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Working Rhetoric and Composition

Bruce Horner and Min-Zhan Lu

The constitution of rhetoric and composition as a discipline is the subject of a long-standing and ongoing debate that grapples with what each of the terms might be said to signify in relation to the other, and why. There is, of course, an inevitable politics to these grappling that merits investigation: what seems to matter, why, to whom, with what histories, and most important, with what consequences. Often investigation of these politics focuses on power plays and competing interests. Here, however, we pursue those politics that aim at defining, and redefining, the meaning(s) of rhetoric and composition as a discipline in ways responsive to the ever-changing, specific material conditions of its formation and social reception. We aim, in other words, to approach rhetoric and composition as something that necessarily and rightly needs to be continuously “worked” (and reworked) to articulate alternatives and forms of resistance to hegemonic forces and relations.

To highlight possible points of departure for such a politics, we begin by mapping the main questions embedded in particular definitions we see operating in common discourse about rhetoric and composition. We delineate the ways in which specific definitions address some of these questions in light or disregard of others; the material conditions shaping particular notions of rhetoric and composition; and the ways in which individual notions impede or advance efforts to build more equitable...
and mutually constitutive relations across a rich array of strands working rhetoric and composition. Finally, we propose lines of inquiry by which such relations might be developed. These include, importantly, recognizing, and making more productive use of, relationships that *rhetoric and composition* might have with rhetorical study not affiliated with composition, and also with education and applied linguistics. Neglect of the relationship of *rhetoric and composition* with these last two areas of study—coded most commonly by the terms *literacy* and *English*—has, we argue, limited the scope, insights, and effects of contemporary work in rhetoric and composition.

**Mapping Rhetoric and Composition**

We can get a sense of current tensions and assumptions regarding the work of rhetoric and composition in the discourse of listserv postings, job advertisements, the naming of courses and programs of study and the positions of those responsible for them, and publication practices. These reveal three complicating tendencies in debate over the nature and function of *rhetoric*, *composition*, and *rhetoric and composition*:

- the tendency to use all three terms interchangeably with one another and with *writing*, *English*, and *literacy*
- the tendency to treat the meaning of each term as stable and self-evident
- the tendency to treat rhetoric and composition as mutually exclusive and/or in hierarchical order

We begin our discussion of the tensions and assumptions regarding the work of rhetoric and composition operating in current discourse by considering a recent posting on the WPA-L listserv of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, one that generated a flurry of responses:

>I recently had a colleague tell me that she is a composition specialist and I’m a rhetoric specialist—the implication was that we don’t think the same way and we don’t do the same things. Honestly, I didn’t even understand the comment. How can anyone be one (a composition specialist) and not the other (a rhetoric specialist)? Are rhetoric and composition separate again? Can we teach composition without teaching rhetoric? Do we have to add rhetoric to composition now? Is this problem (if it even exists) stemming from the textbook industry? Is the distinction present in some textbooks and forcing us to find new ways to re-integrate what should already be integrated? The history of our discipline tells us that the separation of composition from rhetoric was, at least in part, one cause of the downfall and subsequent denigration of composition. Are we heading back in that direction? (McComiskey, 2006a)²

First, it is worth noting that, in addition to manifesting the strong tenor of the debate about the relationships between composition and rhetoric, the post indicates that the terms *rhetoric, composition, and rhetoric and composition* are used to refer to a wide array of practices, bodies of knowledge, and institutional sites—for example, not only to an
academic discipline but also to particular types of textbook and professional activity, such as teaching. Further, the post indicates that the “separation” of “composition” and “rhetoric” needs to be understood in terms of the material conditions of one’s work: not just the ways in which the textbook industry might constrain our sense of the relationship between “rhetoric” and “composition,” but also the institutional histor(ies) of rhetoric, composition, and rhetoric and composition.

The wide array of practices, bodies of knowledge, and institutional sites associated with rhetoric, composition, and rhetoric and composition is also illustrated by the language of job postings. But these job postings also tend to use all three terms interchangeably to identify an academic discipline, program, area of study, body of scholarship, curriculum, professional organization, and set of publications, and they often do so in conjunction or affiliation with three other terms: writing, English, and literacy. For example, under the classification “composition and rhetoric” [sic], the 2006 Modern Language Association Job Information List includes positions for people with expertise in “composition,” “advanced composition,” “basic writing,” “developmental writing,” “advanced writing,” “technical and/or scientific writing,” “professional writing,” “international technical communication and comparative rhetoric,” “visual and/or digital rhetorics,” “literacy,” “minority rhetorics,” “teacher preparation,” and “mixed/multiple genres” and to direct a “writing” or “composition program” or “writing center” (Association of Departments of English 2006). These phrasings appear in a site sponsored by the Association of Departments of English.

This interchange of terms is likewise signaled by practices in naming courses, institutional sites, and faculty. Although “writing” is the common name given entry-level undergraduate (composition) courses (sometimes also “Freshman English”) or an institutional site (for example, a “writing center”), these are usually administered by faculty specializing in “rhetoric and composition” housed in departments of “English.” And as many of the job postings make clear, candidates for advertised positions are expected to teach in graduate programs with names such as “rhetoric and composition,” “writing studies,” “writing, rhetoric, and American culture,” and “composition and cultural rhetoric.”

Literacy is also increasingly used to signify these course and programs, as well as to identify research projects examining textual practices in light of the rhetorical contexts of their production and reception. For example, the University of Pittsburgh Press series publishing Composition in the University (Crowley), Composition-Rhetoric (Connors), and Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing (S. Miller) is called the “Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture.” Works by such composition scholars as Anne Ruggles Gere, Christina Haas, Linda Flower and her colleagues, and David Bartholomae are included in Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook (Cushman et al.; see also Kintgen and Kroll). Graduate programs identified with rhetoric and composition carry names such as “Rhetoric,
Composition, and Literacy Studies,” “Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy,” or “Language, Literacy, and Rhetoric.”

The WPA-L listserv posting and the language of the job ads also show a tendency to treat the meaning of *rhetoric*, *composition*, and *rhetoric and composition* as stable and self-evident. In the WPA-L listserv posting cited above, for example, both Bruce McComiskey and his putative colleague seem to be sure about the meanings of “composition” and “rhetoric,” despite their quite opposed views of each and of the relationship between them. And the job ads and naming of programs and publications make no attempt to define any of these terms despite their heterogeneous use of them.

