

## Undoing Composition?

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Literacy studies raise a major challenge for the field of composition: the adequacy and stability of its historical foundations in rhetoric studies. The cultural and historical, anthropological and sociological turn in literacy studies disrupted two long-standing monopolies on normative, canonical definitions of reading and writing held by, respectively, English literary studies and reading psychology. Three decades after *Ways with Words* and *The Literacy Myth*, we now have a major corpus of social scientific studies of local and historical reading and writing practices, affiliated cultural scripts and texts, diverse and eccentric interpretive communities, and affiliated social and political relations of power.

It is now almost a cliché in the field to begin from a critique of universalist, autonomous models of reading, writing and literacy. The new consensus, reflected in this symposium, is that the social practices of writing are evident in micro-sociological and ethnographic accounts of community and everyday uses, and that these practices sit within macro-sociological political economies that attempt to govern the ownership and control of texts (Castells). The micro-analysis by Heath and colleagues, using Hymes's ethnography of communication, recorded a previously unrecognized diversity of everyday "literacy events" of African-American communities, working-class Whites, migrants, linguistic and religious minority groups, women and children. Together with critical work on literacy and the British working class by Hoggart and Williams, these community-based studies set the grounds for a new critique of canonical approaches to reading and writing.

At the same time, the emergence of new technologies over the last three decades has generated a "second wave" of literacy studies, focusing on new communities, identities and practices affiliated with new media and digital arts. Studies of multiliteracies and multi-modality are the new core business of educational and social science researchers (see Cope and Kalantzis). Taken together, the last three decades of literacy studies has succeeded in destabilizing the premise of autonomous and intrinsic models of literacy: an unquestioned belief in the durable value of a received, Eurocentric canon of texts, practices and "ways with words." Simply, new and blended texts, communities of readers and writers, bloggers and tweeters, new forms of identity and social interaction are developing as we speak—and literacy studies researchers are steaming away trying to document, describe, interpret, theorise and, indeed, prognosticate the directions and consequences of this new textual universe for those in cities and hinterlands, for dominant and minority communities, for elite and marginal classes—North, South, East and West. These matters come into play each time we scan a headline about Wikileaks, internet censorship and control, or whenever we speculate on the social effects of blogs, tweets and webpages.

Historically, the definition of what counts as “literacy,” “reading and writing,” has depended on those institutions that have “sponsored” literacy, to use a key term in this symposium. Schools, churches, mosques and universities tend to reify and naturalize literacy, creating a “selective tradition” of cultural scripts for its ideological contents and everyday uses (Luke, *Literacy*). In so doing, they enable and constrain particular bodily and cognitive practices. Yet as much as these institutions attempt to “control” the social construction of literacy, they also tend to be caught up in a continuous game of catch-up, trying to critique, override and, in instances, appropriate the dynamics of linguistic and textual exchange by everyday users and interpretive communities. Foucault’s description of the “eccentric” local uses and uptakes of discourse holds, regardless of attempts by the state and by multinational media and information corporations to control, survey and profit from what people do with texts.

This said, let’s return to the field of composition studies. Via the National Council of Teachers of English, prototypical journals like *College Composition and Communication*, *English Education*, and later journals like *Writing in the Two Year College*, the field of composition studies was defined by historically evolving relations of rhetoric programs, composition and writing programs in universities, and, most recently given the change in student demography, programs in English as a Second Language and English for specialized and “academic” purposes. *College Composition and Communication* provided an activist platform for composition scholars and teachers, post-Dartmouth, to raise issues of dialect, cultural diversity, and “students’ right to their own language.” Yet the field of composition studies has often been treated as a service area of remedial instruction, relegated to a subordinate position in university status and funding. It is hardly surprising, then, that composition and writing have sat in complementary and, at times, vexed relationships with traditional and postmodern literary studies in university English literature departments (which, historically, were invented almost a century *after* the establishment of rhetoric studies in Scotland and England).

The establishment and consolidation of composition studies into an academic *and* social field, then, has required a reification of writing into a *universal* phenomenon: that is, the assumption derived from the Sophists and Scottish rhetoricians and grammarians that there are generalizable and transferable approaches to spoken and written expression, and specifically to the teaching and learning of writing. Recall that one of the antagonistic objects of the New Literacy Studies has been the century long reification of reading into a scientifically measureable and technically reproducible human behavior by psychologists from Thorndike onwards. Here I want to propose a parallel caveat against the core assumption of many working in the field of composition studies: that there are generalizable and universal ways of teaching writing.

The turn towards ideological analyses of literacy was based as much in historical analyses, political economic analyses of literacy and power as it was produced through ethnographic and field-observational studies. Other important “critical” orientations to literacy have emerged. I here refer to the use of critical discourse analyses in a range of forms—from Foucauldian genealogical analyses to the political hermeneutics of Norman Fairclough, to Teun van Dijk and colleagues in journals like *Critical Discourse Studies* and *Discourse and Society*.

