
Scholarship, Teaching, and the Future of Composition Studies

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The history of composition studies in the past three decades is, in large measure, a story of professionalization. It's a history written by men and women whose scholarly and professional work has shaped our field and encouraged it to grow in rigor and sophistication. It's a history reflected in the development of some six dozen doctoral programs (Brown et al. 240); in the number and variety of journals publishing composition articles, more than 100 according to one count (Anson and Maylath 151); and in the burgeoning of professional conferences. It's a history that shows, too, in the increasing variety of scholarly specialties women and men explore and advance in their doctoral studies, publications, and conference papers, and in the number and variety of organizations (advancing scholarship, teaching, and program administration) that have evolved to serve the field.

Any history, of course, is part of a broader milieu. In the case of composition studies, this includes the importation of the German academic model in the 19th century, the way this evolved in American university structure and departments, the special impact on English departments of waves of World War II veterans and, later, of so-called "open admission" students, and the impetus Sputnik gave to research and public support for research. I'm using a broad brush, here, but it's a familiar story and only background to my focus in this essay.

When did composition studies begin as a scholarly field? Many people mark it with the publication of *Research in Written Composition* in 1963. Robert Connors sees the "the real beginnings of a scholarly tradition in composition history" in the 1970s, when "composition studies had evolved to the point where it was granting its own doctoral degrees" (55). James Berlin labeled 1960-1975 "The Renaissance of Rhetoric" (120). Precise dating isn't the point. So let me pick 1969, the year I completed my doctoral work in literature and took a faculty position, one dimension of which—coordinating first-year writing—brought me to professional work in composition and its teaching.

In that same year of 1969, a Carnegie Foundation National Survey of Faculty asked for response to this statement: "In my department, it is difficult for a person to achieve tenure if he or she doesn't publish." 21% of faculty surveyed strongly agreed with that statement: at both private colleges and comprehensive universities 6% agreed, and at PhD granting universities 27% agreed. Two decades later, the Carnegie Foundation surveyed faculty on the same issue. This time, 42%—twice the 1969 response—said it was difficult to get tenure without publishing: at PhD granting institutions the rate nearly tripled

between 1969 and 1989 (from 27% to 71%); it quadrupled at liberal arts colleges (from 6% to 24%); and it increased seven fold (from 6% to 42%) among faculty at comprehensive universities (Boyer 12).

An increasing emphasis on publication between 1969 and 1989 is part of the milieu within which composition studies has developed. So it was no surprise when Jane Peterson, in her 1990 CCCC Chair's Address, said that "we have become a dynamic profession through devoting . . . years to establishing our identity as an emerging discipline, to becoming respectable through scholarship and research" (26). Peterson's words, as it turns out, offer caution at least as much as celebration of our field's growing professionalization. For composition studies has developed its scholarly identity in relation to academic reward systems that, Peterson said, "have institutionalized a hierarchy that places teaching far below research and scholarship" (26). And Peterson cautioned that there is "evidence that a hierarchy exists within" our field, "evidence that we consider teaching far less important than research or scholarship . . ." (27).

How could such a hierarchy develop in a field whose roots in composition instruction go back 2000 years (hence James Murphy's title, *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*) and whose recent impetus lies in the arrival of veterans and open-admission students at America's colleges and universities? A comment by Ronda Grego and Nancy Thompson in a 1996 issue of CCC implies an answer: "Composition . . . has been busy in the 70s, 80s, and 90s growing ever more substantial intellectual roots of its own, gaining a measure of intellectual confidence . . . through our research, developing terms and methods through which to name our work at least to ourselves, if not yet fully to the ruling apparatus of the academic system" (68).

During composition studies' several-decade development as a field, this apparatus has included a concept of faculty work—and ways to reward that work with salary, teaching reductions, grants, tenure, promotion—centered on research and publication. So it's understandable, to quote Peterson again, that composition has worked to "become respectable through scholarship and research." We have appealed, John Trimbur writes,

to the volume and quality of research and scholarship produced under the aegis of rhetoric and composition studies to demonstrate how serious we are and how well organized we have become to address the burning issues of our field. Moreover, we have attempted to expand what it means to do scholarship by arguing why and how teaching composition, administering programs, and writing textbooks can and should be counted as scholarly activities, at least when done properly—that is, professionally, as disciplined applications of theory and research. (134-35)

By doing this, however, has composition studies de-emphasized the importance of students, student writing, and the classroom except when they are done "as disciplined applications of theory and research"? Some well might say "yes." For instance, several women and men thanked me for publishing the 1991 CCC article in which Howard Tinberg charges that "[c]omposition, which

has been for so long committed to the importance of the classroom as the scene of learning and teaching, is determined to cut itself from its root" (37). Or consider the graduate students about whom Chris Anson wrote in 1993:

Many of my students find it difficult to embrace research but want strongly, almost passionately, to teach. There is the sense that scholarship . . . really doesn't have much to say about teaching, that the living, breathing world of the classroom or the writing lab holds the greatest promise for a sense of self-definition, a career, a goal. (251).