Finally, despite the seeming interchangeability of *rhetoric*, *composition*, and *rhetoric and composition*, there is a tendency to treat rhetoric and composition not as mutually dependent and constitutive, but as mutually exclusive and/or in hierarchical order. For example, though McComiskey’s post depicts rhetoric and composition as “inseparable,” it focuses on the pitfall that “composition” faces without “rhetoric.” While McComiskey expresses difficulty imagining how one could “teach composition without teaching rhetoric,” it is not clear that the reverse is true (that is, that it would be impossible to teach rhetoric without teaching composition). Thus, from this post, “rhetoric” appears to be an intrinsic part of “composition,” but “composition” may not be an intrinsic part of “rhetoric.” We see this even in usages that might at first glance suggest a different relationship. For example, while the title of W. Ross Winterowd’s *Composition/Rhetoric: A Synthesis* suggests the possibility of a mutually dependent relationship between the two, the title also implies a need for synthesizing, and in the book, Winterowd identifies composition as merely a branch of rhetoric. In his account, just as cardiology is a branch of medicine, and just as “a cardiologist must be a physician, so a compositionist must be a rhetorician” (35). The “synthesis” offered, in other words, is one of subsuming composition within rhetoric.

We believe that linking the three terms (*rhetoric*, *composition*, and *rhetoric and composition*) with a rich and changing array of practices, bodies of knowledge, and institutional sites can enhance the work of rhetoric and composition as an institutional space for developing alternatives and forms of resistance to hegemonic forces and relations. However, we believe this possibility is effectively limited by the tendencies to treat the meaning of each of the terms as stable and self-evident; to use them interchangeably and uncritically with “writing,” “English,” and “literacy”; and to treat rhetoric and composition not as mutually dependent and constitutive, but as mutually exclusive or in hierarchical order. To advance the possibilities for (re)working rhetoric and composition, and to counter these limiting tendencies, we call for a deliberative probing of how and why each of us defines each of the three terms in particular ways at particular times, and how these ways might either perpetuate binaries that constrain our work and its effects or, alternatively, make productive reworkings of rhetoric and composition possible.
**Deliberative Working of Rhetoric and Composition: An (In)Vested Probing**

We pose two sets of questions for putting definitions of *rhetoric, composition*, and *rhetoric and composition* to productive work. One set of questions probes the “what” of competing definitions of the three terms:

- What kinds of curricula, programs, professional organizations, publications, students, research, and/or bodies of knowledge do we have in mind when using the three terms?
- What traditions and examples (figures and works of scholarship; pedagogical theories and practices; ideal processes and products of language practices; research methodologies and foci; programs, curricula, organizations, and publications) inform our definitions of these terms?
- What specific concerns, interests, goals, and possibilities might be prompting our use of each of the terms?

When addressing these three what-questions, we need to keep in mind that one’s sense of rhetoric or composition in light of any of these questions affects one’s sense of the relations between them. For example, if rhetoric and composition are each understood in terms of particular traditions—say, rhetoric as a tradition of studying the production and reception of texts that extends from before Plato to the present, and composition as a tradition of producing a particular kind of text, namely student themes—then composition might well be seen as being subsumed by rhetoric. And alternatively, if rhetoric and composition are each understood in terms of programs of instruction for first-year undergraduate students, they might well be seen as in alignment with, rather than in hierarchical relation to, each other.

Finally, we also need to keep in mind that the material conditions of one’s work produce specific concerns, interests, goals, and possibilities that might prompt different uses of the terms. For example, teachers involved in teaching “basic writing” at the City University of New York during its open admission period went about addressing these questions in ways delimited by their tenuous institutional status in traditional English departments. On one hand, these teachers turned to scholarship in a broad range of disciplines, including cognitive psychology, sociology, and linguistics, as well as literary theory (for example, New Critical close reading; see Shaughnessy’s “Basic Writing”). On the other hand, while implicitly highlighting the affiliation of their work with “literature”—applying “close reading” to student texts—and “creative writing” (the question of what “real” writers do when composing), they staked a claim for the legitimacy of their students and their work by dubbing both their field and their students “new,” thereby responding to the question of what tradition within which to place their work with images of the frontier, pioneers, and trailblazing (see Horner, “Mapping”; Lyons).
To enhance rhetoric and composition as work articulating alternatives to hegemonic forces and relations, we need to accompany the what-questions with a second set of questions addressing the when, how, and why of our work, questions that further locate our definitions in material social history (past, present, and prospective):

- Which of the strands (programs, curricula, professional organizations, publications, students, research, and bodies of knowledge) are we foregrounding, and at the cost of which others? What particular relations across these strands are we highlighting or dismissing? Why?
- How might we contextualize the specific concerns, interests, goals, and possibilities driving our use of the terms? How might our uses be seen as formed in response to and shaping particular (existing and/or anticipated) social-political-economic conditions?
- In what ways might our past and present positions work to reinforce and/or interrupt potential dichotomizing of “rhetoric” and “composition”?
- What do we see as the critical changes in global-local conditions of life? In the nature and function of “writing in English”?
- How might we best go about reworking rhetoric and composition? Why?

As these questions suggest, we believe that the work of rhetoric and composition can best proceed not only through questions of definition and relations between definitions, but also, and more important, through questions of the histories and conditions of that work, including efforts to shape rhetoric and composition and the institutional reception of those efforts. Although, as we observe in the opening to this essay, this is in line with recognizing the “politics” to defining these terms, our position is one of deliberate, and deliberative, engagement with those politics, understood here not simply as the clashing of competing “special” or “private” interests in a winner-take-all scenario—a politics of “combat”—but as the pursuit of possible alternative responses to hegemonic forces: a politics of hope. By shifting debate from a focus on airing and ranking competing versions of the “what” of rhetoric and composition, these latter questions might enhance deliberations on how and why certain visions of rhetoric and composition might be more constructive for building equitable and co-constitutive interactions between them.

