage critically the means by and modes in which they are asked to write, to examine their own writing processes and to question the authorities that shape their compositions. For instance, I might suggest they ask when, why and for whom a five-paragraph compare-and-contrast essay may be the best choice, or to examine why they might feel compelled to write in third person or first. My pedagogies are substantially grounded in post-process theory, which Thomas Kent sums up as the threefold belief that writing is “public,” “interpretive” and “situated” (1). Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon further define post-process theory as the belief that “no generalized process can prepare students for the manifold writing contexts they will go on to occupy” (7). Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon are writing in response to reductive versions of process pedagogies (for instance, the insistence that all students write in the same regimented step-by-step process). I extend this sentiment to pedagogies that enclose academic

writing in the brackets of formalism and correctness. My own pedagogies aim to open writing up.

To that end, I invite students to posit alternatives to the choices (or in some cases, mandates) of genre and style given them in classrooms. I encourage students to learn what Joseph Petraglia calls “rhetorical sensibilities,” the “development of a sensitivity to the rhetorical possibilities available” (62). For example, Kaufer and Dunmire suggest that students can learn such cognitive and metacognitive skills through a pedagogy in which they “take apart and analyze the situated rhetorical performances of others” (qtd. in Petraglia 62). Similarly, John Clifford describes combining reflection on others’ texts with students’ reflections on their own responses to those texts (Clifford and Ervin 192). He writes, “I am encouraged by the numbers of students who refuse to write what has always been written, who seem willing to challenge received norms by taking responsibility for the construction of an alternate symbolic narrative” (193). While I believe that familiarity with and practice in conventional academic writing are useful, I also believe that students should be given the room to practice and the authority to make their own rhetorical choices, even when they are poor choices—we learn from our failures, after all. Students in my courses are asked to experiment at the intersection of composition, cognition and context.

In retrospect, I see that my former student Robby was doing just that: challenging the norms of my classroom, conducting his own prose experiment. He would not be bound by the five paragraphs I assigned, choosing instead to



break out, to write on the classroom walls. Today, I encourage “wall writing.” I want students to see themselves as subject-participants, not objects, in the interactive social world of writing. I categorize my wall writing theory of composition as a post-process theory of relation, described by Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon:

. . . theories of relation remain attentive to the ways in which power is conserved, shared, and appropriated through writing and how such exchanges affect individuals. Writing pedagogies influenced by such theories propose that students are best prepared to write in college and beyond when they are encouraged to develop a self-conscious awareness of the complexity of writing and the interrelationships that make individual agency possible. (10-11)

In my teaching and in my own writing, I do not assume individual agency is easy to achieve, or that examining power relationships alone results in better writing. I do, however, believe that education should be more than learning prescribed norms—it should be learning to assess and perhaps to challenge standards. Students should, I believe, know both where standards come from and the risks of subverting them.

I cannot deny that our location in academia imposes rhetorical and authoritative limits on student writing—I must ultimately grade assignments, and I am beholden to departmental and institutional course objectives. The class is enclosed in the university’s walls. So, I write on that border with my students, the

border between academia and each of their extended contexts, each segment of reality pressing in on the same wall.

My post-process theoretical stances are not new or remarkable. The field of Composition is populated by many progressive scholar-teachers contributing a wealth of theories. Yet, I am frustrated that so much of the progressive work of Composition studies is not consistently or widely making its way into the classroom, as most writing classrooms are not inhabited by degreed compositionists. While Composition studies has an abundance of disciplinary knowledge, universities continue to hire persons unfamiliar with it to teach writing. The result, I believe, has been the dominance of formalism and reductivism in much composition teaching, manifested in an emphasis on academic discourse; the formal teaching of grammar; and the focus on standardized assessment. I do not reject these stances entirely. Instead, I resist the notion that they can or should encapsulate the teaching and studying of writing. Readers should understand that my post-process perspective leads me to call these stances into question; moreover, in this project I move towards a larger critique of the business model of higher education that facilitates these more conventional practices.

#### Purpose of the Dissertation

In this dissertation, I will argue that curricular choices in composition are overdetermined by the academic labor system and its negative effect on the status of composition theory. Despite the growth of disciplinary knowledge, composition programs are still staffed largely with underpaid and under

supported faculty and graduate students, many of whom have not studied composition theory in any depth. In some institutions, a single compositionist may act as Writing Program Administrator, supervising a temporary staff. While some colleges and universities have taken steps to reform the teaching and staffing of composition, too many have not.

I will argue that, in the corporatized university, Composition studies and composition theory are devalued. In order to rationalize the wide use of contingent and graduate student labor and a renewed emphasis on assessment, administrators must treat composition theory as superfluous. I will demonstrate that, while the contingent and student workforce is often dedicated, they are also unlikely to have studied composition comprehensively. Compositionists become token luxuries, unnecessary to the curriculum when those without expertise in composition can be hired to teach writing. Moreover, the corporate dedication to flex labor and its increased profit margin means that administrators do not change the material circumstances that resist theory's incorporation into composition teaching and curricula.

Further, I will contend that three models of composition teaching, which I believe can be used in reductive and theoretically weak ways—grammar study, focus on academic discourse, and assessment preparation—are perpetuated because they support the means and goals of the corporate university. This matters greatly, I will explain, because 1.) the quality of composition teaching suffers; 2.) the largely untenured, under-prepared and underpaid workforce suffers; and 3.) the state of composition teaching will not change en masse

unless we directly address the intersection of composition theory and composition labor.

In other words, I do not believe that administrators can simply alter graduate assistant training, improve contingent labor conditions, or insist current faculty study more composition theory. None of these solutions directly address, first, the fact that most student and contingent teachers are not and do not plan to be compositionists. When their scholarly and professional goals lie elsewhere, they cannot be expected seriously to pursue Composition studies and development in their own subject areas simultaneously. Second, any supplemental training for these teachers can only hope to be cursory; the demands of teaching and scholarship do not allow for substantial disciplinary study in composition. Without ample time, resources and motivation to do so, teachers are unlikely to view the comprehensive study of composition as plausible. Thirdly, even the best contingent, student, and literature faculty teaching composition are indicative of the lowly state of Composition studies. The message is complex and contradictory: the university recognizes a degree in Composition, but does not deem it at all necessary in order to teach writing. If anyone can teach writing, then composition theory and compositionists are devalued.

To refigure composition teaching, academics must act collectively for reform of the corporatized university's labor system, such that all teachers of composition are both schooled in composition theory and given the respect, security and pay to implement theoretically strong curricula. Indeed, I believe that

unless compositionists take steps to advance the role of theory and reform labor, composition may be destined to stagnate as a collection of skills and drills courses, despite the intellectual work of composition scholar-teachers and a minority of progressive programs. When the majority of writing teachers have goals beyond the field of Composition, they are less likely to be invested in program development—they want to move on to teach literature or cultural studies courses, not upper-level composition courses. When teachers are graduate students or contingent workers, they are less likely to have the time and resources to develop even their own classes beyond the status quo. They want to survive juggling graduate studies, teaching loads, and demands on their relatively small paychecks. Composition instruction should be more than an obligation to the department or an ordeal to be survived. Students are not served unless the status of Composition studies is reformed.

## Dissertation Structure

### *Chapter Two*

In chapter two, I explain and defend my choice of methodology: using narrative in concert with theory. While narrative is a popular tool in undergraduate composition assignments, some Composition scholars, like Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, believe that theorizing and storytelling are best kept separate in professional scholarship (301-303). Narrative is still largely subjugated in the academy, and is especially suspect in scholarship (Ede 145, Tobin 3). Despite this tenuous position, I believe that marrying theory and narrative is a productive means of arguing the central premise of my dissertation,

a more integrated role for theory in composition teachers' work. Specifically, I contend that this combination 1) can make theory more accessible, 2) can encourage scholars to consider more carefully the effects of context on theorizing, and 3) can improve the status of teaching narratives. More immediately, this section will justify my choice to open each chapter with a personal narrative that I connect to my context and my theorizing. I weave references to my context throughout each chapter as well.

### *Chapter Three*

In chapter three, I review some of the complex connotations of the central terms of my dissertation: theory and theorizing. Further, I acknowledge that composition theory's close ties to pedagogy have at times resulted in conflict; tension surrounds the role of theory in a field built on practice. I believe that I must consider this tension before proceeding with my arguments; a full definition of the term "composition theory," including the prejudices and fears it might arouse, is necessary to situate my subsequent arguments. Additionally, as my dissertation aims to alter the role of theorizing in Composition, I should aim to understand the range of responses readers might have to the term. Finally, I argue that emphasizing the verb "theorizing" is an effective means of discussing theory with a diverse audience often divided over the term.

### *Chapter Four*

While I suggest in chapter three that theorizing is an essential tool, in chapter four I argue that the academic employment system devalues and even suppresses the critical engagement of composition theories. I posit that in the

corporatized university, part of a global movement towards neoliberalism, staffing conventions are now more often based on cost-effectiveness than expertise. If administrators deem knowledge of composition theory unnecessary to the teaching of composition, if teaching becomes a generic skill, then they may cheaply staff writing courses with graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees who may have little or no knowledge of the field. The budget's bottom line trumps the teacher's subject knowledge. If this is so, a reformation of labor practices is necessary for a reformation of teaching practices. I argue that one tactic in a larger strategy for altering the university's unfair labor practices is to reassert the essential role of composition theory to composition teaching.

### *Chapter Five*

In chapter five, I theorize three pedagogical approaches to composition teaching: 1) grammarian, 2) arbiter of academic discourse and 3) assessment coach. I assert that pressures from both within and without the corporatized university encourage the adoption of these roles. Further, I critique these stances as theoretically weak, and argue that teachers' working conditions, the culture of textbooks, and the encroachment of standardized assessment into higher education—all symptoms of the corporate culture of the university—may be the primary reasons these pedagogical perspectives remain so popular. Finally, I contend that this situation may significantly limit, and perhaps even hinder, the ways teachers and students alike perceive and practice writing.

## *Chapter Six*

To conclude this project, I provide specific examples of how I use theorizing to refigure my own work in composition. I first explain how theoretical scholarship has shaped my pedagogy as demonstrated in two writing assignments I developed for the course College Composition. Secondly, I describe how I theorize in the public blog-writing I do for non-scholarly audiences, working for reforms in the corporate university, while acknowledging the risks of these compositions.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORIZING IN CONTEXT OR, A NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

“Any measurement must take into account the position of the observer.

There is no such thing as measurement absolute, there is only measurement relative. Relative to what is an important part of the question.”

Jeanette Winterson, *Gut Symmetries*, 9.

#### Everything Is Relative

At first, I couldn't place the scent, or perhaps I didn't want to. A second deep inhalation, and there was no denying it: my classroom smelled like cow manure.

I had come a week early to move into my office and to get a feel for the building. Room 120, which would be home to two of my four classes, was smaller than I had imagined, but that, I thought, could be worked around. The smell, however, was an obstacle I had not anticipated. Later, a colleague would explain that the university's campus is in close proximity to several farms, and during certain months, the fertilization of the fields means keeping the windows closed. I tried to imagine the class that would occupy this room in seven days' time: twenty-five students in a cramped room, windows closed, and air conditioning that, I had been warned, is temperamental. Plans are in the works to replace Lytle Hall with a more modern structure, one large enough to accommodate the ever-growing student population and the increasing competition for faculty office space. For now, though, this is my reality, and one I am glad to be living, despite the abundance of scent and the lack of space, because this is my first full-time,

tenure-track university job. Truthfully, although the Composition Program Coordinator apologized while showing me the tiny office I occupy, I was trying to contain my glee over having my very own desk and an entire bookshelf and a door!

Relativity: that could be the theme of my first semester in a full-time position. To begin, a workspace that others might scoff at seemed palatial to me in comparison to those I had occupied as an adjunct instructor. I learned to temper my reactions to new luxuries, from library privileges to a parking permit, not wanting to seem terribly naïve to my fellow professors. I reminded myself that my reactions were more the result of years of being treated, as many adjuncts are, as less than professional, and not the result of any grand accommodations now. I also adjusted to the new duties that accompany tenure-track work, including the expectation that I will publish and present scholarly work on a regular basis. Professionalism demanded I divide my focus rather than concentrate exclusively on teaching.

During my time at this university, I have been challenged to understand the relative nature of my own practice. After years of adjunct teaching at colleges without writing programs, I am pleased to enjoy more professional opportunities, accompanied by the society of colleagues in my field. I also enjoy much more academic freedom; with no more department-mandated texts or standard syllabi, with the respect and status of a full-timer, I can finally experiment with the kind of practices I have long read about, at last engage the theories I have given short-shrift in my previous circumstances.

When I worked as an adjunct, I had little choice but to toe a department's line, even if I found the pedagogical theory behind its practices objectionable. While teaching at a community college, I was reading Kenneth Bruffee's "Conversation of Mankind," but collaborative learning was discouraged in favor of outlining models of the current-traditional modes with a projected display. I was studying Thomas Kent's post-process theory while teaching at a small private college, where I was asked to use a grammar handbook and accompanying drills. A position at a large Jesuit university allowed me the most freedom of choice; finally I was able to use workshops and conferences to my heart's content. But the department still required me to teach freshman composition as a course in argument, using Aristotle or Toulmin as a model. All the while, I looked forward to the time when my professional expertise would earn me the respect to shape my own courses. And indeed, the full-time position I have now provides me that respect. However, having the academic freedom to engage the theories and methods of my choice does not mean I have entered a pedagogical paradise.

Circling twenty-six desks for a workshop in my stuffy, cramped classroom that first day at my tenure-track job, I pondered the logistics of large group workshops with such a very large class. I wondered how much concentration I could expect from students squeezed together and sweating on an Indian summer day. I considered how I would schedule one-on-one writing conferences with all eighty of my students among committee, department and division meetings. Standing in my classroom, I learned what veteran teachers know,

what Einstein taught us in physics, what Kent insisted in Composition: expectations must shift with the frame of reference; everything is relative.

### Purpose of Chapter Two: Placing Theory in Context

The fulcrum of this study is the interplay of theory and material reality, the tension between my ideas and ideals and the writing and teaching I actually do. In this chapter, I suggest that I can best argue for an enhanced role for theory in Composition studies by marrying theory and experience in a narrative methodology. To that end, I explore the rationales, benefits and risks of integrating both personal narrative examples and theorizing into academic work. Certainly other composition scholars have used narrative in their scholarly work and argued its academic relevance, including Gian Pagnucci, Candace Spigelman, Sondra Perl, Nancy Sommers and Lad Tobin, to name a few. Yet, every time a scholar blazes this trail, it seems soon overgrown by the vines of a more traditional academic prose. Narrative has yet to achieve mainstream status in scholarship. Therefore, I explain and defend my choice to open each chapter with a personal narrative and to weave references to my context throughout. Again, my approach is influenced by my post-process ideology, a position suggesting, “that how composition theory can or should influence instruction may be determined only in specific material circumstances” (Vandenberg, Hum and Clary-Lemon 9). Any argument I make in this dissertation ultimately depends upon my relative frame of reference.

## Chapter Structure

In the first section of this chapter, “The Benefits of Situating Theory in Narrative,” I argue that narrative enriches theorizing in three ways: 1) by “Bridging the Gap Between Abstract Theory and Material Reality;” 2) by “Making Theory More Accessible;” and 3) by aiding scholars who are “Considering the Effects of Context on Theorizing.” Additionally, I establish the real need for a conscious effort to help both readers and writers in composition to engage theory. These are the primary reasons I have chosen to incorporate personal narratives throughout this project.

In the second section, “The Risks of Narrative in Academic Scholarship,” I explore the risks of using a narrative methodology in theory-based research. I focus my attention on three areas: “Narrative in Scholarly Publications,” “The Intellectual Risks of Narrative,” and “The Status of Narrative and Teaching in the Academy.” I note that narrative is still often considered suspect in academic scholarship.

At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader should know that the benefits of adopting a narrative methodology outweigh the risks. Moreover, the reader will see that a thoughtful mingling of narrative and theory may improve the status of narratives among researchers.

### The Benefits of Situating Theory in Narrative

In this dissertation, I explore theory’s role in composition instruction and argue that making theorizing a priority in the work of writing teachers can improve pedagogical choices, employment practices, and student learning. In the

process, I utilize personal narratives, including descriptions of my educational and professional contexts, as well as stories of my professional experiences. I have adopted this method to reap the following benefits, each discussed in a subsection below: 1) to bridge the gap between abstract theory and material reality; 2) to make theory more accessible to my readers; and 3) to encourage myself to consider more carefully the effects my context has on theorizing. In this section, I demonstrate the viability of these benefits in order to defend narrative methodology in the dissertation as a whole. Moreover, I suggest that in order to promote an enhanced role for theorizing in the field, the accessibility that narrative lends theorizing is especially significant.

#### *Bridging the Gap between Abstract Theory and Material Reality*

My decision to incorporate narrative into my dissertation is greatly inspired by Lisa Ede's 2004 *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*. I cite her at length, as her purpose in that text is to encourage the sort of contextualized theorizing I intend to do throughout this project. Ede considers the phenomenon that Gian Pagnucci and Lad Tobin also reflect upon. In *Living the Narrative Life: Stories as a Tool for Meaning Making*, Pagnucci observes that narratives can promote "a deeper understanding of the issues involved as well as greater opportunities to talk about those issues" (44). As scholars engage in narrative, their stories can become, as Tobin describes his own narratives in *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*, "part of a scholarly investigation of a teaching problem" (2). Ede explores the benefits of composing a scholarly investigation that encompasses both lived

experience and theoretical consideration. She is wary of representing one's position in purely abstract and theoretical terms, acknowledging the significant impact of complex material reality on teaching as well as on life in general: ". . . I experience my life not as a monolithic or essentialist commitment to a particular constellation of practices but rather as a series of negotiations with and among the various practices that make up my life" (7). The reality of such negotiations might be made clearer to both writer and reader, she argues, when scholars describe and discuss their own personal contexts in tandem with theory. In this way, Ede explains, ". . . I hope to remind readers of the material situatedness of all textual practices (including my own). In so doing, I hope to give specificity and concreteness to my observations and to invite readers to relate these observations to their own experiences" (16). Further, Ede believes that locating theory [which can be a "textual practice"] thusly may allow readers better "to build enthymematic bridges" between theory and their own experiences (142).

I believe that Ede's position here is indicative of the tendency to equate a teacher-scholar with a single school of thought or theory. Tobin might be called "an expressivist." I am "a post-process theorist." Reality, of course, is not so reductive. My pedagogical choices may generally reflect post-process theories, but the material circumstances of my teaching may call on me to adapt and adopt other perspectives and practices. I may find that my students, for instance, respond well to some expressivist practices; a mandatory institutional test may demand direct grammatical instruction. I must always negotiate my theories and my circumstances. Further, no theory can, in practice, remain "pure" in the

classroom. Instead, as Downing, Harkins and Sosnoski note, “The pure form of a theory is rarely germane to the exigencies of the situation in which it is allegedly applied. In different contexts, not only are different theories required, but different versions of the same theory are called for. What helps, helps” (15).

Acknowledging this negotiation and the situatedness of theory may work to disassemble the false binary of theory and practice (discussed at length in chapter three), the feeling among some writing teachers that composition theories are intellectual exercises disconnected from their practice.

As this dissertation aims to connect composition teachers with theory, it behooves me to adopt a methodology that may bridge any perceived gaps between composition theories and their day-to-day practices and experiences. For instance, while some progressive composition theorists have long rejected traditional forms of grammar-based and assessment-focused pedagogies, these remain commonly employed approaches. I personally do not embrace the theory behind these practices, but I have had to engage them, particularly during my time as an adjunct, as my circumstances required. Situating my own theorizing with personal narrative gives me the opportunity not only to connect with readers through shared experiences, but also to examine why theories and practices are so often at odds in Composition programs.

### *Making Theory More Accessible Through Narrative*

Locating composition theories in material realities serves not only to bridge philosophical considerations and concrete concerns, but also generally makes theory more accessible to readers. Ede argues this point, noting that



theoretical scholarship might be more accessible and effective if writers “make our work more relevant to the teachers we wish to reach” (206). I have chosen to establish relevance by grounding my scholarship in personal narrative. Certainly compositionists—that is, those whose primary area of study, scholarship and teaching is Composition—already see the relevance of theory to their work. By far, however, most of those teaching composition are not compositionists, but instead are graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees (Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues 340). This point is crucial, as this majority of non-tenure-track employees in composition is the group most likely to be unschooled in composition theory (a phenomenon I address in chapter four). Moreover, in many institutions literature faculty, also often with minimal exposure to composition scholarship, teach writing courses. Given this population, I believe that narrative’s usefulness in fostering accessibility is essential to arguing the central point of my dissertation. In fact, the need for greater accessibility to composition theory is demonstrated by my own story.

When I first began doctoral study, the word “theory” confounded me. As a master’s student in Literature, I naturally came to associate the term theory with literary theory. When I became a doctoral student in Composition studies, the course listing Theories of Composition in the graduate catalogue threw me: I initially had difficulty reconciling the study of composition with a body of knowledge I personally associated with interpreting texts. Afraid of revealing my ignorance, I instead let it grow into an aversion. When I heard “theory,”

undefined, used in my early classes, I never asked for clarification. Instead, I avoided in my own scholarship using texts or referring to authors labeled “theoretical.” And that course in Theories of Composition? I steered clear of it until my third semester. During that semester, I found myself in the professor’s office discussing possible topics for a paper. Conversation turned to my classmates’ various reactions to the study of theory. I forget what comment of mine prompted my teacher’s response, but he offered, “Well, you like theory, Amy. Not all of them do.” I believe I nodded, perhaps muttered a casual, “yeah,” but my inner voice was asking: I like theory?

Until that moment, theory was for me akin to ancient Greek or neurosurgery or dining etiquette: it seemed an entity created by and only accessible to an elite. I had felt this way as a literature student, too, resisting association with any one school of literary theory. My disregard, I believe, was motivated by a feeling of insecurity that somehow I was not smart enough or learned enough to engage it. Further, I was intimidated by unfamiliar terminology, and wary of questioning ideas I had long taken for granted. As a graduate student in English, I was initially an outsider to theoretical discourse. My studies at IUP made me realize that, as a teacher, I am enveloped in composition theory every day; it informs my lesson plans, my interaction with students, my grading, and more. In the course Theories of Composition, as we investigated and critiqued the ideologies inherent in various approaches to writing and teaching, we were, in fact, “doing theory.” By the end of that semester, I came to see theorizing as an intrinsic part of teaching.

And yet, despite nine years of teaching experience on the secondary and post-secondary levels, I had rarely stopped to consider the relationship between my work and theory. I was not a novice to teaching writing, but I had not actively theorized my practice. As I noted previously, knowledge of the relationship between theory and practice is a commonplace among established compositionists. Yet for most of the people teaching composition, people like me who had no knowledge of theoretical discourse in composition, linking teaching and theory constitutes an important insight.

What is more, it is an insight often overlooked. Teachers instead most often rely on what Stephen North first termed “lore”: “the accumulated body of traditions, practices, and beliefs in terms of which Practitioners understand how writing is done, learned and taught” (22). The lore that carried me through my early years of teaching, long before I studied composition, was invaluable. It was comprised of the advice and stories of coworkers who had taught courses similar to mine; I applied their lessons to my own classrooms, always asking for more ideas, discarding or altering ones that seemed inappropriate to my context. Likewise, in “The Postdisciplinary Politics of Lore,” Patricia Harkin insists that lore is beneficial and akin to theory, as through it teachers “adopt, adapt, and apply theoretical articulations” (125). At the same time, my experience fits another of Harkin’s descriptions: “practitioners rarely attend to the theoretical implications of their practice . . .” (125). In my teaching past, I more often than not reduced my choices to what worked, without ever systematically exploring why it worked.

Furthermore, while I adapted my practice using lore, it was very often in support of educational goals I had not questioned. In my first classrooms, no one could write “on the walls” but me; I did not share my authority with my students, or encourage them to critique or break conventions. My job, I believed, was to teach grammar, to prepare students to pass tests, and to provide practice in five-paragraph themes. Lore alone did not lead me to examine these goals; it just helped me to reach them more creatively and efficiently. Nor did my first readings of abstract theories lead to significant change, as they lacked any immediate connection to my experiences.

