

Relating “Literacy,” “Rhetoric,” and “Composition”: Notes on Glascott, Graff, and Horner

Patricia Bizzell

We learn from New Literacy Studies that to be literate means to be in some kind of relationship with symbols for spoken language. I may have experienced the bare minimum of literacy when I was in South Korea last year. All around me I saw mysterious symbols, on signs, shop-fronts, menus, etc. I could not read them. But I knew they were supposed to represent spoken Korean.

In our Symposium, we have three concepts in play: “literacy,” “rhetoric,” and “composition.” Brenda Glascott implies that “literacy” is the most comprehensive of the three, as it encompasses analyses of language-based “reception and production activities and artifacts,” and among these are both “other-directed” and “self-directed” genres. Following Stephen Mailloux, she implies that traditional literary studies is more limited because it is primarily concerned with the “reception” of written genres, analyzing them to determine their aesthetic merit. While traditionally, such study may have concentrated on what she calls “imaginative writing,” that is, novels and poems, it is also true that literary critics have paid attention to so-called literary nonfiction genres, such as the belletristic essay and memoir. From a theoretical point of view, we might consider all of these genres to be both “other” and “self” directed. But it’s true, literary critics typically do not explain how to produce them.

Glascott suggests that “rhetoric” is also a more limited term than “literacy” because it is concerned primarily with the “production” of “other-directed” genres such as oratory. Her references to classical rhetoric make me think that this is where she gets these parameters; arguably, classical rhetoric is primarily concerned with coaching speakers on public deliberative, forensic, and epideictic genres. In its long subsequent history, however, rhetoric has focused on other, less public oral genres, such as conversation (see, e.g., Madeleine de Scudéry), and a wide variety of written genres (see, e.g., medieval *ars dictaminis*, or textbooks on letter-writing). Rhetoricians have also evaluated the “reception” of oral and written texts, whether by analyzing their persuasive effects on audiences, or even by judging their style and structure according to aesthetic criteria very similar to what literary critics employ. As is well known, there is even a branch of literary criticism that announces itself as rhetorical, promulgated most famously by Wayne Booth but arguably, nowadays, by Mailloux.

Thus, the designation as “rhetorical” of language-using phenomena that Glascott views as more properly the domain of “literacy” studies may not be due to scholars’ desire to gain the “gravitas” associated with the classical discipline, at least not entirely (insert smiley-face here). There is, in fact, a long history of rhetoric concerning itself with “letters, memoirs, diaries, and textbooks,” as Glascott herself points out. Rhetoricians, like literacy scholars, may well be interested in texts that are not deemed to have great aesthetic merit, because studying them produces valuable insights about how

people in various times and places tried to express themselves (“self-directed”) and sometimes, to influence others (“other-directed”). Certainly we can see both of these interests animating one of the most important studies that Glascott cites, namely Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream*, in which who Royster’s subjects were and what they were trying to accomplish in their social worlds are of more interest to Royster (and me) than the aesthetic qualities of their texts.

Perhaps the over-arching human activity that holds enduring interest for scholars, whether they call themselves literary critics, literacy scholars, or rhetoricians, is how humans do things with words.

“Composition,” I believe, may indeed be a term with a more limited reach, however. “Composition” is implicated when “literacy” is redefined from the capacious boundaries that Glascott suggests to a more reified and reduced notion, such as when it appears in promises that, as Harvey Graff puts it, “a more equal distribution of a productive mass literacy will trump social, economic, and political inequality.” This is the “literacy myth,” since achieving this reified literacy may not “bring employment and rewards to all those in search of fair work and pay, *regardless* of their ability to read and write across different media and different languages” (Graff’s emphasis). Bruce Horner critiques buying into the literacy myth when he looks at writing instruction that “[makes] a fetish of specific deviations from what are thought to be formal features of academic writing by changing these features—for example, by mixing languages, or composing in a manner recognized as ‘multimodal,’ in the hope ‘that academic writing can thereby be transformed.’” One way of interpreting his point here would be to say that just because one lone composition teacher encourages her students to use Spanglish in their English-language compositions, Spanglish will not thereby become more acceptable in academic writing at large nor will the socioeconomic oppression Spanglish speakers labor under be thereby alleviated.

With the term “composition,” I reference activities that produce artifacts in school-based writing courses, which usually encourage students’ self-expression but must also attend to their abilities to satisfy audiences in other school courses. I completely agree with Horner that no composition teacher should imagine that diversifying the kinds of oral and written productions she encourages will automatically transform either the academy or the larger (unjust) society. To think so would be to “fetishize,” in Horner’s terms, one’s innovative pedagogy. Nevertheless, as long as composition teachers understand that their diversifying pedagogy cannot change the world all alone, surely Horner would not warn them away from it. After all, he is a strong advocate of a kind of diversifying pedagogy that responds to “translingualism” and that is discussed in detail in a volume he co-edited, *Cross-Language Relations in Composition*.

Horner does have another concern, of course: that diversifying pedagogies not be reified, that is, treated as “[objectified] sets of such practices and conditions, rendering them stable, internally uniform, and discrete through locating them in terms of space [in my liberated classroom?] but not temporally as the always emerging products of actions.” To do so would be to turn more diverse notions of academic writing into the sort of literacy critiqued by Graff, imagined as an entity that can be gifted by the privileged to the disadvantaged, whom it then behooves to make good use of it. Let’s not do that.

But if we keep the emphasis on practice and on the ever-developing creativity of everyone in the school setting, students and faculty, then it seems to me that “composition,” even if limited in scope to

particularly school-related kinds of language use, can become a fruitful field for literacy study and can incorporate insights from rhetoricians’ ways with words.

College of the Holy Cross

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