

English Compositionism as Fraud and Failure

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In fall quarter, 1963, my freshman writing class at Dartmouth had nothing to do with writing. The instructor, a professor of American literature named Don Rosenthal, thought of us as bad English majors, incapable of analyzing poems by Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams at the level to which he was accustomed. Pontificating and bloviating his way through class, Don set out to make us better New Critics, a course objective for Freshman Writing not mentioned in the catalog. He spent no time—literally not one moment—teaching us how to write better.

I did learn to write at Dartmouth from my classics professors, who sat down with me and worked through draft after draft, identifying my best prose and where my organizational strategies, word choices, paragraphing, and sentence craft did less than full justice to my insights. The best of these teachers, Jack Zarker, assigned papers in his Catullus and Horace classes and gave generously of his office time to review my work. Under his tutelage I improved dramatically. I owe Jack a lot, notably my career. Since 1968 I have been a college-level writing teacher, a “mere classroom practitioner” doing English department dirty work.¹

¹Joseph Harris, *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1968* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 90.

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Here is an obvious truth that would be rejected near universally within my adrift, embarrassing, infuriating, failing profession: Jack Zarker had nothing to learn about teaching expository writing at the college level.² If Jack had decided to teach English composition full-time, he could have succeeded at that job as fully as he did as a classicist, without further training. The resources Jack carried with him included excellent writing ability, excellent speaking ability, excellent training in the structure of language, wide-ranging intellectual interest, wit, an ear for diction, an eye for argument, endless patience with students, and palpable passion for his material and the process of putting it across. None of this—none of what it takes to do the job well—has been conveyed in any significant guild publication or conference presentation for decades. Instead, we have put our best energies into redefining straightforward work as an esoteric field of study—“compositionism”—with heavy ideological loading.

In the late 1940s, the initial volumes of *College Communication and Composition* featured practical, useful articles like “Help for the Problem Speller” and “Reading and Grading Themes.” In stark, unflattering contrast, contemporary volumes feature pretentious nonsense like “Sustainability as a Design Principle for Composition: Situational Creativity as a Habit of Mind” and “Rhetorical Scarcity: Spatial and Economic Inflections on Genre Change.” This professional devolution marks an elitist wrong turn, the selling of our demotic birthright as superior teachers for a mess of one-percenter “Theory” potage.

Compositionists today are laughingstocks on and off campus, notorious for babbling about “borderlands narratology” and “sustainable digitalized hyper-rhetoric” when students cannot write a coherent paragraph or even use an apostrophe correctly. I can think of no other field, academic or otherwise, in which the uninformed, “amateur” public has such a decisive advantage over guild-certified experts. A three-step program of professional reform follows: (1) dissociate composition teaching from literature teaching, (2)

²The reference at “adrift” is to Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). See the four reviews in the February 2012 *College Communication and Composition* (vol. 63, no. 3), collectively depicting the book as methodologically unreliable but substantively correct about U.S. higher education, <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CCC/0633-feb2012/CCC0633Reviews.pdf>. The interesting part is how the professional positions of these reviewers led to very different takes on *Academically Adrift*’s significance; apparently the closer you are to teaching composition to bad writers, the more value you see in Arum and Roksa’s insights.

dissociate composition teaching from composition studies and composition theory, and (3) put writing instruction in the hands of practitioners—of *whatever* academic training and political leaning—whose only job is to guide student-writers toward proficiency at the level traditionally associated with “higher” education.³

Lauer’s Flawed Overview

To hear insiders tell it, over the past four decades English composition teaching has been thoroughly and purposefully professionalized. Prior to the Great Awakening, the story goes, amateurs like Jack Zarker offered worse than useless writing instruction. Now, in sharpest contrast, guild-certified compositionists offer student-centered pedagogy drawing on the work of established scholars, researchers, and theorists in the field.

A paradigmatic overview appears in Janice M. Lauer’s “Composition and Rhetoric” in the National Council of Teachers of English collection *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s)*.⁴ In this essay, Lauer depicts preprofessional composition as “only a teaching practice” without “a place in the academy as a full-fledged discipline” (109). Teachers offered “a stifling pedagogy” (112), slashing away at mechanical errors and less than elegant wordings but providing little help for novices struggling to come to voice on the printed page.