To illustrate the uses to which these questions might be put, we turn to two sites where questions of disciplinary definition come immediately to the fore: the design of a first-year undergraduate course in rhetoric and composition, and the design of graduate curricula to prepare future members of rhetoric and composition.3 We recognize that our choice of first-year undergraduate programs as one site for investigating definitions of the discipline could be seen as itself presupposing a definition of the field’s “location” that has been hotly debated, and in two ways: that the field is or ought to be concerned especially, if not primarily, with the apparent “service” function of teaching undergraduate students what is almost always called “composition”; and that the field ought to be affiliated primarily with teaching as opposed to...
research (see Harris, *Teaching*; Crowley, “Composition’s Ethic”). But it is precisely for that reason that we choose this as one site for considering the questions raised above: such arguments bear directly on questions of disciplinary definition. Attention to the design of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition might seem to offer a potential counter-position to that which identifies the discipline primarily with the teaching of undergraduates. But this, too, depends on the design in question. In identifying what will be taught in graduate courses, designers of graduate programs are defining what they believe future members of rhetoric and composition need, or ought, to know and be, which depends on what is believed these future members will and should be doing, likewise matters of dispute.

**Re)defining First-Year Composition**

As we have already suggested, attention to a first-year undergraduate course is itself controversial in posing a particular kind of curriculum, students, and program as a defining focus for the discipline. For at least some, the common required first-year undergraduate course, whether called “writing” or “composition” or “rhetoric,” is essentially coded as *composition*, and decidedly not *rhetoric*. For example, Sharon Crowley argues that any connection between rhetoric and composition obtaining currently is a political move to “lend respectability to composition,” a move that, she complains, “puts rhetoric at the service of composition” (“Composition Is Not” para. 3). For Crowley, at least for the “modern” period of the last hundred years, *composition* has become the appropriate term to name a debased undergraduate curriculum whose institutional role is politically suspect and effects on teachers’ working conditions nefarious. *Rhetoric*, by contrast, is the tradition of study and art of investigating arguments concerned with social and civic discourse. Although Crowley acknowledges that “there is no necessary reason that rhetoric could not be taught in this *composition* course” (“Composition Is Not” para. 4), she simply does not find this to be the case in practice.

In this argument, composition, at least in modern times, is defined primarily as an institutional site, and secondarily as the teachers, students, and administrators who are located there (compare Gage 15). That is to say, it is a tradition emerging out of the wreckage of the traditional classical curriculum in the United States associated with the industrialization of education and the need to gatekeep credentialing of particular social groups. The locus classicus for this argument is the development of freshman English at Harvard (see Brereton; S. Miller, *Textual*) and its drilling of students in the cranking out of daily “themes” on matters of no civic or social consequence, except the unacknowledged (“hidden”) consequence of gatekeeping. It follows from this that “rhetoric and composition” is at best a political maneuver by which an academically illegitimate practice borrows a veneer of respectability.
this perspective, the only cure for this sordid situation is to inject actual knowledge of rhetoric into the curriculum: Crowley suggests that the efforts of Edward P. J. Corbett, Frank D’Angelo, and W. Ross Winterowd to “insert rhetoric into current thinking about composition” might have had the potential to effect such a cure, but laments that “their attempt to inoculate composition with rhetoric did not take” (“Composition Is Not” para. 3). Instead, for Crowley, (modern) composition is defined by an emphasis on “self-expression” and a view of invention as a simple matter of selecting a topic on which to write, characteristics reinforced by the insecure and exploitative working conditions of teachers, conditions that likewise militate against any attempt to teach political and social critique. By contrast, rhetoric codes as a concern with social and civic engagement, a concern she sees as especially pressing at a time (ca. 2003) “when the prevailing regime of truth carefully monitors teachers to insure their intellectual conformity” (“Composition Is Not” para. 9).

A recent account by M. J. Braun of her attempt as a writing program director to redesign a first-year undergraduate composition curriculum to follow rhetorical principles exemplifies such codings. Braun views composition as dominated by expressivist and formalist concerns that grow out of and reinforce bourgeois liberalist ideologies treating writing in decontextualized, de-historicized ways. Thus, in order to “produce writers who are cognizant of the social, cultural, and political economic relations embedded in these discourses [that actually circulate],” as opposed to preparing them to write what she calls the “pseudo genres invented for the classroom” (90), she believes that the program she was directing needed to be freed from the “ideological stranglehold” of composition. “Because,” Braun says, “composition and rhetoric constitute two distinct disciplinary projects,” she believes that “replacing a composition program with a rhetoric program, in effect, means that the mission and objectives of the writing program must experience a sea change” by “replacing the key terms of and concepts handed down from composition’s long first-century with the critical language of rhetoric” (95). It is only by doing so that the program would be able to prepare students for “civic life,” a concern she felt to be all the more urgent following 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq (90).

Braun’s account illustrates the ways in which specific concerns, interests, goals, and possibilities prompt particular uses of the terms rhetoric and composition. These concerns help to produce particular readings not only of the current sociopolitical climate nationally and internationally, but also of conditions “on the ground,” in the teaching of the first-year writing/English/composition course and the history of its institutionalization and subsequent practice. Such readings risk dichotomizing rhetoric and composition in the strands of knowledge, practices, students, and curricula foregrounded and neglected, and in the relations across these strands that are highlighted and dismissed. For example, such readings of rhetoric and composition omit from consideration the near exclusion of all but the most privileged populations
from the tradition of rhetorical study from classical times through at least the nine-
teenth century (T. Miller). They ignore the primarily socially conservative effects of
that study on its participants. They fail to address the questionable character of some
of the pedagogies employed. And, at best, they show lack of awareness of the myriad
exes of curricula in and outside postsecondary institutions not affiliated with
that tradition that have encouraged exactly the kinds of social and political critique
called for (see, for example, Freire; Hollis; Wible).

Perhaps less obviously, such readings neglect the powerful and prolonged, if
admittedly mixed, tradition of engagement in composition teaching and scholarship
with theories and practices of critical, feminist, and “progressive” pedagogy, a tradition
that has explored the challenges of pursuing “social and civic” commitments in
pedagogically effective ways. And such readings neglect the potential of recognizably
“academic” work to be itself a site for and means of social and civic engagement. Composition instead appears as little more than *rhetoric manqué*, its focus resolutely
and solely on individual cognitive processes and “expression.” Broadly, such an
account omits the overlap of composition (and conceivably, rhetoric) with work in
critical literacy education, an overlap that ties composition firmly with reading and
writing instruction prior to and outside of colleges and universities, a tradition in
which Paulo Freire’s work serves as the locus classicus. And it gives a definition to
rhetoric that omits the resolutely apolitical—that is, politically conservative—ways
in which “principles” of “effective” rhetoric have long dominated the curriculum of
“composition” courses (see Fulkerson, “Composition Theory”), as well as challenges
to any curriculum that aims at sociopolitical critique (see, for example, Fulkerson,
“Composition at the Turn”).

