

## Review

Williams, James D. *Preparing to Teach Writing: Research, Theory, and Practice*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 2003. 403 pages. \$39.95 (paper).

Mark Wiley

I have used previous editions of James Williams's *Preparing to Teach Writing* in classes with students who are Williams's primary audience: future teachers of writing from elementary school through first year of college. For the most part, I have found both of those editions useful because Williams provided clear and thorough discussions of topics that usually create anxiety among new teachers (and no doubt among many experienced ones as well), topics such as the relationship between grammar and writing, English as a second language, bilingualism, and writing assessment. However, I am not certain I would use this third edition of *Preparing to Teach Writing*. Most of the key elements I liked from previous editions remain, and have, for the most part, been expanded; however, the polemical elements in this third edition as well as key elements either only touched upon or ignored create significant flaws which, although not fatal, certainly diminish the book's overall value, particularly for the readers he seeks to instruct.

Although Williams's ostensible purpose is to help prepare students to be effective writing teachers, his secondary purpose is to argue aggressively that the field of rhetoric and composition has, well, gone afield. He claims in the preface that in the first edition of *Preparing* published in 1989, the cognitive approach "dominated" composition and was likewise the approach he took. By 1998 when he was asked to develop a second edition, the field, in his view, had become more political "[...] and less concerned about the pragmatics of instruction" (xiv). This was a significant shift, one influenced by postmodernism, the ramifications of which Williams explored to a limited degree in that 1998 text. In this third edition, however, the field is in what

Williams refers to as a *post-postmodern* period, which for him means that no single theory dominates and that theory and practice have gone their separate ways with “few points of contact between them.” Nevertheless, despite the seeming chaos reigning in the field, Williams offers help to future writing teachers and argues that we can still claim that there is an effective way to teach writing, and that way is to use a process approach in a workshop environment grounded in a *social-theoretic* model of writing.

I will expand on what this social-theoretic model entails later in this review and then consider Williams’s criticisms of the state of the field. Nevertheless, while it is easy to find fault with what is not in his book, still in a text aimed at preparing future writing teachers, there are some obvious subjects of which our students should at least be made aware if they are to have a chance at being effective in their own classrooms. Yet these subjects Williams either glosses over or completely ignores. Let me first, though, summarize the elements that remain from the previous two editions and comment on their usefulness in helping to prepare future writing teachers.

Successive editions of *Preparing to Teach Writing* have gotten substantially longer, yet the basic structure of the text has remained fairly consistent throughout. Key elements that reappear include an overview of the history of rhetoric from ancient Greece to the emergence of the first composition courses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critical discussions of contemporary approaches to writing instruction, and informative discussions of the relationship between reading and writing and grammar and writing. Williams also includes informative chapters on English as a second language, the psychology of writing, assessment, and developing writing assignments. In two appendices, Williams identifies and corrects some “writing myths” which take the form of sentence-level advice, such as it’s okay to begin a sentence with a conjunction or with *because*, and he also includes samples of senior high school student essays.

The new elements in this third edition are, as Williams writes in the preface, a broader discussion of the history of rhetoric, extensively revised discussions of contemporary rhetoric and approaches to teaching writing, and a chapter called “Best Practices” in which Williams weighs in on the elements for effective writing instruction. The phonics-whole language debate that has been a recurring feature in successive editions receives some additional elaboration, and in the chapter on grammar and writing, a detailed discussion on why teaching grammar does not improve students’ writing replaces much of the grammatical analysis found in the previous edition. Chapter 7 provides additional description of Chicano English and a brief discussion of *Spanglish*, “[...] a combination of Spanish and English” (250). Chapter 9 focuses on developing writing assignments that are aligned with “outcome

objectives” and includes Williams’s summary of the WPA Outcomes Statement. As in previous editions, the final chapter addresses writing assessment but in this edition provides a broader overview of the topic, including discussions of validity and reliability, the use of holistic scoring and portfolios, the politics of assessment, and the effects of state-mandated testing, among others.

Since Williams’s stated primary purpose is to help future teachers *prepare* to teach writing, there is much less of the “how to do” something and more emphasis on reasons why the process approach, the workshop, a focus on usage (rather than grammar instruction) and the use of holistic scoring are best practices for teaching writing. The extended discussions on grammar and usage, dialects, and the reciprocity between thought and language reflects Williams’s expertise in linguistics and relationships between cognitive psychology and the production of written discourse. Future teachers will certainly benefit from his informed and highly readable explanations as well as from his practical suggestions for conducting writing workshops and holistic scoring sessions.