When I began to study composition formally (seven full years after I had begun teaching writing) the scholars who had the greatest influence on my thinking were Lad Tobin and Nancy Sommers, writers who weave lore and theory into the same scholarly cloth. In *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*, for example, Tobin theorizes student writing and the ways teachers assess both their papers and the students themselves. He narrates his own experiences in the classroom and in the process reveals a great deal about his own mistakes. In the prologue, Tobin explains: “I’ve always felt these personal confessions serve as the kind of specific, concrete examples we always ask for in our students’ own writing. I’ve hoped that these personal examples help to establish me as a credible and sympathetic narrator” (2). More than that, Tobin’s confessions invited me into his scholarly conversation: I could recognize myself in his concrete discussions of what worked and what failed in

his classroom, and so I felt more comfortable with his theorizing of those situations. I began to reflect on my own practices in similar ways.

Six years after reading it, I can still recite passages of Nancy Sommers' article from *CCC*, "Between the Drafts." She describes standing in a supermarket parking lot with a colleague who is concerned about his teaching. She admits that, "Without any reference, except to locate my own authority somewhere else, I felt compelled to suggest to him that he read Foucault" (27). She left feeling that she had done little to address his problems. Later, Sommers reimagines that conversation: "This time I listen. I understand why he showed so much disdain when I paid homage to Foucault. He had his own sources aplenty that nourished him. Yet he hadn't felt the need to speak through his sources or to interject them into our conversation. His teaching stories and experiences are his own; they give him the authority to speak" (28). When I read this piece, I was an experienced teacher, but a novice scholar at times intimidated by theoretical discourse. Sommers made me feel as though I, too, had authority. She helped me to find a voice, allowing me to write and speak about composition while still pursuing a more comprehensive understanding of its theories.

Therefore, I neither intend to place lore and theory into opposition, nor to prefer one to the other. Instead, I believe that collecting lore while also engaging composition theories allows me greater clarity, empowers me with the ability to better understand not only what works, but how it works, under which circumstances, and for whom; and it allows me to connect my classrooms, my students, and myself to the larger world.

Having defined lore, I briefly define “composition theory” as inquiry covering a range of issues, including the production, history, effects, and teaching of writing. I also espouse Patricia Bizzell’s description of “theorizing” as, “. . . thinking about what one is doing—reflecting on practice—but thinking about it in a systematic way, trying to take as much as possible into account, and using the ideas of other thinkers wherever they may be helpful” (2-3). I will more thoroughly discuss the meanings of the terms “theory” and “theorizing” in chapter three. In this section, my intention is to situate the need for greater accessibility to composition theory, given the reality that many writing teachers do not actively engage it.

As Harkin and North note, many teachers prefer the immediacy and accessibility of lore to the study of theoretical discourse. Lore does not require one to engage in formal scholarship. Instead, lore can be acquired or created through trial and error, and also through friendly conversation and the sharing of teaching materials, as well as through scholarly texts (North 24), both akin to sharing narratives. When teachers swap stories about what succeeds and fails in their classrooms, they are constructing narratives aimed at communicating lore. This image of casual storytelling should not demean the creation of lore; its narrative form does not signify a lack of intellectual effort. In this vein, Downing, Harkin and Sosnoski argue that lore is “born out of self-reflection and self-criticism; teaching lore is not foolish or thoughtlessness. In other words, some teachers and students work as theorists even though they are not recognized as professional or institutional ‘Theorists,’” (15-16). Teachers may systematically

reflect on practice but not produce published theoretical discourse. Similarly, I will contend in chapter three that composition theory and lore should be considered in concert. In this section, I purport that, given teachers' preference for lore, they might more willingly engage theoretical scholarship if it is likewise passed on with narrative.

In the same way, bell hooks has proposed that an audience with a resistance to theoretical discussion may become more open to theory if it is couched in the personal (120). She observes, "When you tell a story about how you use an abstract idea or a bit of theory in a concrete situation, it just feels more real to people" (121). My adoption of a narrative methodology in this dissertation is intended to have this effect.

#### *Considering the Effects of Context on Theorizing*

On a scholarly level, I intend the narrative methodology to remind me that my theorizing is grounded in my contexts. My objective is to use narrative to contextualize my scholarship as a means of conceding potential bias and gaps in experiential knowledge—and of indicating where experience may provide insight.

In adopting a narrative methodology, I espouse the position of feminist compositionist Jacqueline Jones Royster who suggests that scholars should better understand their own intellectual positions by researching the contexts of the scholarly sources that have shaped their thinking. She asserts that this detective work into the circumstances surrounding the production of the texts scholars admire "reminds us that knowledge has sites and sources and that we are better informed about the nature of a given knowledge base when we take

into account its sites, material contexts, and points of origin” (280). Royster writes in reference to the scholarly sources academics study and use. I apply this same sentiment to the scholarly texts we create, believing that as I make claims and relate my perspectives throughout this dissertation, personal narratives may assist in reminding me of their points of origin and in evaluating my arguments.

Moreover, a narrative methodology allows me to acknowledge where established theory is not reflected in teaching programs. For example, earlier in this chapter, I described my own experiences of being required by administrators to use conventional methods, while at the same time studying more progressive theories of composition. In my own employment, theories considered commonplace in composition scholarship have not always been allowed in practice. Were I not able to reference my own practice, to narrate my experience, this insight might be lost. Narrative methodology, then, puts additional resources at my disposal.

### The Risks of Narrative in Academic Scholarship

I have outlined three benefits of incorporating personal narrative into discussions of theory. Despite these advantages, the scholarly use of narrative remains risky. One might argue that narrative is currently “in;” admittedly, the respected Thomas R. Watson Conference had “Narrative Knowledge / Narrative Action” as its theme in 2006. Even so, the general professional reception to narrative remains cool.

In this section, I explore the hazards of a narrative methodology in three parts: “Narrative in Scholarly Publications,” “The Intellectual Risks of Narrative,”



and “The Status of Narrative and Teaching in the Academy.” In “Narrative in Scholarly Publications,” I consider the general attitude of scholarly publishers to narrative. In “The Intellectual Risks of Narrative,” I acknowledge a critique of narrative as a scholarly tool. In each part, I indicate how these risks affect my approach to using narrative throughout the dissertation.

In “The Status of Narrative and Teaching in the Academy,” I note how the subordinate status of teaching in the academy in turn affects the status of teaching narratives in scholarly writing. Ultimately, my intention in this section is to indicate that the risks that come with adopting a narrative methodology in this dissertation and in research generally are worthwhile not only for the benefits previously noted, but also for the potential credibility that theorizing in tandem with narrative may lend to narrative itself in the academy.

### *Narrative and Scholarly Publications*

My first exposure to the tentative position of narrative in the academy was in reading Lad Tobin’s 2004 *Reading Student Writing: Confessions, Meditations, and Rants*. His collection of essays was unlike anything I had encountered previously. Tobin’s narratives are by turn funny, disturbing, and sad; they are also reflective and insightful. Yet in his prologue, he notes that his narrative style frequently evokes a strong negative response from academic publishers. One reviewer for a scholarly journal to which Tobin had submitted a piece was so put off by his narrative that he wrote, “I not only hate this article; I also hate its author” (2). Tobin makes this observation of the state of style in academia: “academics who cite charts and graphs have complete disdain for academics

who cite Lacan and Foucault who have complete disdain for academics who fail to cite anyone at all. But while there is more than enough academic contempt to go around for any and all prose styles, it is the autobiographical essay that has become the shibboleth in the contemporary English department” (3). Certainly Tobin is generalizing faculty perspectives. Of course, one can love Lacan and Lad both. Any general tolerance for narrative, however, is not reflected in the bulk of scholarly publications in Composition. I acknowledge, then, that my narrative methodology goes against the professional grain and might be considered unscholarly if seen through the lens of current publication trends.

Tobin’s experience speaks to a troublesome reality that Ede described in 2004:

In recent years, scholarly presses have demonstrated a strong preference for brief and highly focused texts. Scholars who attempt to resist this preference could find it difficult to publish their work. They might also meet resistance from peers, for theoretical critiques typically do not include reflections on personal experience or interrogations of the assumptions grounding the critique. (145)

As I write, I do so recognizing that this hierarchy exists in scholarly writing, with narrative sitting at its bottom. However, the publications of Tobin, Pagnucci and Ede, to name a few, suggest that narrative and theory can find a place in academic scholarship. Their examples encourage me to proceed with narrative methodology.

### *The Intellectual Risks of Narrative*

Rejection from publishers or those who use publication trends as a standard is not the only risk that comes with the incorporation of narrative into a dissertation. Some theorists, such as Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, consider the use of teaching anecdotes in scholarly work risky for intellectual reasons. Specifically, Salvatori's concern is that anecdotal knowledge of teaching resists theorizing (303). She worries that teachers can too easily draw shallow conclusions from their stories, and thus teaching practices are less likely to be problematized and critiqued (301-302). Salvatori does sound a fair warning: people can over-generalize through narratives, or reinforce their biases rather than challenge them. In fact, after reading an early draft of a later chapter of this project, a friend and colleague of mine noted that I had glossed over the details in my personal examples that made me most uncomfortable. She asked: Were not these, potentially, the details that might reveal the most about my thinking and reasoning? Might I have been unconsciously editing out my own failures, making myself the hero of my own narrative? Perhaps with a similar concern in mind, Ede admits that by locating her theorizing in her own experience, she is limiting her study "in significant ways; it enables me to see some things and not others" (30). As I proceed with my dissertation, then, I acknowledge the need to be hypercritical of my narratives and to be open to alternate readings of my own stories. Ideally, I aim to use narrative to reveal bias rather than to mask it.

### *The Status of Narrative and Teaching in the Academy*

My use of a narrative methodology also proves risky as it is so closely tied to teaching. The majority of the narratives I employ in this dissertation surround my experiences as a teacher. The subject matter compounds the risk, since teaching as both an activity and as a subject of scholarship holds a subordinate place in the university as a whole. In *The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace*, David Downing observes that in academia's system of commodity and disciplinarity, which he terms "the knowledge contract," teaching is significantly devalued:

Practically speaking, the general terms of the knowledge contract implicitly justify the devaluing of teaching because it is less directly involved in the production of knowledge. . . . These activities certainly involve ways of knowing, but they don't always follow disciplinary models, and the very situational nature of these practices has made it difficult for them to attain anything other than subordinate jurisdictional status in higher education. (24)

If, as Downing asserts, teaching is significantly devalued, and if, as Tobin says, personal narrative is disrespected, then it stands to reason that incorporating narratives specifically focused on teaching into one's scholarship is a doubly dangerous proposition.

My choice of a narrative methodology may seem too precarious; however, there are movements within academia to alter its value system. For example, central to Downing's study is the call to re-envision the knowledge contract so

that it values more diverse and representative forms of work performed in higher education, and to establish “a less dominant role for epistemologically based forms of disciplinarity within the expanded array of professionally contracted work we do as faculty and students” (39-40). Specifically, he sees collective bargaining and labor reform as the vehicles for this change, “our main hope to preserve forms of autonomy and control over our working lives” (40). On a smaller scale, I propose that scholarly texts that consciously and purposefully integrate theory and narratives of our teaching lives may also challenge academic values. In academia, theory lends scholarship credibility; Harkin notes that theory has been heretofore grounded in and maintained by the disciplines, which often insist on a scientific model emphasizing the reliability and validity of research (127). Therefore, scholarship that marries theory and narrative may be rhetorically smart, increasing the exposure and status of narrative, and perhaps leading readers to reconsider narrative’s place in academic work.

I do not mean to suggest that writing about one’s own teaching experiences in tandem with theory will transform the knowledge contract. Nor do I believe that compositionists cannot or should not do useful intellectual work disconnected from pedagogy. I do believe, however, that if workers in higher education treat narrative as an important component of their theoretical work, and not as a separate genre, we can begin to affect positively the respect that both teaching and narratives garner in scholarship.

I hope, too, that if more scholars see the value of employing narrative, then narratives need not rely on theory to legitimize them in scholarly

publications. Stories might stand alone with authority. Indeed, the composition journal *Writing on the Edge: On Writing and Teaching Writing* [WOE], is one professional publication indicative of a future where teachers/writers/scholars can use narrative free from conventional references to theory. WOE's website explains:

We want articles that capture the excitement of writing and teaching, so we encourage authors to experiment with other forms besides the traditional academic journal article, such as personal essays, humor, and fiction. . . . In all submissions, we want our readers to sense the person as well as scholar behind the writing, so we are looking for articles and essays written in a clear, engaging, and personal style. (Boe and Schroeder)

Publications such as WOE enrich our definitions of scholarly work, encouraging us to find more places for narratives to stand.

In this chapter, I have presented the rationale for my methodology, using theory in tandem with narrative. After reviewing both the advantages and hazards of using this approach in the dissertation, I believe that a narrative methodology is not only justified, but is best suited to my purpose of arguing for a more prominent role for theorizing in the teaching of writing.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LOCATING COMPOSITION THEORY

“Coming to terms with the real world, theory bridges the chasm between the actual and the possible; it provides an articulation between bitter truth and a vision of what might be.”

Lynn Worsham, “Coming to Terms: Theory, Writing, Politics,” 103.

#### Composition Theory: A Contentious Term

Relating the topic and form of my dissertation to friends and colleagues has sometimes been like admitting that I have decided to join the circus: a very few people have been excited, some confused, and most wary. A friend and fellow graduate student fell into the second category.

“Why would you do a theoretical dissertation?” she asked. “Wouldn’t you rather do something more concrete, with interviews or focus groups?”

She might as easily have asked, “Why the circus? Wouldn’t you rather be an electrician or an engineer?” I was not daunted by the responses of some classmates who expressed a preference for other kinds of studies. But I have been unnerved by colleagues who warned me that making composition theory the focus of my project might actually be professionally hazardous. One professor suggested that the word “theory” in my title might be off-putting to potential employers reading my curriculum vitae. Could an interest in composition theory really cost me a job, I wondered? Another professor advised, half-jokingly, that I find a substitute term like “philosophy”:

“It’s a fairly accurate term,” he explained, “but less associated with controversy than theory.”

An English professor teaching at the same small private college as I gave me the most pause. After I explained to him that I was writing about the role of composition theory in the field, he sighed and said, “Composition theory? It just tells us all the common sense things that writing teachers have always known. ‘Writing is a process!’ No kidding. If I were you, I’d tackle something more rigorous.”

Once again, I felt as if I were “writing on the walls,” with skeptical eyes looking on in judgment. I began to see that I could not take a shared understanding of or reaction to composition theory for granted.

#### Purpose of Chapter Three: Exploring the Role of Theory in Composition

In this dissertation, I argue for a more prominent role for theorizing in the field of Composition. Complicating that goal is the myriad of ways in which the terms “composition theory” and “theorizing” are understood, as well as the controversy regarding theory’s role in the field. Therefore, I believe that a definition of the terms “composition theory,” “theoretical discourse,” and “theorizing,” including the prejudices and fears they might arouse within Composition studies, is necessary to situate my arguments throughout this dissertation. My aim in this chapter is not only to make my own understandings of the terms clear, but also to determine a means of entering the conversation surrounding composition theory without falling into the false theory / practice binary which discussions in the field so often employ.



## Chapter Structure

I begin by “Defining Composition Theory” and theoretical discourse, acknowledging the complexity of the terms and their relationship to literary theory. In “Theory in the Eye of the Beholder,” I explore some misconceptions regarding composition theory. Next, I review “The Controversy Over Theory in Composition Studies,” describing the tensions surrounding the role of theory in Composition. To illustrate these tensions, I explore positions expressed by Stephen North, Wendy Bishop, Gary Olson and Sydney Dobrin as representative voices in the debate.

Finally, in “An Emphasis on Theorizing,” I define “theorizing,” making an effort to differentiate it from generic thinking. Building on the work of George Hillocks, who found that many writing teachers work from unexamined theories, I associate “theorizing” with systematic reflection, and I claim that such reflection should be fundamental to composition teaching. Specifically, I argue 1) that emphasizing the verb “theorizing” is an effective means of discussing theory with a diverse audience that is often divided over theory; and 2) that theorizing is a useful rhetorical tool in resisting those forces, such as assessment and labor practices, that suppress growth and change in the field of Composition. I do not claim that theorizing alone can revolutionize composition, but that compositionists can employ theory much more effectively than they have previously, a claim I will develop in chapters three and four.

## Defining Composition Theory

As I discussed in chapter two, when I entered a doctoral program in Composition studies, my understanding of the term “theory” was well rooted in Literary studies. Engaging the term in its new context was not easy, even though I had already been teaching writing for nine years. In fact, my teaching experience may have hindered my willingness to study theoretical discourse in composition; to do so would not only involve questioning long-held beliefs about teaching and writing, but it would also require admitting that I had been teaching while ignorant of the field. These circumstances were a significant challenge in my early studies.

In chapter two, I argued that marrying theory and narrative is an effective means of making theory more accessible to those who are, like I once was, wary of the subject. In this section, my intention is further to scaffold communication by locating my understanding of the terms “composition theory” and “theoretical discourse” clearly and specifically.

First, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between Composition studies and Literary studies. This is not merely because, as was my experience, most students of Composition studies begin more broadly in English studies. Composition theory grew alongside (and at times intertwined with) literary theory in English departments. In “Where Did Composition Studies Come From?” Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt note that Composition “evolved in its efforts to understand the central problem of meaning in discourse” (272). This pursuit of understanding was a part of the “consciousness raising” in English departments

as scholars “confronted problems like the modality of text production . . . the language processes of reading and writing, and the roles of authors, readers, and interpretive communities in the phenomenon of text meaning” (274). While Composition studies and Literary studies have (controversially) become more independent of each other in recent years, even sometimes separating into distinct departments, they cover much of the same theoretical ground. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a thorough description of the connections between literary and composition theory; therefore, I focus on a few significant connections.

Within the field of English studies, one can find varying understandings of the term “literary theory,” as Karen J. Winkler explains in “Scholars Mark the Beginning of the Age of ‘Post-Theory’”:

Theory is one of those buzz words with an elastic meaning. Often it is shorthand for the post-structuralist proposition about the slipperiness of language and the instability of meaning that began to be imported from France in the 1960’s. . . . Theory sometimes refers not just to post-structuralism, but to any of the ‘isms’ and schools of thought that have shaped literary interpretation in the last 30 years—Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, the critical theory of Germany’s Frankfurt school. Theory implies a way of doing criticism that at times seems to merge with philosophy. (A9)

From this perspective, defining theory even within a single discipline is a complex task. In addition to its association with “schools of thought,” literary theory is,

according to Jonathan Culler, also correlated with critically examining the field through the lens of another, including “works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong” (3). As Culler and Winkler position it, one may understand literary theory to be anything from post-structuralist close reading, to socio-political analysis of literature, to an interdisciplinary attempt to find literary insights. Certainly other understandings of literary theory exist; however, it is not my purpose in this dissertation fully to explore the term in that field. Rather, I present this basic overview as the perspective which a doctoral student in or new teacher of composition might have, perhaps not having studied literary theory as thoroughly as a literary scholar would have. As a case in point, when I began teaching literature and composition as an adjunct, my only formal exposure to theory was in a single course in literary theory in a master’s program.

Moreover, my experience in that course was with *theoretical discourse* in particular, a term with a meaning distinct from *theory*. Theoretical discourse refers to the body of written scholarly works that have been published, anthologized or canonized. Theoretical discourse may also be perceived as an industry: the collection of journals and texts published for both material gain (usually minor) and academic credibility (necessary for tenure and promotion). It is not a singular term; multiple theoretical discourses exist, overlapping and intersecting.

Literary theory and composition theory (and literary theoretical discourse and composition’s theoretical discourse) certainly share common philosophical

ground, as in their use of schools of thought such as Marxism and feminism. Composition and literary theory also share an interdisciplinary approach. In “Deconstructing Composition,” Scott Mclemee describes the rise of the genre of composition theory in the 1970s:

Compositionists began drawing on scholarship from other disciplines. Research in linguistics and developmental psychology shaped the emergence of ‘cognitivist’ composition scholarship. . . . Sociological and anthropological citations began showing up in composition journals, as open-admissions policies compelled writing instructors to grapple with differences in culture and class. And compositionists revived the study of rhetoric, finding the writings of Aristotle and Cicero the original body of sophisticated communications theory.

These diverse sources and motivations prompt Nystrand, Greene and Wiemelt to describe Composition studies as “an interdisciplinary writing research community as well as a pedagogical forum” (314). Theoretical inquiry in the field covers a range of issues orbiting composition—its production, history, effects, and teaching. I agree with Mclemee who similarly identifies “‘discourse,’ a term covering all forms of communication” (par 7) as the center of Composition studies. While one path of theoretical inquiry might differ significantly from another, theorists share a common “conversation,” to use Gerald Graff’s term (12). For instance, composition scholars investigate the political consequences of discourse; the relationship among thinking, writing and technology; the nature of

creativity; the ways in which students create meaning through collaborative work; the outcomes of student-centered academic writing; and the effects of class, race, and gender on how one acquires academic discourse. Each of these disparate topics in some manner engages the act of composing, creating new knowledge about writing, teaching, or learning in the process.

Although my intent in this section is to establish a broad understanding of the term “composition theory,” theorists do further define composition theory by category, as in the schools of feminism and Marxism mentioned above.

Nystrand, Greene and Wiemelt construct broad, chronological categories in their history of Composition studies: formalism, constructivism, social constructionism, and dialogism (302-303). Some other notable divisions are modern and postmodern theory (Faigley 14-20); or expressionistic, cognitive and social-epistemic theory (Berlin “Rhetoric” 478); or anti-foundationalist and foundationalist theory; or “theory with a small t and Theory with a big T” (Dobrin 11). These divisions demonstrate that even within a single field, the meaning of the term can be further delineated according to philosophy, methodology, and even scope. For instance, Sidney Dobrin observes that theory with a small t is associated with “local practice” (12), while Theory evokes “universal, generalizable, grand explanations” (11). Readers may not necessarily bring the same associations to the term “theory” as do I, another reason why contextualization is a significant step in scholarship: we may more easily communicate across interests and disciplines if we make our usage clear.

## Theory in the Eye of the Beholder

In chapter two, I briefly noted some criticisms of lore, including the misconception that it is not an intellectual practice. I sided with Harkins (among others) in asserting that lore creates knowledge (125) and, while it does not fit neatly into disciplinary norms (127), it is a valuable and necessary tool in determining practice. Theory, too, is not without its misconceptions. Further complicating a shared understanding of theory is the misperception that theoretical discourse represents a body of immutable knowledge of writing practices, or a set of mandates regarding pedagogy. Certainly, scholars and teachers can employ theoretical discourse in rigid ways. Yet theory is not innately authoritative; rather, persons or institutions may so use it. Moreover, a theory may be strong or weak, applied ethically or unjustly. These observations may be evident to the seasoned theorist. Early in my own career as a student and as a teacher, however, I initially believed theories were a more akin to scientific laws, as indisputable as Newton's gravity or Kepler's motion. Perhaps this was because theoretical discourses were presented to me in rigid terms, in the venue of required undergraduate textbooks and, later, administrative directives. During that time, I was not invited to theorize composition any more than I was invited to question the adjunct pay scale or the number of GAs sharing a single office desk.

On a large scale, the potential rigidity of theoretical discourses in application is exemplified in the popular understanding of the concept of "paradigms," critiqued by David Downing in *The Knowledge Contract*. Thomas Kuhn first applied the term "paradigm" in the context of the Sciences in 1996; the

concept has since become ubiquitous in the humanities. A paradigm is a way of seeing the world, a commonly accepted set of theories for interpreting reality.

