

# Where We've Been and Where We Might Go

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In 1972, when Gary Tate launched *Freshman English News* (hereafter *FEN*)—the original name of what became *Composition Studies*—he provided the nascent discipline of composition with a forum for conversation. He would be pleased to see how far both this forum and the discipline have come. To prepare this article, I looked back over the issues I edited from 1981-1985 and discovered an interesting bookends effect.

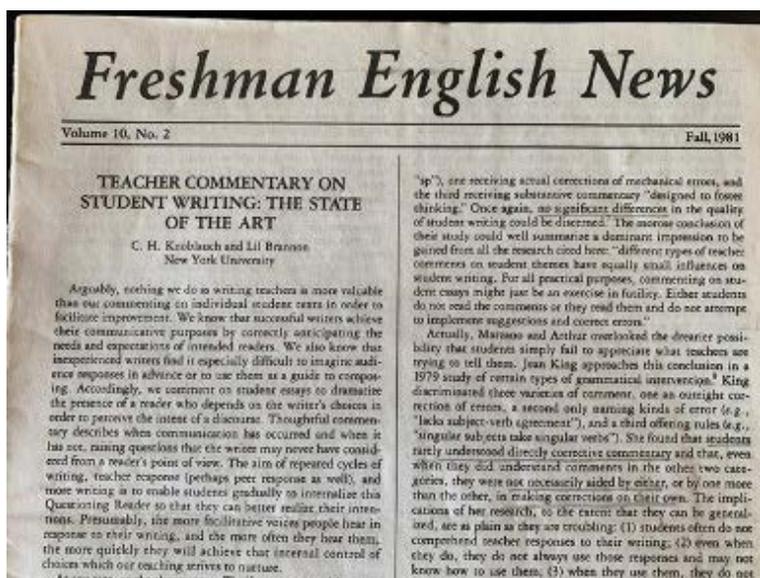


Figure 1.

In fall of 1981, Gary appointed me “Acting Editor” for my first issue, Volume 10, Number 2. The lead article, as shown in Figure 1, is by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon, an excerpt from their book *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, which would be published by Boynton/Cook three years later. The subject is, as the title makes clear, “Teacher Commentary on Student Writing,” and the focus is on the abundant research suggesting that teacher comments have little or no effect on the quality of student writing. In the 70s and early 80s, traditional practice, as Knoblauch and Brannon make clear, was for teachers to make comments and corrections on student papers, return them and move on to the next assignment. Revision was not yet standard practice.

So one way we can understand how far we have come as a discipline since *FEN* was launched is to recognize how pervasive revision practices have become in our discipline. When I started teaching freshman comp in 1972 as an ill-prepared teaching assistant, revision was rarely mentioned. It certainly wasn't built into the composition curriculum the way it so often is today. I spent a decade as a teaching assistant in three different graduate programs under the tutelage of four very different composition directors and only the last one I encountered, in the final years of my doctoral work, expected us to build multiple drafts and revisions into our curricula. None of the dozens of textbooks I was assigned or sought out in those years made revision a central activity in the writing class. But that was all changing.

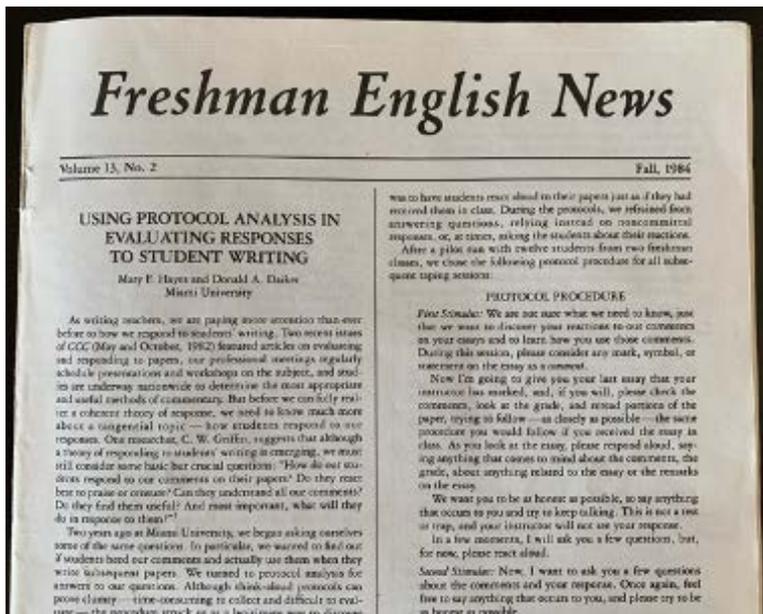


Figure 2.

Knoblauch and Brannon were on the cutting edge of that particular trial balloon, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, and *FEN* was perhaps the first journal to include articles critiquing standard practice and suggest the crucial role of revision in the student learning process. It's no surprise that three years after the Knoblauch and Brannon article, the subject of teacher commentary took centerstage again in *FEN*.