And Sandra Stotsky, a recent editor of *Research in the Teaching of English*, in 1996 had this to say about research and teaching in our field:

Many researchers have offered dogmatic recommendations to teachers on the basis of one or two studies rather than letting their results serve as a limited and tentative source of knowledge to inform pedagogical judgment. Moreover, much research is addressed chiefly to other researchers, not to teachers. . . . I believe that educational research is justifiable only if it is relevant to practice and intelligible to teachers, enlarging their understanding of pedagogical issues. (209)

Let me be clear that I do not think composition studies has turned its back on teaching and students; indeed, reservations such as the three I just mentioned show that teaching lives powerfully in the conscience of our field. Still, I have some concerns—about balance or emphasis among teaching, research, and publishing—at what I take to be a critical point in time for American higher education.

Composition studies has achieved its scholarly identity through such means as founding conferences, journals and graduate programs; stressing rigorous research and refereed publication; and working to bring teaching, administration, student writing, and many other subjects under the umbrellas of research and publishing. Not coincidentally, it did so during a time when liberal arts colleges, comprehensive universities, and PhD granting universities all had increasing research expectations for faculty members. But as I point out in *Academic Advancement in Composition Studies*,

even as the importance of publication has grown on all types of campuses, many faculty members have grown unhappy with the extent to which scholarship and publishing form the basis of faculty rewards. Some of this resistance comes from heartfelt faculty desires, such as higher education scholar Clara Lovett has described: "At every type of institution, faculty express a longing for an older and spiritually richer academic culture, one that placed greater value on the education of students and on the public responsibilities of scholars" ("Evolving" 10)

The milieu within which composition studies is developing, then, includes dissonance between the rising research expectations of the 1970s and 1980s and the attitudes and goals many faculty have for their careers. National

faculty surveys conducted by UCLA since 1989 are illustrative. In 1989, 59% of faculty reported that they considered research an essential or very important goal, and 23% said that they spent more than a dozen hours a week on research; by 1995, these figures had declined—just 55% considered research essential or very important, and only 17% spent more than twelve hours a week on research. As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported after interviewing the author of the UCLA report, faculty

attitude toward the balance between teaching and research has shifted slightly [between 1989 and 1995]. Being a good teacher is an essential goal for 99% of those surveyed, but their interest in research appears to be declining. (Magner A13)

In the face of such shifting attitudes, it is not surprising that ideas of faculty work and reward have been much discussed since 1990, when publication of *Scholarship Reconsidered* encouraged efforts already underway to eliminate sharp distinctions between the “teaching” and “research” aspects of faculty work. Four years after *Scholarship Reconsidered* was published, for instance, an AAUP committee concluded that pedagogical work can “fall on both sides of the line between what we see as teaching and what can be classified as scholarship,” and it recommended “enlarging the perspective through which we judge scholarly achievement” in order to “more accurately define the many ways in which intellectual inquiry shapes . . . our interrelated roles as teachers and researchers . . .” (47-48). About that same time, members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) began drafting an “intellectual work document” much influenced by *Scholarship Reconsidered*, which it specifically invokes:

“To be considered scholarship, service activities must be tied directly to one’s special field of knowledge and relate to, and flow directly out of, this professional activity. . .” [Boyer 22]. What Boyer is arguing is not that all service should count; rather, service can be considered as part of scholarship if it derives from and is reinforced by scholarly knowledge and disciplinary understanding. As Boyer makes clear, in work of this sort, “theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other” [23]. (WPA 97)

In 1995, a national working group on faculty rewards involving sixteen professional associations (including CCCC and MLA) reported that there are many ways to “satisfy the scholarly, professional, or creative dimensions associated with promotion, tenure, and merit recognition”—ways as diverse as “publishing the results of one’s scholarly research, developing a new course, writing an innovative textbook, implementing an outreach program for the community . . . or assisting in a K-12 curriculum project” (Diamond and Adam 13-14). And in 1996, the MLA Executive Council accepted a commission report which sets aside the traditional categories of teaching, research, and service. Instead, it emphasizes *Service, Teaching, and Research/Scholarship* as “sites and occasions of faculty work” (MLA Commission 175), all of which bear on the *Intellectual Work* and the

Academic and Professional Citizenship of faculty members. Research, in this new MLA approach, “is no longer the exclusive site of intellectual work” (177); rather, service and teaching and scholarship *all* are evaluated for the quality of their intellectual work and the quality of their academic citizenship.

