

Speculative Middles and *Composition Studies* at 50

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When I was asked to reflect on the 50th anniversary of *Composition Studies*, I didn't realize that, really, I'd be reflecting on a relationship that spans nearly half of my life and almost all of my professional life. In 2000, as an MA student at DePaul University, I was an editorial assistant for *CS* under Peter Vandenberg. Because of that experience, I wound up writing my dissertation on the role of scholarly journals in shaping discourses of identity. In 2010, I took on the role of Editor of *CS* before it moved on to Laura Micciche's editorship. As anyone who has ever taken on editorial roles with a journal might know, even when you are finished with the day-to-day job, the journal itself stays on in your psyche—an old friend, a familiar read. As time moves on and new editors make their own choices and new scholarship emerges, it forms itself again in your mind—each new issue a mark on a landscape, much the way a sapling makes its way as a member of a larger family of trees and scrub in a forest. There is never a static moment, frozen in time. We are always in the middle of things.

To that end, this reflection is really a reflection on the tension between old and new, between tree and forest as *CS* makes its way towards 50. It is in these between spaces that I see the real contribution that *CS* makes on the landscape of rhetoric and writing studies. To be in this now, we are both looking back and looking forward. We might consider moments like these, as Springgay and Truman do, the “speculative middles” prompted by an attunement to “activating problems and concepts in the midst of the event” (5), to think of what we know in this in-between as both already planned (as the history of the journal laid out by its archives tells us) and at the same time, exploratory (imagining *CS*'s future). When I think about the speculative middles of *CS*, I am drawn toward thinking about problems: the problems facing this small journal in particular, and the problems facing all of us in the field. The tensions between these problems seem to me to point to what the journal has always done well, as well as pointing attention to where it may continue to intervene to help make all of our working lives, and our teaching lives, better.

When I was doing historiographic archival work for my own dissertation, one of the places that drew my attention to the shape of the field through its journals was through publication of special issues; notably, in most of the field's largest journal publications. This kind of activity privileged identity-based rhetoric and was grouped in the mid-seventies (especially for women), the nineties (particularly for people of color and members of LGBTQ communities), and the early millennium (markedly for class and disability-based rhetorics)

(see Clary-Lemon). The special issue was a way to make sense of both pressing issues of the moment as well as to give journals a sense of identity—to show what they themselves considered valuable sites of knowledge. When I turn to the archives of *Composition Studies/FEN*, I see these patterns play out as well, tending to poles of both the familiar and the new. On the one hand, the journal signals what has always been important to its readers with its choice of special issues: namely, the ways that we teach and theorize writing and the contexts by which we sustain new approaches to it. Its first special issue in 1995 was one on doctoral education; the next, almost ten years later, “Composition in the Small College” in 2004. Throughout the millennium, *CS* focused on both looking backwards in history (with a special issue “On 1963” in 2008) and forwards into new programmatic and generic spaces, with issues on the writing major (2007), and later, comics and multimodality (2015). On the other hand, *CS* shows with its special issues its commitment to widening the scope of why writing matters, and for whom: for women (in 2011), for multilingual and translingual writers and teachers (2016), and for all of us concerned with equity and access (2020). When I turn to *CS*’s most recent special issue, “Diversity Is Not Justice: Working Toward Radical Transformation and Racial Equity in the Discipline” (2021), I see a journal that is facing both its past and future, proffering critiques of the field’s past and present—particularly its investments in academic “whitestreaming”—and moving towards a more equitable discipline that honors and supports Black and Indigenous faculty and students, notably by providing alternative models of knowledge making (Taczak and Davis 10).

When I look at this small sampling of *punctum* that special issues reveal about this journal, I see the problems and the opportunities that it has always had. The pressure of being a small, independent publishing space when so many other venues for scholarship are being amalgamated into large, for-profit publishing houses means that it has had the freedom to hold its care for writing practices with its care for equity. It remains one of the few of the field’s journals dedicated to writing theory and practice; to that end, it has maintained over its lifetime a dedication to invitation—both for new scholars and for those who are more established. Yet *CS*, like most venues for scholarship in the academy, is a place that has for a long time been marked by whiteness and privilege. In its 50th year, *CS* might mark a turning point for scholarship that can build on its history, care for its most vulnerable, and infuse a field with answers to speculative middles.

In 1974, Richard Coe wrote an award-winning essay about the future of the discipline, “Rhetoric 2001,” for *Composition Studies*. In it, he says, “Western culture especially has a pathological tendency to look only at the parts, to not see the forest for the trees” (9). He critiques logics that ignore the whole,

arguing that we can—and must—do better to resist this kind of compartmentalizing when we teach writing. In 2022, nearly 50 years after Coe wrote his futuristic piece for the field, you might say we are still struggling with this same tension. From the speculative middles, perhaps we can see all the parts, forest and trees—commitments to writing and teaching writing, commitments to upending the white academy, commitments to keeping knowledge-spaces not-for-profit—as the whole body of work of the field, rather than discrete parts. As Coe notes, “the organism that ‘wins against’ its environment becomes extinct” (9). Perhaps, in gathering our commitments together holistically, we can be mindful of those environments that show us the seeds in our hands and the earth under our feet. We might, then, turn our face up to the shade and know better the woods that we navigate.

Works Cited

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