Then good things started to happen. According to Lauer, “In the 1960s and 1970s, scholars argued for new theories of invention...adaptations of tagmemic linguistics that yielded an inventional guide of nine perspectives for students to deploy” (114). “New classifications of discourse challenged the emphasis on teaching expository discourse” (115). “In 1974, an important document was published by the Conference on College Composition and

³“Higher” education, that is, as distinguished from “tertiary” education, which suggests an institutional continuation of secondary education without further expectation as to the intellectual level of the work assigned and done. For shameful misunderstanding of “tertiary education,” see *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), by William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, for whom U.S. postsecondary education is successful just for the number of butts in the seats. Reading just a few paragraphs of typical undergraduate writing will temper anybody’s enthusiasm for “tertiary” education, a.k.a. “College Lite.”

⁴Janice M. Lauer, “Rhetoric and Composition,” in *English Studies: An Introduction to the Disciplines*, ed. Bruce McComiskey (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2006), 106–52. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

Communication, supporting the legitimate use of social dialects in students' writing: 'Students' Right to Their Own Language'" (120).⁵ Then, "in the 1980s, a rhizomatic spread of theory, research, and new pedagogy occurred, called by some 'the social turn'" (121).

All kinds of exciting new approaches followed this "social turn." "[R]hetoric and composition theorists and teachers started using cultural studies to inform their work" (130). "[Patricia] Bizzell also called on the work of Paulo Freire to help students develop a critical consciousness" (130). "Victor Vivenza described postmodern invention in terms of Lyotard's notion of paralogy as 'discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable and paradoxical'" (131). Barbara Couture "described a phenomenological rhetoric of writing" (131), while still others "have fashioned feminist pedagogies" (126).

There is no polite way to put it: All of this is garbage.

Where is the proof? Why doesn't Lauer show a single benefit to a single student from exposure to these exciting developments? And the damning answer: Lauer would leap to display favorable evidence if there were any, but, as she and all other insiders know, there is none.⁶ This realization should spark another: Lauer is not presenting the conceptual and methodological tautness of a "full-fledged discipline" but a loose congeries of fads, false starts, and quirky enthusiasms. Unlike a *real* discipline, Lauer's inventory shows nothing building on anything else. All too often, then, something as impressive-sounding as Couture's "phenomenological rhetoric of writing" came and went without further notice: a gimmick with a gloss of "theory," thus publishable but useless.

Spurring no improvement in student writing, Lauer's "rhizomatic" breakthroughs did occasion much career advancement, the ambitious wielding the new-fangled as both cudgel and lever. From the late 1980s through the 1990s into the early 2000s, classroom practitioners experienced a seamless transition from being lorded over by professors of literature to being lorded over by Writing Program

⁵For a devastating critique of "Students' Right to Their Own Language," see my "'Students' Right to Their Own Language': A Counter-Argument," in the Fall 2010 *Academic Questions* (vol. 23, no. 3).

⁶Evidence here is easy to come by, empirical and anecdotal alike. For the former, see results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the Graduate Record Examination, and, in particular, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Together, test results show this pattern: a lackluster situation in the 1950s and early 1960s worsened through the later 1960s and 1970s into the mid-1980s and then leveled off low. We produce a handful of excellent writers, many good writers, many more poor writers, and too many non-writers. The anecdotal reports reinforce these data. Especially telling are those from veteran college professors, human resource specialists, military recruiters, etc., in positions to see cohort after cohort of graduates arriving at their next station in life. The next of these informants to say anything good about the newer, more recent writing they have seen will be the first.

Administrators and Professors of Composition Studies. This should be understood as a matter of “Meet the new boss/same as the old boss.”

The new bosses *cared* no more about student writing—often less. Gary Tate, an influential author and professor in the field of composition for over forty years who passed away in 2012, told the best story about this. Reviewing the anthology *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy* in 1995, Tate noted that none of the authors’ “composition pedagogy” involved actually teaching composition, and then wrote:

Reading this book, I was reminded of a brief exchange I had a few years ago with a leading proponent of cultural studies. After listening to him read a paper describing a freshman composition class he had taught the previous year, a paper that made no mention of the writing of his students, I asked him how they wrote in the course. “Like freshmen always write,” he sneered, as he walked away, obviously bored by the thought of student writing.⁷

As James Sledd, a radical compositionist of another stripe, accurately noted, “We have a simple, utilitarian function, but an important one, and it’s that function which these professors have rejected scornfully.”⁸