But engaging the politics of such arguments in a way that allows for pursuit
of possible alternative responses to hegemonic forces requires that we not only
acknowledge the partiality of accounts of rhetoric, composition, and *rhetoric and
composition*, but also the goals and possibilities to which these arguments point, as well
as the substance of their critiques of failure to pursue these. For example, it is worth
recognizing the partiality of not only the account of rhetoric that we’ve critiqued
above, but also the account we’ve offered of composition being engaged with theories
and practices of critical, feminist, and “progressive” pedagogy. After all, much of
the work identified above as part of a tradition in composition that pursues writing
pedagogies aligned with critical, feminist, and “progressive” literacy pedagogy in
fact represents and is represented as opposition to the mainstream of composition.
Moreover, there are significant overlaps in the possibilities to which both perspec-
tives point. Crowley herself imagines a “full-blown course in rhetoric” would provide
“intellectual sophistication that [would immerse] students and teachers in political
and social critique” (“Composition Is Not” para. 9). Her concern for achieving these
goals, and her critique of the apolitical—that is, politically conservative—character of
much work that goes on in first-year undergraduate composition courses, is shared by the tradition of composition outlined earlier. Likewise, that tradition shares her opposition to the exploitative working conditions of those teaching such courses, seen as working hand in glove with such politics.

Despite their shared concerns, the tradition of composition outlined earlier might be distinguished from perspectives like Crowley’s in two ways: (1) its location of the origins of those concerns in the experience of teaching itself rather than in a body of knowledge and tradition that brings such concerns to teaching (see note 5); and (2), for some of us, in the desire to recuperate, and the belief in the possibility of recuperating, the academic as a site for civic and social engagement. On the first point, rather than bringing progressive politics to the classroom via rhetoric, such politics can be seen as emerging out of the experience of that classroom. As Mina Shaughnessy observed of those who devoted themselves to the teaching of basic writing, it was that experience that “pedagogically radicalized” them by helping them “come to know, through [their] students, what it means to be an outsider in academia.” And it was that experience that led them to “reject in [their] bones the traditional meritocratic model of a college” (“Miserable Truth” 114). That same experience may account for the suspicion among many self-identified “compositionists” of anything smacking of academic tradition, including the study of rhetorical theory, and of those heralding the value of such academic traditions—a suspicion that risks degenerating into anti-intellectualism.

On the second point, those in the position of regularly teaching first-year undergraduate courses are nonetheless committed by such positioning to engaging the site of the academy and to considering the possible recuperation of its writing practices.7 We can see the tension of such a commitment in some of the more popular textbooks used in first-year writing courses. For example, in Ways of Reading, whose popularity is signaled by the appearance of its eighth edition, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky attempt to recuperate for the academy particular writings and ways of reading them that are in fact somewhat marginal to the experience of most first-year undergraduate students. In the text’s introduction, Bartholomae and Petrosky state that there is “certainly nothing wrong with” such mainstream practices as the summary, paraphrase, essay exams, or reading for information or main ideas. Yet they follow this by warning of a “danger” in imagining that reading consists only of such mainstream practices, for, they explain, there are “ways of thinking through problems and working with written texts which are essential to academic life, but which are not represented by” such practices (6). In line with this concern, the readings their text anthologizes are, on the whole, not standard academic texts but on the margins, or cutting edge, of academic culture, by figures similarly positioned (Gloria Anzaldúa, John Berger, Paulo Freire, Clifford Geertz, Mary Louise Pratt, Adrienne Rich, Edward Said, Alice Walker). In offering texts, and ways of reading
texts, that are admittedly at odds with what the authors see as typically academic except, perhaps, in their difficulty, the pedagogy of *Ways of Reading* offers a counter to traditional academic readings, and to traditional academic ways of reading (and writing) assigned to students.

However, it is important to bear in mind that such pedagogies, ones with which we ourselves have strong affiliations, have been critiqued from both Marxist and rhetorical perspectives for the ways in which they reinforce the site of the composition course as an intimate middle-class domestic space for students’ display of themselves as meaning-makers for the *in loco parentis* figure of the teacher (Trimbur, “Composition”) and, more pointedly, for how they place students in a “discursive position [. . .] divorced from political praxis, or in terms of traditional rhetorical education, from democratic agency in the public forum” (France 594). For example, as Alan France has complained, the position of “textual critic” that *Ways of Reading* assigns students “is no more politically enabling than the experiential soothsayer” that France sees promulgated in expressivist pedagogies (602).

As a way of interrupting the dichotomizing of rhetoric and composition operating in such disputes, we might try to imagine alternative approaches to first-year composition. These would not “bank,” in top-down fashion, the insights of rhetorical theory for students to “apply” in engaging established rhetorics of civic engagement. Nor would these approaches risk insularity by restricting their aim to, at most, teaching reading and writing practices that resist traditional academic reading and writing practices. For example, we might respond positively to demands like France’s that students be given a “rhetorical” education while simultaneously insisting that to “educate” students in rhetoric in ways that advance “democratic agency” requires pedagogies that will engage students themselves in the kind of resisting reading and writing, at once respectful and questioning, of the canonical texts and principles of rhetoric that a textbook like *Ways of Reading* encourages. Students, in other words, might be asked to read and write against as well as with the grain of canonical texts of rhetoric, and to pursue a range of possible meanings to be made of these texts, in the ways that scholars of rhetoric themselves do. Conversely, as we read Trimbur to be arguing, a first-year composition course might engage students and teachers in exploring and intervening in how various texts, including academic texts, might manifest social and civic engagement, and with what contingent effects, rather than assuming the fixed character of what such engagement might look like. Similarly, students might consider the ways in which the problem of the audience in the first-year composition course that has led some critics to dismiss its rhetorical authenticity (see Petraglia) is instead paradigmatic, operating in workplace and other writing sites as well (see Ong). In such courses, concerns traditionally identified with rhetoric would be central, but these would be taken as needing to be reworked through students’ acts of composition rather than through escape to “real-world” writing.
Redefining the Graduate Rhetoric and Composition Program

It might be argued that while many would have serious qualms about putting first-year undergraduates in a required course in the position of reworking the concerns of rhetoric, putting graduate students in such a position is both to be expected and encouraged. Graduate programs, after all, are meant to prepare their students to engage in the professional activities of the discipline, and questioning canonical knowledge is just part of professional academic disciplinary business-as-usual.