Downing first describes the usefulness of paradigms in the academy: “paradigms serve to restore and maintain order through the institutionalized mechanisms of containment: paradigms provide handy kinds of disciplinary yardsticks insofar as individual performances can be judged in comparison with the standards of normalized, paradigmatic work . . .” (97). Yet this normalization can become exclusionary, rejecting “imaginative, innovative, speculative, nondisciplinary, nonparadigmatic, nonmodern kinds of work and lore” (99). In “The Ecology of Writing,” Marilyn M. Cooper describes this occurrence within the field of Composition. Cooper explains that, “theoretical models even as they stimulate new insights blind us to some aspects of the phenomena we are studying” (183). Using the “cognitive process model of writing” as an example, Cooper notes that theorists who adopt it may ignore the social nature of composition, as it does not fit neatly in the cognitive process paradigm (183). The researcher must guard against this tendency if theory is to remain useful as one changes contexts, and if institutions are to be amenable to innovation.

Moreover, good theory can turn into bad practice in the individual classroom. Discussing process theory, Vandenberg, Hum and Clary-Lemon note that, “A given teacher may encourage students to engage with each other in a collaborative, seemingly process-driven pedagogy; the teacher might do so, however, in the most formulaic of fashions, driven not by a belief in the social construction of knowledge, but by a desire that students assimilate each other to



a rigid demand for surface correctness” (3). Just as teachers and scholars should resist dismissing lore for its informal or narrative qualities, so must they resist treating any theory or theoretical discourse as a monolith for its connection to scholarship.

To that end, I keep the metaphor of wall writing in mind when I compose or consider theories. Composing a theory for me is akin to intellectual graffiti; I scrawl my reflections on the walls of academia, acting as part of a tradition while simultaneously challenging it, defying it. My graffiti might turn out to be useful or insightful: graffiti as high art. On the other hand, it might be an eyesore. Beauty is in the eye—and usefulness is in the context—of the beholder.

Even when we work from shared understandings, however, teachers may not lend composition theory much consequence, as my next story suggests. In the following section, I consider how the debate regarding the appropriate role for theory in composition may affect general perceptions of theory and my overarching argument in the dissertation.

### The Controversy Over Theory in Composition Studies

Tim [a pseudonym] and I talked over our brown-bagged lunches in my office, neither of us with much time to spare during the workday. My yogurt and his sandwich competed for space among the stacks of student papers and unsorted mail on my small desktop. As one of only three compositionists in an English faculty of thirty-five, I find myself having a lot of conversations like this one with Tim, a full-time temporary faculty member in his first year at the university. From time to time, instructors come into my office, just down from the communal one

shared by the Temps, asking for advice regarding particular classes or assignments. Tim wanted to talk about group work.

“When I walk through the halls,” he said, “I notice a lot of the composition classes doing small group workshops.” His voice dropped to a whisper, adding: “Honestly, I’ve never gotten group work. I don’t know how to use it effectively.”

“Workshops are tough to manage,” I admitted, “I’ve been tinkering with them for years, and I still keep altering my approach.”

Checking his watch, Tim continued, “I haven’t been using them this term, but I keep wondering if I’m missing out on something. I thought maybe you had something I could read on the subject.” He took a quick bite of his lunch.

Swiveling my chair to face my filing cabinet, I bent to begin searching for an article I knew was buried somewhere in the clutter. “Have you read Kenneth Bruffee’s ‘Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind’? It’d give you a great foundation on the concepts.”

Tim looked skeptical. “Does it offer any techniques? Some sample questions students can ask each other about their papers?”

“Well, no,” I began, “It’s more theoretical. But it has plenty of pedagogical applications, if that’s what you mean.”

Tim looked apologetic, saying, “I don’t have time for that, really.” He certainly was busy, teaching an overload that semester, six classes, including three in composition. “Do you have any handouts I could use as a model?”

“Sure,” I answered, and stood to open the top drawer of the cabinet.

Tim's reluctance to engage the theory behind the practice we were discussing was certainly tied to his material situation at the time. But it may also be indicative of another issue in Composition studies, the question of application—should composition theory focus primarily on pedagogy, on being immediately transferable to the classroom?

The purpose of this section is to explore the tension that has persisted in conversations about composition theory and how that tension may affect communication with the audience of teachers I wish to influence. In particular, I focus on the debate over the purpose of composition theory: should it always be tied to a pedagogical end, or should composition scholars focus on discourse more broadly, removed from the classroom? By examining the discussion surrounding the role of composition theory, I aim to discover a means of better engaging writing teachers who may dismiss composition theory, a necessary means towards my goal of finding a more central role for theorizing in the practice of composition teaching.

The purpose of theoretical scholarship has frequently been a divisive subject for compositionists. In fact, in 2002, Gary Olson proclaimed that Composition was entering “the new theory wars” (25). Here he is responding to his assessment that “composition is . . . witnessing a revitalized backlash against theoretical scholarship” (25) which does not focus on pedagogical concerns. Conflict arises as composition teachers debate the relevance of theoretical research in a field founded on teaching basic writing skills. While many teachers conduct scholarly work (required for those on tenure-tracks, of course) and most

scholars teach (even those with course-releases), some writing teachers identify themselves primarily as practitioners, to use Stephen North's term, and deny that composition theory—in part or in whole—is integral to their work. Indeed, the claim, "I don't have a theory" is not uncommon among writing instructors. In turn, this position can provoke criticism from composition theorists, whom North calls scholars and philosophers. This disagreement regarding the place of theory has grown deep roots. Downing, Harkin and Sosnoski note that, "Over the years, research came to mean only the opposite of teaching. Those who could, did research; those who couldn't, taught" (8). Writing in 1994, Downing, Harkin and Sosnoski further noted "a groundswell of research interest in pedagogy" (8). Despite continued growth of pedagogical studies in Composition, however, the debate over the best focus for Composition scholarship continues. This is perhaps why, as I noted in the introduction to this chapter, some professors suggested I avoid the subject of composition theory—it can provoke partisan reactions.

The conflict over theorizing in Composition studies is commonly characterized as a binary between theory and practice. The falseness of this binary is largely recognized: one cannot have a practice without a theory; they cannot truly be in binary opposition. Indeed, those teachers who claim to work without theories certainly do have theories at work behind their pedagogical choices, beliefs about the nature of writing and of learning to write; these theories are simply unacknowledged or unexamined. Rather than a conflict of binaries, the tension over composition theory might better be described as a conflict

between the goals compositionists have for classes or programs, or as a side effect of frustrations with the state of employment conditions. These concerns are complex, and I will explore them more fully in chapters four and five.

In this section, I note that the theory / practice binary, while false, has served some educators as a less complicated frame for dealing with the daunting practical and material realities of composition teaching, or of resisting developments in the field. The binary persists. I provide a brief overview of the polarizing conflict surrounding composition theory; my discussion allows me to define the terms “theory” and “theorizing” as not only removed from this false binary, but also to engage the concerns of teachers and scholars as I continue the dissertation. I may reject the binary view of theory and practice, but while it is still so employed, I need to address it if I am to encourage teachers to move beyond it.

A complete historical review of the debate over composition theory is not within the scope of this project. Therefore, I will use Stephen North’s seminal text, 1987’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*, which in part analyzes the conflicts between the groups he calls practitioners and philosophers, as a useful touchstone for discussing compositionists’ perspectives on theory. I then present Wendy Bishop’s 1999 critique in *CCC* of the relationship between Composition teachers and theorists as an indication of the persistence and evolution of these same tensions. Finally, I consider Gary Olson’s 2002 work in *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, and Sydney Dobrin’s 1997 *Constructing Knowledges: The Politics of*

*Theory-Building and Pedagogy in Composition* because they suggest that compositionists might break out of the theorizing-teaching conflict by conceding the room for both intellectual growth as well as pedagogical innovation. I then contemplate the practical value of this perspective in communicating with a resistant audience.

*Practitioners and Philosophers: Stephen North*

Twenty years ago, North argued that practitioners, like theorists, do indeed create new knowledge for the field; he describes teachers' practice-as-inquiry occurring as they are confronted with unique classroom situations to which they adapt in completely original ways (33). However, he observes that practice-as-inquiry is difficult under the working conditions of most compositionists (36), many of whom are overworked and under-supported temporary employees, adjuncts, and graduate assistants. The practitioners who do consistently pursue inquiry in composition teaching, he says, "are relatively rare birds—people who defy the more usual career pattern: whose classroom successes don't lead them to become administrators of some kind; who don't 'graduate' to teaching literature; who don't burn out in the face of impossible odds . . ." (35). He describes most composition teachers in the 1980s as focusing on what works in the classroom, too harried to inquire into why. North warns that "This bedrock pragmatism" can be "habit forming. Practitioners tend to become habitually impatient with complicated causal analyses, which in turn makes them relatively cavalier about such analyses even for the purpose of inquiry" (40). Eventually, this line of thinking may lead practitioners to deny the relevance of

composition theory in their daily work, and to criticize composition theorists for pursuing anything not directly and immediately pedagogical. If the work does not address teaching itself, the reasoning becomes, it is not worth our already limited time.

North's observations are still relevant twenty years later, as my lunch conversation with Tim reveals. Tim's interest in using collaborative learning in his composition class was limited to practical concerns: handouts he might use in a workshop. I cannot speak to his interest or lack thereof in composition theory, but his immediate needs and time constraints led him to decide that an understanding of the theory behind the practice was not necessary. Certainly it might not seem pressing when he had so much work on his plate. My offering of Bruffee's article, a piece of theoretical discourse disconnected from lore was perhaps inappropriate in Tim's eyes; Bruffee himself writes that he does not offer "recipes" (416). Bruffee does offer theories which Tim and I might have discussed in tandem with lore and adapted to his practice. If only I could rewind and have that conversation again.

Impatience with composition theory may also stem from another cause observed by North in the 1980s. He notes that some theorists, whom he calls "Philosophers," may create tension if they move from "considering the preconditions of the ideas we might use in deciding what to do" in the composition classroom, to presuming to make decisions about what teachers must do (112). He worries that writing teachers are sometimes made to look either incompetent or irresponsible by composition theorists. North cautions

theorists from presuming to “rescue” practitioners with reforms wrought from theoretical scholarship (324-331). Such condescension could certainly lead to practitioners resenting composition theorists and a rejection of theoretical pursuits by association.

I do not know if Tim resented my offering of a theoretical text in response to his request for help with collaborative learning techniques. I do know that the Composition Coordinator at the public university where we are both employed has cautioned me against directly criticizing any single pedagogical choice made by the temporary faculty or by the professors of literature teaching composition classes. We may see the weaknesses in teaching writing with grammar drills or through lectures, he explained, but making caveats concerning writing pedagogies could lead to the resentment North describes. My colleagues might interpret criticism of their pedagogical choices as insulting to their professionalism. My supervisor’s diplomatic tactic, instead, is to discuss composition theory and pedagogy at weekly lunches held for those teaching writing—lunches sadly not well attended.

*Teachers and Theorists: Wendy Bishop*

The tensions North described in the relationship between practitioners and philosophers are represented in scholarship throughout the 1990s. As a case in point, I offer Wendy Bishop’s 1999 “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition.” Her piece demonstrates that the conflict over the role of theory in pedagogy did not diminish as compositionists became more commonplace in the academy. Rather, some compositionists continue to be



wary of the changing body of theoretical scholarship in the field. Extending North's observations, Bishop believes that teachers conducting practice-as-inquiry, what she describes as theory grounded in the classroom, are not given the same respect as other theorists.

Bishop explains that she is at once a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes (10). As such, she takes umbrage with social-constructivist theorists, who, she claims, often dismiss or disparage compositionists who insist upon grounding their scholarship in classroom practice, or who employ widely accessible prose styles (she singles out expressivists as favorite targets). These theorists, she says, hold up writer-teacher-writers such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow "as representatives of the old, the self-centered . . ." which in turn "encourages us to diss their teacher-functions. . . . We can dismiss them and move on to other agendas" (23). Bishop worries that these "other agendas"—constructing theory unrelated to practice—leave little room for her in the academy (23).

The "easy culprit" in this phenomenon, Bishop asserts, is "Current-Market-Forces." Compositionists theorize apart from pedagogical concerns, she believes, out of a need to appear more professional in a system that does not value teaching very highly (12-13). The resulting scholarship "sweeps pedagogy under the skirts of long, black, academic robes" (12). She believes that her own value as a teacher and theorist is diminished in these circumstances. She concludes that composition scholars need to be much more wary of labeling

each other, and that we need to do more “writing about our writing” (29) in order to understand better our scholarly motivations.

North and Bishop suggest to me that many composition teachers may view discussions of composition theory as irrelevant to their needs; as offensive to their abilities; or as dismissive of their work, and, by extension, of them. As I argue to make theorizing vital in composition teaching, then, I am faced with the challenge of communicating with a possibly defensive audience. Next, I consider whether the defense of composition theory offered by Gary Olson and Sydney Dobrin provides any insight into addressing theory with this audience.

*Theory and Intellectual Growth: Gary Olson and Sydney Dobrin*

In 2002, Gary Olson replied directly to Bishop’s 1999 critique in “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline.” Ultimately, Olson believes that arguments over the relevance of theory may at heart reflect “ideological difference” concerning the goals of intellectual study in composition (28). Specifically, while he does not deny the suppressed status of teaching in the academy, he believes that Bishop is simply resistant to the development of the field beyond pedagogical matters. Olson reminds compositionists that theorists do indeed value teaching, yet, “we don’t value teaching to the exclusion of every other intellectual concern” (26). He believes that there is room for a variety of theoretical pursuits in Composition, that, in fact, compositionists must allow for this diversity if the field is to grow as an intellectual discipline.

Many scholars, such as Hillocks (*Teaching Writing* 28), Dobrin (148-149) and Olson (24), defend the need to theorize composition beyond pedagogy.

Dobrin, for instance, argues, “We, as scholars, are obligated to consider aspects of written language if we are to move towards a fuller comprehension of composition and of written discourse in general. Making pedagogy a necessary end of theory places unneeded constraints or limitations on composition scholarship” (21). He further asserts that if composition teachers reject theory beyond the pedagogical, “we are willingly accepting the role of service department in the university whether we like it or not” (32).

While I agree with the defense of extra-pedagogical composition theory offered by Dobrin and Olson, I do not believe that it is of much practical use in communicating with the practitioners North described, whether they are teacher-theorists like Bishop, temporary faculty like my colleague Tim, or the many teachers and graduate students engaged in teaching writing who are not students of composition theory themselves. They might concede the benefits of the intellectual growth of theory as contributing to the body of knowledge in the field; yet, this concession in and of itself does not change the low value the university places on teaching, or give instructors the time or motivation to study a variety of composition theories. So what am I to do? How am I to discuss theory with this diverse group?

#### An Emphasis on Theorizing

I propose that one means of attracting a larger proportion of writing teachers to a discussion of composition theory is to emphasize the verb, “theorizing,” defining it as an indispensable tool for all scholar-teachers, no matter one’s instructional status or professional agenda. This is a tall order given

the resistance to theory I have described. Still, I do believe positioning theorizing this way can at least open the door to engaging more composition teachers in conversations about theory. I see in “theorizing” the marriage of lore and scholarship, a seam mending the binary tear. That is, theorizing is the act of applying both the insights learned from lore and the knowledge gleaned from theoretical scholarship to the challenges in the context, the classroom, at hand. How might my conversation with my colleague Tim have differed if I had engaged him in a discussion considering whether and why collaborative learning might be appropriate for his classroom? Rather than exchanging theoretical discourse in the form of articles or lore in the form of handouts, we might have discussed his context specifically and together learned something about his students or his goals for the course. This would likely have been more appealing to him than my reaction of handing him a theoretical text. At the same time, the conversation would be influenced by my theoretical studies. What’s more, Tim might have been more amenable to considering theory in the future had I first invited him to theorize in a personal, situated manner.

More than that, I believe that theorizing one’s beliefs about writing and teaching writing should be an essential component of being a composition teacher. Teachers should examine their own and others’ theories regularly, and in turn consider them in relationship to the material and intellectual obstacles that they face every day. Perhaps writing teachers should consider James Berlin’s perspective as he introduces the theories in the collection, *Changing Classroom Practices*: “The proof of their value is finally in their usefulness in the classroom”

(Foreword viii). I believe that teachers should value their lore enough to theorize it, and value their theories enough to consider their intersections with lore.

Again, this may seem an obvious position to compositionists or scholars who regularly engage theory. However, George Hillocks's benchmark work in *Ways of Thinking, Ways of Teaching* demonstrates that many writing teachers do not in fact reflect on the theories behind their practices, instead believing that their stances are common sense positions. Hillocks finds that writing is often treated as a simple skill that can be passed on without concern for personal philosophy; indeed, many teachers still claim that they do not hold any personal theory of writing or teaching writing that may affect their work.

Of course, Hillocks' study shows that writing teachers are always operating from a theory, even if they are not consciously aware of it. Even among those who claim no pedagogical theory, "it is clear that underlying their work are what amount to relatively simple, practical theories that enable teachers to order activities . . ." (*Ways of Thinking* 113). That is, while a teacher may not consciously reflect on theory, there is nonetheless a set of beliefs about the nature of learning and of writing serving as the foundation for instruction. Furthermore, Hillocks notes that "the assumptions we make and the theories we hold have a powerful effect on what and how we teach" (*Teaching Writing* 28). In chapter five, I examine the theories behind three common approaches to teaching composition (grammar instruction, initiation into academic discourse, and assessment preparation), demonstrating that these positions do not simply comprise the common sense transmission of skills, but instead reflect specific

beliefs about the nature of writing and learning. In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for subsequent discussion by further clarifying the meaning of “theorizing.” Specifically, I define “theorizing” by its emphasis on systematic reflection, and I claim that such reflection is fundamental to the teaching of writing.

Educational theorist Kanavillil Rajagopalan emphasizes the importance of “theorizing” being systematic in particular: “Theory [and theorizing—he is speaking of the act, the verb, here] certainly involves reflection, but it is the effort to structure that reflection that gives it its distinctive flavor.” Likewise, Patricia Bizzell defines theorizing as: “. . . thinking about what one is doing—reflecting on practice—but thinking about it in a systematic way, trying to take as much as possible into account, and using the ideas of other thinkers wherever they may be helpful” (2-3). I believe George Hillocks describes structured reflection most clearly and thoroughly in *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*. Theorizing, he says, should “at minimum” (51) include:

1. A systematic account of the phenomena under consideration, including multiple levels of analysis as appropriate
2. Explanations of important relationships among the phenomena
3. Revelations of assumptions underlying the analysis. (52)

Note that the definitions provided by Kanavillil, Bizzell and Hillocks do not exclude lore. Bizzell refers to practice, “what one is doing,” and Hillocks to “the phenomena under consideration.” Certainly lore may be the mode of expressing one’s practices, or the object under consideration.

In the frame provided by these three scholars, theorizing is the act of self-consciously and critically analyzing relationships, accompanied by the intentional investigation of preconceptions, and the incorporation of others' perspectives. It is this activity that I have in mind as I use the term theorizing throughout this project.

Further, I take a cue from Amy Lee, who proposes in *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision* that writing teachers should always be on guard against the tendency to separate the acts of theorizing and teaching (11), as though one's pedagogy might be independent from one's philosophies. Like Hillocks, she argues that teachers often and easily come to see their pedagogical practices as "given, natural, or just common sense. Once we teach or understand our teaching in certain ways, or once we consciously adopt and enact a specific pedagogy, it becomes difficult to critique our assumptions and practices. They come to seem inalterable, given, unchallengeable" (9). Rather, teachers might "seek ways to revision and represent pedagogy as necessitating reflection and action both in and outside the classroom" (12). Lee presents theorizing one's practices as a significant part of a composition teacher's job, just as important as choosing a textbook, generating course materials, or producing scholarship.

This connotation of the term "theorizing," I believe, resists pitting teachers against each other in a false binary of theory and practice, intellectual work and practical lore. Instead, it creates a space both for the growth of composition knowledge in diverse directions, as Dobrin and Olson wish, and for the

acknowledgement of the intellectual contributions and material needs of composition teachers, explored by North and Bishop. By marrying theory and lore in the term “theorizing,” theories can find greater relevance. Moreover, lore, once “configured,” to use Downing, Harkin and Sosnoski’s term, “achieves theoretical force” (16-17). Composition teacher-scholars can see theory as “a set of reflections, a way of thinking about our entire range of experience, to be tested in our daily lives” (Berlin Foreword viii). When composition theory and lore are considered in concert, they together make a richer, more complex, and perhaps more useful tool, expressing both abstract possibilities and the complications of material reality.

Moreover, if compositionists embrace and assert a central role for theorizing, it can be a useful rhetorical tool in reforming a labor system that separates the study of theory from the practice of pedagogy. In chapters four and five, I will argue that the culture of the corporate university actually discourages systematic reflection on composition pedagogies in order to maintain profitable staffing practices. I agree with Lynn Worsham that “. . . the purpose of the intellectual work of writing is not to justify what we already believe or to rationalize a framework of meaning; the point is to alter the affective relations that position us in a world that wants us to go quietly, silently into the good night that ideology has already prepared for us” (104-5). Theorizing can allow us to imagine and propose alternatives to the reality imposed upon us by administrators, textbooks and assessment tests. Theorizing is an opportunity to accomplish what Antonio Faundez says is the purpose of all intellectual work: “. . . all intellectual



activity is done with the aim of understanding reality and, if possible, of changing it” (9). In that vein, my aim in the next two chapters is to use theory as a tool for challenging and changing the reality of composition teaching. Specifically, I want to argue that an ignorance or suppression of composition theory should not be treated as an inevitable component of labor relations or assessment culture. Rather, compositionists should seek to alter these realities by asserting the fundamental necessity for theorizing in the teaching of writing.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### COMPOSITION THEORY AND ACADEMIC LABOR

“It is ourselves we must scrutinize, however reluctant we are to do so.”

Cary Nelson, “Resistance Is Not Futile,” xvi

#### Becoming a Compositionist

I admit that early on, first as a graduate assistant and later as an adjunct, I did not know what I was supposed to be doing as a composition teacher, often feeling under-prepared, unqualified, and even at times unwilling to teach composition. Back then I thought of myself, really, as an English teacher who had to teach writing as a condition of my profession, but, just as the actor really wants to direct, I really wanted to teach Shakespeare or Chaucer. Teaching writing exclusively, outside of creative writing, was not a concept to which I had been exposed. That option was not encouraged, not even presented to me as an undergraduate or masters student in the English department. The objective was clear: established, successful English professors teach literature. Yet I found myself, year after year, teaching composition.

I can remember when my sense changed: in my ninth year of teaching, one of my employers (I was an adjunct at two colleges at the time) offered me a choice among available classes, both literature and composition. Sitting in the shared space of the English adjunct office, I hesitated, considering for a moment my career dominated by composition courses. I surprised myself and chose the writing course, saying to my equally surprised colleagues, “I teach writing. I’m a writing teacher.”

With my admission, I had to consider what that moniker meant beyond a list of courses on my curriculum vitae. I reflected on my own lack of training and pedagogical, theoretical and professional knowledge of composition, something none of my employers had cared to notice—that is, they may have noticed, but hiring me indicated that they did not care. I held a Masters degree in English, but had taken only a single course in teaching writing. Indeed, it would not have been convenient for the administration to acknowledge my lack of composition study, nor economically profitable to replace me with a full-time professor of Composition.

Yet I began to feel that I was doing my students a disservice through my own ignorance. I remember a freshman composition student asking me about the mechanics of drafting in our course. She had never felt comfortable or productive doing the brainstorming activities in our text. In fact, she thought they might be hindering her. What, she asked, was the rationale behind them? What did her inability to follow the version of The Writing Process in our text say about her abilities? Finally, she wanted to know why I seemed to emphasize clarity so much in my marginal comments on her drafts—and just what did I mean by “clear,” anyway? I stammered through a semblance of an answer whose details I cannot now recall. What I do remember is feeling the inadequacy of my reply, and realizing how little knowledge about writing I actually possessed. I wondered what sort of writing teacher I could be if I knew more about composition beyond what my students’ textbooks told me. And so I began applying to doctoral programs in Composition studies, not only with the intention to increase my

knowledge of the field, but also, of course, to increase my chances of finding a full-time teaching position. I had no idea then what a professional gamble I was actually taking.