Note then how much of the composition theory praised by Lauer has aimed not to improve student writing along established standards but to delegitimize those standards. This is exactly the thrust of many “feminist pedagogies” to which Lauer gives blanket approbation. Applying Hélène Cixous to the composition class, for example, Clara Juncker writes in *College English*:

“Woman” must explore her *jouissance*, her sexual pleasure, so as to bring down phallogocentric discourse and, ultimately, change the world....We must allow women writers, in other words, to speak in foreign tongues.⁹

Dale Bauer is even more vehement in *College English* about subordinating educational to political ends: “The feminist agenda offers a goal toward our

⁷Gary Tate, “Empty Pedagogical Space and Silent Students,” in *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*, ed. Karen Fitts and Alan W. France (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 270.

⁸Cited in Alison Schneider, “Bad Blood in the English Department: The Rift between Composition and Literature,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 13, 1998, A-14.

⁹Clara Juncker, “Writing (with) Cixous,” *College English* 50, no. 4 (April 1988): 431.

students' conversions to emancipatory critical action."¹⁰ Sorry, no: In any legitimate composition class, conversion is from worse to better writer, *jouissance*—the pleasure of the word well chosen, the sentence well crafted, the point well made.¹¹

A Far-Lost Profession

By 1980 at the latest, compositionism's least teacherly elements had won the day. Even as weaker student-writers were entering college needing as much no-nonsense instruction as we could give them, the profession was losing itself in blathering on the shameful level of Lauer's "Lyotardian discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable and paradoxical paralogy." At local, state-level, and national conferences, I attended session after session wherein presenters detailed their program's application of a political or philosophical theory and then rolled their eyes in dismay, flabbergasted, whenever someone asked if students actually wrote better as a result.

Around this time, the phrase "current-traditional" was introduced to distinguish old-line, word-by-word writing instruction from the theory-based approaches. Richard Nordquist accurately captures "current-traditional rhetoric" as "a disapproving term for the textbook-based methods of composition instruction popular during the first two-thirds of the 20th century."¹² Such disapproval shaped the brand-new role of writing program administrator (WPA) in the 1980s and 1990s. Wishing to appear committed

¹⁰Dale Bauer, "The Other F-Word: Feminist in the Classroom," *College English* 52, no. 4 (April 1990): 389. I mention *College English* as the source of these quotes to indicate the growing interaction in this period between the literature and composition-rhetoric sectors of English department work. The dynamic was this: Literature welcomed composition upon seeing compositionism mirror its own "Theory" preoccupations and leadership structure. What transpired at eye level was the further descent of writing curriculum and classroom pedagogy into blathering chaos.

¹¹The heuristic value of feminist composition theory lies in its complete dissociation from classroom engagement and observation. The actual gender problem in English education is that boys and young men are so far behind girls and young women. One would never get to a *need* for feminist theorizing and invective from classroom engagement or observation, or from analysis of test results. This suggests forcefully the general situation: "Composition theory" is *imposed* on practice rather than flowing organically out of it. The strongest impetus for composition theorizing unquestionably has been the placement of composition instruction inside English departments dominated by professors of literary theory. To attain professional status at the level of the Derrida-Irigaray spewers, an ambitious compositionist had to spew some Derrida or Irigaray. This remains a powerful reason to dissociate composition and literature.

¹²See Nordquist's definition of "current-traditional rhetoric" at "Grammar and Composition Rhetoric," About.com, <http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/curtradrhetern.htm>.

to improved student writing, American universities hired WPAs to replace current-traditional instruction with progressive experimentation. The transformation was near-total. By the turn of the century, the most prominently published state-of-the-profession review would relegate current-traditional teaching to a single snide footnote, likening it to a nagging, persistent pestilence.¹³

As antagonist to the field's redefinition, compositionist publications introduced a stock character: the economics or history or engineering professor who "just doesn't get it." Our author runs into this colleague—always a male; let's call him Bob—at lunch or some convocation exercise, and Bob says something idiotic like, "The students taking courses in my department can't write for beans. What are you doing over there to help them get better?" Straining to be diplomatic, our WPA author spells it all out as patiently as possible, explaining that the writing staff is trained to situate students as genderized/racialized subjects of their own antinomian Foucauldian subaltern borderlands discursivity. Bob then confirms he's a moron by saying, "That's all well and good, I guess, but my students still can't write for beans." Our author in response can only look to the sky and sigh, "Why me, Goddess?"