But perhaps the most common way of defining such knowledge in rhetoric and composition programs represented in program and course catalog descriptions assigns “rhetoric” to “history” in the form of courses (often required) in the “history of rhetoric,” and in relation to specific groups, as in “minority” and “ethnic” rhetorics. And “composition,” by contrast, becomes “theory” about pedagogy or empirical “research” about composing processes in an unspecified, decontextualized, ongoing present. In a review of graduate course offerings in rhetoric and composition programs, Karen P. Peirce and Theresa Jarnagin Enos note that the two most common course types offered in such programs are “composition theory” and “history of rhetoric” (205). In a review of textbooks used in introductory courses on rhetoric, Melissa Ianetta and James Fredal describe them as presenting histories of rhetoric, either in terms of a collection of “Great Authors” or in terms of the theoretical frameworks defining intellectual movements (192–94). They note that both sorts of texts present contemporary rhetoric in terms largely divorced from concerns with pedagogy (198).

Of course, the actual work conducted under the auspices of course descriptions may well defy their implications, and textbooks do not determine the uses that are made of them in courses. Nonetheless, these tendencies illustrate a dynamic in curriculum design: in order to be recognized by the dominant as acceptable, programs, courses, and the textbooks for use in courses must appear to rehearse dominant beliefs about what the curricula offered for those pursuing graduate study in rhetoric and composition should be. Although we recognize and, along with countless others, have ruthlessly exploited the tenuous character of the relationship between the actual work of courses, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, work implied by the language of catalog and website program and course descriptions and textbooks, this kind of language nonetheless constrains people teaching and taking the courses represented by these. For example, at our institution, students (and their advisors) must find a way of determining whether enrollment in Rhetoric and Textual Analysis or Assessing and Responding to Student Writing or a Seminar in Rhetorical Studies offering “investigations in rhetoric and composition” will count toward either the three required hours in “rhetoric,” or the three in “pedagogy and program administration” (or even the three required hours in “literature”).

Such curricular designs, and the unacknowledged uses to which they may be put,
rehearse what will be a familiar chain of binaries: rhetoric/composition, past/present, theory/practice, scholarship/teaching, authors/students. We see these binaries, and the contradictions to which they give rise, emerging out of the two legitimate and intersecting though often competing concerns motivating the designing of graduate programs: (1) concerns for achieving academic disciplinary legitimacy within the institution and profession; and (2) concerns for affecting current academic (that is, teaching and administration) practices, using whatever resources are available. Pursuit of academic disciplinary legitimacy often reinforces such binaries insofar as this pursuit is responsible primarily to dominant definitions and concerns of the profession, which in turn reflect dominant definitions of academic professionalism. This pursuit thereby risks failing to prepare students for the ever-changing needs they face in their work as teachers, administrators, and even scholars. They may be “qualified” to teach a History of Rhetoric course but unprepared to respond to ongoing local, disciplinary, or global history in rhetorically effective ways.

Pursuit of concerns affecting current academic practices reinforces these binaries insofar as that pursuit is primarily reactive to rather than proactive toward prevailing institutional and other contexts. Attending to what are perceived to be immediate exigencies, it risks failing to produce students who will be recognized as legitimate by dominant members of the profession (see Bartholomae 22). Such students may be able to talk about the work they have done locally and its significance, but they may not appear to be able to offer a course on the history of rhetoric already on the books, and in the list of core required courses, of a department where they apply for a position. Instead, their work can fall into the amorphous category of having “experience,” its value hard to assess by conventional measures, as illustrated by the difficulties that writing program administrators, as well as teachers, have in arguing for the value of their “experience” in these roles (see Council, “Evaluating”). They thus risk lacking the cultural capital necessary to carry out the kind of work they believe is needed. Moreover, designing a program in response to what are perceived to be local, national, or international exigencies risks not just guaranteed obsolescence but misreading exigence.

Clearly, combating the dichotomizing of rhetoric and composition in any politically useful way will require more than simply choosing one over the other. For example, if those of us more concerned with composition defined primarily in terms of first-year pedagogy were simply to insist on designing graduate programs that focus first and foremost on such matters, the effect would not be a marshalling of resources to meet current needs but, rather, a reification of both a canon of scholarship on pedagogy (think Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Ira Shor, and debate on their work) and the institution of the first-year required course itself (see Dryer). Nor would it seem to be useful to reverse the terms of the binaries, as we see in the futile, if perpetual, attempts to honor the “scholarship of teaching” or the
scholarship of writing program administration. Attempts to reverse the terms of the binaries in fact maintain dichotomies operating in dominant definitions of academic professionalism by retaining a hierarchical relation between the terms’ references, and by accepting the validity of those references in marking a specific activity or body of knowledge. For example, claims to the “scholarship” of “teaching” privilege scholarship over teaching even in the attempt to grant greater value to teaching (see Horner, “Redefining Work”).

Instead of these tactics, we can interrupt the dichotomizing of rhetoric and composition and the chain of binaries linked to this by relocating the work represented by the various terms rhetoric, composition, theory, practice, and so on as activities that cut across the binaries, and by finding ways to carry out this work not simply under cover of traditional curricular and program designs, but explicitly. Instead of emphasizing the “scholarship of teaching,” for example, we can investigate what it might, and should, mean to teach scholarship, or to practice theory, or to compose rhetoric as well as to enact a rhetoric of composition. To work against reifications implicit in assigning rhetoric to “history,” graduate programs can incorporate into their designs explicit ways to address how histories of rhetoric are composed (a perduing issue—see Schilb) and to combat the canonizing—in the sense of the de-materializing—of rhetoric through examination of rhetorical study itself as material social practice (compare Ianetta and Fredal 192 ff.). And in place of seminars on teaching rhetoric or composition, we can focus on the rhetoric and composition of teaching (and of writing programs).