#### Purpose of Chapter Four: Connecting Composition Theory and Labor Practices

In this chapter I analyze the relationship between composition theory and the academic labor system. I propose, first, that academic managers in the corporatized university have reason to perpetuate the belief that composition theory is superfluous; second, that this degradation of composition theory negatively effects teaching; and third, that the role of composition theory in composition teaching can only be changed as part of a larger strategy of collective action.

Much has been written about the plight of contingent labor generally, and professional organizations like the American Association of University Professors and the National Council of Teachers of English have drafted statements calling for better conditions, pay, and benefits for contingent employees. As use of part-time labor increases across disciplines, comprising 48% of all teaching positions in 2005 (Jaschik), academics are becoming more openly critical of the labor system. My purpose in this chapter is to take the critique in a new direction by demonstrating a connection between the problematic academic labor system and the poor status of composition theory.

I posit that as the university has become corporatized, part of a global trend towards neoliberalism, staffing conventions have become more often based on cost-effectiveness than expertise. Further, theorizing is a threat to this system:

to consider carefully the theories underlying one's views on writing, teaching and learning includes acknowledging biases or gaps in knowledge that might disrupt the rationale behind current labor and funding arrangements. If administrators deem knowledge of composition theory unnecessary to the teaching of composition, then they may cheaply staff writing courses with graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees who may have little or no knowledge of the field. The budget's bottom line trumps the teacher's subject knowledge.

I do not suggest that the study of composition theory will solve academia's labor problems; instead, I argue that an analysis of the labor system's effect on composition theory can be a useful tool in reforming practice and employment in composition teaching. In this, I am inspired by theorist and academic reformer Cary Nelson. In "Resistance Is Not Futile," Nelson argues that reform requires "a collective project of theory and action. . . . Neither will suffice on its own" (xv-xvi). This chapter is a step towards such a collective project, providing analysis that can inform action.

### Chapter Structure

In "Staffing Practices in Composition," I provide a brief overview of the academic labor system generally, and then take a closer look at employment in Composition. Reviewing the work of David Harvey, Marc Bousquet, Henry Giroux, Lynn Worsham, James Sledd, Richard Ohmann and David Downing, I demonstrate that in most institutions, the heavy reliance on contingent workers leads to a division between "compositionist" and "composition teacher." That is, degreed compositionists with backgrounds in theory are made into managers,

while the teachers generally have not studied composition in depth. I look, too, at the trend in creating staffs of full-time but non-tenure-track composition teachers. Whether largely contingent or full-time and non-tenured, these staffing options position composition teaching as a second-class activity.

I move from a review of current critiques to an analysis of the effects of this two-tiered labor system on the status of composition theory in the second section, “Generic Teaching and Composition Theory.” Employment in composition relies upon a generic view of teaching; that is, administrators must insist that discipline specific study is not necessary to teach writing. I borrow the term “generic” from George Hillocks, who uses it to describe the belief that if one can teach, one can teach anything (*Teaching Writing* 3). I argue that this stance devalues the critical engagement of composition theories, as persons can be hired to teach writing without any formal study of the subject. Moreover, this system leads to circumstances in which teachers are more likely to accept conventional forms, practices, and beliefs as inevitabilities; the demands of the position often provide little time, resources, or motivation for exploring innovations in the field.

Lastly, in “Reforming Labor and Validating Composition Theory,” I acknowledge that simply producing scholarship or promoting the study of composition cannot alter the status quo in composition theory and teaching. The labor system itself must be reformed if change is to occur, and academics taking collective action armed with analysis is the best means of succeeding.

## Staffing Practices in Composition

Just after the Adjunct Faculty Orientation—an hour in a computer lab aimed at introducing us to the University’s web programs and getting us online access to the library—the Writing Program Administrator asked me into her office. The other attendees and I had just been hired at the large private university to teach freshman composition and introduction to literature in the Fall of 2002.

After I sat down in the WPA’s office, she began, “I understand you have been teaching at the community college, Amy.” I thought this was an odd statement—she had recently interviewed me for the job, so she certainly was already familiar with my résumé and work history. I explained that yes, I had been teaching part-time at the community college, as well as at a small private college.

Then the other shoe dropped: “Well, Amy, you’re going to have to quit any other adjunct positions you currently hold. The University’s policy is that our adjuncts do not work at other institutions.” I thought I sensed an apology behind her eyes, but the WPA just smiled at me.

I was a bit stunned. My reply was part stammer: “Ok . . . um . . . why?”

Her answer was both logical and demoralizing. First, she explained, adjuncts working at several schools are often overworked and distracted, and they may struggle with travel between locations. The University’s administration felt that exclusivity would ensure better performance.

It was true: I did often feel overwhelmed teaching five to six classes per semester. At times I knew the pressure kept me from doing my very best teaching. I suspected her reference to travel signaled problems with scheduling or lateness. Undeniably, my availability to the University would be less flexible were I to schedule courses at the other institutions. And, yes, I was once late to the community college after a fire drill at the private college delayed my leaving on time.

Clearly I would be better off working at one location. Yet the WPA's logic failed to address my pressing material concerns. I was working at several institutions in order to make a living wage. Truth be told, my cumulative salary still placed me below the poverty line. The community college offered me \$1100 per course, with a cap of three courses per semester; the private college did them only \$100 better, and limited adjuncts to two courses per semester. Neither provided me with benefits of any kind. So, I protested diplomatically.

"I respect your position," I said, "but I will miss the income."

Again I saw the apology in her face, but her answer toed the University's line: "That's why we pay our adjuncts more per course than other local schools." She looked uncomfortable, and ended our conversation with, "Thanks for your time. See you on Monday."

The University did pay slightly more: \$1400 per course. I was limited to two courses during my first semester, with the possibility of three thereafter. That would result in my making \$7400 in the academic year, again with no benefits and no possibility for promotion to full-time status.



After some struggle, I decided to lie by omission. I quit the community college and quietly kept working at the private college, where the English department chair was sympathetic and planned my schedule around my obligation to the University.

In the Fall of 2003, I took some guilty pleasure in quitting my position at the University. After beginning my doctoral studies in Composition, the department chair at the private college asked me to direct their writing center. While they could not offer me a full-time or tenure-track position, they did give me three part-time contracts: one to direct the center, one to teach two classes (composition or literature), and one to direct a theater production. Yes, that did mean I was working full-time hours with no benefits and only a minor pay increase, but I was finally located at a single institution with no financial loss. Ironically, my pursuit of a Composition degree meant that I was actually teaching fewer writing classes. My new credentials had instead merited me a contingent administrative position in a writing center.

At that time, I assumed that the eventual completion of my doctoral degree would naturally result in tenure-track teaching, and indeed I did obtain such a position when I finished my coursework. My continued studies and professional experience have made me realize, though, how out of the ordinary my luck in landing a tenure-track, teaching-focused job really was.

In this section, I scaffold my arguments concerning the connection between labor and theory by providing some background in the university's employment system. First, I review "The Transformation of Academic Labor,"

describing the university's increased use of contingent and graduate workers, connecting this development to global labor trends. Next, I analyze "The Division of Labor in Composition," demonstrating that "compositionist" has largely come to mean "manager;" at the same time, writing programs are staffed almost entirely by contingent teachers who are not required to study the field. I argue that this system contributes to the perceived intellectual divide and the actual material divide between pedagogy and theory. Finally, I assess the position of "The Full-time, Second-class Theorist" as an equally problematic staffing strategy.

### *The Transformation of Academic Labor*

Staffing across all academic disciplines has undergone a transformation in the past thirty years. Writing for *Inside Higher Ed*, Scott Jaschik reports that in 1975, 30 percent of university faculty were part-time. In contrast, in 2005, "part-time positions made up 48 percent of faculty jobs. . . ." As more full-time yet non-tenure track positions are created, making up "20 percent of jobs in the 2005 . . . tenured and tenure-track positions have become decidedly in the minority" (Jaschik). This development is part of a larger global trend, as Richard Ohmann observes in "Accountability and the Conditions for Curricular Change." Ohmann insists that, "one can see in the casualization of academic labor the same process of dispersal and degradation that capital initiated against the core workforce in almost every industry around 1970" (68). If "the university has become more like a business" (69), it is because administrators are adopting the dominant economic philosophy.

This profit-driven, corporate philosophy may be rooted in the global rise of neoliberalism, which David Harvey traces in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. In that text, Harvey describes the growing dominance of this philosophy worldwide, giving special attention to its evolution in the United States, Great Britain and China. He defines it thus: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Harvey argues that neoliberalism has been the driving force in both global politics and corporate practice in the past forty years. Moreover, he describes it as a system that “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3), further claiming that, “Neoliberalism has meant, in short, the financialization of everything” (33). Throughout this chapter, I theorize the university’s labor system within a neoliberal corporate framework, considering what happens to composition theory and instructors as profit-driven, casualized labor becomes the norm.

Academia’s turn towards part-time untenured labor certainly parallels Harvey’s description of neoliberal labor policy: “Workers are hired on contract, and in the neoliberal scheme of things short term contracts are preferred in order to maximize flexibility” (167-168). In order to maintain this flex-work system, managers attack unions and get rid of tenure systems (168). Faculty’s willingness to fight neoliberal policies in academia is complicated by their now tenuous positions. In *The University In Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-*

*Academic Complex*, Henry Giroux notes that, “Faculty power once rested in the fact that most faculty were full-time and a large percentage of them had tenure, so they could confront administrators without fear of losing their jobs” (118). That changed in the 1980s, however, as “the newly corporatized university” began “to limit faculty power by hiring fewer full-time faculty, promoting fewer faculty to tenure, and instituting ‘post-tenure’ reviews that threaten to take tenure away” (118). As a result, Giroux says, “Many faculty live under the constant threat of being downsized, punished, or fired and are less concerned about quality research and teaching than about accepting new rules of corporate-based professionalism in order to simply survive in the new corporatized academy” (128). These rules include the increased casualization of labor, which is met with insufficient resistance from a disempowered faculty, resulting in a teaching staff increasingly populated by graduate students and temporary instructors.

#### *The Division of Labor In Composition*

While the trend towards part-time and untenured positions is systemic in academia, nowhere is it so entrenched as in composition, so much so that many administrators no longer see anything alarming in a subject being taught almost entirely by contingent labor, albeit supervised by full-time professors. In *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, Marc Bousquet provides an overview of the history of composition labor:

While the course [freshman composition] was commonly staffed by full-time lecturers and tenure-stream faculty until the 1940s, the expansion of higher education under the G.I. Bill initiated the

practice of adjunct hiring and reliance on graduate employees to teach the course. By the mid 1960s, the casualization of writing instruction was institutionalized and massively expanded in order to fuel cross-subsidy of research and other university activities.

During this expansion, a significant fraction of the collective labor of rhetoric and composition specialists was devoted to supervising and training casualized first-year writing staff. (158)

While increases in the number of graduate programs suggest that Composition studies has achieved some success as a field, the truth is that at most institutions, composition faculty are untenured and have “little acquaintance with the disciplinary knowledge of rhet-comp” (Bousquet 158). Little seems to have changed in the twenty years since Sledd called composition teaching “a slave trade” (“See and Say” 138). The continued use of non-compositionist, contingent workers prompts Joseph Harris to lament that, despite the growing “disciplinary apparatus” of Composition studies, including “our presses and journals and conferences and graduate programs,” the actual practice of staffing of courses has remained much the same (357-358). Similarly, Downing notes that while the theoretical work of literature and composition changes, “What doesn’t change is most often revealed in the perpetuation of exactly the same basic labor practices . . .” (93). That is, the use of temporary and part-time flexible workers. Many compositionists are still hard-pressed, then, to find full-time teaching positions.

Some programs do hire full-time, degreed compositionists exclusively to teach, but most institutions are more interested in hiring compositionists to be

Writing Program Administrators [WPA]. Overall, those with the most knowledge of composition theory are often actually doing the least teaching, getting course-releases in order to attend to administrative duties. Composition theory in this model is divorced from composition teaching, its study instead qualifying one to supervise contingent faculty. Lynn Worsham explains in an interview with Scott Mclemee that this move “to collapse the work of administration into the work of theory” is “a disservice,” making theorists into the rulers of an underclass of part-timers. Bousquet calls this “the problem of ‘tenured bosses and disposable teachers’” (158). Bousquet’s choice of phrase may be homage to James Sledd, who famously critiqued the “boss compositionists” (“Why the Wyoming” 173) who oversee contingent composition teachers with “contempt” for their lack of disciplinary study (172). Sledd is angry with a system that rewards research but not teaching (175). More recently, Bousquet and Worsham observe that the system rewards research by removing the composition theorist from teaching as much as possible. This division clearly contributes to the false perception that pedagogy and theory are in binary: in the model described by Worsham, Bousquet and Sledd, tenured bosses produce composition theory but do not teach (or teach much less); disposable teachers instruct, but are seldom asked to engage composition theory, whether by studying, writing, or reflecting on practice.

The division of labor in composition may ultimately be motivated by the trend Ohmann and Giroux identified in the university as a whole—a growing concern for profitability. Ohmann argues that as universities “look to the bottom

line as businesses do,” they will assess the English department’s value using largely financial standards (71). This is what prompts Michael Bérubé to note that, “What rationale we [English departments] have usually relies on our functions as teachers of writing” (32). English departments are moneymakers for the university primarily because most every student, regardless of major, is enrolled in one, two or three semesters of required writing courses. Cheaply staffing writing courses with adjuncts and graduate students makes budgetary good sense.

What’s more, this system becomes self-perpetuating. In his assessment of neoliberal labor practices, Harvey suggests that, “Employers have historically used differentiations within the labour pool to divide and rule” (168). The workforce is more easily manipulated if placed into tiers. Contingent workers may feel powerless to question their lot; meanwhile, WPAs and full-time professors know that their benefits and status are tenuous in an atmosphere marked by challenges to funding and tenure. Their understandable insecurity, as noted previously, may keep them from seeking solidarity with contingent faculty. Sledd notes more selfish motivations for tenured faculty’s inaction. English professors need composition courses to bolster their threatened budgets (budgets which, he notes, support their research), but as a whole they have little interest in teaching composition themselves. Professors may be willing, then, to turn a blind eye to the inequities of the system that allows them to maintain funding while teaching literature (“Why the Wyoming” 166). As a result, the division composition labor

into full-time WPA theorists and contingent instructors is challenged by a minority of scholars and activists, but otherwise perpetuated.

### *The Full-time Second-Class Theorist*

Some colleges have attempted to solve the problems of a contingent work force by creating Composition programs staffed entirely by full-time but non-tenure-track compositionists. Doug Hesse has received attention lately for his initiative in setting up such a program at the University of Denver. At the Modern Language Association Conference in December 2007, Hess described Denver's program as similar to one at Georgia State University, with "multiple-year, renewable contracts that have resulted in full-time jobs with better pay and benefits than adjuncts could have earned, even teaching many courses" (qtd. in Jaschik). Still, Hesse worries: "whether the creation of these jobs was a form of 'collaboration' with the system that fails to create tenure-track jobs. Was the program, he wondered, 'a composition Vichy regime'?" Hesse ultimately says that since these new programs improve teaching, they are positive overall: "What's best for students trumps everything for me." Hesse concludes, "If academics wait until colleges return to the assumption that every possible position should be tenure-track, 'we'll wait an awfully long time.'"

While the University of Denver and universities with similar programs may have improved conditions and teaching at their institutions, they still contribute to the diminishment of composition faculty. Composition programs staffed by full-time non-tenure-track teachers give the illusion of equity, but in reality, the message sent is that composition teaching is less important than instruction in



other fields which merit tenure lines. Bousquet suggests that teaching composition is still not seen as “faculty work” (183) and distinguishes being “treated like” colleagues from actually being colleagues (182). By extension, composition theory is still positioned as a second-class scholarly pursuit when compositionists are sequestered at the bottom of a tiered system, even a system of full-timers.

Even when full-time, tenure-track compositionists in independent programs or departments staff courses, their professional expertise may still be trumped by economic concerns. Take, for instance, the Writing Program begun at Syracuse University in 1986, which has been analyzed for its failures as much as for its successes. James Zebroski reflects on his experiences in that program, positing that in a post-Fordist system, within the increasingly corporatized University structure, professionalized writing risks sacrificing democratic procedure for profit (166-167). In essence, he saw faculty treated more and more like a flex-labor force with little say in governance or curriculum. Moreover, administrators were increasingly non-faculty or faculty released from teaching duties for management duties. He feels academic freedom and scholarly pursuits were both limited by a system more concerned with serving the student-clients in efficient and cost-effective ways. In other words, matters of money can come to matter significantly more than those of pedagogy, theory, or academic development. Ultimately, Zebroski suggests that Syracuse’s program serves as a warning that if we are not vigilant, we may create “Composition and Rhetoric,

Inc.,” wherein compositionists are akin to factory-line works acting out mandates from above.

Next, having considered the inequities of employment between those who study composition theory and those who actually staff writing classes, I explore the effects of the academic labor system on composition teaching and theory.

### Generic Teaching and Composition Theory

My brother Jim and I are both teachers—he in comparative literature and I in composition. As a graduate assistant in English, some of Jim’s teaching experience has been in composition. He has never taken a course in Composition studies. On one chilly autumn evening, we sat at my kitchen table drinking coffee and discussing our dissertations. I mulled over the repercussions of staffing practices in composition, objecting to the position I had been in myself as a teacher with only superficial training. I explained how I often felt lost in my early years as an English master’s student, teaching composition: Did no one mind that I knew nothing about how people acquire discourse conventions? That I planned my courses with a series of guesses, based mostly on my memories of the writing course I had taken as a freshman?

Jim’s nose crinkled as he leaned back in his chair, the familiar sign that I was in for a debate rather than a discussion. His sticking point: anyone can teach composition.

“I don’t need any special knowledge to teach writing, really,” he began, then adding, “No offense.” That addendum is significant; it is a tacit admission of a position many academics harbor. While I may work long and diligently studying

composition, many believe that Composition studies is, in a sense, superfluous, because just being a good writer is qualification enough to teach writing. It is a position that dismisses and diminishes my studies, my degree, and my scholarship. Moreover, it is a position with negative repercussions for both unprepared composition teachers and their students.

In this section, I propose that the widespread belief that almost anyone can teach writing is neither inadvertent nor innocuous. In “The Degradation of Composition Theory,” I posit that administrators must treat composition theory as superfluous in order to rationalize staffing procedures, and argue that, consequently, anti-theoretical stances are becoming more common. Second, I demonstrate that “Contingent Teaching and Scholarly Development in Composition” are often antithetical. Next, I propose that “The Quality of Contingent Teaching” suffers under these circumstances. Finally, I link “Theorizing and Reflective Composition Teaching.”

### *The Degradation of Composition Theory*

In 2001, the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues reported that 75% of composition teachers are graduate students [GAs], adjuncts, and temporary employees (340); degreed compositionists make up a small percentage of this group. I argue that, in order to justify hiring from a pool of persons lacking discipline-specific expertise, managers perpetuate the belief that composition theory can be divorced from practice. In turn, the actions of administrators encourage many writing instructors to believe that theorizing is not vital to practice.

Certainly a person with no graduate study in composition might be an excellent writing teacher. Certainly Literature and Composition are closely entwined fields, so that the majority of those who teach composition—GAs and contingent labor more likely to have degrees (or degrees-in-progress) in Literary studies—have some education that can inform their work. On the other hand, most writing teachers lack a foundation of knowledge regarding the acquisition of advanced literacy and are not current with developments in the field. Bousquet puts this situation in perspective:

In English departments, it is now typical for students to take nearly all first-year, and many lower-division, and some advanced topics courses from nondegreed persons who are imperfectly attuned to disciplinary knowledge and who may or may not have an active research agenda or a future in the profession. (42)

As graduate study in English currently stands at most universities, unless one chooses to concentrate in Composition studies specifically, a graduate student rarely receives more than a cursory introduction to the field. Sledd notes that graduate students with no background in composition studies may benefit from “limited teaching, after careful training and under intelligent supervision.” However, he worries that what is most often offered these new teachers is “surveillance, rather than instruction” (“Why the Wyoming” 168). Some institutions do offer more in-depth teacher training for graduate students. Yet, I cannot help but object, as Sledd does, that such programs are not enough to excuse staffing composition “with the least experienced, least prepared, most

poorly paid of teachers” (“Why the Wyoming” 167), who, moreover, are also shouldering a full schedule of graduate credits (“Or Get Off The Pot” 85). Some graduate students might be successful composition teachers despite this system, but it is not constructed to foster good teaching.

That managers and even tenured faculty have objected so little to the contingent staff’s lack of Composition study suggests that Composition’s disciplinary knowledge is not widely regarded as a professional prerequisite to teaching writing. Until quite recently, I have been one person in an on-call staffing army, populated mostly by persons with little or no expertise in teaching writing beyond having been hired to teach sections of composition at other schools in the past. This suggests to me that, however I may define myself, many define “composition teacher” as a warm body with graduate credits in English.

Of course some administrators and faculty may privately believe or even publicly claim that composition teachers should know composition theory, but to act openly on this preference would disrupt the current practice of employing persons with little or no disciplinary knowledge. Hillocks describes the situation thusly: “The educationists seem to believe that teaching is generic: Once one knows how to teach, one can teach anything” (*Teaching Writing* 3). Managers using the contingent system, then, do not necessarily hire teachers with content knowledge of composition, as much as those with some experience with teaching in general. Hillocks explains the contradiction at the heart of this preference: “Today, on the one hand, we hear from the writing establishment that writing is a special craft that requires a trained professorate. But college and school

personnel administrators tell us, through their actions, that nearly anyone can teach it” (4). Managers accept the latter stance as it allows them easily to draw from the pool of cheap labor in English studies.

Moreover, managers’ support of this system tacitly subjugates composition theory. In the corporate model, composition theory is not a profitable commodity; it is a niche market that does not pay off. As administrators maintain this perspective through their hiring policies, graduate and contingent employees are behooved to agree (at least publicly) that teaching is generic and composition theory is superfluous.

For instance, I can speculate why my brother, looking skeptical at me over our mugs of coffee, was not eager to consider the place (or absence) of Composition studies in his own work. Given that composition teaching largely funds his own studies in comparative literature, he and other graduate employees are naturally defensive of their positions; indeed, they have little motivation even to consider the rationale behind their funding. Without the assistantships that position these students as composition teachers, many would not be able to afford their graduate educations. While a few English graduate programs are working to integrate the studies of Literature and Composition, most students must choose one track or the other. If the administration insisted that all writing teachers either be students of composition or be thoroughly trained in the field, many English graduate students like Jim would either lose funding to those on a composition track, or spend a great deal of time supplementing their already full plate of literary studies with composition texts or

coursework. Contingent faculty already holding degrees but ungrounded in composition are in the same position; they need their jobs teaching writing and so are not motivated to acknowledge any detriments their lack of composition study may bring.

Many tenure-track and tenured professors have become entrenched in this system as well. For instance, Joseph Harris argues in “Thinking Like a Program” that writing teachers need not be compositionists. While he values composition scholarship (362), he does not believe that compositionists have any “unique skill in teaching students the moves and strategies of academic writing” (360). Armed with that philosophy, Harris has created a first-year writing staff at Duke University comprised entirely of post-doctoral fellows from “a wide range of disciplines” outside of English studies, the majority of whom have not previously taught or studied composition. These non-tenure track employees are not required to engage composition theory, though Harris works with them on designing assignments and defining course goals (360). Yet, I suspect his willingness to employ teachers ungrounded in the field has more to do with his worry that the labor system and the status of compositionists cannot be changed. Harris admits that:

If . . . more than a few American universities were willing to support the work of first-year writing teachers as a separate discipline, with the protections and privileges of departmental status and tenure, then I would gladly sign on the cause. But that is not a choice most of us have been offered, and I don’t see how accepting a

subordinate status in an existing discipline is preferable to working as a valued member of a multidisciplinary program. (362)

Rather than challenge the administration, then, Harris has adopted its position that the teaching and theorizing of writing are separate endeavors. Harris does not quite embody Bousquet's claim that tenure-line faculty choose to ignore concerns with composition labor "as a managerial responsibility" (20)—he does, after all, make the effort to try something new. But he also chooses to "reform" labor by accepting as inevitable management's policy of generic, contingent teaching.

