

Too Green to Talk Disciplinarity

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We weathered the winter of division, disconnection, and distance; we march into the spring longing for togetherness in difference. We witnessed spectacle: words dehumanize and dispossess; we reaffirm why our work revitalizes and reunites. As the material consequences of our symbolic acts and discursive practices are increasingly seen and felt in a disoriented public, composition studies has yet to reassert the core values it upholds and the cultural capital it preserves upon entering its septuagenarian years. Reading on, you may notice that composition studies is and has been conceptualized liberally in myriad, sometimes-conflicting metaphors. Maybe that's part of why I feel too green to talk disciplinarity?

As a disciplinary community, we fought—and we fought hard—to get where we are today within our respective institutions and out in the marketplace of disciplines. Still, we continue to reflect on and rewrite who we are in response to rapidly changing political and institutional realities. Yet I often wonder, as a junior scholar, who we have in mind when we matter-of-factly insert the inclusive pronoun *we* in the grand disciplinary narrative. I know for certain that I did not attempt to put myself in the narrative when typing the first *we* of this paragraph. I did, however, picture an assembly of pathfinders, pioneers, and prominent scholars (many of whom also contributed to this issue) that we—here I mean the next generation—look up to and cite in our papers. Aren't we too green to talk disciplinarity anyway?

A discipline is constitutive: in a similar fashion as we (re)shape the identity of the discipline, the discipline molds our professional identity. I attended CCCC for the first time in 2015 as a master's student seeking my way into the field. I fondly recall walking into the Newcomers' Coffee Hour early in the morning, anxiously looking around the room filled with excitement and not knowing where to place my body or emotions. As I was hesitating to stay, Professor Cindy Selfe approached, handed me a cup of coffee, and introduced herself with a welcoming smile. Her air of modesty instantly put me at ease. For a moment, I was in disbelief: one of the pathfinders whom I read in the literature was greeting me in person and opening the door to the professional community I now call home. That initial cross-generational contact set the tenor for the growth of my sense of belonging.

But not every door is wide open. Some doors are closed but unlocked. Some doors are closed and locked. A discipline disciplines. It “sets boundaries and demarcates hierarchies of experts and amateurs” (Lenoir 72). The more consolidated the disciplinary identity, the more disciplined we need to be to

“make it.” And the longer it takes to be professionalized, the more regimented generational hierarchies become, and vice versa. Borrowing Bronwyn Williams’s metaphor, as the disciplinary solar system expands and grows more diverse, we are “out of contact with nearby solar systems,” despite the powerful centripetal force the core enterprise of composition exerts (128). The traditional monolithic notion of “composition” has now become a meta-discipline that encompasses a multi-center landscape of subfields, each with its distinctive norms and agendas. The job market is a barometer of this trend: in an advertisement, the term *compositionist* used to denote a specialist, but now marks a new kind of generalist. We, especially the young, the new, and the green, are defined less by what we do and more by where we belong. Our paths to the promised land have become narrower. Generation after generation, we push the boundaries, chart new territories, and make new connections; yet, we seem to be losing interest in our neighbors. We are too busy making sure we are on the “right” track.

To be sure, under the auspices of the strong disciplinary identity and the infrastructures and superstructures that have been laid out, numerous channels have been established to facilitate communication and push back against scholarly and generational silos. For example, CCCC maintains the long tradition of the Newcomers’ Orientation at its annual convention and provides various awards/grants and editorial assistantships for junior scholars; we benefit from mentoring programs such as the CCCC Committee on the Status of Graduate Students and the WPA-GO co-sponsored mentoring program; there are also evolving grassroots advocacy groups that serve to connect and support graduate students, such as nextGEN. Other forms of institutionalized or informal mentorship abound in different professional spaces. It’s a truly wonderful time to mature as a junior scholar in composition studies, thanks to all the nurture and care.

Suffice to say, the field has been pushing hard for trans-generational communication, mentorship, and allyship. Yet I do not think we as a disciplinary community have done enough to frame our trans-generational exchanges around the notion of “partnership” and foster trans-generational collegiality. The idea of trans-generational partnership rejects (although perhaps only nominally) the rigid hierarchical structures and domination/oppression framework inherent in different forms of mentorship and allyship. It highlights collaboration and shared responsibility in trans-generational activities on equal terms. It invites the young, the new, the shy, and the marginalized to not only work together with the established, but also to unsettle the field, make some noise, and break some walls. While, as Goggin reminds us, stability should remain our priority, given where we are today I wonder if we are confident enough to embrace a little bit of instability by transcending the generational boundaries

and co-constructing the knowledge/practice enterprise upon partnerships. I wonder if we are confident enough to make the young and new front and center in our partnerships, at least every now and then.