We see such moves, conducted currently under many different guises, as enacting a politics of hope in the possibility of creating more just and equitable alternatives to hegemonic relations in their use of the resources that study in rhetoric and composition already provides. These moves draw on what we perceive to be a shared concern at the core of traditions of both rhetoric and composition with addressing the historical moment: not simply “immediate” experience, nor simply “the past,” but the moment understood in its full material context as historical in the sense of being conditional, shaped but also subject to change.

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The work of actual people “in” either rhetoric or composition illustrates the challenges of carrying out such moves. As we can see in the postings on the thread including that cited earlier, a chain of stable binaries clearly constrains people’s work as well as perceptions of it. For example, in the posting that prompted McComiskey’s comments quoted earlier, an instructor asked for help planning an “advanced composition course” so that it might introduce students to “the concept of rhetoric” (Alexander). Thus, the instructor’s teaching appears to be based on the belief that rhetoric is something not for beginning but for “advanced” composition courses,
a set of concepts to be introduced after students have acquired some kind of basic understanding of composition in earlier courses. Many of the replies that followed seemed to accept and operate on this notion, offering various suggestions of texts to use and concepts to introduce. Indeed, it was McComiskey’s post that challenged that notion, asking, “Is this question a sign of a larger trend?”

It’s clear from many of the posts subsequent to McComiskey’s (including additional posts by McComiskey) that their writers wish to challenge such binaries. McComiskey, for example, invokes them in his second contribution to the thread only in order to reject the distinctions as “insidious” [2006b]. But it’s also clear that these binaries have enormous power in shaping people’s work. For example, in one posting on the thread, a writer notes that her graduate coursework, subsequent scholarly focus, and teaching assignments have been largely restricted to, and thus best labeled as, “composition,” not “rhetoric.” In another post, a WPA rejects using “rhetoric” to name a two-semester course sequence because the courses don’t explicitly address rhetorical principles. Thus, using “rhetoric” to name these courses would, the writer believes, give the appearance of claiming for them the status associated with classical rhetoric that these courses have not earned.

One sees in such postings the difficult dialectic that people in rhetoric and composition must engage while naming and indeed doing what they do. The larger academic institutional settings where they work constrain their “everyday practices,” restricting their maneuvers primarily to de Certeauian tactics and uses in response to institutions’ strategic practices defining the spaces within which those maneuvers must operate. Those debating whether composition teachers ought to know (and teach) rhetorical theory, or whether composition needs to associate itself with rhetoric to avoid denigration, or whether someone with graduate coursework in rhetoric is qualified to teach courses in composition (and vice versa), maneuver within established institutional hierarchies. These render graduate teaching “higher” than undergraduate teaching (and likewise accord greater status to “higher” education than “secondary” education); they commonly rank “research” above “teaching” and both above “service” in assigning merit, tenure, and promotion; and they assign greater status to “basic” research in relation to “applied” research and, at least within the humanities, to “theory” in relation to “practice” and even empirical research.

This is not to say that these maneuvers (or their outcomes) must inevitably conform to institutional expectations. For example, it turns out that McComiskey, dubbed a “theory guy,” teaches plenty of first-year composition (McComiskey, [2006b]). Likewise, teachers may put standard textbooks to different uses that go unnoticed (see S. Miller, “Is There”; P. Scott). But those adopting such maneuvers must inevitably contend with institutions’ set pathways, and thus are subject to being misunderstood and dismissed as peculiar, self-defeating, or misguided, and to suffering the consequences assigned by institutions to individuals so deemed. For
example, as Shaughnessy has warned, “[A]s writing instruction is presently organized, the teacher who wishes to give his [sic] best energies to the instruction of ill-prepared freshmen must be ready to forego many of the rewards and privileges of his profession” (“English” 95). And as Bartholomae has admitted, graduate students who don’t take the standardized routes of entry into professional careers in composition tend to take a “battering” on the job market (22).

Although such warnings would appear to doom those defining their work in professionally unorthodox ways to institutional marginalization, the history of basic writing also suggests alternative possibilities. For it’s possible to read that history as a story of working across institutional hierarchies. We see this in the development of basic writing into a scholarly “subfield” of composition (arguably the site of some of the most seminal scholarship in rhetoric and composition of the last thirty years) marked by the publication of landmark, award-winning books and essays and, of course, by the institutionalization of the Journal of Basic Writing and the Conference on Basic Writing as forums for such work by teachers with such commitments. 12 Similarly, those involved in writing program administration have argued with at least some success for institutions to accord their work, traditionally denigrated as (mere) “service,” the same value ordinarily assigned only to work taking the form of publications in traditional scholarly genres (see Council, “Evaluating”). This is in addition to developing a journal (WPA: Writing Program Administration), conference, and sponsoring organization to support the work of writing program administration and to shape the study and teaching of writing and policies affecting these (see Council, “About” and “Network”).

Such efforts are commonly identified with “professionalization.” As such, like any tactical maneuvers, they are contradictory in their effects insofar as they must work both with and within institutional constraints. Indeed, the contradictions of rhetoric and composition’s “professionalization” have themselves been the subject of heated debate, including its failure to improve the working conditions of most instructors and the effect of that professionalization on how work is defined. 13 For the purposes of the present argument, what seems crucial here is to consider what such efforts do and don’t foreground, and at what and whose costs, within which personal and disciplinary contexts, in pursuit of what goals, and with what effects on the limiting definitions for composition and rhetoric described above.

One possible direction for such considerations to take is to foreground the “intellectual” and “theoretical” work that rhetoricians and compositionists produce in the process of teaching first-year courses. For example, Bartholomae has explained that he regularly teaches first-year composition because he sees it as a place where one can “think out critical problems of language, knowledge, and culture through the work of ‘ordinary’ or ‘novice’ or student writers, [. . .] a way of working on the ‘popular’ in relation to academic or high culture.” It is, as he puts it, an “intellectual
project" (24). We see a similar move in James Slevin’s identification of the teaching of first-year composition as an activity of “interpretive pedagogy” in which teachers work “collaboratively with students and colleagues to interpret educational practices and to work for educational reform” (Introducing 2). This pedagogy, Slevin asserts, is “made possible, within schooling, only when and because students participate fully in the work of composition” (16). In such arguments, key terms in the discourse about the day-to-day work of rhetoric and composition—students, teaching, difference, intellectual projects—are given inflections alternative to dominant institutional designations of the space of the first-year composition course as a site only for the application of the fruits of intellectual projects conducted elsewhere; of the teaching of first-year composition as appropriate only for non-tenure-line instructors providing the service of “delivery” of these fruits; and of students as (at best) the depositories for such deliveries. Instead, students are seen as participating with teachers in the project of “think[ing] out critical problems of language, knowledge, and culture.”