This work has the potential to push composition studies down two further lines of inquiry. First, there is a continuing need to document how the shaping of literacy in social institutions like schools and universities is complicit in ideological control, access to economic and social power, and, indeed, cultural inclusion and exclusion. This imperative isn't an abstraction for my academic colleagues and students who work in universities and schools in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, China, and other countries where boundaries over who can read, write and speak, about what, to whom, always sit slightly uncomfortably below the surface of pedagogic and scholarly exchange. The obvious point here—whether we pursue it formally through neomarxian ideology critique or via structuralist sociological analyses (Albright and Luke)—is that any formulation of an “ideological model” (Street) requires a thoroughgoing analysis of ideology per se, of class and cultural, state and corporate interests at work in the formation of specific text types, and, indeed, in the normative formation of particular kinds of literate human subjects, to the exclusion of others.

The second line of inquiry concerns the emergence of discourse analytic work that focuses on the knowledge/field specificity of discourse and genre (Lemke). Beginning from Halliday's systemic functionalist linguistics—the argument of Lemke, Fairclough and others is that the broader agenda of critical literacy is about teaching students to unpack the relationships between specific text types, and lexico-grammatical formations that have value in particular social/institutional fields. Their analytic point is that each social and institutional field, disciplinary field of thought and knowledge paradigm, develops specialist vocabularies and, indeed, highly specialized and dynamic generic forms. Further, this is done in relation to the affordances and possibilities of particular communications media (from print to blog).

This model doesn't overtly conflict with traditions of “genre” advocated in the field of college composition and communication, back to the work of Kenneth Burke and his Chicago colleagues, many of whom were avid students of Aristotelian philosophy. For Burke, social function was accounted for in terms of specific “grammars of motives.” But it potentially marks out yet another historical face-off between Gorgias and Aristotle: the assumption that writing, its forms and approaches, right down to lexical choice and sentence-level grammar depends on social purposes (Aristotelian “final causes”) realized in relation to disciplinary and knowledge formations. In their analysis of *Origin of Species*, Halliday and Martin show how the core social functions of scientific categorization and taxonomy generate specific lexico-grammatical and generic designs. In sociological terms, Basil Bernstein argues that different fields “classify” and “frame” knowledge differently, with distinctive foci on disciplinary boundaries and interdisciplinarity, and with different degrees of what he refers to as “verticality,” that is, depth of knowledge. At the same time, how knowledge is classified and framed, named and constructed in any specific field is neither benign nor politically disinterested. Here Bourdieu's analysis of “homo academicus” establishes the role of “discipline” in the establishment and maintenance of knowledge/power hierarchies in universities.

This raises a number of questions about the field of composition as it is institutionally constituted and located. If the institutional demands of student composition are always field-specific

and, perhaps, even paradigm specific, the days of “generic,” universal, cross-institutional ways of teaching “writing” may be numbered—particularly in increasingly specialized, technical and professional university programs. Writing essays for English classes does not translate into efficacy at writing laboratory notes, right down to the mastery of specific sentence-level grammatical formations (e.g., transitive versus intransitive, passive versus active, kinds of sentence-level modality). Nor will it necessarily transfer to the construction of webpages or participation in online discussion. There is already a shift in many institutions from university-wide college composition programs, remedial writing interventions and ESL programs to field specific programs lodged in host departments and faculties. The emergence of “writing for engineers” or “writing for accountants” are responses to the specific knowledge demands of professional fields—as is the move from generic English-as-a-Second language programs to English-for-Specific Purposes programs. One leading East Asian university has specialist writing courses for training Mandarin-speaking engineers in the conventions of the English-language PhD thesis in the field of engineering. This situation is further complicated by the increase of digitally-researched, interactively produced, multi-modal and mixed genre assignments in both high school and university courses.

Can the field keep up? Simply, if the (now old) “new literacy studies” has yielded a focus on context, locality and knowledge/power relations—this, in itself, should set the grounds for an analytic and practical “de-reification” of writing and composition as they stand. My polemical point is that this may require a reconnoitering of the field’s historical roots in Scottish and American rhetoric—and, at the least, an engagement with three sets of issues that have been placed on the table by the “critical” turn in literacy studies and discourse analyses: (1) the role of discipline/field/knowledge/power configurations in shaping what counts as writing, text and discourse; (2) the changing linguistic and cultural resources of students and aspiring writers wrought by the permanent disruption of mainstream demographics in all “Western” school and university systems; and, last but hardly least, (3) the core epistemological and textual issues raised by shifts in the modalities of communications to digital and post-print forms. Neither the canon, nor the cohort, nor the media remain the same.

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