How will composition studies adapt to the post-*Scholarship Reconsidered* world predicted by those four reports and illustrated each week in *Chronicle* stories about assessment, accountability, productivity, post-tenure review, and a growing emphasis on undergraduate education in the hearts and budgets of university trustees and state governing boards? This is a major question our field will face over the next five to ten years. It’s a complex question with which I’ll try to deal at least sketchily in the rest of this essay.

Will composition studies begin to abandon the commitment to research and publication through which our field has developed over several decades? I see no evidence that such a retreat is likely, nor would one be desirable. For it would mean the loss of a vitalizing source of insight into what we do, as well as the loss of our field’s credibility and influence in future discussions about the role of scholarship and teaching in the lives and job descriptions of college professors.

Will composition studies come to focus so exclusively on research, publication, and graduate education that it has no time for the reform of faculty work and rewards being demanded as much from within the academy as by legislators, governing boards, and the public? I don’t think so, and I hope not. For that could cut the field off from its pedagogical roots. And it would be bitterly ironic for this to occur just as other fields are starting to take seriously what composition studies has always known: that the intellectual work of faculty is broad and complex, not neatly niched in research and publication.

Neither of those futures—abandonment of scholarship and publishing nor abandonment of concern for teaching, students, and programs that serve them—seems likely, unless I’m badly misreading our field. Recall Jane Peterson’s concern that composition has developed within “a hierarchy that places teaching far below research and scholarship” (26) and her caution that there is “evidence that we consider teaching far less important than research or scholarship” (27). Think of Chris Anson’s graduate students who “sense that scholarship . . . really doesn’t have much to say about teaching, that the living, breathing world of the classroom . . . holds the greatest promise for a sense of self-definition, a career, a goal” (251). A field whose prominent leaders *and* newest aspirants feel such concern for teaching is unlikely to abandon it. At the same time, neither of these examples suggests abandonment of scholarship: Peterson expresses her concerns in a well-reasoned and well-documented journal article (based on her address at a scholarly conference), and Anson’s students feel their concern while working in graduate school to develop the theoretical and research abilities to be scholars.

As those examples indicate, composition studies tends to see connections—rather than chasms—between teaching and theory, between student

writing and scholarly publishing. This is true, as well, in the statement by Sandra Stotsky—a scholar who edited a prominent research journal—that “educational research is justifiable only if it is relevant to practice and intelligible to teachers, enlarging their understanding of pedagogical issues” (209). Connections between teaching and scholarship show, too, in John Schilb’s words about teaching, theory, and publishing:

Composition studies won’t . . . help its students much if it clings to some willfully unreflective notion of practice. Rather than reject theory, writing instructors should argue for broad, supple notions of it. This effort would entail pointing out how theory can be formulated even in their own courses. In other words, theory needn’t be the property of a vanguard, but instead an activity in which many composition teachers engage. . . . I wouldn’t maintain that pedagogy is the only thing that composition specialists should write about. Nor do I believe that the only good ideas about teaching are those that get published. . . . But whatever forms their ideas take, teachers of writing need to emphasize how reflective their teaching can be. (220)

And connections of teaching, scholarship, and publication are clear in Keith Kroll’s and Barry Alford’s proposal for “a reform initiative at two-year colleges to develop personnel review standards that see teaching as a reflective and intellectual endeavor in which research and publication play important parts” (68). Two-year college writing teachers, they note, “cannot simply imitate the research and scholarship model of the four-year college and university” but “need to develop professional standards that reflect their local circumstances” (65). But Kroll and Alford are convinced that

greater commitment to research would enhance the involvement and teaching of two-year college writing teachers. . . [and] that the published insights and experiences of two-year college faculty members are needed within composition studies. (64-65)

Just as that passage sees a need for a two-year college perspective within composition studies, I believe a composition-studies perspective will be important to the rethinking of faculty work and rewards—including the roles of scholarship and teaching—in which the American academy will be engaged for some years to come.

There may be academic fields whose members were dismayed when an AAUP committee recommended “enlarging the perspective through which we judge scholarly achievement” and a group of representatives from 16 professional associations decided that scholarly activity can be demonstrated in ways as diverse as “publishing the results of one’s scholarly research, developing a new course, writing an innovative textbook, [or] implementing an outreach program for the community” (Diamond and Adam 13-14). Composition studies, however, is *not* such a field.