The fall 1984 issue, Volume 13, Number 2 (see Figure 2), leads with an article by Mary Hayes and Donald Daiker, "Using Protocol Analysis in Evaluating Responses to Student Writing," which cites Knoblauch and Brannon's work as the starting point for Hayes and Daiker's efforts to understand

how students respond to written feedback from teachers. They conclude that personal conferences with students “remain one of the best ways” for teachers and students to communicate (Hayes & Daiker 4). And they assume, in their protocol, that students are expected or required to revise their initial drafts. That they can assume revision is part of most composition curricula is a clear marker of changes in the profession.

The degree of change is further indicated by the final article in the issue, Richard Jenseth’s review of the publication of Knoblauch and Brannon’s book in 1984. Jenseth notes that Knoblauch and Brannon’s sixth chapter is devoted entirely to revision practices, distinguishing between “failed ideas” (like correcting papers) and a growing body of “facilitative” responses that initiate a dialog between teacher and student on “what a writer has actually said and why she has said it,” rather than on what the writer should do to improve the paper. The latter type of comments, Knoblauch and Brannon argue, impose the teacher’s agenda on the writing and “limits the student’s role to ‘copy editor,’” which makes serious revision unlikely (Jenseth 23).

These two articles, both referencing research launched in *FEN* three years earlier, give us a useful gauge in measuring how the discipline was changing. Revision was becoming a common expectation in the discipline, and teacher commentary was shifting from correction to conversation with the writer. (Coincidentally, while the Knoblauch and Brannon article was in the first issue I edited, the Hayes and Daiker article and the Jenseth review were published in the final *FEN* issue I worked on. Those two issues of *FEN* and the issue of teacher commentary shaped an early period of my career. I subsequently published several articles on responding to student writing, including a chapter in my memoir, *Unteaching: A Writing Teacher’s Odyssey*. So the issues surrounding teacher commentary and these three articles in *FEN* were central to my work throughout my career.)

The disciplinary shift from single draft to multiple drafts has not been an easy one, especially given the increased size of composition classrooms and the heavy demands on composition instructors. In the early 90s, I taught in an English department where the tenured faculty, none of whom taught composition, dictated much of the freshman composition curriculum and specifically banned revision and student-teacher conferences! (My article about the experience, “Opening Doors,” was published in *Composition Studies* in 1995.) Outrageous as that seems, my experience is not unique. There are still schools and departments and composition programs where progressive pedagogy has been restricted or outright prohibited. Our discipline’s evolution from traditional to progressive practices, from product to process pedagogies, has been bumpy and remains incomplete.

A few years ago, while attending the Conference on College Composition and Communication, I arranged to meet a friend and former colleague for lunch at a nearby restaurant. It was filled with academics, of course, but what struck me was how many were sitting at a table, sipping their preferred beverage, while marking student papers. I was stunned. I had given up marking papers years before and assumed that most other composition teachers had done the same. Apparently not. When my friend arrived, he apologized for being late. His excuse? He'd been marking student papers!

We had a lengthy, if highly charged, discussion about the practice. He knew all the research and all the articles against marking papers, but, he said, "my chair expects it." I wondered: How many of those sitting around us were going through the motions of a debunked practice just to please a superior? Why haven't we liberated ourselves from the expectations and demands of non-compositionists? Those questions still haunt me, even in retirement.

When I look through current issues of *Composition Studies* and see how far we've come as a discipline since Gary Tate launched *Freshman English News*, my sense of pride in our discipline is tempered by an awareness that while we may agree in theory on the better practices in our field, we sometimes remain crippled by our need or desire to please administrators ignorant of current research. As Victor Villanueva pointed out in a recent *Composition Studies* article, "Tradition and Change," it is a "deficit presumption" to assume student writers lack something which we professionals must provide. That presumption drives our collective impulse to correct essays and direct revision, both of which leave us rewriting the essays, not the students. In spite of decades of scholarship, that presumption, Villanueva reminds us, remains.

When Gary Tate launched *Freshman English News*, there was no discipline called composition. He gave us a medium for conversation just as our field of study was emerging. The transition from *Freshman English News* to *Composition Studies* over two decades (1972-92) parallels the development of the discipline. We have much to be proud of, but we've left many of our colleagues behind. While the issue of teacher feedback and written comments on essays has largely disappeared from *Composition Studies* articles, that is not because everyone has adopted better practices.

Some are restricted from doing so by uninformed administrators, some by antiquated pedagogies imposed on them, some by ignorance of current scholarship, and some simply because changing old habits can be exhausting. We all have a responsibility to inform colleagues about the scholarship in the field and invite, persuade, or cajole them into adopting the best practices our research has identified.

That, it seems to me, would be a fulfillment of Gary Tate's dream and an important, dynamic role for a journal to take up on its fiftieth birthday.

## Works Cited

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