But to be more useful, such alternative accounts of our work would need to be contextualized in terms of the specific material conditions obtaining, and shaping, these efforts. The ways teachers make the teaching of first-year composition an “intellectual project” in which students collaborate are likely to differ radically as these efforts engage with the specific program and institution in which that teaching is housed, the instructor’s professional status, physical plant conditions, and the number and material situations of the students. And these accounts should also include discussions of ways to improve the conditions of teaching that would further such work. Likewise, accounts of research can be contextualized in terms of perceived exigencies on the ground, rather than by pursuing the traditional academic exchange value of being recognized as “purely academic” in their motivation, production, and consequences.

Such efforts at redefining the work of rhetoric and composition are in keeping with Andrea Lunsford’s observation that even the conflicts animating the field are prompted because of commitments “to link the scholarly and the pedagogical and the practical at every turn; and to make students and learning the heart of our endeavors” (5–6). Of course, it is possible to understand this linking in ways that reinforce the binaries of rhetoric/composition, theory/practice, scholarship/teaching, and so on. But it is also possible to pursue ways that counter these. For example, the ways in which rhetorical theory, rather than taking us away from teaching, emerges out of teaching can help to counter the theory/practice, research/teaching chain of binaries structuring the standard paradigms for rhetoric and composition. Further, seeing both “teaching” and “theorizing” as acts of composing rhetorics would call for evaluation of our theories as well as our practices in terms of social material exigencies and actions. This would require that we contextualize our theories and practices in terms of local, disciplinary, institutional, and global histories, interests, concerns, and goals.
We end with three lines of inquiry to which we see such contextualization leading:

1. How do people in the “rhetoric” strand of “rhetoric and composition” distinguish their work from others in “rhetoric” housed in departments and disciplines of speech and communication, media studies, journalism, and literature? Why?

Dichotomizing templates for composition and rhetoric in *rhetoric and composition* beg the question of why “rhetoric and composition” is the professional affiliation for those who identify themselves as working primarily in rhetoric. We find inadequate the familiar answers to this question: “the dictates of the job market,” and the pedestrian observation that most of those working in “rhetoric and composition” are first exposed to and become intrigued by it through teaching and having to deal with teaching “composition.” For it is a fact that many of those compelled to teach composition in their graduate education or early academic careers do not subsequently remain involved; instead, they seek other options as soon as possible (see, for example, O’Dair).

Thus, we need more accounts from those affiliated with the rhetoric strand of “rhetoric and composition” of how they perceive the distinction between the rhetoric they do in “rhetoric and composition” and the rhetoric others do in other fields and disciplines, and of the ways in which their disciplinary identification with *rhetoric and composition* has informed and been informed by their sense of the relation between research, scholarship, and service. This line of inquiry could in turn call attention to the contributions to *rhetoric and composition* of those whose education and/or “scholarship” has led them to be institutionally designated as working in other areas of English, including creative writing and literature.

2. How do those of us involved in both composition and rhetoric account for the significant, long-standing, and ongoing contributions to “rhetoric and composition” of those with training and positions in the fields of education and applied linguistics?

Insofar as rhetoric and composition is concerned with teaching and with language, the work of those in rhetoric and composition necessarily intersects with work in the fields of education and linguistics. Yet the *rhetoric and composition* designation glosses over the deep roots of its work in these fields (see Faigley; Stock), despite the fact that many figures whose work has historically been key to rhetoric and composition, and many figures active in the field so designated, are most closely affiliated with these fields; and despite the fact that many others in rhetoric and composition bring substantial experience in education and linguistics, including experience teaching high school and English as a second language, to their work in what is nonetheless simply called *rhetoric and composition*.

One consequence of this glossing is rhetoric and composition’s often-lamented
inattention to, if not outright denigration of, work in the teaching of writing in primary and secondary schools (aka “language arts”) useful to its work and to understanding that work. Another less obvious consequence is a failure to recognize, and benefit from, work directly relevant to those in the United States concerned with rhetoric and composition that, elsewhere, is found in these “other” fields, as tends to be the case, for example, in the United Kingdom, Canada, France, New Zealand, and Australia.  

3. How are those of us in “rhetoric and composition” addressing our tendency to equate “writing” with writing “in” English? Our inscription as the margin of a transnational English-only business?

It is a fact that “rhetoric and composition” as such is almost entirely a U.S., English monolingual phenomenon without parallel elsewhere, a field that anyone attempting to explain its work to those outside the United States must needs explicate. Thus, while those in rhetoric and composition have produced a wealth of studies on new and old communication media technologies, they have largely treated English as the unquestioned linguistic medium (Horner and Trimbur). However, the contradictory simultaneous pulls of the “globalization” of English as a “standard” and its fracturing into a variety of fluctuating “world Englishes” is forcing the question of what even “writing in English” might mean and involve, as is the sheer fact that the majority of those now using English do not qualify as “native” English speakers.

Rhetoric and composition can respond to this question in two ways. First, it can examine the ways in which its work might support, or counter, the promotion of standardized uses of English that restrict who is deemed to have a legitimate right to be heard and what they might say, and that support a tacit policy of “English-only” serving the interests of racial and ethnic prejudice and global capital (see Lu, “Essay”). Second, it can investigate the rhetorics of particular uses of English, and uses of other languages, in light of the current shifting constitution and status of these languages and varieties of them, and how students might participate in these investigations to pursue more equitable social relations for all, locally and globally.

