

Response to Andrea Scott

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I want to thank Andrea Scott for taking the time to respond to my article and for the care she took in trying to understand my point of view. To some extent, our seeming disagreements are only that and result from a confusion in my original article.

So let me begin by describing how much I agree with what she says. Like her, I'm not convinced that what Adler-Kassner has dubbed "writing about vampires" should be abandoned, having seen, firsthand, how effectively a writing course whose topic is not writing itself can teach academic writing. Fangs dripping, I also agree about the value of writing programs like Expos and the Princeton Writing Program (PWP), not just to students but to the people who teach in them, many of whom do, indeed, go on to get jobs in their original disciplines. I fear that my article, committed as it is to laying bare a problem I see with such programs, might make it seem that I don't think they help their instructors; this is the confusion that I referred to above. But I agree with Scott completely that they enrich those who teach in them, both pedagogically and in terms of their scholarship—and that the PWP should be especially commended for how seriously it takes the professional development of those who teach in it. I have never regretted my time at Expos, not just because it allowed me to live in Cambridge, with my partner (the kinds of practical considerations that perhaps Harris pays short shrift to), but because of how much it taught me about writing pedagogy and helped me improve my own scholarly writing.

Yet I think some disagreement between us remains: I do not think the problem that I tried to elucidate in my article about first-year writing programs like Expos and the PWP is fully resolved by Scott's response. As implied above, I was trying less to lay bare the difficulties these programs cause for the employment prospects of writing program faculty than to articulate a set of puzzles that they can bequeath to their alums. As Scott confirms, the experience of working in such a program can be transformative, and much of the problem lies in my ambivalence about that transformation. I became committed to what I termed "transdisciplinarity": a way of teaching academic writing that attends to what different disciplines have in common and teaches those commonalities; it's a way of teaching beyond a single-disciplinary focus, which makes a lot of sense in programs like Expos and PWP because contained within a single class will be students destined for many different disciplines. Yet "transdisciplinarity" can lead to problems when instructors return to their home disciplines or even when they try to transfer this model, as a WPA, to a differently structured writing program. Yet is the problem

“transdisciplinarity” itself, or is it, instead, the resistance this approach often meets outside these writing programs, in my case, from the faculty at a small liberal arts college whom we recruited to teach first-year writing courses? And what can these writing programs do to help its soon-to-be alums navigate the often difficult legacy it leaves us?

Scott suggests it might be “transdisciplinarity” itself that is the problem when she suggests another (better) model of teaching writing, “metadisciplinarity,” which “give[s] students an early opportunity to see how conventions of academic argument play out in different disciplines.” Presumably, this better model does not leave the same problematic legacy for PWP alums to contend with. Yet if I may be permitted a moment of against-the-grain reading, I believe Scott might not be as opposed to “transdisciplinarity” as she believes herself to be. Scott remarks that she finds Harris’s ideas of disciplinarity limiting, that, like me, she thinks that disciplinarity enables knowledge, that it does not just stymie it.¹ Yet in the paragraph explaining metadisciplinarity, she, as I do, puts syntactical emphasis on how the PWP teaches the similarities between disciplines: “Such a program cultivates in . . . instructors . . . a ‘meta’ awareness of disciplinary practices by attending as much to similarities as to differences in intellectual practices.” Moreover, Scott comments on how a single disciplinary focus can “limit” knowledge, a claim remarkably similar to the one Harris makes, which she seemingly disagrees with earlier in her piece. I hope I’m being more attentive than nitpicky here: these instances highlight a commitment to “transdisciplinarity” that I think such programs as we’re both the products of produce.

Is “metadisciplinarity” so different from “transdisciplinarity” with their provision of a peak from which to view different disciplinary conventions and emphasize what they have in common? Seemingly, both of us like this approach and the views it affords. It is in this agreement, then, that our disagreement might really lie. I’m not sure “transdisciplinarity” (or “metadisciplinarity”) is an unmixed blessing to those who teach it and who will go on to teach in conventionally disciplined departments or even head writing programs taught not by recent PhDs but faculty who are not given (and who might not necessarily want) the ample training provided by Expos or the PWP. The problem with “transdisciplinarity” might be its very seductiveness, the way that it makes the idea of a single disciplinary approach seem “limited.”

In other words, Scott may share my own ambivalence about disciplinarity: whether it really is just as good as “transdisciplinarity.” Perhaps I made it too easy to think that I wanted to move beyond “transdisciplinarity,” back to a more orthodoxly disciplinary view. But I’m not sure I do. Scott seems to suggest you can have both at once in this idea of “metadisciplinarity,” access to a broad vista without losing sight of the specificity (and value?) of a

particular disciplinary lens.² She suggests that you don't have to choose. But I've found that you do: even at Haverford, where you would think vampiric, topic-based writing classes would be a natural home for "transdisciplinarity," this approach was a difficult idea to get the faculty teaching writing courses to adopt, and I'm not sure that "metadisciplinarity" would have worked much better: these faculty did not want to teach the similarities (or differences) between writing in different disciplines; they just wanted to teach writing based in their own. Programs like Expos and PWP, no matter how much they also emphasize disciplinary differences and provide opportunities for the people who work in them to advance in their home disciplines, also depend, quite fundamentally, on teaching what disciplines share. They emphasize "argument" and "evidence" as concepts that are meaningful in more than just local manifestations. I still love the idea of "transdisciplinarity," and it's precisely this love—and the awkward positions it put me in once I had left these programs—that I grapple with. I needed my program to help me understand not the idea of disciplinary difference (Expos did that, too), but the way that our jobs after we left might not be all that interested in this perspective. I was, frankly, shocked when I realized this. Should I have tried harder to get my current colleagues in the English department, when we were trying to design a first-year writing course, to see the light?

After I left Expos, I found I had to abandon—or at least hide—my commitment to "transdisciplinarity"—and I think the same would have been true of "metadisciplinarity." Should I still champion these concepts? Is a single disciplinary view limiting in some way? Or is there, indeed, a way to have it all? It sounds like the people at Princeton spend a lot of time theorizing just what they want their students to learn about the disciplines; I hope, too, that they also include in the professional development they offer their instructors a chance to think about how deeply their choices as a program will shape them.

NOTES

1. I think Harris is quite aware of how disciplines provide protection; he's quite aware, for example, of how literature professors can marginalize those who teach and research composition as existing outside the discipline of English, even when these people inhabit the same department.

2. It seems to me, rather, that it's the multidisciplinary nature of the classes at PWP (which distinguishes them from Expos' classes, at least while I was there), that might be the thing that teaches disciplinary difference. If a class itself is multidisciplinary rather than the program taken *in toto* than it has the chance to show students how at least two different disciplines might consider the same issue. Expos itself has moved in this direction in recent years, with at least one unit that draws from different disciplines and discusses them comparatively.