I believe that one serious consequence of composition's labor system, whether it take the form of graduate assistantships, temporary contracts or WPAs, is that it may discourage teachers from exploring or even acknowledging the theories at work behind their positions as writing instructors (or their role in hiring instructors). For many people teaching composition, theorizing their practices may result in conceding a lack of professional expertise. What do you do if you discover that you (or the persons you hire) have large gaps in disciplinary knowledge of the field in which you teach?

In my own case, I returned to graduate study in composition; however, I had the significant benefit of a supportive, well-employed spouse who could shoulder the burden of the cost. Many persons teaching writing do not have the resources to study composition; after all, they are already graduate students in English literature, or living on contingent-worker salaries. Just as significant, I had the desire to pursue composition as my primary field. Many writing teachers



are not interested in getting a composition degree—they teach writing as a condition of their employment or funding, and are actively working for jobs focused on teaching literature or cultural studies. They may enjoy teaching writing, and certainly can be good teachers. A few may even do scholarly work in composition. At the same time, there is little motivation for such teachers to upset labor and funding arrangements by attaching any great consequence to a lack of disciplinary knowledge. Rather, they are more likely to see teaching composition as “dues paying” in the English department, and to do their unexamined best. They need the job, after all, and their employers rarely demand further study beyond an introductory course. WPAs, who must find multitudes of teachers willing to work for contingent pay or with temporary contracts, cannot afford to make expertise a deal-breaker, given that most of the people applying are not degreed compositionists.

It is no surprise, then, that resistance to theorizing one’s work in composition persists among English professionals. This may seem counterintuitive in a time when the numbers of graduate programs in composition are on the rise. Nonetheless, anti-composition theory sentiments are making their way from department meetings into scholarly journals. Take Robert Lee Mahon’s 2000 article “A Curmudgeon Leery of Composition Theory,” which echoes the feelings of many of my colleagues. Mahon describes himself as “a 21-year veteran of the composition wars” (1) who is “professionally undeveloped” (2). He explains, “I’ve never been to a teachers’ conference except to get rid of my travel budget by signing in. . . . Nor have I ever taken a course in anyone’s theory of

composition...nor read, except for yuks, a single article from any of the scholarly journals I don't subscribe to" (2). He claims that his own experience with academic writing, coupled with the advice from a "1904 edition of *Composition and Rhetoric*," provides him with all he needs (7, 9). His position may seem outrageous to those working in institutions with well-established or progressive writing programs; however, it is a common view in many English departments. Worsham describes the atmosphere thus: "For the past 30 years, people in the field have tried to define [composition studies] as an intellectual discipline. . . . But now it seems like people are embracing it as a service component," creating "a very chilly climate" for composition theorists (cited in Mclemee). As I noted in chapter three, Gary Olson believes we are in the midst of, "the new theory wars" (25). His statement is prompted by a growing trend among composition teachers to adopt atheoretical or anti-theoretical stances, as if pedagogy could be separated from theory.

I have frequently seen such stances take the form of emphasizing "basics" over theory. For instance, I was tapped in 2006 to teach an undergraduate class for secondary education teachers called "Teaching Writing" while an adjunct at a small private liberal arts college. I asked the faculty at an English department meeting which theories they suggest I emphasize. The consensus: no need to consider theory at all. "What these students need," offered one colleague, "is more practice in proper grammar and syntax so that when they become teachers they can pass on those basics." He seemed not to recognize that a theory lies beneath the approach he suggested, that even if I did not require the students to

read theoretical texts, I would be bringing theory into my classroom. Ultimately, I was directed to train future writing teachers divorced from any scholarly investigation of the discipline. (Luckily, no faculty followed up on my course reading list!)

### *Contingent Teaching and Scholarly Development in Composition*

The combination of a philosophy of generic teaching, a contingent labor force, and resistance to theorizing practice can be detrimental to professional development. That is, composition teachers under this system are less likely to pursue their own scholarship in the field—once they are in place, their working conditions do not nurture further study. Maureen Murphy Nutting reports that they often do not qualify for professional development programs (36). Moreover, teaching an overload of courses at more than one institution to make ends meet makes staying current with scholarship in the field extremely challenging (36). The American Association of University Professors reports that even when in full-time but non-tenure-track positions, such faculty's larger course loads provide "less time . . . to pursue scholarship or even keep up with developments in the field" (Curtis and Jacobbe 7). Moreover, these positions often do not have research requirements, making it less likely that administration will even consider supporting their scholarship (7).

Giroux argues that as a consequence, "the intellectual culture of the university declines" (118). I believe that this effect is direr in Composition than in other disciplines. Most contingent composition teachers are actually literature specialists. As a result, any time they do set aside for scholarly work is less likely

to be dedicated to Composition studies. Ironically, then, the longer they teach composition in the contingent system, the farther they might be removed from developments in Composition. Composition theorists (employed as WPAs), and composition teachers are placed into separate categories. The contrast is not only one of tenured versus contingent faculty; the division of labor perpetuates the belief that composition study itself is adjunct.

This belief may reinforce the growing rift between Literary and Composition studies, discouraging English graduate programs from integrating their study. Why give equal time and resources to composition theory in the English degree if a person can be employed to teach writing without it? Moreover, the view of composition theory as superfluous to teaching writing may make compositionists resentful, as it characterizes their degrees as intellectual wastes of time. It may also result in composition teachers who concentrate in literature studies feeling under prepared, overwhelmed or neglected by those who assign them composition classes without providing a sufficient foundation.

### *The Quality of Contingent Teaching*

The lack of scholarly knowledge of composition, coupled with the poor working conditions of the majority of composition teachers, can be detrimental to the quality of teaching, through no fault of the teachers themselves. Giroux notes that working conditions, including “less time to prepare, larger class loads, almost no time for research, and excessive grading demands” can lead to teachers “becoming demoralized and ineffective” (121). In addition, administrators often supply little or no training in composition teaching even though their staff has

minimal disciplinary knowledge, and they often fail to provide material resources in terms of office space and sometimes even library privileges. The best of teachers may work effectively even under these circumstances. However, Bousquet points out that, “The system of cheap teaching doesn’t sort for the best teachers; it sorts for the persons who are in a financial position to accept compensation below the living wage” (3).

Management wants quality teaching, yet its actions suggest that economical teaching is the priority. Gwendolyn Bradley observes that, “Courses that are packaged once and delivered over and over by low-paid, part-time teachers are cheaper and more efficient to produce than courses designed individually by highly qualified, tenure-track professors.” Prioritizing economics over quality has consequences: “Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime” (Bousquet 41). Composition teachers are made to struggle both financially and professionally, inevitably negatively affecting instruction.

Poor material circumstances and a lack of a foundation in Composition studies can, at best, result in a lack of reflective teaching. At worst, instructors may perpetuate methods that, while useful in their own experiences as writers or learners, may not be appropriate for the students in their classrooms, a phenomenon I will explore in chapter five. Both Hillocks and Salvatori note that this is a genuine problem. Salvatori observes that when people assume teaching is generic, requiring “no special training,” then teachers are less likely “to engage questions that pose a threat to comfortable ways of teaching and habitual ways of thinking about teaching.” Hillocks’s study of writing teachers revealed that

teachers do frequently put too much faith in the methods they have used previously, or those that were used to teach them. When students fail, teachers tend to rationalize and blame the students rather than question their pedagogical choices:

If students do not learn much . . . it is not surprising because they are weak and cannot be expected to learn. The teaching has not failed; the students have. . . . Teaching writing becomes a protected activity. There is no need to call assumptions about methods into question, no reason to try something new, no reason to doubt oneself as a teacher. (*Teaching Writing* 28)

Here is the greatest risk teachers take when they do not consciously theorize their work: students may be branded as incompetent or unintelligent if they do not respond to the stance and method adopted by the teacher. I do not mean to say that every teacher who avoids theorizing fails in this way. Rather, it is a risk that teachers cannot afford to take when students' educations are on the line.

### *Theorizing and Reflective Composition Teaching*

In contrast, theorizing has the potential to facilitate a teacher's growth by encouraging the reflection and self-critique Hillocks found so many teachers avoiding. In this vein, Jasper Neel underlines the power of theorizing to enrich perspective: "Theory forces one to interrogate one's position. Ignorance of theory usually permits one to remain unaware that one holds a position, one of many possible positions, a position that can change. Ignorance of theory blinds one to the knowledge that changing one's position changes what one sees and how one

sees it" (11). Experience in tandem with theory is what makes the composition teacher more than a general practitioner and what may belie mediocre teaching. I do not see theorizing as a panacea; nor do I suffer from what Stanley Fish famously termed "theory hope," the belief that the teaching of writing can be "justified or explained by a set of principles that stands apart from their practice, by a theory" (354), which can in turn make all teaching successful. On the other hand, I do believe that theorizing nurtures the sort of critique that can lead to effective action; it discourages us from taking a textbook's word at face value, from relying on practices that have ceased to succeed, and from accepting too readily that what has been must continue to be.

I do not mean to judge teachers of writing too harshly. Stephen North cautions scholars against making practitioners the "source" of "a knowledge and method crisis" (324). This criticism too easily devolves, he says, into portraying teachers as mere "technicians" (331) who must be instructed by the more savvy scholars, or worse, "something like the simple, indigenous population of the newly discovered, mostly unexplored territory of Composition" (325). Sledd expresses the same concern, balking that the "contempt" that compositionists express "for the real teachers of composition," the contingent workers ("Why the Wyoming" 172-173). And their concern is a legitimate one—North cites several scholars whose condescension towards teachers makes their work painful for me to read, especially since I can recall being spoken to in such a manner by colleagues when I was an adjunct. This stance can reinforce the false theory-practice binary by belittling the importance of lore and alienating teachers.

Yet I believe North takes his argument in defense of teachers to an extreme; although he never claims so overtly, his tone at times suggests that teachers should be protected from the work associated with theorizing. For instance, in his critique of Ann Berthoff's position in *The Making of Meaning* that teachers should take an active role in "philosophy," making scholarship a part of the job description, North writes:

Accepting the liberal model [which Berthoff represents] might be even worse. Under it, they [teachers] acquire not merely a new body of information, but at least one and maybe more than one new mode of inquiry as well. . . . it would again not be enough for them to figure out what to do (with each class, for each students, and so on); they would be bound, in addition, to try to ground their actions in some philosophically defensible context—defer not to a pragmatic logic, and adopt a dialectic in favor of (or, perhaps, as the preliminary to or basis for?) their ordinary mode of inquiry. (336)

My response to this position is to wonder why North portrays this multifaceted role for compositionists as terrible. Certainly it asks more from teachers. Certainly it does not solve the labor and working conditions of so many teachers. Rather than reject a more reflective and responsible role for compositionists because of these obstacles, I have tried to show here how the complex demands of the role can serve as a justification for changing current labor practices. I argue that the terms "composition teacher" and "compositionists" should be collapsed. Faculty can insist that informed, effective composition teaching is best performed by



tenure-stream, degreed teachers with a scholarly foundation in Composition studies. Again, I acknowledge that this argument cannot be made through theorizing alone—below, I will argue that collective action is a vital component of reform. Theorizing is, however, a good starting place, a means of critiquing and perhaps resisting dominant ideologies, of imagining alternatives.

At the present moment, however, academic managers prefer that teachers refrain from thinking too deeply about the connections among theory, pedagogy and staffing. Or, rather, as Claude Mark Hurlbert notes, “managers want us to think, write, and publish on the material reality [of the labor system], and then accept it” (Note to author). Teachers are encouraged to accept as inevitable the economic rationales that determine what it means to be a composition teacher.

#### Reforming Labor and Validating Composition Theory

I argue that one tactic in a larger strategy for reforming composition teaching is to challenge labor practices by reasserting the essential role of composition theory in composition instruction. It is not enough that those with degrees in Composition, who make up the minority of university writing teachers, write and publish theory. Nor can faculty simply require contingent workers, already overworked and under-compensated, to take up Composition studies. Instead, faculty must act collectively, pressuring administrations to alter the current system. I agree with Sledd, who argues that, “there can be no revolution in the teaching of writing until the exploitation of teachers is ended” (173). Teachers must insist that the trend of staffing the university overwhelmingly with

contingent workers must be reversed. Moreover, faculty should insist that all writing teachers have expertise in Composition studies. Only collectively can faculty improve writing instruction without great cost to teachers. This is a social justice issue—instructors and students alike suffer materially and intellectually under the current system. This is a fight worth our time, efforts, and risk.

Like Bousquet, I believe that while theorizing the labor market is a necessary first step to altering the labor practices in composition teaching, critique itself does not create change (162). Too often, he insists, composition theorists spend a lot of effort and ink theorizing the failure of radical pedagogies to alter the economically driven system (175), or using critical theory to argue the obvious, that change is possible (161). Ohmann, Giroux, Downing and Bousquet have each asserted that at some point composition teachers must take what they learn from theorizing and act collectively as part of a labor union.

Moreover, all four acknowledge the need for union leadership outside of the ranks of the tenured. Ohmann is inspired by the recent work of GAs and contingent faculty in organizing, noting that “unionizing among those who otherwise will constitute the cheap labor pool for privatizing education” is a strong force for reform (71). Likewise, Giroux believes that “faculty, students, and staff need to organize labor movements and unions” together (204). Downing also includes students in his call to action (113). This suggests that unions should do more to reach out to students, to inform them of the ways in which current labor practices affect the quality of instruction. If students are made to understand how labor policies degrade their teachers’ material and intellectual conditions and in

turn the education students ultimately receive, they can be powerful allies in demanding change.

For instance, the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties has made a point of connecting with students on each of the campuses it represents, through scholarships, activities and information campaigns (Kutztown University: Association of Pennsylvania State Colleges and University Faculties). When professors considered going on strike and holding a no confidence vote in the university president in 2007, individual students as well as student organizations threw their support behind the union at my university. Union officials have told me that student voices were a significant factor in those negotiations.

Ironically, while students become allies, it may be more difficult to convince full-time faculty to act for change. Bousquet calls for “social-movement unionism” (183) and “collective agency” (184), among GAs and the untenured, but he believes that other faculty have opted to invest in the corporatized system (12-13). Keith Hoeller shares this assessment. In “The Future of the Contingent Faculty Movement,” Hoeller notes that faculty unions are in part responsible for creating the two-tiered labor system: “The tenured faculty and their union leaders made a pact with college administrators, who agreed not to lay off tenured faculty, as long as the tenured faculty would allow them to increase the use of contingent faculty.” He also notes the failure of faculty unions and national faculty organizations to bring about real change:

For all of the publicity and all of our accomplishments, we have not yet stemmed the still rising tide of exploited contingent faculty. The multi-tiered system remains in effect throughout academe, even where campuses have been organized by one of the big three faculty unions. With perhaps only a handful of exceptions . . . part-time faculty are still earning only about 50 percent of what full-timers earn for teaching the same number of courses. Most adjuncts still do not have benefits, and few have any job security whatsoever. And none have automatic promotion to full-time tenure-track positions.

In the past, some tenured or tenure-track faculty may have seen nothing wrong with part-timers earning less money for the same workload. At one time, they could have assumed that most adjuncts were not Ph.D.s; we naturally want the time, effort and money invested in our degrees to be worth more to the university. That reasoning will no longer hold, however. According to a 2009 report from the American Federation of Teachers, full-time, tenured or tenure-track positions now make up only 27.3% of all jobs across all institutions; at public, four year schools in particular, the numbers are not much better: 39% (Jaschik “The Disappearing”). This means that more and more Ph.D.s are graduating to non-tenure-track positions. Tenured faculty are now in the minority; the concerns of temporary and part-timers *are* the concerns of Ph.D.s. Even if this were not the case, I believe we have a moral obligation to our students to fight for a labor

system that makes quality education a priority—the flex-labor system, in contrast, prioritizes profit.

Concrete achievements have been best achieved, says Hoeller, by grassroots movements of contingent faculty, collectively working from within or without of larger unions. Contingent faculty acting collectively may seem too precarious a course to pursue. After all, by their nature, contingent workers can be dismissed at the end of a term rather easily. However, the labor system is especially vulnerable to resistance from this group. For example, if an English department's entire pool of graduate employees and adjunct faculty organized a work stoppage just before the beginning of a semester, composition teaching would be shut down at many institutions. At my own institution, for example, the full-time tenured and tenure track faculty could not teach all scheduled courses in the English Department under such circumstances, even if they all adopted overloaded schedules. Administration would be hard-pressed to recruit enough workers in time, and might be forced to negotiate.

Tenured and tenure track faculty are empowered to act effectively as well, if only they would collectively agree to do so. In "The New Academic Labor System," Richard Moser argues that while tenured faculty are complicit in the abusive labor system, "it depends on our complicity to continue. When we decide that having cheap labor on hand to teach our introductory courses or to provide inexpensive replacements for us while we conduct research is not worth risking the destruction of the university and our profession along with it, then the system

will be reformed.” In effect, collective action, whether among contingent or full-time professors, is the best bet for ending what Hoeller calls “faculty apartheid.”

Yet, the risks that come with collective action, for both tenured and temporary faculty, are enormous. One does not put one’s livelihood at stake easily or quickly. I do not harbor any delusions that collective actions such as strikes or sit-ins can take place suddenly or spontaneously. Rather, reform-minded faculty can begin to change the atmospheres of their institutions, bringing labor issues from the margins to the centers of more of our conversations with administrators, students, and each other. This may produce a labor-minded culture within a university that makes collective action more feasible. I will discuss strategies for affecting the culture of individual universities in chapter six.

In order to collapse the scholarly and theoretical work of the compositionist into the pedagogical work of the composition teacher, the academic labor system must be reformed. When theorists are made into supervisors and “composition teacher” is synonymous with “contingent worker,” no one wins except those balancing the university’s budget. If academic workers of all kinds organize to reject the growing use of contingent labor, however, composition teachers and students alike have much to gain. When composition teachers have sufficient expertise, time, and pay to theorize their pedagogies, when composition theory is perceived to be necessary to informed practice, progressive and effective teaching are likely to follow.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE COMPOSITION TEACHER'S THEORY

“Choice is illusory to the degree it represents the expectations of others.”

Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 7

#### Revising Composition

The six members of the Composition Committee filed into an empty classroom, following the smell of sesame bagels (a department staple) and carrying an array of travel mugs and bottles of water. Three documents sat lined up on the table in front of us, paper soldiers of the curriculum in rank: the current course description of English 023: College Composition; the Guidelines for Course Revisions; and the University Mission Statement. That day in September 2007 began our semester-long project of revising the official College Composition course description and objectives.

Keith [a pseudonym], the committee chair, opened with a disclosure: “This revision is under greater scrutiny than usual.” As with past revisions of other courses, we were all concerned about our new description passing the Curriculum Committee, which would finally approve or reject our changes. That body, consisting of professors from across the disciplines, had notoriously scrutinized the revisions of other writing courses, wanting more explicit commitment to the mastering of “basic writing skills,” such as grammar and punctuation, structure and academic style, included among course objectives. But the Curriculum Committee was not sitting in judgment alone. This year, Keith

explained, we would also work under the critical eye of the newly formed Assessment Office. This was the first we had heard of it.

“Assessment Office?” I asked, “Since when do we have one of those?”

“It’s the university’s response to the up-coming Middle States Review,” Keith offered, referring to the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, a body that accredits colleges and universities. The Assessment Office, Keith explained, would now monitor assessment methods across all departments in order to assure their sanctioning by Middle States.

“Oh,” I returned, “It’s The Ministry of Standardization!” My joke expressed a common fear among the committee members: that the English Department might be forced to employ assessment methods not of our choosing in order to produce the sorts of numerical data other disciplines often provide. We all wondered aloud if we would have to create an “objective” writing test, with Scantron forms or multiple-choice questions.

Keith allayed our fears and acknowledged the complexity of our position at once. “In order to gain the approval of other bodies,” he said, “our committee’s revision must in some ways reflect the expectations of others. Yet, we also have a responsibility to challenge those expectations, to assert our specialized knowledge. We are, after all, the composition teachers.”

That put me enough at ease to get down to business. We soon discovered, however, that our committee members were not entirely of the same mind regarding what a course in composition ought to be. Our differing specializations in English studies and varying exposure to and experiences with



Composition studies, it seemed, affected our perspectives on what comprises composition teaching. Certainly my own pedagogical philosophies, grounded in post-process theory and emphasizing rhetorical flexibility was not shared by all of the teachers present. I wondered silently to myself how the committee would react if I began talking about student prose as “writing on walls.” Subsequently, we have spent many meetings debating the composition instructor’s responsibilities. For example, are teachers obliged to provide direct grammar instruction; to assign a “generic” research paper; or to incorporate computer technology into assignments? The Middle States Review has since come and gone, but these matters have not yet been settled. The committee members are struggling, as are many compositionists, to reconcile competing theories of composition and administrative and bureaucratic demands.

#### Purpose of Chapter Five: Connecting Composition Theory, the Corporate University, and Curricula

This difficulty in reconciling institutional pressures and composition curricula is a symptom of the current academic culture—one that subordinates the theorizing of teaching practices to other concerns as higher education becomes more corporatized. In chapter four I explored the development of this corporate culture; in this chapter, I theorize its effect on curricular choices.

In particular, I argue that staffing practices and assessment trends have stunted the pedagogical growth of composition programs; that is, while many compositionists strive to move the teaching of writing in progressive directions, institutional policies result in the reiteration of theoretically weak pedagogies. For

instance, as assessment tests become ubiquitous, teachers are pressured to structure composition classes around skills and formats that belie the complexity of learning to be a better writer. Likewise, when instructors are hired to teach composition with little or no training in composition theory, they may make pedagogical choices for reasons of familiarity and efficiency rather than for any strong theoretical rationale.

### Chapter Structure

Each section of this chapter explores a different model of composition teaching: grammar-based instruction, a focus on academic discourse, and assessment preparation. My categorization is certainly a simplification; rarely does a teacher work from a single theoretical motivation or pedagogical approach. Yet, I assert that these approaches deserve particular scrutiny as they endure largely because they support the means and goals of the corporate university. Specifically, they facilitate contingent working conditions, the culture of textbooks, and the encroachment of standardized assessment into higher education, all symptoms of corporate culture. This matters greatly, first, because the quality of composition teaching suffers; these same approaches are often applied in reductive and theoretically weak ways, especially when administrators pressure teachers to measure advanced literacy skills with high stakes tests. Further, I note that the largely untenured, under-prepared and underpaid workforce may adopt these positions out of practical and material concerns. When instructors are neither familiar with composition theory nor encouraged or obliged to theorize practices, they—or the administrators who often make

curricular choices for them—tend to fall back on venerable, habitual pedagogies (Hillocks *Ways of Thinking* 112) reproduced in textbooks rather than adopt progressive perspectives. While some universities foster dynamic composition programs, the current culture encourages stances that ultimately perpetuate Composition as a collection of service-oriented, skills-and-drills courses.

I should acknowledge, as I did in the Introduction to this dissertation, that my critique of these models is necessarily rooted in my personal philosophy of teaching writing. I value rhetorical flexibility and post-process pedagogies; I do not teach form divorced from context. At the same time, I do not claim that pedagogies emphasizing grammar or academic discourse are entirely without merit. In the sections below, I acknowledge that these subjects are part of a larger discussion about writing in my own classrooms. Nor do I think that teachers should not assess their students. I assess them on a regular basis, albeit over the course of many drafts and entire semesters. Rather, I resent the dominance of formalism and reductivism, a dominance often supported by administration for its simplification of writing instruction, which in turn facilitates the corporate system of labor and assessment.

#### Composition Teacher as Grammarian

Usually, there is no crying in the Writing Center. But composing and, perhaps more so, taking a composition class, can occasionally be emotional experiences, as students write about personal experiences or face the challenges of revising. So I always kept a box of tissues on hand in the Writing

Center I directed at a small liberal arts college. One cold November day, a junior English major came in, flustered and eyes shining with restrained tears.