Our response to Bob should have been this: "Look, it takes time, but we're on the job working nose-to-nose with kids who come to college with glaring deficiencies in wording, sentence construction, paragraph construction, and sustained argumentation." Instead, our leadership dismissed *that* job as not worth doing. Insisting that no oral or written discourse that *communicates* can be "deficient," they browbeat every Bob in sight with bogus, name-dropping expertise.

Nationwide, the WPA rewrote program goals in line with guild-certified epistemological and ideological positions. Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, became a professional preoccupation though its connection with classroom teaching was never made clear. Apparently, low-achieving students would write better as soon as they and/or their teachers understood the "social constructionist" principle that knowledge is inextricably linked to context.¹⁴ Process would then take over, improving their writing with no

¹³Richard Fulkerson, "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," *College Composition and Communication* 56, no. 4 (June 2005): 654–87.

¹⁴For an especially useful critique of social constructionism, see Mark Bauerlein, "Social Constructionism: Philosophy for the Academic Workplace," *Partisan Review* (Spring 2001): 228–41.

training, coaching, or red-penning needed.¹⁵ Then, writing skills having been spoken to (!), the oppositional political agenda of the courses could be laid on full-force, raising students' critical consciousness of the pervasive social, economic, and cultural oppression in the United States of America.

Everyone seems aware of the wrong turn the profession took except for guild insiders, making their habitual self-congratulation always seem absurd.

In her introduction to *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom* (1993), Jacqueline Jones Royster expresses great enthusiasm for her guild's recent record of accomplishment.¹⁶ Alert readers, though, will hear ugly overtones in Royster's every note of praise. Where Royster exclaims, "In essence, we have reached out abstractly and concretely across boundaries of knowledge and experience to enhance our understanding of the written word as a human phenomenon" (xi), the wide-awake will picture stumbling excursions into random realms of airy speculation. Where Royster wants "to acknowledge multiple ways of envisioning the world and representing reality" (xi–xii), the wide-awake will picture the staunch refusal ever to say, "This is better than that"—except where "that" asserts something positive about individual achievement, objective truth, nonrenewable energy sources, the cheeseburger, male heterosexual desire, or the United States of America.

At a key juncture, Royster gets in the word that best captures what compositionism has been about for decades, the one thing at which the guild truly excels: "These essays act as springboards for reflecting on the ways in which we interrogate and problematize in this discourse community" (xii). The

¹⁵Sondra Perl's "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers" (December 1979) might be the single most influential article ever published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, and so nowhere else can the detriments of reifying Process be pointed out to greater effect. One reads the prose of Perl's subject Tony and cannot begin to see its bad parts (which are very bad) as either caused by flaws in his writing process or amenable to remediation by way of process instruction.

Perl cannot see (or, for political reasons, chooses not to admit) that Tony used much the same composing process as every student at CCNY and elsewhere who would write a much better paper on the same topic. No question, the better writer will pre-write and plan somewhat differently from Tony, making more or fewer stops along the way to completing a draft. Perhaps the better writer composes in the dorm room at night while Tony writes in the library mid-afternoon. Perhaps one or the other writes the paper in longhand before keyboarding it. Perhaps one or the other reads or gets a friend to read the piece aloud at every stopping-point. We can study these and countless other process variables, and in the end almost all the differences in the quality of the essays will remain unaccounted for.

Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill, and Ernest Hemingway all wrote standing up: Does anyone imagine for a moment that Tony would even inch toward becoming a writer in their league if he stood instead of sat as he drafted his threadbare, simplistic thoughts?

¹⁶Jacqueline Jones Royster, forward to *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom*, ed. Gary A. Olson and Sidney I. Dobrin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), xi–xiii. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

key word is “problematize.” Composition theorists are world-class problematizers, adept at taking sound, honorable professional practices, poking into them, seeking out problems, and inevitably finding many. Their favorite problem to uncover is complicity with political evil, which is ubiquitous. In this spirit they have problematized logic, organization, clarity, third-person exposition, Aristotelian rhetoric, Standard English, literacy itself, education itself, and writing instruction that aspires only to improved writing.

With friends like these, what enemies do student-writers and higher literacy really need?