Rather, composition studies has been developing for years a broad, inclusive view of what the MLA Commission on Professional Service recently

called “intellectual work”:

the various ways faculty members can contribute individually and jointly to the collective projects and enterprises of knowledge and learning undertaken to implement broad academic missions. (175)

For years, too, composition studies has known what the commission recently illustrated—that there are a great many worthy “projects and enterprises of knowledge and learning,” among them:

- “Creating new questions, problems, information, interpretations, designs, products, frameworks of understanding, etc., through *inquiry* (e.g., empirical, textual, historical, theoretical, technological, artistic, practical).”
- “*Connecting* knowledge to other knowledge.”
- “*Preserving* . . . and *reinterpreting* past knowledge.”
- “*Applying* aesthetic, political, and ethical values to make judgments about knowledge and its uses.”
- “*Arguing* knowledge claims in order to invite criticism and revision.”
- “*Making specialized knowledge broadly accessible* and usable, e.g., to young learners, to nonspecialists in other disciplines, to the public.”
- “*Helping new generations to become active knowers* themselves, preparing them for lifelong learning and discovery.”
- “*Applying* knowledge to practical problems in significant or innovative ways.” (175-76 emphases added)

And composition studies also understands the truth—and practical realities—of another of the commission’s statements:

Just as research in the [faculty work] model is no longer the exclusive site of intellectual work, so is service no longer the exclusive site of academic and professional citizenship. It can also entail substantive intellectual labor. (177-78)

Composition studies knows a great deal about the “substantive intellectual labor” of service—as is quite clear in a Council of Writing Program Administrators’ effort to develop “a framework by which writing program administration can be seen as . . . scholarly and intellectual work . . . worthy of tenure and promotion . . .” (WPA 92). The WPA statement assumes that “scholarship consists of acts of inquiry that identify new ideas, data, or processes and share them in specific forms (e.g., articles, books, presentations) subject to peer review” (92). For that reason, it argues,

[i]n order to be regarded as intellectual work . . . writing program administration must be viewed as a form of inquiry and knowledge-making that has formalized outcomes that are subject to peer review and disciplinary evaluation. Just as the articles, stories, poems, books, committee work, classroom performance and other evidence of tenure and promotion can be critiqued and evaluated by internal and external

reviewers, so can the accomplishments, products, innovations, and contributions of writing program administrators. (WPA 98)

And the WPA statement works to make concrete—and useful—its generalizations about “formalized outcomes that are subject to peer review and disciplinary evaluation,” by proposing four criteria (102-03) with which to evaluate five common categories of administrative work: “Program Creation,” “Curricular Design,” “Faculty Development,” “Textual Production” (other than books, articles, conference papers, etc.), and “Program Assessment and Evaluation” (99-102).

Whether or not they are *official* writing program administrators, composition studies faculty often devote much time and energy to activities in that list—in addition to their work with their students and their conventional research and publishing agendas. So composition studies understands, probably better than some disciplines, that there are many worthy “projects and enterprises of knowledge and learning” (MLA 175) and that there are significant connections among teaching and scholarship and academic administration. For this reason, I think composition studies is in a good position to provide leadership as the academy tries to redefine the work and to reform the rewards of faculty members.

At the 1994 meeting of the Rhetoric Society of America, I made a similar prediction based in part on progress reports that had recently come from the MLA Commission on Professional Service and the 16-association project on faculty work I’ve mentioned before. In the current “climate of review and reform,” I said, “scholars and teachers and professional associations” in our field “can and should play a significant leadership role.” For

[t]eaching long has occupied an important place in rhetoric and composition. Most research published in the field’s refereed journals and scholarly books, like most dissertations written in the field’s doctoral programs, has some connection to teaching or students. We know that research can lead to pedagogical expressions such as textbooks, new programs, teaching materials, and workshops for college and high school teachers. And we don’t have to worry about how others will perceive our treating pedagogical and applied research as “scholarship”; from past experience, we already know. (Gebhardt, “Scholarship” 182)

That experience, gained during thirty years of evolution as a scholarly field, gives composition studies a perspective very different from that of fields which have only recently begun to sense that the intellectual work of faculty is broad, complexly connected to teaching and students, and not limited to research and publication. By articulating that perspective in the discussions and debates to come, composition studies can provide important leadership to American higher education in refining the relationship of scholarship and teaching and in redefining the work of faculty members.

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Correction for WPA 20.1/2

The correct listing of authors for an article in the fall/winter, 1996, issue should have been:

Holberg, Jennifer H., Mark C. Long, and Marcy M. Taylor. "Beyond Apprenticeship: Graduate Students, Professional Development Programs and the Future(s) of English Studies." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 20.1/2 (fall/winter 1996): 66-78.