Ellen [a pseudonym] had first come to the Writing Center as an anxious freshman looking for advice on a research paper; at the end of her sophomore year, I hired her as a tutor. This day, she looked anxious once again, dropping her pile of texts on a table. I poured her a cup of coffee (coffee pots, like tissues, are necessary to every Writing Center), and asked what was the matter. Ellen was taking a course called English Grammar.

“It’s awful,” she said. “I call myself a writer and a tutor, but I don’t know anything about the rules. I didn’t realize how stupid I was before I started this course.”

Ridiculous, I told her. She was, after all, a published creative writer, an excellent student, and one of the best tutors on my staff. This might be a difficult class filled with unfamiliar material, but that should not lead her to doubt her abilities. Ellen was unconvinced. Already, it seems, the teacher of English Grammar had put her on the spot in front of the class with a technical question and then lamented the inability of a writing tutor to answer it. “Did you take Composition?” he had asked her.

I was angry. Yes, I admit that my reaction may have been prompted in part by ego—this was my tutor he was criticizing, after all. The only compositionist on staff, I was further perturbed by his implication that Ellen and her classmates should have learned in composition class the same grammatical language employed in his English Grammar course. I was also distressed by the

student connecting her failing with incompetence, as if her composing and tutoring skills meant nothing without the ability to identify a gerund. In that vein, I believed that her professor's connection between facility with language and knowledge of grammar's metalanguage was unfair.

Patrick Hartwell theorized a grammarian's approach to composition teaching in his 1985 benchmark "Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar." He asserts that facility with language, what he calls "Grammar 1" (324), is not dependent on knowledge of grammar's metalanguage and formally written rules, or "Grammar 2" (327). Hartwell's analysis of accumulated grammar research flies in the face of the common belief that most writing errors are due to ignorance of grammar rules. He argues that formal knowledge of grammar "has no effect" on one's writing performance (328). In fact, he goes so far as to say that "the advice given in 'the common school grammars' is unconnected with anything remotely resembling literate adult behavior" (332). Indeed, even the greatest grammatical stickler must admit that the writing we admire—from Charles Dickens to Ernest Hemingway—is often rife with "misplaced" punctuation and comma splices. One might argue that such writers consciously choose to break rules, but Hartwell's research suggests that most "mature writers" do not necessarily think consciously in terms of grammar when they compose (333). That is, while they may consider general sentence fluidity, they are not reviewing specific rules as they initially draft. (I suppose there are exceptions to this phenomenon, like English teachers who work with grammar's metalanguage

regularly.) Mature writers do, of course, offer up insightful content and fluid prose where our students are often stumbling about with ideas and phrasing.

In this section, I theorize the role of composition teacher as grammarian. I critique a grammar-focused approach to teaching writing and propose that efficiency and tradition, both promoted by textbooks, too often trump a critical examination of this flawed pedagogical approach.

Hartwell compels teachers to recognize that when they read students' drafts, they may often fail to nurture the fledgling content, choosing instead to begin by circling fragments or commas. Rather than focus on grammar instruction, then, Hartwell's analysis concludes that mastery of print literacy occurs "top down, from pragmatic questions of voice, tone, audience, register, and rhetorical strategy, not from the bottom up, from grammar to usage to fixed forms of organization" (335). In fact, he found that students most often could find and correct their mechanical errors without supplementary grammar instruction just by being given the opportunity to read their work aloud (334). In "Minimal Marking," Richard A. Haswell makes a similar claim, observing that students do not learn to edit by working towards "the abstract understanding of a mistake someone else has discovered" (601). Instead, he found success with a method of placing check marks near mechanical errors in student papers, usually without explanation or error-types identified. Students were better able to detect and correct their own errors in future drafts, without his having to use class time teaching grammatical concepts and lists of rules (610).

In my own classrooms, I do not deny the pedagogical usefulness of grammatical instruction. However, I engage it in the spirit of Hartwell's and Haswell's findings. Students should not ignore grammar errors in their work since, I remind them, their readers likely will not ignore them. I discuss grammar in the context of students' drafts, as we work together in conferences and group workshops. Rather than reduce grammar instruction to completing a drill or identifying parts of speech, my students and I negotiate the grammar of their works in progress, at times even deciding a rule should be broken with rhetorical intent.

Hartwell and Haswell wrote their pieces twenty years ago, yet many still define the work of composition teachers as providing direct instruction in grammar. For example, in 2007 the Director of Composition at my current place of employment conducted a survey in the English department, asking what professors would like to see emphasized in Composition classes; many respondents indicated "more grammar instruction." The popularity of this approach is evidenced by the mass of grammatical workbooks, handbooks, and computer programs sold to composition teachers year after year. Take the *Bedford/ St. Martin's 2008 Catalogue of Composition Readers*, for example. It includes an online service called "Testing Tool Kit: A Writing and Grammar Test Bank," offering "Nearly 2,000 questions" for ascertaining "students' writing and grammar competency" (106). Every textbook publisher has one if not several of these programs available. Recently, a representative of a publishing house stopped by my office to inquire about my "textbook needs" for the subsequent

semester. When I explained that I do not use a reader in my composition classes, she regaled me with descriptions of one such “resource for students,” consisting of grammar and punctuation tests students may take online and then email to the instructor. “Wildly popular!” she assured me. That I would not want such a resource seemed alien to her. Of course, she was trying to sell me something. Yet her surprise mirrors that of some of my university colleagues who scoff at my rejection of grammar-based instruction.

The theory behind a grammarian’s approach to composition teaching is that people can learn to write through formal mastery of prescriptive rules. The expectation is that once students can name the parts of speech and recite grammatical conventions, their compositions will be less likely to contain mechanical errors. In practice, the complex task of improving writing is reduced to rehearsing comma rules, combining sentences and unilaterally disallowing sentence fragments, with less time spent discussing the development and expression of ideas in students’ compositions. This approach may work for some students; however, in the 1980s Hartwell and Haswell contradicted the belief that it is a necessary approach, or one useful for all students. David W. Smit’s 2004 survey of research in Composition studies reiterates their conclusions: “novice writers do not need to have writing tasks simplified for them; they need help in accomplishing writing tasks in all their complexity . . .” (139). Nevertheless, while professors may choose more diverse and challenging readings for composition students, they may also continue to simplify their treatment of actual student



writing—hence the persistent popularity of grammar drills, now moved to the world wide web.

In my experience, most students come to college already able to choose the right grammatical form in (a, an) given sentence. It is in actual performance that they stumble: in the clear expression of complex ideas and in nuanced phrasing; in the interpretation of discipline-specific knowledge; or in the adjustment to the differences among discourse communities. Yet many composition teachers persist in working from the theory that more grammar instruction will translate into better student prose. In “The Subject Is Discourse,” John Clifford suggests that grammar is favored because it lends power and authority to the instructor: “Teaching grammar . . . clearly installs the instructor as the Subject who knows against those subjects who clearly cannot know, unless they apply themselves diligently and, of course, without wondering why” (393). I think back to my own early years as a teacher, wanting so much to seem professional and knowledgeable, yet feeling so very green. Perhaps I initially taught grammar conventionally because I wanted to establish myself as a banker in the Freirian sense, depositing knowledge to my empty-vessel students. What Clifford overlooks is that teachers like me have also been compelled to teach grammar formally both on the secondary and postsecondary levels by administrators with fixed curricula. Still, Clifford does oblige me to consider my hesitation in questioning administrative mandates. Why was I so slow to reflect critically on my pedagogy of direct grammar instruction?

George Hillocks believes that unexamined or unwavering pedagogical stances are directly connected to a teacher's own training. His studies reveal that: "Rather than through considering alternatives and making a conscious choice, most teachers appear to have acquired the stance through what Lortie (1975) would call an 'apprenticeship of observation' in schools, or through textbooks, or through association with other teachers" (*Ways of Thinking* 112). That is, we tend to teach the way we were taught, for good or nil. Certainly many teachers were themselves first introduced to writing instruction as grammatical study.

In "On Asking Impertinent Questions," Richard E. Miller suggests that textbooks are particularly responsible for the perpetuation of practices, even theoretically weak ones. He examines James McCrimmon's composition textbook *Writing with a Purpose*, first published in 1950 with reissues through the 1990s, as a case in point:

Over the past fifty years, this textbook has been used to introduce hundreds of thousands of first year writing students to the conventions of academic discourse. . . . In terms of who has had a more powerful influence on the writing of undergraduates, in the second half of the twentieth century, it's a pretty easy call: the textbook author towers over the literary giant, the exercise writer over the artist, mundanity—some might say—over beauty. (149)

The 1967 fourth edition of McCrimmon's popular textbook does indeed include an extensive "Handbook of Grammar and Usage" not unlike those currently

circulated by textbook companies, demonstrating Miller's point: while direct grammar instruction does not translate into better prose, the continued emphasis on grammar instruction in textbooks encourages this approach to teaching composition.

Taken together, the work of Hillocks and Miller suggests that many composition teachers simply adopt familiar pedagogies supported by familiar texts. Companies reissue texts like *Writing With a Purpose* because so many teachers are willing to adopt them; strong sales mean that companies have little financial motivation to risk publishing anything new. Compositionists are a part of this cycle, too: they write and seek to publish the traditional texts that they know are marketable and, of course, will contribute to curriculum vitae. Further, Hillocks's work suggests that traditional texts sell with so little objection to their outdated approaches because teachers adopt texts reflecting their own educational experiences. As today's students become tomorrow's teachers, it is clear why Miller believes the textbook is so powerful: it facilitates the perpetuation of a perspective, not necessarily for its merits, but for its familiarity. I would add that we should acknowledge that the textbook author is powerful, too; this perpetuation is not a faceless phenomenon, but a system driven by teacher-authors as much as by publishing houses and the composition labor pool.

I further believe that the adoption of theoretically weak textbooks—that is, texts that emphasize stances that composition scholars have long critiqued and even rejected—suggests that teachers are still not critically examining the theories behind curricula and pedagogies connected to such texts. Or, if they are,

then other concerns must be trumping theory. Grammatical drills are less time consuming to grade than student drafts; lessons on punctuation are more objective than complicated discussions of style. The familiar textbook can be comforting to the teacher untrained or inexperienced in teaching writing or harried by an overload of courses. And, of course, administrators may compel instructors to use a particular curriculum or textbook. In “A Place in Which to Stand,” Claude Mark Hurlbert comments on this widespread dependence on and forced use of textbooks, noting that, “without inspired writing program administration or collective action, there may be little to do, sad to say, but adapt” (357). In the culture of the corporate university, the largely contingent workforce may feel powerless to challenge their circumstances, instead adopting a textbook that facilitates their professional survival.

Most striking in McCrimmon’s textbook *Writing With a Purpose* is the chapter “Patterns of Organization,” including exposition, comparison and contrast, classification, process description, and causal analysis. The structural models in this chapter are otherwise known as the modes of current-traditional rhetoric, school-genres that persist in classrooms today. In fact, the 2004 fourteenth edition, re-titled *The New Writing with a Purpose*, by Joseph Trimmer, contains these same modes. The persistence of these modes through fourteen editions suggests that generic academic models remain a staple of the composition class; I was required to teach the same modes (although with a text other than McCrimmon’s) at a community college in 2002.

In the next section, I theorize the teaching of writing as a series of academic modes, and assert the limitations of approaching college composition as adherence to fixed schemas.

#### Composition Teacher as Arbiter of Academic Discourse

The rooms in this part of the building, I thought, remind me of bad prose—boxy and windowless. I was in the basement of Mercy Hall, visiting an Introduction to Communications class at the request of the course professor. He had wanted me, in my role as Writing Center director, to speak to his students about research paper writing. In preparation, I had asked the instructor for details regarding his assignment.

“Oh, you know,” he offered, “It’s just the standard research paper. APA format.”

With only this description to work with, I prepared to discuss incorporating source material and avoiding plagiarism. In the classroom in Mercy Hall, the Communications students and I discussed the meaning of common knowledge and the difficulty of summarizing. Halfway through the class period, the professor interrupted and asked me to address organization.

“Very tricky in longer essays,” I began, and launched into a discussion of how writers might analyze their information and major and minor arguments to discern a logical, workable design.

“Can you describe a standard model for them?” the professor interrupted. After I noted that several models do exist within and between disciplines, he stepped in to say that if students have not mastered an “alternative form,” they

should not attempt it—stick to the “standard structure,” he warned them, lest they make a mess of their work. A pregnant pause followed, during which the professor must have realized his expectations were still unclear to me.

Thankfully, he jumped in with a brief description of “how to organize a research paper.” His “standard structure” turned out to be an extended form of the five-paragraph essay: the introduction containing a one-sentence thesis statement, and each body paragraph beginning with a reason in favor of the thesis, followed by supporting details.

I left the classroom at the end of the period feeling conflicted. In the Writing Center and in my composition classes, I encourage students to make decisions based on purpose, audience, and context. Of course they make some poor choices, but I believe that in the course of writing multiple drafts, students can learn from their failures as much as from their successes. That is one reason why I emphasize drafts and revision, giving student-writers the time to play with rhetorical possibilities, perhaps to fail, and to try something new. Yet this Communications professor, like others I have encountered, clearly did not want to discuss these rhetorical matters. In his mind, academic writing—or at least students’ writing—should be of one design. I realized that, had these students followed the advice I wanted to give them, they might have failed the assignment. The professor had invited me in as an authority on writing, assuming I shared his view of conventions; instead, I introduced ideas inconsistent with his approach to teaching academic writing.

I have frequently worked hard in my own composition classes to convince freshmen that they do not always need a “blueprint statement” after a thesis, and that a paragraph is not bound to being three to five sentences in length. These conventional rules are so familiar to them that some have difficulty writing in any other way. At the same time, some of my colleagues reinforce the perspective that there exists one “academic essay” format that can and should be followed to produce prose acceptable in the academy. Yet, some of the rules of academic writing that teachers present as part of this standard academic genre may not in fact be transferable to all academic contexts. Take, for example, a “Paper Checklist,” I found left behind in the English Department copy room, further identified as a review of “what is expected of you when you write an academic paper.” This inventory of “rules” dictates where the thesis should appear, the ratio of the body’s length to conclusion’s, and acceptable transitional phrases (including an admonition against “clichéd” transitions, though why “however” makes the cut and “in conclusion” does not, is not made clear). It is possible that the teacher who created this list planned to hold it open to critique, or to discuss its discourse-specific context. No indication of such was apparent.

I worry that too often emphasis is placed on whatever set forms and rules a given teacher or textbook deem most crucial, rules often presented as universal rather than the discourse-specific conventions or personal pet peeves that they are. In this vein, the “Paper Checklist” I found aspires to define a genre called the “academic essay” in a singular, limited manner. The theory of composition behind the role of teacher as arbiter of academic discourse assumes

that one can learn academic writing by adhering to a simplified rule-set, in this case particular sentence structures, organization schemas, and set phrases identified as “academic.” Master particular models, and you will be a good writer. In this section, I challenge this theory and its accompanying implications of what counts as “good” prose in academia.

Many compositionists have struggled with the definition of “good” writing. What English teacher has not read a five-paragraph essay, thesis located in the final sentence of the first paragraph, transitions and citations in order, that was nonetheless devoid of engaging ideas and critical reflection—that was, at bottom, dull? Surely work in the five-paragraph genre can be engaging. And, of course, novice prose can seem remarkably disorganized, especially in first drafts, making the use of fixed schemas or templates attractive to both student and teacher. Mandating a particular form such as the five-paragraph essay might aid students in ordering their ideas, while simultaneously making our work in reading their drafts a bit less daunting. Moreover, students will occasionally be asked to write in fixed forms during their college careers—for instance, the lab report, or the brief essay exam question. So, I am not contending that instruction in fixed forms of academic discourse is without its usefulness.

My point is that when instruction is dominated by form, allowing content and expression to take a back seat, students may more easily get by producing less thoughtful, purposeful, critical, or expressive prose. Similarly, working from a post process perspective, Vandenberg et al critique presenting “good” writing in terms of universal norms, as such pedagogy “can erase a broad range of



differences that students bring to the writing classroom, diminishing alternative ways of thinking, acting, and communicating in the world” (5). Students may become very adept at composing in the confines of a schema, not questioning how it might limit their prose or censor their ideas.

For instance, when I taught composition at a community college in 2002, the program director required me to teach current-traditional modes. The program was designed to emphasize standardized structures associated with these modes; therefore, the students in my classes learned the transitional phrases and organizational schema outlined in the textbook. They practiced the text’s four means of opening an introduction (a question; a vivid description; a quotation; a startling fact). With class time devoted to these matters, only in my comments on final drafts did I remark on rhetorical matters such as audience, or challenge the ideas expressed in their prose. I was teaching them tunes to which, the course seemed to imply, they could write any lyrics they liked. A few students managed to write interesting or humorous pieces, but too often I received “process essays” on how to change a tire and “comparison and contrast essays” asserting that cats are superior pets to dogs. I cannot blame the students; they produced what the course (and I) asked of them: facility with select academic forms. In truth, I believe that these modes are really only widely recognized as “academic forms” in the context of classroom exercises, as methods of organizing novice compositions. I have never, as an upper-classman, graduate student or scholar, reproduced a current-traditional mode. These forms might be another way we categorize student writing as “non-texts” and deny

composition students the descriptor “writer.” In this vein, Lad Tobin describes the common attitude among English teachers that “Everything is a text but *this* is a student essay” (10) (original emphasis). That is, writing teachers do not frequently expect, encourage, or even allow students to attempt to write as established scholars do. The assumption is that students must master these classroom modes before they can wrestle with the larger concerns of “real” writers.

In my work in writing centers, I see that students come to tutors wanting and needing to wrestle with concerns other than form. They are struggling with more complex intellectual issues of writing, such as expressing a multifaceted thesis or avoiding logical fallacies, issues my community college class did not prepare students to tackle. Yet many composition teachers believe their first duty is to teach the conventional rules of a generalized academic discourse. The “academic essay” is discussed as a singular genre transferable among academic contexts.

But what is an academic essay? In *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*, Anne Beaufort notes that assignments calling for an “academic essay” are “in need of a specific disciplinary anchor to be a well-grounded intellectual and communicative task . . .” (14). When composition assignments are not so anchored, then “Writing becomes for the sake of a writing class, rather than writing for the sake of intellectual pursuits. And the skills taught are without grounding in, or acknowledgement of, the effects of subjects and their social contexts on writing

activity” (12). Beaufort believes such context-free writing is all too common in composition classes. While composition teachers may superficially discuss purpose, audience, and context, these considerations sometimes take a backseat to the conventions of the genres the teacher chooses to represent “the academic essay.”

The belabored modes—usually including narration, classification, process analysis, comparison and contrast, cause-effect analysis and sometimes argument—remain popular choices to embody the academic essay. I believe that the reasons for their longevity are the same as those that explain the ubiquity of direct grammar instruction. First, composition teachers are often graduate students or adjuncts teaching at more than one institution with three or four or even five sections of composition (and all of the accompanying papers to grade): they are short on time. Reading a paper for particular markers of academic discourse is less time consuming than assessing matters of content or rhetorical approach. Even if instructors do have the time and resolve to teach beyond the limits of modes, administrators may thrust mode based texts upon graduate and adjunct employees. Modes may also be comfortingly familiar to teachers from their own experience as students, and are nicely packaged in countless textbooks for the instructor untrained or inexperienced in teaching writing. If instructors do not have a sense of how to structure a composition class, a great many textbooks suggest that they focus on modes.

In such texts, the pedagogical theory seems to be that one can write in any academic context by mastering generic models. A student need not consider

how the content, audience, or purpose might influence organization—the schema limits choice. For example, in his *Writing with a Purpose*, McCrimmon goes so far as to provide formulas: an illustrative essay is “T + E1 + E2, etc., where T stands for thesis and E for example” (61) (original emphasis). Similarly, in the community college I taught from a text providing two options for organizing a compare and contrast essay; students were not encouraged to stray from the prescribed patterns. Ann Berthoff critiques similar “positivist conception[s] of language,” objecting that they act “as a set of muffin tins into which the batter of thought is poured,” and may lead “to question-begging representations and models of the composing process” (“Is Teaching” 330). A positivist theory of composing treats prescriptive rules as if they preceded thinking, and therefore must be accommodated at all times; a few accepted academic models are portrayed as facilitating the processes and purposes of every student writer.

The popularity of a positivist view of academic writing has surged recently with the publication of *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. I attended a standing room only session at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication [CCCC] featuring the authors, during which many attendees testified to their love of the text. The authors’ stated goal is “to demystify academic writing by isolating its basic moves, explaining them clearly, and representing them in the form of templates” (IX). They further claim that, “In showing how to make such moves, templates do more than organize students’ ideas; they help bring them into existence” (XIV).

Graff and Birkenstein acknowledge that templates may be criticized as overly “prescriptive,” “passive” or “automatic” (XIV-XV). They insist, however, that many students need such explicit instruction, and that templates can in fact “stimulate and shape” critical thought (XV). In April and May of 2008, members of the Writing Program Administrators Listserv debated these very facets of *They Say / I Say*, the authors and many established composition theorists contributing. The discussion was often passionate and at times heated. At one point, William Thelin writes, “B&G [sic] couldn't do any better than making vague allusions to those silly compositionists who think the 5-paragraph essay is a formula. It's as if B&G want to pretend the field of composition doesn't exist--or at least that it doesn't matter.” He goes so far as to jokingly call for “A good old fashioned stoning” of the authors. Charles Bazerman adds, “This discussion indicates the depth and range of the intellectual resources of our profession--a depth and range not recognized by the authors [Graff and Birkenstein], whether or not their book is useful.” Graff and Birkenstein replied in defense of their text and in objection to the “incendiary language used both by Thelin and Bazerman.” These exchanges demonstrate that while the use of templates is popular, it is by no means uncontroversial among compositionists.

Coming as I do from a teaching philosophy grounded in contextual considerations and a pedagogy encouraging students to break out of conventional forms and “write on the walls” of academia, I am naturally suspicious of this approach. I prefer student-writers to begin with critical thought, and then to shape the composition as rhetorical context demands. Yet the

ubiquity of formalism, and its popularity among the attendees in that CCCC conference room, made me wonder if I were missing something. I wondered if I were doing my students a disservice by not identifying “the moves that matter” as exactly as Graff and Birkenstein did. Perhaps the text could teach them tools useful in college writing. And, if the templates can indeed “stimulate and shape” critical thought (XV), perhaps my own theories needed review. So, one semester, I adopted the text for my composition classes.

In that semester, students’ rough drafts suffered from the same early troubles as those produced without templates: undeveloped thoughts, clunky phrasing, and organizational confusion. Another complication was added to their writing, however. The select pieces of their drafts based on the templates were often, to be blunt, incomprehensible to me, as if the students had been playing an academic form of *Mad Libs*. As usual, I held one-on-one conferences with the students to discuss their works in progress. They universally complained that the templates were inhibiting, limiting both what they could to say and how they could say it. Often, their phrasing had become mangled as they shoehorned ideas into the blanks. I felt limited, too, helping students to produce texts with a very short list of rhetorical tools—there were no templates for including personal experience, for instance, or for experimenting with mixed genres. Formalism was losing its allure.

I decided to stop using the text two-thirds of the way through the semester when a student made an observation during class: the sample professional essays found in the back of the textbook were likely not produced with templates.

Instead, he said, those authors had probably learned by “writing bad drafts first and then writing better ones.” So, that is what we did for the remainder of the semester. Their rough drafts were fraught with problems, as is usual in composition course, but the discussions about the many ways they might solve those problems were infinitely more interesting (and perhaps more educational) than revising for adherence to the few moves that matter to Graff and Birkenstein

I worry that templates, like modes, facilitate instructors’ impatience with the time and investment it takes some students to practice and express critical thinking in their writing. Teachers may mistrust the ability of their students to adopt conventions over time, or want to avoid reading the disordered prose that comes with learning new concepts. Similarly, Derek Owens compares student papers to “prefab forms” and wonders, “How complicit have we [teachers] been in contributing to this terrain, we who have been conscripted, conditioned, and determined in part by obligatory prose forms assumed within our institutions and professions?” (365). We should not be surprised, suggests Owens, that student papers are, “Functional. Forgettable” (366). Templates may make for cleaner, quicker essays; the quality of the content is assumed to follow later. Learn these forms first, they say, and the matter will take care of itself. To use Berthoff’s metaphor: initially, anyway, the taste of the muffins is not as important as their uniform look.