Bizzell’s Conversion

Whereas Janice Lauer saw fit to praise Patricia Bizzell’s move to Freirean pedagogy as exemplary of compositionism’s excitement,¹⁷ others will more aptly understand it as exemplary of the field’s descent into ham-handed classroom politicking.

In her introduction to *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* (1992), Bizzell describes Freire as her pivot-point away from English teaching to classroom political conversion.¹⁸ Identifying herself and her professional allies as recent veterans of the civil rights, anti-war, and women’s liberation struggles, Bizzell analyzes their common devotion to Freire as a way to carry The Movement into the classroom. Without meaning to, Bizzell here indicts an entire era’s leadership of English composition teaching, a leadership group that never *outgrew* 1960s-romantic oppositionality.

Considering “[w]hether academic discourse can be taught in a liberating way,” Bizzell answers that it cannot if college writing programs limit themselves to “equip[ping] students for performing the writing tasks their college education demands, and the writing tasks they will encounter after leaving college.” Understanding academic literacy as too closely tied to hegemonic patterns of thinking, Bizzell claims that “[b]asic writers are very much like Freire’s peasants” for the oppressive conditions in which they have been placed (129, 133). To inspire Freire’s brand of “critical consciousness” in American students,

¹⁷Lauer, “Rhetoric and Composition,” 130.

¹⁸Bizzell’s *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992) collects previously published articles and offers a new, very revealing introduction. Further references to this material will be cited parenthetically within the text.

then, is to liberate them to strike blows against socioeconomic inequality, political impotence, and cultural suppression.

All this, of course, is a huge stretch: Our students—“basic” and advanced writers alike—are nothing like illiterate Third World adult peasants.¹⁹ Far from silenced and passive, they are loaded with opinions and rarely shy about asserting them. As collegians, they must learn to think through, express, and defend their opinions far better than they presently do, precisely the role of traditional writing instruction. Improved literacy can “liberate” them to take their political, vocational, and intellectual aspirations in any direction that they—not their Freirean professors—please.

Bizzell’s interests next turn to “Foundationalism and Anti-Foundationalism in Composition Studies,” and she writes: “The problem facing me then becomes how to argue in an anti-foundationalist universe of discourse for left-oriented or egalitarian social values” (26–27). By this point it troubles Bizzell not at all to argue for “left-oriented or egalitarian social values” in class. She worries instead that other leftist theorists will think she is still “advocating the inculcation of academic discourse” (27), i.e., doing the job that writing instructors are paid to do. Pushing students to join her in a quest for “social justice, defined in some left-liberal way,” Bizzell has “to figure out how we all can use rhetorical power to effect democratic political change” (29–30). But how “democratic” can any class be that is led by a rhetorician so aggressively using her training and position to reorder students’ political sensibilities?

Bizzell has a problem with James Berlin’s putting “contestatory and socialist” ideas at the center of his writing courses at Purdue University. The problem is that Berlin did not go *far enough* in his propagandizing. According to Bizzell, he held back too much, troubled by academic niceties:

Berlin and his colleagues might openly exert their authority as teachers to try to persuade students to agree with their values instead of pretending that they are merely investigating the nature of sexism and capitalism and leaving students to draw their own conclusions. (p. 272)

But what “authority as teachers” can Bizzell possibly be thinking about here?

¹⁹Bizzell admitted this in 2009. Catch, though, the tone of her concession: “I tended to elide important differences here and once, Heaven forgive me, actually wrote these words, ‘Basic writers are very much like Freire’s peasants.’ Well, no they weren’t, but Freire’s ideas did suggest...” No. Once we appreciate that Freire spoke about entirely different people in entirely different situations, his ideas will resonate only with New-New Left educator-propagandists *desperate* for theoretical backing. “Opinion: Composition Studies Saves the World!” *College English* 72, no. 2 (November 2009): 177.

The only source of authority in a composition class is expertise in the teaching of composition, i.e., the very work whose legitimacy Bizzell had led the guild in attacking and eroding. Drawing on the remnants of this authority now to win students over to their professors' politics goes past opportunism to a particularly foul hypocrisy.

Sadly, Lauer was correct to place Bizzell's conversion to Freirean theory at the center of the profession's evolution. Hers is "the kind of critical pedagogy that most of us espouse."²⁰ The main business of "most of us," then, is not to teach students to write better prose, but to prepare them to take action against America's political evils, which we can conveniently list for them.

