

Review

Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction

Joseph Petraglia, editor. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995. 259 pp. (Paper 22.50, Cloth 49.95)

Kirsti Sandy

In his introduction, Petraglia claims that "this anthology presents neither a monolithic argument against General Writing Skills Instruction (GWSI) nor any recommendation for the abolition of writing instruction" (xvi). GWSI refers to "the idea that writing is a set of rhetorical skills that can be mastered through formal instruction" (xi), generic skills that, once developed, can be transported to any writing situation. What this collection does present, however, is a series of arguments about what Petraglia calls "the abolitionist movement" in composition. Several of the contributors note growing dissatisfaction with the compulsory first-year composition course, stressing its lack of contingency, its view of writing as a generalizable skill, and its ultimate inability to convince increasing numbers of people within the field of its effectiveness. This collection, the most thorough and comprehensive study of the abolitionist movement to date, places the abolitionist movement in a historical context, offers several arguments in favor of abolishing compulsory first-year composition, includes a descriptive account of a program that has undertaken the reforms which many of these writers speak, and concludes with a response by Charles Bazerman. The result is an effective theoretical groundwork for implementing Writing Across the Curriculum programs.

The collection begins with Robert J. Connors' "The New Abolitionism: Toward a Historical Background." Connors notes that abolitionist arguments are not new in the field; in fact, since the birth of compulsory first-year composition, the course has had its detractors. The abolitionist movement, which reached its peak just before the turn of the century, was the result of university faculty's disinterest in teaching the first-year composition course, which often was considered drudgery. Other early critics of GWSI, most notably Thomas Lounsbury, who in 1911 published a critique of required composition courses, claimed that a skill-based writing class denies the free expression of ideas. Also under attack was the impertinence of lazy students who were clearly not interested in a compulsory writing class. Earlier critiques such as Lounsbury's often came from literary scholars, distinguishing them from the dissenting voices of the present, which come from within the field of rhetoric and composition.

Maureen Daly Goggin continues in a historical vein in "the Disciplinary Instability of Composition," as she traces debates about writing instruction

within the field itself. Rhetoric's move toward composition was a necessary one, given its marginalization in the late nineteenth century. An emphasis on pedagogy, then, helped maintain rhetoric's presence in the university and allowed rhetoric and composition to earn its status as a viable discipline. However, Goggin notes that the field is now controlled by what she calls an "ill-conceived and rotting pedagogical structure," one that necessitates a return to composition's rhetorical roots.

Several of the essays in this collection center on a similar theme—the limitations of GWSI—claiming that these limitations stem from a variety of factors. First, the tasks students are asked to do in the composition classrooms call for hypothesizing about audiences about which most students are ill-informed. Even writing directed to "real" audiences is inauthentic in that it provides students with an "actual" teacher who has few ties, if any, with the audience at hand. Cheryl Geisler's "Writing and Learning at Cross Purposes and the Academy" and Charles A. Hill and Lauren Resnick's "Creating Opportunities for Apprenticeship in Writing" both discuss the inability of the classroom setting to reflect "workplace" writing. Geisler notes the contradiction between composition instructors' goals, which often include assignments that primarily call for the reporting of research done by experts and very little of what Geisler calls "knowledge making." Hill and Resnick note the discrepancy between what students write in a composition classroom and the specialized writing in particular fields, proposing that writing apprenticeships occur within the particular contexts of the workplace.

Other writers illustrate the inadequacy of skill-based instruction, contending that GWSI courses suffer from the misconception that general writing skills can apply to all writing tasks. David Russell, in "Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction," uses the Vygotskian concept of activity theory to outline the limitations of a general skills assumption. He draws an analogy between the activity of ball playing and writing instruction, noting that a course in "general ball use" would in no way prepare one for the rigors of particular sports, such as basketball or volleyball. More necessary is a knowledge of the rules of the particular games and how the ball is used within these contexts. Russell's argument illustrates the inefficacy of a general writing skills course and emphasizes the need for more context-sensitive instruction.