Pursuing these lines of inquiry will almost inevitably lead not only to rethinking the relationship of rhetoric and composition to work in education and applied linguistics as well as to other work in “rhetoric,” but also to confronting the forces shaping current work in rhetoric and composition and the effects of its work in return, globally and locally. The question of language difference, for example, arises both at the “global” level of international media, institutional “articulation” agreements and cooperative ventures, and the exchange of knowledge, students, and texts, and at the local level—in the heterogeneous language resources and desires of our students, and our own efforts to respond to these as well as the efforts of our colleagues and communities. Simultaneously, rhetoric and composition confronts daily the consequences
of globalizing economic relations, both in representations of that globalization as a matter of TINA (“there is no alternative”) or “la pensée unique” (Ramonet), and in the much-lamented yet ongoing casualization of labor in the teaching of rhetoric and composition despite the ostensible value of that labor in its official charge to standardize the English of global commerce.

The tensions between rhetoric and composition within *rhetoric and composition* attest to the power of these forces to shape our habitus. By implication, however, recognizing the source of those tensions in these forces may enable us to turn those forces to our collective advantage, and the advantage of our students, in the tactics we develop in response, and, thereby, to put rhetoric and composition to productive work.

**Notes**

1. Except when quoting others, we put the phrase “rhetoric and composition” in italics when we refer to the phrase as a disciplinary label whose individual terms—*rhetoric, and, and composition*—and the phrase as a whole—*rhetoric and composition*—are subject to dispute: both the meanings of each individual term and the possible relationship(s) between them suggested by the phrase *rhetoric and composition*. For a sampling of that debate, see Coleman and Goodman; Gage; Kopelson; Mulderig; J. Murphy; Swearingen; and works discussed later. For an overview of the debate on which we draw here, see Horner and Lu, “Rhetoric.”

2. We wish to thank Bruce McComiskey and Kara Alexander for generously granting us permission to cite from their postings. The public status of the listserv posting genre is unclear, and the relatively ephemeral nature of their production precludes writers of postings from developing and substantiating arguments hinted at in what they write. As McComiskey has reminded us (personal email), this can mean that postings can appear especially vulnerable to critique from sustained scrutiny simply because the nature of the genre of listserv postings does not allow for the kind of development of authors’ thoughts that, say, the genre of a journal essay (like this one) affords. Indeed, often these postings are quickly formulated both as responses to earlier postings and as provocations to further consideration of issues by other listserv participants (McComiskey’s postings served both functions)—somewhat like utterances in conversations, public or private—rather than as full-scale articulations of considered positions, hence the frequency with which they take the form of questions (again, as in McComiskey’s posting cited here, and Alexander’s). Our discussion of the listserv postings is meant to capture some of the turns such collaborative consideration happened to take in this thread, and the postings themselves should be understood in terms of the constraints as well as potential of the genre.

3. Other sites for investigation would include the criteria used for evaluating applicants for any of the positions whose postings are discussed previously, and criteria used by journal editors for evaluating the relevance to the “field” of manuscripts submitted to the journal.

4. Crowley distinguishes “modern” composition from the historical practice of the intertwining of “rhetorical and literary composition” from ancient times through the nineteenth century.

5. See, for example, Chase; Durst; Fox; Goldblatt; Hurlbert and Blitz; Kells; Lu; R. Miller; T. Scott; Seitz; Tassoni and Thelin; Wallace and Ewald. Crowley acknowledges that “there are composition theorists and teachers who attempt to achieve the goal of civic commitment in their first-year courses.” She attributes this orientation to motivation from “Marx and neo-Marxist theorists […] [or] from the brand of cultural studies associated with the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall” (“Composition Is Not” para. 6).


7. The alternative is to treat as unproblematic what one’s experience of academic writing shows to
be problematic, or to engage in an elaborate shadow play of pretending to engage students with academic writing while in fact pursuing some other end.

8. Our book *Writing Conventions* represents our own effort to pose such traditional rhetorical concepts as *audience*, *purpose*, and *genre* as terms with contested meanings meriting investigation by students.

9. It should be noted that institutional processes for approving programs and courses of study mandate that the discourse describing these must respond to beliefs dominant among faculty and administrators unaffiliated with rhetoric and/or composition, however defined, or even the departments in which such programs are housed.

10. See Langstraat and Lindquist’s distinction between “paradigmatic” and “syntagmatic” understandings of the discipline affecting graduate program design (23–24 and passim).

11. And has written specifically about that teaching in, for example, his book *Teaching Composition*.

12. We’re thinking here not just of Shaughnessy’s own scholarship, but also of the award-winning publications of such figures as David Bartholomae, Patricia Bizzell, Glynda Hull, Mike Rose, and Marilyn Sternglass, and collections such as *The Sourcebook for Teachers of Basic Writing* (Enos), *Landmark Studies on Basic Writing* (Halasek), the *Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing* (Adler-Kassner and Glau), and Michael Moran and Martin Jacobi’s *Research in Basic Writing*.

13. See Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola; France, Lalicker, and Teutsch; Gorzelsky; Gunner; Harris, “Behind”, Horner, “Redefining, Resisting”; M. Murphy; Sledd; Slevin, “Disciplining”; Trimbur, “Writing.”

14. We’re thinking here, for example, of such figures as Lil Brannon, James Britton, Suresh Canagarajah, Lisa Delpit, John Dewey, Janet Emig, Paulo Freire, James Paul Gee, Anne Ruggles Gere, Keith Gilyard, Joseph Harris, Patrick Hartwell, Glynda Hull, Paul Kei Matsuda, James Moffett, Anthony Petrosky, Mary Louise Pratt, Mike Rose, John Rouse, and Brian Street.

15. See Emerson and Clerehan, and Matsuda. We’re thinking here, for example, of scholarship by such figures outside the United States as Roz Ivanič, Mary Lea, Theresa Lillis, Allan Luke, Alastair Pennycook, and Brian Street.

16. For example, in her study *Écrire à l’Université: Analyse comparée en France et aux États-Unis*, Christiane Donahue is forced to “borrow” the English phrase “composition theory” to name the field for French readers and to devote an entire chapter to describing it, there being no literal French equivalent to “composition theory” as there is for, say, education (*l’enseignement*, *éducation*, *pédagogie*, *didactique*) or linguistics (*linguistique*) (see Donahue, chapter 1).

17. On the globalization of English, the development of world Englishes, and the pedagogical implications and consequences of these, see Brutt-Griffler; Canagarajah; Horner and Lu, “Resisting”; Lu, “Living-English”; Parakrama; Pennycook; and Widdowson. On the concept of the “native” speaker, see Kramsch; Leung, Harris, and Rampton; and Singh.

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