Terry Eagleton addresses this issue more directly in *Literary Theory*. While he writes in the context of students in Literary studies, I think his observations pertain to the teaching of a generalized academic discourse: “All

that is being demanded [of students in higher education] is that you manipulate a particular language in acceptable ways. It is this which is being taught, examined, and certified, not what you personally think or believe, though what is thinkable will of course be constrained by the language itself” (201). Eagleton criticizes teachers who want only a reproduction of “a specific form of discourse,” a demand that might seem innocuous except “It is just that certain meanings and positions will not be articulable within it” (201). And, Eagleton adds, teachers of academic discourse may “remember whether or not you were able to speak it proficiently long after they have forgotten what you said” (201). Similarly, John Clifford notes that, “Writing subjects learn that the panoply of discourse conventions are, in fact, the sine qua non, that adherence to ritual is the real ideological drama being enacted” (387). This dissociation of thinking and writing seems counter not only to the value the university lays on critical thinking (at least in mission statements), but to the writing truly respected both in and out of academia.

Further problematic is the assumption that an easily identifiable, general academic discourse exists—that the conventions McCrimmon, Graff, or Birkenstein teach are transferable across disciplines and contexts. David W. Smit challenges this assumption in *The End of Composition Studies*. If we acknowledge that what is considered good, normal, or correct differs with context—that is, that many discourses coexist both within and without of the university—then what compositionists often teach as “academic discourse” actually has little meaning beyond a few “school genres” (90). As such, generic



academic writing may be more exercise than expression, a gate-keeping tool rather than an intellectual one.

On the other hand, Beaufort asserts that many composition teachers may claim to teach a general academic discourse, but in fact are teaching very discipline-specific genres:

students in writing courses are most often schooled in the discourse community norms and genres associated with literary studies or cultural studies or journalism (especially the sub-set of creative non-fiction). If students begin to learn some of the literacy practices of these discourse communities, there is some benefit. But what leaves students short-changed as they move into other course work and fields is that the particular discourse community (or communities) in which the teacher is situating himself or herself is not made explicit. (10)

Specifically, she believes that writing teachers may choose a few genres they deem important, but do not often explain that the conventions of these genres are not universal. Vandenberg Hum, and Clary-Lemon express a similar concern that such an approach “promotes a universal response to infinitely disparate rhetorical circumstances, allowing students to infer that a standard procedure should yield uniformly positive results independent of an immediate context or the expectations of readers in a given context” (5). In my experience in the writing center, for example, many students have been taught that they may never use “I” in an academic essay. As a result, I have seen journal entries, narratives

of field experiences, and personal narratives written in the third person, the impersonal “one” used in literary analysis. I would add to Beaufort’s claim that when some teachers do explicitly acknowledge their focus on a particular discourse or genre, they do not necessarily emphasize the need for students to be rhetorically flexible when they write in other contexts. While some students are able to adapt to new discourses with some trial and error, research suggests that students commonly cannot do so without explicit instruction—instruction rarely provided (Beaufort 11).

Like Beaufort, I am not suggesting that students do not benefit from practicing the genres of literary studies or journalism. Nor am I arguing for writing-across-the-curriculum to replace composition courses. Instead, I object to the theory that teaching these particular genres translates into teaching “academic discourse.” I am wary of writing instructors taking on the role of arbiter of academic discourse when their texts, assignments, or syllabi are actually grounded in the conventional structures of a few modes or genres.

Finally, some compositionists object to the very notion that academic writing should be the focus of composition classes. Teaching academic conventions exclusively or uncritically, as the only acceptable means of composing oneself in the university, may be just as limiting as a template. What is excluded by conventional discourses? What is tacitly labeled “wrong”? In “An Uncomfortable State of Mind,” Blitz and Hurlbert observe that: “A great many composition educators say that it is our obligation to teach students to write and read for and within curricula made by academics for academics. Others would

say that it is our responsibility to assist students in resisting these constraints” (45). In fact, much admired academic writing resists convention. Witness the success of Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, and Nancy Sommers.

In an Advanced Composition course aimed at English majors, I encouraged students to try on an unconventional academic style in the culminating seminar paper. I was impressed with the intellectual and creative work they produced. One student, who identified his style as an emulation of Anzaldua and Homi Bhabha, had trouble accepting my praise of his draft. When I asked him why, he paged through his paper, stopping at a poem he had woven into the text. “This just seems . . . naughty!” he said, adding that he could not imagine many teachers accepting such work from an undergraduate.

Of course, current trends in academic testing reward investment in grammatical and structural conventions rather than in critical and creative prose. Perhaps feeling powerless to fight the pressures of assessment, teachers too often avoid or ignore critical examinations of the theories behind assessment-driven pedagogies. In the next section, I explore the theoretical and material complications of adopting a role grounded in accountability to testing.

#### Composition Teacher as Assessment Coach

“Number four needs a comma!” Mike said, celebrating his discovery by waving his red pen in a circle next to his head.

“No, I’m telling you. It’s fine. This one is correct as-is,” insisted Phil, shaking his head and looking glum.

Mike turned to me for support, but I was noncommittal. “You could put a comma before the ‘and,’ but I’ve never been taught that’s a hard and fast rule. More of a regionalism.”

My colleagues Mike and Phil (pseudonyms) sat with me in the Cougar’s Den, a small dining room on the campus of the private college where we each held temporary positions. In 2005, the English department faculty decided to initiate a Writing Proficiency Exam. All students would be required to pass it before graduation. The pilot run of the test was given to several sections of Introduction to Literature classes; Mike, Phil and I were tapped to grade the first batch. The first section of the exam consisted of fifteen sentences, each containing one error in grammar or punctuation—or not. Students were instructed to use proofreading marks to fix the sentence, or to write “correct” if no error was apparent. The professor in charge of the exams had not bothered to make an answer key for the graders. We were English professors, he said; certainly we could figure it out. So, over lunch, my colleagues and I endeavored to make a common key. The problem: we could not reach a consensus.

This anecdote would likely not surprise Dennis Barron, who, in *Declining Grammar and other Essays on the English Vocabulary*, notes that while most people treat English professors as if they were experts in linguistics, these teachers probably have more extensive knowledge of literature (53). The linguistic expertise demonstrated even by compositionists usually comes not from the memorization of grammar and punctuation rules (though we do memorize many of them over time), but from extensive practice and play with the

concepts Hartwell claimed mature writers consider: “voice, tone, audience, register, and rhetorical strategy” (335). So, while Mike, Phil and I were all strong writers with MAs in English, we eventually made our common key by appointing one in our group to decide all differences (Mike drew the short straw).

I relate this tale not to expose the creator of that Writing Proficiency Exam, but to demonstrate how the complex and messy process of improving composition is sometimes oversimplified, reduced to formulas that are more easily defensible, teachable, and ultimately testable. In “Accountability and the Conditions for Curricular Change,” Richard Ohmann explores the university’s increased interpretation of accountability as the “Quantification of aims and accomplishments” (63), and the reduction of the “complex things we most highly value” to the numerical data produced by standardized testing. He connects this perspective to “the ideas and language of business that have trailed along with accountability in its migration to the university” (63). Ohmann believes that the corporatized university has advanced a culture of accountability less out of a desire to aid students (or “clients,” in this parlance), and more in an attempt “to plan, oversee, and assess our [teachers’] labor” (64), a trend he traces to the 1960s. Teachers, he claims, are not being held accountable to their students, but rather to their managers, politicians, and investors in higher education: “Accountability, in short, is not to the disempowered but to the powerful” (65). If Ohmann is correct, then the pressure on teachers to accept and excel at quantifiable testing is palpable; the stakes suddenly include job security.

Under this pressure, teachers may adopt theories of composition (like those I described in the previous sections) that lend themselves to standardized and timed assessments, allowing the university to assign labels like “proficient” or “remedial” with as little fuss as possible. They find ways of adapting to the testing environment rather than admitting the subjectivity and shades of grey connected to the judgment of “good writing.” What’s more, teachers may in the process train and test students in ways that run counter to their own experiences of writing well. I could not recite all prescriptive comma rules, yet I insisted my students review them in preparation for that Writing Proficiency Exam. I did not believe this would make them better writers; I just wanted them to pass the test so they could graduate.

In this section, I demonstrate the increasing influence of standardized assessment in corporatized higher education, consider its implications for composition pedagogy, and critique the theories behind the trend. Finally, I note that some composition teachers and administrators—as administrators often create or mandate tests—may embrace the theories of writing and learning inherent in current assessments for the familiarity and efficiency they bring to teaching and testing. Once again, institutional forces suppress composition scholars’ insight into and criticism of assessments. Positive test results matter more than theoretically sound teaching.

I agree with Doug Hesse that higher education is becoming part of the national “assessment culture” (“The Nation Dreams”), a phenomenon that first gained significant ground in secondary education. Freshmen arrive in college

composition classrooms experienced in taking the mandated state assessment tests that have enjoyed renewed vigor thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act. In Pennsylvania, for example, students in K through twelve are tested in verbal competency using “embedded-error multiple choice items” and directed writing prompts (The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment 4), graded with rubrics emphasizing fixed forms and grammar. This sounds remarkably like the test I was asked to grade at the private college. The first section of that test asked students to detect grammatical errors in each of fifteen sentences; the second, timed section required the production of an essay in response to a prompt. The rubric provided to the readers of the test essays rewarded structure and grammatical correctness over thoughtful content or creativity. My experience with this test is not an anomaly; Ira Shor noted in 2001 that “about 97% of [college] Composition programs use fill-in-the blank placement tests or the so-called ‘timed impromptu’ essay, a fifty-minute, agree or disagree exam that the CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test had been modeled on” (par 11).

Some colleges may use portfolios or other more progressive assessments instead of or in addition to these standardized tests, but current trends suggest that they are unlikely to become the norm. For example, a 2005 report from the National Council of Teachers of English further predicts that the Scholastic Achievement Test [SAT] will be used not only as a means of gaining college acceptance, but as a college placement test as well (Ball, et al 9), assuring that freshmen can be easily tracked and their skill-level easily labeled. Soon, freshmen will not be the only college students affected by standardization trends:

on August 10, 2006, the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education, sanctioned by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, called “for public universities to measure learning with standardized tests” (Dillon), including tests in verbal competency. This report, “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education” [also known as “The Spellings Report”], demonstrates that the creep of standardized writing exams is undeniably working its way through higher education.

I felt the power of the testing trend on February 28, 2008 at a meeting of the Composition Committee at the university that currently employs me. The head of the Assessment Office attended to inform us that the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education [PASSHE] had recently mandated testing in all state universities that measures performance in “key courses,” including composition. A test will be administered to students before graduation (no specific timeline has yet been announced). While the final form of the test had not been chosen, PASSHE’s options include multiple-choice exams and timed essays. And, indeed, one sample we were shown was produced by the Educational Testing Service [ETS], the same corporation that makes the SAT.

The decision to implement these tests is a part of PASSHE’s participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability [VSA]. VSA is a program created by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. According to VSA’s website, its goals are to aid public institutions to meet the following objectives: “Demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public; Measure educational



outcomes to identify effective educational practices; Assemble information that is accessible, understandable, and comparable.”

PASSHE announced this move in a press release entitled “PASSHE Universities Among First to Join National Efforts to Promote Accountability.” (The head of the Assessment Office gave me a copy of this press release; it has since been removed from PASSHE’s website.) At my university, no humanities dean, chairperson or professor was consulted in the decision to adopt a test, nor were they asked what manner of test might be best. The assumptions are that standardized testing is necessary and that writing skills can be measured by it.

Compositionists are increasingly pressured to provide administrators with standardized assessments that please federal commissions and Middle States review boards; they are further obligated to students for whom testing often comes with high stakes, even including graduation. I wonder, then, if the composition classes in higher education may soon suffer the widespread pedagogical effects Leila Christenbury observes in secondary schools. Writing an OpEd for the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE] website, she warns that, “when one kind of test and test score become the focus of all, and results in intensive drilling for that particular test—as is done now in school districts across the country—then mastering the material can become truly secondary. It’s not about learning; it’s about learning to take the test.” High school English teachers may feel pressured to take on the role of assessment coaches, altering writing instruction to suit the theories of administrators and test-makers who believe that writing can be represented by and mastered as a set of rules and formulas. As

standardized tests become more abundant at the college level, composition teachers come under the same pressure to conform to theories of writing unsupported by studies in the field.

The theoretical underpinnings of the popular approach to writing assessment are deeply problematic. Working under the perspective of writing-as-testable-skills, instructors may dedicate more class time to teaching students to pass tests, with the assumption that students will become better writers in the process. Yet test-skills have not been proven to correlate with the ability to compose well under other circumstances. In his 2005 CCCC presentation, “Myths of Method: A Hermeneutic Critique of Standardized Literacy Tests,” David Hanauer provides a pointed appraisal of the theories behind standardized writing tests. Examining such tests and their public rationales, Hanauer notes that test-makers assert a very specific theory of literacy: “Literacy ability is equivalent to the linguistic structures and exhibited behaviors manifest in the written text produced under test conditions and in response to a specific stimuli prompt” (slide 11). As a result, Hanauer says, the test devalues content, ignores context and audience (slide 12), and cheapens the writers’ own thoughts (slide 13). Instead, “only form is valued and evaluated” (slide 12), and only that form deemed acceptable to the test-makers. Ultimately, Hanauer believes that this theory of assessment leads to a test that “does not test reading or writing—it tests closeness to a specific set of socially sanctioned linguistic forms” (slide 26). Hanauer may be preaching to the converted at the CCCC, but this sort of analysis is becoming necessary in order to defend assessment methods that

encompass broader definitions of literacy. Such methods, such as portfolio based assessments, have not gained ground, perhaps because they are more time consuming and therefore more costly to enact. But students pay a different price when they are taught to write for conventional tests. NCTE critiques the new writing component of the SAT and ACT, predicting that “The kind of writing required for success on the timed essay component of the SAT is likely to encourage writing instruction that emphasizes formulaic writing with specific but limited textual features” (Ball et al 5). Hence college freshman arrive well trained to recite the conventions of the five-paragraph essay, but poorly prepared to produce the more thoughtful writing expected of them by professors (6).

Computerized tools that aid students in practicing for standardized assessments have become popular pedagogical tools in writing classrooms on both the secondary and college levels. Teachers may use them to grade assignments even when they are not preparing for specific tests. These developments prompt us to recognize some of the more ridiculous effects of assessment culture. Teaching composition can be reduced to students using a program to produce an essay that is then scored by another program. Students and teachers need only press a few buttons, check a few boxes. In this vein, Shirley K. Rose notes that:

At a time when software programs such as ‘Essay Generator’ (see [www.essaygenerator.com](http://www.essaygenerator.com)) can produce compositions that have all the formal features of essays, and online-scoring software such as ETS’s [Educational Testing Service] Criterion Online Writing

Evaluation Service ([www.ets.org/criterion](http://www.ets.org/criterion)) purports to read and evaluate essays for structure and coherence, and grammatical correctness, composition teachers, curriculum developers, and program administrators may need to ask some impertinent questions about the continuing viability of the essay form as a means for thinking . . . . (162)

While I agree that these technologies must lead us to ask questions, I do not see, as Rose does, that the flaw lies in the essay genre itself. Rather, the flaw may be in our ever more limited definition of the essay as strictly bound to easily identified structures that facilitate grading rubrics, and the continued insistence that essays can quickly and easily be used as literacy assessment tools, when drafting and writing assessment is in reality such a complex process. In “Students, Teachers, Give High Scores to Online Writing Assignments,” the Associated Press reports that administrators and students “say they like the instant feedback” and “individualized attention” that computerized assessment brings to overcrowded classrooms. But in exchange for this attention, students learn a very limited perspective on composing.

I can understand why standardizing composition instruction can be attractive to the frustrated or overworked writing teacher. Sydney Dobrin admits that composition teachers, too, desire simple answers: “we want to be able to go to our classrooms, teach writing, see our students engage in discourse; and we want to be able to identify that when we are finished our students are not only better writers—that is, closer to mastering discourse—but also better people, and

if they are not, we want clear signs as to why” (89). Traditional grammar and formulaic organization are far less time consuming to teach and easier to test than the complex interplay of skills that comprise advanced literacy. And, as Dobrin implies, we naturally long for a sense of accomplishment, one I believe is less easily achieved when we give as much attention to the messier and subjective sides of writing in our composition classes. Tidy, clear-cut paths to improved writing would relieve the pressure on all involved.

This desire for a tidy path may explain the persistence of five-paragraph form, the familiar genre that facilitates a teacher’s reading and grading. Not only does it save a teacher time and effort, but the form is acceptable on standardized tests, and as such is often welcomed by administrators. In his opening address to the CCCC in March 2005, Convention Chair Doug Hesse critiqued this influence on composition instruction. Composition classes are largely homogenized, he claims, with the same old curriculum emphasizing generic academic forms; despite good intentions, we come to “teach the same papers to the same ends” (Hesse “Who Owns”). Even those of us who long ago tore up our grammar worksheets and tossed out the current-traditional modes may now implement writing exams, adopt textbooks, and accept definitions of literacy on our campuses that reinforce the view of composition teachers as assessment coaches.

I am not suggesting that writing assessment is necessarily a futile practice. As noted previously, I assess my students’ writing using multiple drafts and a semester worth of work. While some schools have adopted portfolio

assessments that consider the place of a student's writing process and development over time, most schools have not dedicated the staff or resources necessary to assess an entire student body in this manner. The efficiency and cost-effectiveness of "objective" tests is valued over the sorts of assessments I respect; profit margins make standardized tests more attractive. Nor do I think that a composition teacher should never address grammar and structure. I even believe the five-paragraph essay can come in handy once in a while. I do insist, however, that assessment of writing will never be an easy process tackled with Scantrons and number two pencils. Assessment-driven theories of teaching writing separate grammar and structure from context and purpose, which may lead to efficient but empty prose. More significantly, students learning under this theory are faced with a contradiction: the writing valued in classrooms is not widely used or admired in other locations. There are no Norton Anthologies of Five-Paragraph Essays.

### Corporate Compromises

More and more, rather than using a labor system that suits the intellectual and pedagogical needs of a program and its students, administrators select composition faculty who fit into the cost-efficient employment structure of the corporate university. The consequences, I have demonstrated, include a devaluing of composition theories; the university does not necessarily hire the teachers best trained for the position, but the teachers willing to accept the established working conditions. At the same time, instructors are pressured to quantify their accomplishments with assessments into which they have had little

or no input. In this environment, teachers may be more likely to accept conventional forms, practices, and beliefs as inevitabilities. To survive in the corporate university, composition teachers have all too often had to compromise: expertise for employability; theory for reductivism; education for assessment.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION: WRITING ON THE WALLS

“Whatever else is done or not done, we should practice the critical thinking that we talk so much about. We should see and say—see our work in its full social and educational context, speak out against the hypocrisies of our society and our profession even when whistle-blowers take a beating and our best efforts seem ludicrous and pretentious.” James Sledd, “See and Say,” 145.

#### Purpose of Chapter Six: How to Write on the Walls

I write on walls.

That statement began as a literal descriptor: “Mrs. Lynch, that daughter of yours is always writing on the walls!” As I have noted in the introduction to this dissertation, wall writing later developed into a pedagogical metaphor for me, a way of explaining the kind of writing and teaching I endeavor to do with composition students. In this final chapter, I further elaborate on wall writing, describing some assignments I use to encourage students to write on the walls of academia. I do not claim to be creating a new pedagogical approach, nor do I believe that all composition teachers should share my practices. Rather, I aim here to “put my money where my mouth is,” to show how my teaching has been influenced by my study of composition theory.

Of course circumstances may lead me to vary my teaching. As Downing, Harkins, and Sosnoski assert, “In different contexts, not only are different theories required, but different versions of the same theory are called for” (15). That said, generally speaking, I am grounded in the critical pedagogy of theorist-



educators such as Paulo Freire, and further inspired by post-process theory. With this foundation, I try to create a space where students may at once experiment with ideas and expression while also examining the boundaries of what is conventional.

I am able to make reflective, informed pedagogical choices in great part because of my status as a full-time, tenure-track teacher with extensive specialized study in Composition. I am not attempting to hold myself up as a model teacher; rather, I want to demonstrate how my circumstances have made quality teaching more possible.

Moreover, I describe in this chapter how I have returned to wall writing as a means of working for change in Composition studies. Throughout this dissertation, I have called for collective action to reform the academic labor system. Large, direct actions such as strikes are of course precarious, as they put one's livelihood at stake. Such risky moves cannot be come about overnight. Rather, I argue that reform-minded faculty can begin to change the atmospheres of their institutions, bringing labor issues from the margins to the centers of more of our conversations with administrators, students, and each other. Small, indirect actions are safer, but no less valuable. This may produce a labor-oriented culture within a university that makes collective action more feasible. Specifically, I discuss the value of highlighting labor in committee work, meetings, and classes, as well as publishing in professionally unconventional venues in an effort to enlarge the conversation about composition teaching and labor.

## Chapter Structure

I first explain the influence of theorizing on “The Classroom,” demonstrating how theoretical scholarship has shaped my teaching as seen in two writing assignments. They represent the means of wall writing in my composition classes. In the second section, “The Campus,” I provide examples of the ways I use wall writing (in the forms of speaking out and writing out) to work for reform in the university at large, while acknowledging its risks. I conclude in “Further Action” with suggestions regarding directions for future research and changes to graduate curriculum.

### The Classroom

The methods and assignments I use are the combined result of the experience I have accumulated, the lore teachers have shared with me, and, significantly, the theories I have studied. My discipline-specific study in Composition and my full-time status have provided me with the knowledge and time to craft my pedagogy. Reading the scholarship of composition theorists has deeply affected my practice over the years. An explication of my assignments for English 023: College Composition demonstrates the influence of composition theorists on my teaching.

For example, after reading *Relations, Locations, and Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*, edited by Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, I created an assignment I call “Locating Writing.” I ask students to reflect on and analyze their writing processes, their personal definitions of “good writing,” or their perceptions of themselves as

writers. The intent is a less ambitious version of Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon's post-process text: to "remind us that as writers we are never alone . . . and that all forms of symbolic action reflect a way of knowing the world conditioned by how we are positioned in it" (16). My aim, ultimately, is to stimulate thinking about and critique of the ways in which we are taught to read and write. I do not encourage blanket rejection of standards; rather, I assume that students can best make informed decisions about their writing and about their educations when they have considered from where and from whom standards emerge. I return to the tenets of Paulo Freire once again: "to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (85). I want students to be subjects, and not objects in their educations.

I provide students with the following assignment directions outlining my intentions:

In this project, I ask you to consider the factors that affect your identity as a writer. What influences your perceptions of writing, your idea of yourself as a writer, and the development of your work? Our readings, homework assignments and class discussions will ask you to reflect on diverse influences including: race, class, gender, ideology, experience, classes, books, persons, and physical locations. Looking back on these reflections, you will compose a work of "creative nonfiction," the characteristics of which we will discuss and determine in class discussions. As it is an academic piece, your creative nonfiction should be more than

entertaining storytelling: it should have an analytical or critical purpose.

Preparation for composing includes in-class freewriting and discussions intended to promote reflection on students' beliefs about writing. For instance, writing prompts ask, "Why do schools teach and use the five paragraph essay?" "How do you define 'good' writing?" "How should writing be taught?" and "What makes a work 'literary'?" These questions grow out of my post-process stance, "that no conception of 'good writing' emerges outside of an implied or interpreted context" (Vandenberg, Hum and Clary-Lemon 16). In our discussions, I urge students to consider and express what experiences and values underlie their responses.