Although I received extensive systematic training in composition studies during my master's studies, I did not enter my doctoral program as an "official" composition student, as I was affiliated with the second language studies program in the same department. Thanks to the inclusivity of the rhetoric and composition program at Purdue University and the discipline at large, I managed to grab anything I could eat like a hungry kid—taking courses, attending conferences, conducting and sharing research, seeking mentorship—to stay relevant. In retrospect, I wonder if it was my "peripheral" status and lack of an institutionally structured pathway that allowed me to take an eclectic approach and chart my path to finding my professional identity. Every one of us, especially the young and new, inhabits rhetorical and scholarly spaces meaningfully differently. We may well make bold and sometimes unorthodox claims that sound facile, skewed, jarring, even rude. Perhaps the wise and experienced could let us speak before eagerly lending a hand in the name of mentorship. Perhaps think along the lines of a partnership.

As a normative discipline, composition studies takes official stances on what we should be doing. For example, the various position statements that CCCC actively produces, updates, and promotes provide useful guidelines for our professional practices. Invoking a "franchise" metaphor, Gregory G. Colomb cautions that these standards-setting documents, though they strengthen our disciplinary standing, may inevitably lead to uniformity at the cost of local variance. A trans-generational partnership framework would invite us to question whose norms we are validating or denying. It would also invite us to co-author our norms as a means of assessing the grand narrative of what "is" and "ought to be," as we all dwell in drastically different sociopolitical and institutional ecologies.

Infrastructures are emerging to undergird trans-generational communication. A pioneering project is the journal *Young Scholars in Writing* (YSW) that exclusively publishes articles written by undergraduate researchers/scholars in rhetoric and writing. For decades, we have been disciplined to approach undergraduate students as research subjects or those needing help and to treat their writing as research data. YSW, and events like the Naylor Workshop, are demonstrations of a meaningful stride toward trans-generational partnership in that it urges us to read student writing as scholarship and invites us to converse with the next generation as peers (see the founding editors' introduction by Grobman and Spigelman, and also Johnson and Rifenburg's *Composition Studies* piece).

But could we do more? Our scholarly citation practices may have betrayed our scruples (for a full account of disciplinary citation practices, see Amy E.

Robillard's *College English* article). A neoliberal attention economy finds its manifestation in our scholarly activities and gives rise to attention inequality. Our attention is unevenly distributed: most of our limited attention is given to a relatively small number of established scholars and publication venues. Concentrated attention turns into citations, which then translate to professional currency that represents legitimacy and authority. The new voices, if not being listened for, often end up getting dismissed and becoming irrelevant. A trans-generational partnership framework demands that we not only critically reflect on our scholarly practices that may inadvertently reinforce the generational hierarchy, but also proactively dialogue with scholars across generations and circulate scholarship produced by the young and new. As the undergraduate scholars Courtney Buck, Emily Nolan, and Jamie Spallino aptly put it, "inexperience can foster innovation" (123).

A few weeks into my first semester at the University of Maine as a master's student, I had a meeting with my graduate teaching assistant mentor, Dylan Dryer. As a fresh college-graduate, non-native English-speaking instructor teaching writing for the first time in a culturally unfamiliar classroom, I found the incredibly daunting task of teaching much less formidable than familiarizing myself with and positioning myself within the voluminous bodies of composition scholarship. Sensing my frustration, Dylan, with his intense gaze, said to me, "Remember, as a scholar in the field, you need to..." Years later, I forgot what the exact advice was, but the characterization of me as a fellow "scholar" has empowered me to engage and to give. I still feel the weight of the title and the responsibility to guard it.

Am I too green to talk disciplinarity? Perhaps. But despite my broad-stroke generalizations (or ungrounded mischaracterizations) in this piece, I did. And I appreciate this very space that sponsored a trans-generational partnership. We wish for more.

Works Cited

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