Although this volume claims to be an internal critique, many of the authors offer perspectives on GWSI from various fields, primarily education, linguistics, and cognitive psychology. Their arguments range from a critique of the inadequacy of the composition classroom practices of invention and audience analysis to an analysis of the contradiction between what Daniel J. Royer, in "Lived Experience and the Problem of Invention on Demand" calls "invention on demand" and compositionists' view of writing as a situated, rhetorical act. Joseph Petraglia, in "Writing as an Unnatural Act," uses a cognitivist framework to argue that the GWSI classroom offers little in terms teaching the transactive and rhetorical aspects of writing. Instead, he claims, such instruction merely

forces students to pretend that they are writing for a real audience when they are evaluated in a manner that privileges efficiency, clarity, and organization—all qualities that only have a rhetorical “effect” from a teacher/evaluator’s perspective. Fred Kemp, in “Writing Dialogically: Bold Lessons From Electronic Text,” compares the GWSI course to basket weaving, claiming that both require nothing but “mindless discipline,” producing strikingly predictable results. To observe the transactive nature of writing, he offers, one must examine an electronic “conversation,” in which dialogue is privileged and the process of creating the text is an act of knowledge-making rather than duplication and regurgitation.

A familiar theme in this collection is that of abandoning a GWSI curriculum in favor of a WAC model. Those who wonder what alternatives might look like can peruse Aviva Freedman’s “The What, Where, When, Why, and How of Classroom Genres,” which stresses writing within the disciplines, drawing upon Freedman’s own experience at a Canadian University at which GWSI is not offered. In addition, Lil Brannon, in “(Dis)Missing Compulsory First-Year Composition,” describes the program at SUNY-Albany, which abolished first-year composition in 1986 in favor of a WAC model. The result of this change, Brannon claims, has been primarily positive, ranging from a resurgence in faculty and student interest in writing to an indication that students are doing more and higher quality writing.

Not all the contributors propose abandoning GWSI. In “Integrating Cultural Reflection and Production in College Writing Curricula,” David S. Kaufer and Patricia L. Dunmire argue for reform rather than abolition, claiming that the institutional space afforded GWSI should be maintained, yet subject to intensive curricular revision. David Joliffe, in “Discourse, Interdiscursivity, and Instruction,” suggests that the GWSI classroom, if taught in a manner that recognizes and emphasizes the contextual nature of knowledge production, can be an effective site for writing instruction.

“Curricular Responsibilities and Professional Definition,” a response by Charles Bazerman, addresses the need for both abolition and reform. While he recognizes the new WAC movement as an outgrowth of the compulsory first-year writing course, he also notes the limitations of such a course, ending with a call to “reconcile the cause, place it in relation to our broader view, and find intelligent ways to meet the needs and gather our resources” (259). Rather than merely eliminating the cause of GWSI’s many problems, Bazerman proposes that we, as a profession, look at “the broader view,” a view that will work with, not against, what rhetoric and composition scholars and teachers have already accomplished.

Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction is a groundbreaking collection. It will make those who have easily dismissed composition’s detractors sit up and take notice. Despite Petraglia’s introductory disclaimer, the argument does seem monolithic at times. One senses that the contributors have made an effort to present a united front, which, after the first several essays, seems rather forced. However, it becomes clear that the issues the volume addresses are

growing in urgency; complaints about the required composition course are no longer reserved for faculty rooms and private conversations. They have become part of the larger "conversation" of our profession, and its critics are nationally known scholars within the discipline of rhetoric and composition. As Petraglia and others note, it is time to rethink our practices as teachers and administrators; our commitment to literacy demands no less.



*Setting the standard
for a new era of rhetorics!*

THE ALLYN & BACON GUIDE TO WRITING

*John D. Ramage, Arizona State University
John C. Bean, Seattle University*



"... a marvelous introduction to what we do as writers in college. The Allyn & Bacon Guide simply outclasses the competition."

— Charlton Ryan, University of Memphis

"I like the focus on problem-solving and question-posing, on 'surprise,' on peer review, on how to take an exam, on how to navigate the library and the Internet, and most of all the exercises — all of these are wonderful pedagogical tools."

— Allison Warriner, California State University, Hayward

 **ALLYN & BACON**
A VIACOM COMPANY

Department 894 • 160 Gould Street • Needham Heights, MA 02194-2315

Phone: 1-800-852-8024 • FAX: (617) 455-7024 • E-mail: AandBpub@aol.com • Internet: <http://www.abacon.com>