Before writing, we read Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," Leslie Yoder's "Resisting the Assignment," Peter Elbow's "Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard" and Richard Rodriguez's "Achievement of Desire," among other texts. I choose readings in which the authors not only explore how their concepts of writing and language use were formed, but also exemplify mixed genres and designs not typical in students' own academic coursework. In class discussion, we analyze the authors' rhetorical choices, which include mixing narrative and analysis, citing both poems and scholarly sources, and eschewing chronological organization. As they draft their own compositions, I encourage students to experiment with alternative forms, to find an approach that suits their voices and purposes. In this I am inspired by critical pedagogue Amy Lee, who describes the

work of composition teachers in *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision*:

I suggest . . . that we also teach forms and processes of writing, with acute attention to the specific conditions that inform how texts are read in particular contexts. We help students envision themselves as writers so that they might recognize and question the different constructions of ‘authority,’ textual logic, and structure that are normative in specific contexts. . . We can help them identify the conventions that characterize particular forms and rhetorical contexts. We can also learn—from and with them—about the choices we have for not accommodating those conventions, for being authorized to object to them, to produce alternative possibilities for our versions and visions. (2)

Like Lee, I am sensitive to the power dynamics intrinsic to prose production; challenging authority is always an option, but not one without risk. Therefore, I do not ignore the potential consequences of unconventional writing in the academy. Students in my classroom discuss the status of alternative academic prose styles, reading Patricia Bizzell’s “The Intellectual Work of ‘Mixed’ Forms of Academic Discourses.” In this piece, Bizzell notes that “slowly but surely, previously nonacademic discourses are blending with traditional academic discourses to form the new ‘mixed’ forms” (2). Yet she cautions readers that “It would be a mistake to imply that the ‘mixing’ in alternative academic discourses can go on easily, naturally, or without political opposition

from the powers that be” (4). We discuss this opposition in contexts students may encounter, considering how and why “mixed forms” of writing might be received by professors across the disciplines. We also generate ideas for negotiating the use of mixed forms with their teachers, a reflection of the value I place on supporting students’ educational agency.

These classroom activities are the result of my personal journey in working through critical pedagogy and post-process theories. The theorists I study lead me to question the relationship of cultural context to prose production; I see genres, standards and styles as situated. In turn, I create assignments that ask students to question similarly, and I give them the freedom to make choices based in context and purpose rather than enforcing a single set of conventions. My pedagogical choices grow out of critical reflection on composition theory.

In the end, not every student chooses to write an unconventional essay in response to my assignment, nor is that my intention. Rather, I intend to give students rhetorical control over their projects, choosing the form for themselves (with guidance and feedback from fellow students and me). Students have often told me that this assignment is the first instance in which they have been given the freedom to select the form as well as content of their academic writing. Moreover, some of my students have never considered how their educational experiences, reading habits, and cultural affiliations have shaped their conceptions of writers and writing.

Composition theorist Lisa Ede has also inspired my course design. Reading her *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of*

*Location* moved me to reconsider social constructivist theory and, in a separate chapter, the relationship between process and post process theories (see especially her second chapter, “Rereading the Writing Process”). In that text, Ede theorizes a few of her own assignments that encourage students to consider “issues of power and authority” (100) in their conceptions of good writing. Her description of an “Academic Discourse Community Assignment” (232) inspired me to compose a project I call “The Literacy Profile.”

In the context of my classroom, I use the term “literacy” as a shorthand means of describing the collection of specialized communication, reading and writing knowledges expected of members of a particular group. Using interviews and library research, students are asked to investigate a specific academic or professional community (i.e.: history majors, architects), documenting its accepted conventions of “good” writing, analyzing examples of texts produced in it, and considering where and why its members conform to or resist its norms. Ultimately, students present the results of their investigation to the class, using text and photos, explaining the specialized literacy of the community.

One of my goals for this project is to demonstrate the contextual nature of correctness and the relationships between status and risk-taking in composition. In this way, I hope that students can better understand the concept of the rhetorical flexibility needed to write in and between contexts, and, moreover, that they are better informed and prepared to decide when to conform and when to bend or even to defy the conventions of a given discourse community.

By critically examining the forces that shape their own ideas about writing, as well as those of particular academic communities, I certainly have goals for students grounded in traditional rhetorical studies: I hope that they will come to see writing not as a set of conventions to be memorized, but as an event shaped by the rhetorical situation, including the perceptions of author and audience. More than that, however, I hope students will systematically reflect on the ways and means in which writing is presented to them in academia, understanding that standards, instruction and assignments are culturally and ideologically grounded. They might then more thoroughly consider the power dynamics and beliefs about the nature of writing inherent in each class and in each assignment they encounter. In this way, composition theory is not just the progenitor of my curriculum, but also the content of it.

### The Campus

#### *Difficult Realities*

Theory has been my companion outside of my classroom as well, becoming a significant component of the work I do across campus. As I have worked through this project, I have endowed my penchant for wall writing with a new meaning: my desire to leave a mark on the walls of academia by resisting and critiquing a labor system which limits the reach of Composition studies in composition teaching. (I cannot envision a revolution of any kind without the image of graffiti!)

When I was a graduate assistant and later an adjunct, I could not have practiced the pedagogies I do now, or used the assignments I describe in the



previous section. First, the mandatory curricula passed on to me by supervisors forbade it. What's more, I had minimal faculty guidance and even less knowledge of Composition studies to lead me to such practices. So, I relied heavily on textbooks and on my own memories of college writing to structure my courses. My ignorance of composition theory and pedagogy was not exceptional to the administrators who hired me; rather, I was the rule.

While some institutions give contingent faculty academic freedom and provide them with training, I agree with James Sledd that such concessions cannot fully compensate for staffing composition courses "with the least experienced, least prepared, most poorly paid of teachers" ("Why the Wyoming" 167). In the case of graduate students, informed, reflective teaching is made more difficult by a full schedule of graduate credits (Sledd "Or Get Off The Pot" 85). Nor is providing a training program a satisfactory rationale for exploiting a staff which may lack investment and grounding in the field. Likewise, while many adjunct instructors have experience and can be excellent teachers, the labor system is built upon those willing and able to accept the circumstances of contingent employment. Very often, as in the case of graduate students, these adjuncts have not studied composition; they are literature specialists. As I discussed in chapter three, literature teachers do indeed have skills that can inform composition teaching; yet, as most graduate education stands, they commonly study composition in a very limited fashion, if at all. They may be asked to teach, therefore, not only out of their professional interests, but also out

of their scholarly knowledge base. Some composition teachers may succeed despite this system, but it is not constructed to foster good composition teaching.

Academics cannot afford to believe that these circumstances are limited to a few “backwater” schools, or to community colleges, or to open-enrollment institutions. The numbers defy this belief. As I have noted previously, as of 2001 seventy-five percent of composition teachers nationwide were graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees (Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues 340). This shift towards temporary teachers has taken place in the rest of the university as well; the percentage of part-time and untenured positions across all disciplines increased to forty-eight percent in 2005 (Jaschik). The field of Composition studies has grown a respected body of theories and pedagogies, and compositionists and others teaching writing may tap them to create innovative courses, but the majority of people teaching writing has not the preparation, the time, or the permission to do so. Moreover, in those universities where composition instructors have become a class of full-time but nontenure-track teachers, the status of Composition studies and composition teachers has not truly improved. Rather, such programs demonstrate the larger attenuation of tenure in the university.

My central complaint has been that the academic labor system undermines not merely the development of composition programs and the welfare of instructors, but the status of composition theory. Composition theory has become adjunct, something we publish in journals and discuss at

conferences, but too often overlooked when instructors are hired and courses are assigned. The corporate university's reliance on graduate students, adjuncts and full-time temps calls into question Composition studies' role in contributing to the knowledge and practice of teaching in the discipline. How might academics resist and reverse this trend? To begin: by writing on the walls.

### *Speaking Out*

I argue that compositionists and labor activists can influence the cultures at their individual institutions, creating an atmosphere of labor-consciousness that may make the collective actions necessary for reform more likely. We can achieve this through indirect actions, taking small risks that have potentially large impacts. Specifically, I argue that we need to make labor-talk a priority and a common feature in our meetings with administrators, fellow faculty, and students.

Personally, I have made an effort at my home institution to speak about labor in department meetings and committee meetings, connecting our discussions to labor issues whenever appropriate. For example, when the English department gathers to make decisions about hiring, a small group of instructors, including myself, consistently insist that the literature faculty majority consider the number of temporary, adjunct, and non-compositionist teachers employed to teach writing. While we do not demand that every new hire be a compositionist, we make our colleagues mindful of how our choices will affect their own workloads, the percentage of temporary instructors on staff, and the quality of teaching to follow. As a result, the composition faculty has grown from

three to six professors during the past four years, and we are currently searching for a seventh compositionist.

Outside of the English department, I have joined committees that I know will allow me to speak to the intersections of composition and labor. Most recently, I became chair of the Academic Concerns Committee, whose stated goals are to investigate conditions and make recommendations regarding the working and intellectual environment of the university. Chairing this committee is not a risk, as it counts as service to the university in my tenure and promotion applications. At the same time, it provides me a platform for furthering conversations about work.

Truth be told, my colleagues now expect me to raise labor issues no matter what the academic venue. (I've gotten a reputation, it seems.) Each semester, for instance, I have been invited to speak to a class for English majors called Senior Seminar, which focuses in part on introducing students to career possibilities post-graduation. Originally, I believe the course professor invited me to speak because I had experience as both a high school teacher and college professor. Now, however, she tells me that, "someone has to give them some straight talk on the realities of the job market in higher ed." This semester, I informed the class of the recent revelation that many colleges do not accurately report the number of full-time versus part-time faculty to *U.S. News and World Report*, which ranks colleges annually. *Insider Higher Ed* discovered that many colleges have consistently under-reported adjunct faculty and, in some cases, not acknowledged them at all (Jaschik "Calculation"). This lead to an interesting

discussion regarding the percentage of full-time faculty on our own staff; the other professors present saw that these circumstances mattered to the students.

Slowly but surely, the culture of our institution is becoming more accustomed to and comfortable with confronting labor issues. In time, this culture may in turn make reform through collective action seem both less daunting and, more significantly, a necessity.

### *Writing Out*

Further, I purport that compositionists and labor activists need to write more often about these issues in venues outside of the spaces in which administrators sanction us to write: the journals and conferences which (generally) are consumed only by other compositionists. Instead, I argue that reform requires we appeal to a wider audience, that we use every rhetorical tool at our command to write our resistance in sites on the borders between normalized academic publications, the administration, our students, and the public at large. In 1977, James Sledd purported that the “hope” of compositionists “is to generate public pressure for forced change against the obstructive will” of the corporate university (“Or Get Off the Pot” 83-84). More than thirty years ago, he urged us to “appeal to undergraduates and their parents, who pay high prices for a shoddy education; to the taxpayers at large, who want accountability; and to their tax-levying representatives . . . who will act if the electorate demands it. We must look to the common people . . .” (91). I believe this dissertation has demonstrated that Sledd’s call remains relevant today, as problems of labor and quality teaching persist. And I agree with Sledd

that calls for reform might be more effective if compositionists spoke to an audience inclusive of more than other academics, since students, parents, and tax payers have some financial leverage with which to demand change.

In this section, I describe how the World Wide Web provides multiple venues that border the academic and the public. The resulting writing may not yet be the sort rewarded by the corporate university or respected by a tenure and promotion committee. Nevertheless, the venues I will describe—academic blogs—may do much to forward the conversations and negotiations needed to enact reform, as they invite a larger audience to reflect on the intersections of labor, pedagogy, and theory. My own recent work on blogs serves as an example of the sort of wall writing I endorse.

At my home institution, compositionist Kevin Mahoney and I have written and published public texts as part of a strategy for challenging the labor system in our university, including means of reaching students, their parents and the community with more information about hiring practices and their impact on education. For instance, he has recently revised the Composition Program's website to include a blog accessible to the university and the public at large. As a part of the university's official website, it has the potential to generate substantial online traffic. With it, we hope to make the work of compositionists at our institution more visible. As contributors discuss the variety of work they are doing in the university's program, readers may begin to see Composition studies in its richness and complexity. Moreover, contributors have commented on (among other subjects) how their status and working conditions affect and complicate the

jobs they do, providing readers with a peek at the environment in which instruction is taking place.

For example, in an early entry entitled “Why Even Have a Blog?” Mahoney describes the context of the program:

You see, our little Composition-program-that-could consists of four tenured or tenure-track faculty. With only four tenured or tenure-track faculty, a perfectly reasonable question to ask would be: “who teaches all the classes?” That’s really the key question. . . . Most of our Composition courses are taught by faculty whose primary training is not in Composition. Some of those faculty may have had some course work and training in Composition, but Composition is not their primary area of study. In addition, depending upon the semester, many or most of our Composition courses are staffed by full-time, temporary faculty. Over the past several years, we have had at least two temporary faculty members who have degrees in Composition and Rhetoric. But overall the pattern holds: most of our Composition courses are not taught by people trained in Composition.

Mahoney’s introduction to the composition program is not the stuff of typical university public relations. In place of the testaments of mission statements and praise for curriculum seen on most university websites, Mahoney has chosen to present publicly the English department in its complexity and contradiction: we are a staff who strive to do good work in a system that does not demand

expertise. Mahoney is brave in this regard, openly critiquing the system that employs him.

Further, Mahoney explains that bringing issues of labor to bear on pedagogy and theory is the impetus of the blog:

And that is the point of this blog (at least from my perspective). If I had to describe the character of our program, it would be as a conversation. Part of the reason for this is pragmatic: how could you “dictate” a particular approach to Composition to faculty who may not have training in Composition or who may or may not be here in a year or two? Furthermore, how do you maintain a program when some of the most dynamic and engaged Composition teachers are “temporary?” It is our differences that make for a dynamic conversation about Composition.

We hope that as more students, parents, and administrators find their way to the Composition and Rhetoric blog, they will in turn critically reflect upon and question the contexts in which composition is taught at our institution, and join us in applying the pressure needed to change it. We generate more than critique, of course; we want to demonstrate to readers the value of the work compositionists and composition classes can create. For instance, I wrote a review of the annual undergraduate Composition Conference, describing the intellectual and creative work students produced in our classes. In this way, readers may see Composition studies as a worthy academic pursuit.



Off campus, fellow compositionists Kevin Mahoney, Seth Khan, and I have published a public blog called *Ink Work: Organizing, Advocacy and Knowledge Work*. In it, we explore and critique the corporate university's relationship with Composition studies and its effects on the lives of teachers and students. In my first post to the blog, I critiqued and connected national trends in higher education to the situation on my own campus. I concluded by listing some of the questions I plan to tackle at *Ink Work*:

Composition is the only class that all . . . students [at my university] take. As we work to reform our own program, then, we need to ask: What effects, both long and short term, do our labor practices have on student learning? How do the terms of labor contracts affect the pedagogical choices teachers make? How do teachers for whom Composition is not an area of specialty (temporary, tenure-track, and tenured alike) see their role as teachers of writing? (Lynch-Binie)

As the influence of digital print grows, we hope this site can become a resolute voice in the online discussion of academic labor issues. This may seem a small means of contributing to a reform movement, yet the blog may have a more diverse pool of potential readers than a specialized scholarly publication does. In fact, the very nature of blogs may make their readers more influential. In his 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody: The Power Of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky argues that social networking tools like blogs have transferred the power to determine what issues matter from traditional media

outlets to the audience. With the power to comment, forward and link, “a story can go from local to global in a heartbeat. And it demonstrates the ease and speed with which a group can be mobilized for the right kind of cause” (12). In fact, Shirky believes that texts produced with social networking tools, with the standards of multiple authors and reader participation, “are dramatically improving our ability to share, cooperate and act together” so much so that “it is leading to an epochal change” (304).

This coming change was recognized in a series of articles published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in from 2004-2006. In one such article, “The Blogosphere as a Carnival of Ideas,” Henry Farrell argues that blogging has rejuvenated scholarly writing, offering, “the kind of intellectual excitement and engagement that attracted many scholars to the academic life in the first place. . . .” The comments-feature of blogs allows for immediate discussions of ideas, discussions traditionally held at yearly conferences or printed over the course of months—even years—in traditional print journals. According to Farrell, the most significant feature of academic blogging is that it “offers academics a place where they can reconnect with the public.” He believes that blogs provide a greater chance than traditional print publications for more scholars to enter a debate, to reach a wider variety of readers, and consequently “to have an impact on the public conversation.” I hope that *Ink Work* can be a part of this phenomenon, engaging teachers, administrators, students, parents and any citizen interested in higher education in spirited and productive discussion.

### *Risky Writing*

While these rhetorical acts have for me opened up the conversation about composition teaching and labor, they are also risky writings. First, working on these texts takes time away from the obligations I must meet to maintain my employment. Such texts are not part of the subset deemed valuable by the university (or as David Downing might say, they exist outside of the knowledge contract). Farrell observes that “younger scholars may . . . worry that blogging would eat up time that could be devoted to publishing articles or working on a book.” The demands of time are difficult to juggle. Witness the popular blog of Michael Bérubé, English professor at Pennsylvania State University. His site ([www.michaelberube.com](http://www.michaelberube.com)) became a hub of discussion on matters of academic reform, political action and labor issues from 2004 through 2006. In January of 2007, however, Bérubé “retired” from blogging, citing the conflicting interests of blogging and his other academic writing. (Fortunately for his readers, Bérubé came out of online retirement in September 2008.) In the future, academics might negotiate with administrators to give scholarly blogging a place among the work that counts towards tenure. For example, both Mahoney and I include sections on our curriculum vitae called “Public Writing” which list our blog work. Tenure and promotion committees will read these documents, and this exposure might spark contemplation and discussion of the role of such work. Further, today’s academic bloggers will serve on tomorrow’s tenure and promotion committees and can make a case for the value of digital writing. For the present moment, however, blogs are not widely perceived, perhaps especially by the less internet-

savvy among administrators and faculties, as genuine sites of academic work. In “The Attention Blogs Bring,” Bérubé notes that, “In much of academe, blogs are still considered to be variants of personal diaries or individual soapboxes.” For the cautious untenured professor, graduate student, or adjunct, then, blogging must often be reprioritized, however stimulating and respected by its readers, if one is to maintain a successful academic career.

Second, critical and reform-minded writing can single one out; untenured teachers may worry about its effect on their employment. The world of online discourse carries many examples. One case in point is the blog of The Invisible Adjunct. The anonymous blogger was a critical success for her commentary on the academic hiring system. Until her decision to shut down the blog and leave academia in 2004, the author says her writing “was my attempt to provide a space between a chronicle of my angst and a policy paper” (qtd. in Smallwood). The Invisible Adjunct never revealed her name, even in her final posts and in the interviews that followed. She explained to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that she “worries that showing her face would allow those she knows in real life to see her as a misfit, a malcontent. She imagines that eventually she will write again about some of the issues she dealt with on the blog -- this time under her own name. For now, she’s just trying to get out without making any trouble” (Smallwood). She says, “The academy, on the one hand, puts a very high premium on originality . . . . But in certain areas you’re supposed to go with the flow” (qtd. in Smallwood). Theorizing the academic labor system comes with a cost and may even risk one’s position in the academy.

With similar concerns in mind, Duncan Black, a.k.a. the well-known political blogger Atrios, did not reveal his identity until after leaving higher education. As an assistant professor, he “worried that a trenchant political blog might be perceived as inappropriate for a young academic” (Farrell). Farrell notes that untenured professors “may worry that their colleagues may find their blogs objectionable, damaging their career chances.” To be sure, the immediacy of blogs can lead to missteps. Associate professor and blogger Daniel W. Drezner admits: “An honest scholar-blogger—myself included—could acknowledge a post or two that they would like to have back.” Of course, bloggers can take back words, erasing, amending, or replacing posts as they like. Any harm done, however, may not be as easily erased. As they learn from the missteps of the emerging blogger-class of professors, academics may avoid many of the pitfalls of self-publishing on the World Wide Web. Blogging etiquette will soon hold a necessary place, no doubt, in graduate students’ initiations into academic discourses.

In the meantime, I feel that I must value these wall writing mediums and view them as a part of my obligation not only to the field of Composition, but as a means of being responsible to my fellow composition teachers who do not enjoy the comforts of a tenure-track position. I have a responsibility to myself, yes, but I also cannot quietly work in a system while idly accepting its subjugation of my discipline and an entire class of workers. Blog writing is not the only means of resisting and critiquing, not the only way to write on the walls; each academic must find a means for speaking out with which he or she is comfortable.

## Further Action

While the connections among composition theory, the university labor system and quality education are complex, I have a new confidence in my ability to communicate them. This project has taught me much about exploring difficult ideas in tandem with narrative in order to bridge gaps in understanding, experience, and information. I am ready to write on the walls.

My hope is that the writing I do in all venues—in scholarly publications, blogs, interdepartmental memos, letters to the administrators, conference papers and this dissertation—can serve to reform the status of composition theory and compositionists. I hope that my willingness to speak out, to write out, may aid others as they reflect on their own roles in the corporate university, and find a means of joining the struggle for reform.

In this I echo the deference of Marc Bousquet, who acknowledges a “substantial countertrend” to the “managerial subjectivity” that dominates composition, “including such voices as Eileen Schell, Chris Carter, Karen Thompson, Laura Bartlett, Patricia Lambert Stock, Tony Scott, David Downing, and Richard Ohmann” (160). Still, Bousquet warns that, “the institutions of the field are overwhelmingly occupied by persons whose values are shaped in close relation to the practice, theory, and scholarship of the supervisory function,” producing “‘managerial’ theories of change” (160). Therefore, I believe it is imperative that future research must prioritize and extend labor theories of composition: ones critical of the intersections of labor, theory and pedagogy.

Moreover, more graduate programs in Composition should incorporate this theoretical stance into courses in pedagogy and theory. (For that matter, so should English Studies programs generally.) Henry Giroux made a similar call in 2007, arguing that teachers should “orient their teaching towards social change, connect learning to public life, link knowledge to the operations of power . . .” (206). He believes that classrooms are significant sites of change, claiming that, “Pedagogy is a border space that should enable students to confront ethically and politically the connecting tissue of thought and experience, theory and praxis, ideas and public life” (206). Many programmatic manifestations of this concept, however, focus on preparing students to find jobs outside of traditional professorships or on providing employment data. For example, in *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies*, Stephen North suggests “that programs offer Ph.D. students experiences designed to familiarize them with the complex system of post-secondary and secondary education in this country . . . and the full range of job opportunities available in that system” (245). Moreover, North concurs with the 1998 MLA Committee on Professional Employment that graduate programs should “provide applicants with a good deal of information before they apply: data on the job market in general and the particular program’s placement record in particular” (249). Similarly, in “Curriculum for Seven Generations,” Derek Owens suggests that, “Courses encouraging students to critique their field’s relationship to work and its role in the development of a sustainable economy are crucial” (122). While Owens places greater emphasis on critique here, its purpose seems to be the same as North’s: “to help prepare undergraduate majors and graduate

students for a range of current and future career possibilities in rapidly changing economic and technological arenas” (122). Providing students with thorough and honest assessments of the economic prospects of the field is certainly an important first step; students should understand their professional options and obstacles as early as possible. I do not believe that these approaches go far enough, however, to achieve the goal of “social change” (206) Giroux desires.

The specific design of graduate courses in labor theory in the spirit of Giroux’s call is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Generally, I propose that more graduate courses tackle labor theory with the aim of moving through knowledge into action. Such curricular change would certainly begin, as North and Owens describe, by providing future teachers insight into the complex conditions of their future careers. More than that, however, critical engagement with labor theory could encourage graduate students and teachers of composition to write and speak about academic labor practices not only in conventional academic platforms, but also in venues inclusive of parents, undergraduates, and the public at large. Students might learn about workers’ rights, collective bargaining and existing labor organizations (such as the American Association of University Professors). Most importantly, graduate curriculum could prepare future professors to take an active role in challenging the labor system, “to think critically in order to shape the conditions that influence how they participate in a wider democratic culture” (Giroux 201). In this way, the issues I have addressed in this dissertation may move from the margins to the center of our public and professional conversations about Composition studies.



If reform is to serve the laborers and the students, and not merely the managers of the corporate university, then more teacher-scholars need to join the ranks of the writers Bousquet admires. Our government and our universities say that writing matters in their legislation and mission statements; it is time more academics fought to make theory, pedagogy and fair labor practices emblems of that dedication through collective action, more critical teaching and public speaking and writing.

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