

On the Future of Writing about Teaching

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The history of *Composition Studies* is in many ways my history. In 1981, when *Composition Studies* was still *Freshman English News*, I began an MA in English. Not far into my course work, I found myself unengaged by my seminars on the Romantic Poets and Bibliographic Methods but excited by teaching composition. The only scholarly article on teaching I remember reading in my practicum was an early piece by Kenneth Bruffee on peer response. I longed for more. Without realizing it, I wanted what Gary Tate hoped for when he founded *Freshman English News* in 1972: “A broadening of our sense of what is possible [when teaching composition], an extension of our vision, [that] might well occur when we know how others have tried and succeeded, how still others have tried and failed” (1).

By 1992, when *Freshman English News* became *Composition Studies* under the editorship of Christina Murphy, I was in my third year of a PhD program in Rhetoric and Composition. After completing my MA, I had been lucky to secure a series of temporary teaching appointments at a small liberal arts college, and my love of teaching led me to pursue a PhD. In grad school, I learned that the field of composition involved much more than teaching first-year writing. The courses I took—History of Rhetoric, Gender and Writing, the Rhetoric of Human Science, Basic Writing—signified the breadth of this field. The newly named *Composition Studies/Freshman English News* sought to capture this breadth by “exploring the issues that define the fields of rhetoric and composition, rhetorical theory, cultural criticism, and composition pedagogy” (Murphy 2). The journal continues to make representing the breadth of the field an important part of its mission.

When my TCU colleague Ann George and I took over editing *Composition Studies* in 2003, the journal was already publishing on a range of subjects befitting its more capacious name. We had no plans to change the mission of the journal, but we did affirm in our first editors’ note that *Composition Studies* would remain “a journal where both of these qualities of writing instruction—as a noble service and as an engaging intellectual activity—are exemplified and explored” (15). In the interview Ann and I did with Tate for our inaugural issue, he expressed his desire for more of what *Freshman English News* had once aimed to do: “There’s a lot of really important, intellectually sound talk about teaching writing and what composition study should be, but we don’t really see, very much, the teaching of writing in action, in the classroom, inside the office” (18).

In the early aughts, there were at least two reasons for Tate to worry about the status of writing about teaching in a field whose founding preoccupation was how to teach writing. First was the debate sometimes termed the “theory wars” between scholars interested in theorizing about writing beyond the classroom and those who continued focusing within it. Some of this debate took place in the pages of *Composition Studies*. For example, the lead article in the last issue of *Freshman English News* before its name change was a piece by Gary A. Olson titled “The Role of Theory in Composition Scholarship.” In it, Olson argued that “while pedagogical theory is one form of scholarship, there is room for other kinds of theoretical, speculative scholarship” (5). In a subsequent *Composition Studies* article, “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline,” Olson defended his theoretical work from attacks by composition scholars like Wendy Bishop who, in a 1999 *CCC* article, derided the language of theory and called for a return to more teaching-centered scholarship. Interestingly, Olson’s argument for the value of theory did not appear in the lead spot but instead followed James Sledd’s “Return to Service,” a piece that clearly comes down on the side of teaching over theory: “I make no apologies for undignified concern with maligned Freshman English, a course whose careful teaching is infinitely more important than the further development of ‘composition theory’” (11). A look at recent issues of *Composition Studies*, which continue to feature the course designs launched under the editorship of Peter Vandenberg, who took over the journal in 1996, and the roll-out in 2021 of the companion *FEN Blog*, whose name reminds readers of the journal’s origins as *Freshman English News*, make clear that whatever debates we’re having about who we are as a discipline, we are still teachers of writing who want to hear from other teachers about “what is possible” so that we can “extend our vision.” This is especially important for those of us who are white, CIS-gendered, able-bodied, neurotypical. As the editors of the *FEN blog* describe it, “the blog promises to expand what stories are told in the field and who tells them” (“Welcome”).

A second threat to writing about teaching actually grew out of a deep respect for that writing. In a *CCC* article published in 1998, Paul Anderson argued that writing about students and their texts should be considered human subjects research. This meant that most writing about what happened in a classroom would require approval from an Institutional Review Board. CCC made this position official in 2003, with its “Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies” (the same semester Ann and I edited our first issue of *Composition Studies*). One of the key ethical considerations in human subjects research is informed consent: people involved in research should understand what is being studied, including the risks and benefits, before voluntarily consenting to participate. Few of us would quarrel

with the idea that we should ask students for permission to use their work, but the new guidelines did produce some negative effects. Because every IRB is shaped by its local research culture, its response to proposals seeking approval for writing about teaching can vary from refusal to recognize this writing as research to rejection on the grounds that all writing about students is unethical. Even when an IRB does review such proposals, it can take weeks or months to receive approval, complicating a teacher's ability to write about a particular class.

How might these threats affect the future of writing about teaching in composition studies? I'll address the second threat first. Given the limited time graduate students have to complete their dissertations, having to navigate an IRB before starting research may seem too costly a route to pursue. We should not be surprised, then, that Benjamin Miller, who classified recent Rhetoric and Composition dissertations by research method using the categories created by Steven North, found that only 13% of the 2,711 dissertations he plotted were Practitioner studies (159). Scholars on the tenure track may also find it unfeasible to pursue IRB approval for a classroom study that, once conducted, may take several more years to write and publish. Recent revisions in IRB regulations and a subsequent update in the CCCC Guidelines have addressed some of these quandaries, but it is still challenging to write about an unanticipated insight that occurs during the semester or even after the class has concluded, since IRB approval cannot be granted after the fact. As a field, we need to continue to involve ourselves in debates about the ethical pursuit of writing about teaching, including staying up-to-date on our local IRB processes so that we can encourage and support graduate students who want to study their own teaching. And those of us well into our careers should pursue such studies ourselves, which might mean returning to the composition classroom where, at least for me, I'm reminded of how much more I want to know about teaching writing well.

As for the first threat, I think Seth Kahn has it right when he points out all the ways in which our disciplinary discourse devalues teaching, and by extension, writing about teaching. For example, we regularly talk about teaching as something one can be "released" from (600). And graduate students often learn from their mentors that the "best" jobs are those with less teaching and more support for research (592). Those who aren't offered tenure-track, research-oriented jobs can feel like failures, while those who actually want teaching-intensive jobs may be seen as "settling." That needs to change. In these pandemic-influenced times, institutions may be shutting down low-enrolled majors and even departments, but they are not (yet) shutting down writing programs. And the always evolving nature of writing means that whatever we once knew about teaching writing needs to evolve as well. We need to know more about teaching from different cultural positions, to increasingly diverse

students, in a political context where disinformation flourishes and alternate facts abound. Students need what we have to teach.

Second, changes in the job market for Rhetoric and Composition PhDs mean the first job for many will be a teaching-focused position, often non-tenure track. In my survey of RhetComp job seekers over the last decade, many on the job market lamented that search committees were more interested in what they could teach than in their research. What if their teaching and research were more closely related? I'm not saying that all research in composition needs to be about teaching—I agree with Olson that the field should have room for research and theory about other writing-related concerns—but I also think graduate programs that fail to teach students how to write (and publish) about their teaching fail to prepare them for the careers they may actually have. If all of us could see our classrooms as sites of knowledge-making about writing, know how to plan teaching-related research, be able to deal with the vagaries of our local IRBs, and be aware of available outlets for sharing what we learn, perhaps fewer of us would feel torn between being the researcher we *want* to be and the teacher we *have* to be. I hope that *Composition Studies* will continue to be one of those outlets, a place to publish not only about the field but about the work those in the field spend most of our time doing.

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