

Moving Beyond Place in Discussions of Literacy

Jennifer Seibel Trainor

In Kathryn Flannery's contribution to this volume, she cautions readers against romanticizing non-school literacies as more authentic and valuable than essayist, school-based textual practices. Although it is important to document and validate everyday literacies, she writes, Flannery draws on Hull and Schultz to reiterate that we should not "abandon the opportunities that school historically has provided to develop particular forms of text-based expertise, forms that provide a power absent in many everyday literacies" (qtd. in Flannery). Composition is at its best, Flannery concludes, when we "recognize the potential power in the intellectual tools we ourselves" use. Bruce Horner makes a similar point in his contribution to this volume: we have made a fetish, he writes, of what dominant ideology leads us to recognize as "the new" as a means of accomplishing social change. We assume that changing our focus to new, non-school literacies will somehow solve the problems inherent in more autonomous models of literacy. But fetishizing non-school literacies does not actually challenge the power of school forms; fetishizing creates a dichotomy that only reinforces the original hierarchy.

The school/non-school dichotomy that Flannery and Horner critique has, for all its problems, been a productive one in *Composition*. In my own teaching, it has prompted illuminating class discussions about the kinds of writing students do outside of school. These discussions reveal, among other things, that students have their own romantic notions of non-school literacies. In their discussions of the writing they do outside of school, the students describe writing as "free," "creative," and "authentic." In describing the writing they do in school, they talk about losing their own voice, focusing only on what the teacher wants to hear, trying to follow "pointless" rules and formulas. Beyond the classroom, the school/non-school dichotomy has prompted important discussions in our scholarship about the purpose of *Composition*: to what extent does the teaching of essayist texts help our students accomplish writing tasks in other aspects of their lives? Is there any reason to teach the "mutt genres" of school-based literacy? Can we teach writing outside of the specific contexts that call for writing? (See Downs and Wardle; Smit; Wardle.)

In response to my students and to these questions, I've designed many a curricular intervention aimed at bringing the seeming energy and authenticity of my students' non-school writing to the classroom. I'll say more about these efforts in a moment. But as productive as the dichotomy has been, Horner and Flannery ask us to question the school/non-school divide, and to think about not just what it reveals, but what it obscures. How can we learn to view literacy *in* composition, as the title of this journal suggests, and not something that takes place, exotically or authentically, outside it? Are there metaphors or lenses that can help us see the dichotomy differently? Flannery suggests that we need to view literacy not in terms of whether or not it is school-based, but rather in terms of purpose. Drawing on rich examples from her own students, Flannery shows how a focus on purpose

illuminates aspects of our students' literate lives that remain unseen within the familiar dichotomy of school v. non-school literacies. For Flannery's students, school-based genres and conventions are transformed by the students' idiosyncratic purposes in adopting them: "the purposes [students] bring to 'essayist texts' or that they discover through reading and writing do not simply replicate the purposes the institution, the curriculum, or their teacher necessarily have in mind." She cites a provocative example: a student, asked to write a research paper on Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, finds a way to connect Darwin to her own Christian views, transforming both in the process.

Horner similarly advocates a shift in perspective as a way to escape dichotomies that reify literacies. Rather than viewing literacies in terms of their spatial location (taking place in school or outside of it), he suggests we view literacies in terms of temporality. Quoting Raymond Williams, Horner argues that spatial metaphors lead to static conceptualizations of literate texts and practices. These metaphors help "build and reify a great divide between in school and out of school" literacies. Understanding literacy in terms of the temporal, in contrast, emphasizes literacy as an activity that occurs in time. This lens brings into sharper focus the ways that all literacies morph, shift, appropriate, hybridize, and change as they are deployed by individuals and groups.

I'm intrigued by these perspectives. For all that I've been guilty myself, sometimes along with my students, of romanticizing the authentic, voice-filled writing they do outside of school, and for all that I and my students have chafed against the seeming rigidity imposed on them by school forms, when I look at the work students produce when liberated from the necessity of "following the rules," I'm never quite satisfied, and interestingly, neither are they, though they struggle to put into words precisely what they feel is missing from their writing. Two semesters ago, I asked the students to create blogs. They were given freedom to determine the topic, the genre, the design, and the voice of their blogs. One student chose to write about "the importance of courtly, gentlemanly values." His blog, at first, read like a men's magazine, with posts about how to treat women and how to dress like a gentleman. His classmates were not impressed. Some raised issues with the sexism implicit in his stance. Others felt he was simplifying the idea of "gentlemanly." I tended to agree with the students. I found the stance the student had taken to be problematic in the gender issues it raised but didn't address, and overly simplistic in its call to return to the past when "men knew how to be men." With some guidance from a skilled TA working with me that semester, the student wrote a post connecting ideas about gentlemanly behavior to his identity as a Latino. He began to read about the DIY movement on the Internet and found that the ideas behind this movement were similar to feelings he had about what it meant to be a man. Using a timeless academic form—the compare/contrast essay—he wrote two posts comparing his ideas about gentlemanly behavior and the DIY movement. Using academic research tools, he incorporated texts about identity into his writing about his own identity as a Latino.

All of this is to say that his original writing—liberated from school forms—was not any more authentic to what he was trying to say than his later, more school-based writing was. In fact, I'm sure he would say that it was only when he began to use the tools of the academy that he was really able to enact the purposes and express the ideas he began with. Reflecting on his blog at the end of the semester, the student commented that his blog writing "is me in the future—the voice—it's who I'm

going to be when I'm a professional." For this student, his voice was not determined by place but by his sense of his identity as it changed and will change over time. Horner's and Flannery's call to resist the temptations of dichotomous thinking about where literacy takes place provides an important lens through which to see the complexity of the literate work our students, like this one, do in our courses.

San Francisco State University

WORKS CITED

- Downs, Douglas, and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re) Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication* 58.4 (2007): 552-84. Print.
- Flannery, Kathryn. "Babies in Bathwater." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Horner, Bruce. "Ideologies of Literacy, 'Academic Literacies,' and Composition Studies." *Literacy in Composition Studies* 1.1 (2013): n. pag. Web.
- Smit, David W. *The End of Composition Studies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. Print.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. "'Mutt Genres' and the Goal of FYC: Can We Help Students Write the Genres of the University?" *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (2009): 765-89. Print.