Professional Realignment

Recall the words of Pablo Picasso: "When art critics get together, they talk about aesthetics; when artists get together, they talk about turpentine." With us for decades it has been, "When 'mere' writing instructors get together, they talk about words, sentences, and paragraphs; when tenured compositionists get together, they talk about ideology, travel budgets, and course releases." We went adrift when we lost concentration on playing our game and started to way-overvalue talking about it, ideally in departments of writing studies or composition studies. By now, serious consideration is given to proposals to replace mandatory first-year composition with introduction to writing studies classes promising "to help students understand some activities related to written scholarly activity by demonstrating the conversational and subjective nature of scholarly texts."²¹

This skewed priority has drawn out the worst possibilities in the two central tenets of the field's professionalization.

²⁰Anne Curzan, "Says Who? Teaching and Questioning the Rules of Grammar," *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 871.

²¹Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" *College Composition and Communication* 20, no. 4 (June 2007): 559. Beyond the scope of this article is the "divorce" between composition and literature, with compositionists taking their wares to separate departments of writing studies or composition studies. Melissa Iannetta wrote in 2010: "The overwhelming majority of writing faculty still find their homes in departments of English....While some 51 independent writing programs were identified in CCC in 2001, Kathleen Yancey reports a total of some 739 departments of English, and David Laurence suggests the number may be even higher." "Disciplinary, Divorce, and the Displacement of Labor Issues: Rereading Histories of Composition and Literature," *College Composition and Communication* 62, no. 1 (September 2010): 55.

The trend is toward "divorce," which would be welcome if compositionism weren't so out of it.

First, we decided, we would no longer be a “service” operation. The biology department and the business school were not “service” units, so why should we be? Well, as Bob Dylan warbled, “You’ve got to serve somebody.” Offered the blessing of humble pedagogical service, we opted instead for serving an illegitimate elite’s obscurantism, ideological agitation, and obsessive careerism.

Second, we would no longer be “gatekeepers.” Seeing low test scores and bad grades work consistently against certain students—non-Anglophone immigrants, the poor, and ethnic minorities—we would collectively stand against bigotry in the assessment of student discourse. Before long, though, we came to stand against all professional judgments, however realistic and accurate, that did not *rave over* texts produced by members of these now-preferred groups.²² Our problem now lay not with failure but with success: Superior writers of formal expository prose—“superior” along traditional standards of eloquence, cogency, correctness, and rhetorical effectiveness—cravenly surrender to ruling-class hegemony, while weak writers display personal authenticity, cultural integrity, and noble political resistance, their “mistakes” and “shortcomings” actually marking a new, inclusive excellence.²³ All this romanticism sounds far better in “Theory,” of course, than it plays out in the lives of those left to suffer the consequences of inability.

Unwarping writing instruction now will require moving it out from under departments of literature and departments or subdepartments of composition studies. Evidence of the need for this transformation is everywhere. In discussing

²²For the clearest example of bizarre, over-the-top raving, see Tom Fox, *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1999), esp. 61–70. Fox argues here for universities’ welcoming of oppositional-culture students; oppositionality is now to be treated as a healthy response to the pervasive racism and oppression in the United States of America. To illustrate the benefits of bringing heretofore excluded students to campus, Fox prints an entire paper by a student named Leon. The paper, autobiographical, describes Leon’s keeping connection to his ghetto gang in Compton, California, while going to school in a predominantly white high school in nearby Hawthorne. The paper makes literally no *points* about the two communities or Leon’s experiences in them and is riddled with egregious spelling and grammar mistakes. Nonetheless, Fox is prepared to judge it “academic literacy at its best: a focused exploration of a complex topic” (68).

²³See, for instance, Caroline Pari, “Resisting Assimilation,” in *Critical Literacy in Action*, ed. Ira Shor and Caroline Pari (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 1999), 103–25. Working with community college students in New York City, mostly recent immigrant and native-born students of color, Pari sets out to help them avoid “cultural erasure,” i.e., giving up their racial and/or class identity as they go through college. In class, Pari refuses to let her students say they are “just Americans” and get on with improving their English skills. She instead follows “a recent tradition in composition studies that... encourages [students] to develop their own language when faced with the struggle with academic discourse” (123–24). She is thrilled when her students “showed an increased resistance to assimilation” and in particular when her student Maria “wrote parts of her cultural identity essay in Spanish and then translated for me.” Pari is pleased as punch with Maria telling her, “[W]hen I’m with my friends, I try to even eliminate English totally” (117).