Williams admits that his book is “[...] challenging in some parts, [...]”. Nevertheless, those who accept the challenge will come out on the other end with the knowledge necessary to take the first steps toward becoming a first-rate writing teacher” (xvi–xvii). Besides the detailed explanations of theory and research underlying some of the practices Williams advocates, another “challenging” aspect of his text is that *Preparing to Teach Writing* is also an argument not only about what best practices should be and why but also about what is currently wrong with the field of rhetoric and composition. Williams argues for what he calls a “social-theoretic” model of writing. In his words, this “[...]model of composition recognizes that people belong to a variety of discourse communities, each with its own requirements for membership and participation, its own core body of knowledge, and its own values and ways of looking at the world” (81). He prefers the social-theoretic over *social construction* and *social constructivism*. The latter two terms are closely linked and easily confused with one another, and both indicate that society heavily influences, or “constructs,” who we are and what we think. Additionally, Williams wants to avoid “[...] the Marxist connotations that adhere to ‘social construction.’” In contrast, Williams uses the social-theoretic to offer an interactionist perspective whereby writers retain more control over the texts produced in response to social exigencies. The social-theoretic model is pragmatic: when composing texts, students must assume a rhetorical stance of some kind, and these texts’ features, likewise, are constrained by writers’ membership in a specific discourse community (80–1). Using this model as

justification, Williams privileges writing across the curriculum, particularly writing classes linked with content area courses and writing that will help students be successful in school and beyond (see 67–79).

In advocating for this social-theoretic model, Williams is equally clear about what he opposes in rhetoric and composition. As might be expected, he is against romantic rhetoric and the attendant forms of writing linked with it, i.e., self-expressive/personal writing and narratives (58–67). He is also adamantly opposed to postmodern and to post-postmodern rhetoric. Postmodern rhetoric emerged in the field in 1985 and is defined in its opposition to modernism. For Williams, postmodern rhetoric is responsible for helping to maintain the structures of traditional English departments in which literature (and the faculty who teach and produce scholarship about it) retain a higher status and authority than those who teach and study composition. Postmodern rhetoric also abandoned “the goal of improving student writing [...] and drove much deeper the wedge that already separated theory and practice in rhetoric and composition, leaving them essentially separate enterprises” (92). This postmodern condition affecting rhetoric and composition is exacerbated further by post-postmodernism’s focus on consumerism and sociopolitical analyses at the expense of any meaningful research being done that might help us improve the teaching of writing. In this regard, Williams argues that much of the recent research in “[...] rhetoric has become all about theorizing and dissecting sociopolitical contexts, whereas composition has lapsed once again into anecdotes separated from real research and meaningful theory” (96). (See Williams’s recent book review essay in *College English* for more on this last point.) Williams is outraged that the current work in rhetoric and composition is ignoring the “[...] decline in students’ writing [...]” (reported by the NAEP), and likewise ignoring the plight of public school teachers who each year are often individually responsible for the literacy development of over 150 students (96–7).

While some readers will find Williams’s candid assessments of the field refreshing, others will find them reductive in how he represents what he opposes. More troubling for me are subjects Williams either glosses over or ignores subjects that to my mind public school teachers must understand. Williams says little about technology. There are two pages (out of over 400) describing how students can use computers as word processors, for e-mail correspondence, and for using the Internet for research. Is the “world” Williams sees our students entering one where technology plays such a *minimal* role? I recommend that future teachers (and present ones) read Cynthia Selfe’s *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century* to understand what is at stake if we don’t pay attention to technology, how it is used, and who has access to it. And, except for some brief discussion on the politics

of assessment (five pages), Williams ignores the political realities and working conditions of teaching in public schools, that is how decisions are made regarding textbooks and curriculum, how resources are distributed (or not), what professional development opportunities might be worth exploring, and how individual teachers might join together to mitigate existing classroom conditions. True, Williams should not be expected to cover all of these subjects, but in a book aimed at preparing future writing teachers to be effective in the K–12 arena, I question how useful it is for these students to learn the details about how the field of rhetoric and composition has failed them while his text is silent regarding some of the fundamental realities of teaching in these public environments. Although I agree with Williams’s general argument that rhetoric and composition should do more to help our colleagues in K–12, I do not find a book like *Preparing* the appropriate place to plead this case. Moreover, the general goal of Williams’s book, to help each student become a “first-rate writing teacher,” depending on how one defines “first-rate,” is potentially undermined because the subjects his text ignores could help future teachers be at the least, a little more informed and a little more reflective and critical about their own and their institution’s practices.

#### WORKS CITED

- Selfe, Cynthia L. *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999.
- Williams, James D. “Counterstatement: Autobiography in Composition Scholarship.” *College English* 68 (2005): 209–25.