William B. Chace's "The Decline of the English Department" (2009), I select a typical example of the wrong-headedness necessitating change toward institutional autonomy for practitioners.

Chace, author of *100 Semesters: My Adventures as Student, Professor, and University President, and What I Learned Along the Way* (2006), first shows English departments in U.S. higher education as in sharp decline. Between 1971 and 2003, the percentage of undergraduate students majoring in English was nearly halved, falling from 7.6 percent to 3.9 percent. Chace then explains this loss as primarily a matter of the "dismembering" of the literature curriculum, the movement away from close, meaningful, pleasurable study of texts toward "the theories they can be made to support."²⁴ Students voted with their feet, unmoved by their professors' "Theory" enthusiasms: "Fads come and go; theories appear with immense fanfare only soon to be jettisoned as bankrupt and déclassé. The caravan, always moving on, travels light because of what it leaves behind" (40).

To these depleted, ungrounded departments, the responsibility for composition teaching comes as a "sturdy lifeline" (37) and "sizable asset" (42). Composition and rhetoric classes can bestow on students "a proficiency everywhere respected but too often lacking among college graduates" (42). English departments, accordingly, "should place their courses in composition and rhetoric at the forefront of their activities. They should announce that the teaching of composition is a skill that their instructors have mastered and that students majoring in English will be certified, upon graduation, as possessing rigorously tested competence in prose expression" (42). An immediate problem here is that any such announcement is bound to be a lie as long as instructors of composition are drawn from the ranks of graduate students, contingent part-time faculty, ideological zealots, woolly-minded theorists, and bloviating literature professors needing to fill their schedules *somehow*.

Though sympathetic with the undignified professional status of composition instructors, Chace never notes that placement inside literature departments *guarantees* them second-class citizenship. Nor does he question the expectation that writing instruction for non-English majors—over 96 percent of the undergraduate population—will continue to be housed inside the literature department. Conveniently, this "sizable asset" will subsidize Chace's own classes on Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams as well as the seminars on

²⁴William M. Chace, "The Decline of the English Department," *American Scholar* (Autumn 2009): 42. Further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

deconstructionism, queer semiotics, and postmodern highway signage that he finds so repugnant. Chace should be exactly the man to point out that nothing in the logic of composition instruction suggests linking it with literature instruction, in particular with literature instruction that disdains close textual study. His inability to see or say this suggests how desperately our moribund “English” departments need students in seats that they now control illegitimately and on the cheap.

This sense of professional purpose must change. Or rather, given the delusions and vested interests of literary and composition theorists, the sense of professional purpose must be changed, from the outside. I deny no one’s academic freedom here. To composition theorists and researchers I say exactly what I say to literature professors: Do your scholarship, speak your mind, ply your trade as you see fit, in your departments and your classrooms, in your publications and at your conventions. Just don’t suppose that any of this has a special, close connection to teaching remedial, core, advanced, or discipline-specific writing classes. If you want to teach any of these classes, your application will be treated the same as everyone else’s. But be forewarned: If your statement of purpose, publication record, or past teaching experience shows you welcoming *lower* achievement by student-writers, you will not get the post.

What remains, then, are collaborative, administratively independent staffs of competent, eager practitioners. Open to strong writers and teachers from every academic specialization, with or without Ph.D.s or even M.A.s in hand, these syndicates will decide for themselves what is needed to get through to particular students on a particular campus. Accolades will go to teachers stimulating the greatest improvement in their students’ writing and best supporting the work of colleagues through mentoring, performing administrative tasks, and representing the group on and off campus, explaining its policies, receiving feedback on its performance, and agitating for its professional interests.

Initially, the most obvious benefit of this reorganization will be in attitude. One simply cannot take a less winning, less productive stance toward one’s job than that promulgated in contemporary compositionism. Hired to teach effective written literacy, new practitioners are guided by guild leadership to keep reminding themselves how personally demeaning and politically regressive that work is. Far from extending themselves to do their job *well*, they are to extend

themselves to pad their résumés with theory publications and get students to resist the hegemony of the dominant culture. To everyone else around, including the few of us still dedicated to teaching writing *well*, the carriers of compositionism come across as proud to be derelict of duty—the near-sacred duty of guiding student-writers toward excellence of conception and expression.