Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing beyond Our Classrooms

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Seeking New Worlds: The Study of Writing beyond Our Classrooms

As new ways of creating and interpreting texts complicate ideas of how and why writing happens, the field of rhetoric and composition needs to be more conscious of how our institutional responsibilities and scholarly attention to college writing has limited its vision of writing and literacy. It is time to move beyond consolidating our identity as a field focused on college writing, reach out to other literacy-related fields, and form a broader, more comprehensive, and more flexible identity as part of a larger field of literacy and rhetorical studies.

When I watch a science program about astronomy there is often a compelling piece of animation on the formation of the solar system that shows how the cosmic dust sent hurtling across space by the big bang eventually coalesced into the cosmic objects we know so well—first the sun, and then the surrounding planets. The animation ends with the familiar view of the solar system, a seemingly self-contained organization with the sun at the center and the planets whirling about it. It is somehow reassuring to see order emerge from randomness as mass and gravity increase, resulting is a definable system that just keeps spinning around, stable and predictable.
I have found in such animations a metaphor for the field of rhetoric and composition. In our own way we began as a set of disconnected programs and practices, many beginning with first-year writing courses, which eventually bumped into one another and created networks and conversations about teaching writing. When the growth of such programs and the conversations reached a critical mass, our field emerged as a recognizable entity. For the sake of argument, and given this special issue, let’s peg it to sixty years ago. In the years since then, first-year writing, as the largest program, grew as the center of the solar system while other concerns and locations about writing on college campuses resulted in the formation of new bodies, such as Writing Across the Curriculum and writing centers and digital writing. These programs and subfields of varying sizes grew and stabilized, all orbiting within the solar system of college composition. We might draw our diagrams differently or disagree about what is at the center and what is a subfield in orbit, but there is a sense, reflected in some of the more popular histories of our field (Connors; Crowley; Brereton) that we inhabit a system that focuses on the concerns of college-level writing.

As tidy as this solar system metaphor may be, however, just a bit more examination disrupts the notion of rhetoric and composition as a closed and stable field. Although there is no denying that research and theory about college writing has dominated the field for decades, there have always been scholars in our field who have also studied writing and literacy in noncollege settings, from elementary and secondary schools to neighborhoods and community centers. Ideas and research beyond our scholarly solar system often catch the attention of our field like passing comets. Even as journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and *Composition Studies* grew and focused largely on college writing, others, such as *JAC*, increasingly published rhetoric and composition scholarship that looked beyond the literacy practices happening on campus. In recent years the interest in writing beyond campus has continued to develop, and the scholarship in the field reflects diverse interests in research and theory. Our scholarly solar system is expanding, as if we are continuing to find and explore more and more new planets, and in the process, it is reshaping how we imagine the contours of our field and our place in it.

At the same time, however, as we expand our solar system, as our scholarly work grows more diverse in the study of writing, literacy, and rhetoric in many settings, we are doing so largely out of contact with nearby solar systems where
similar issues, research, and questions are taking place. Nearby solar systems—the fields of K–12 literacy education, ethnographic and international literacy studies, and media studies—maintain their own gravitational centers even as all study the same issues of how people create and interpret texts. In other words, while more people in rhetoric and composition research and write about how writing and rhetoric are taking place in communities and beyond traditional college-age students, those works and the conversations they inspire seem to take place largely within our field. Meanwhile, in what I would argue are complementary fields of the study of literacy, rhetoric, and writing, research is taking place that is astonishingly similar. Yet, by and large, people in rhetoric and composition aren’t citing this work, and people in fields such as K–12 literacy education, ethnographic and international literacy studies, and media studies aren’t citing rhetoric and composition research. There just aren’t scholarly conversations happening on a broad scale between our field and other fields that are studying literacy practices and pedagogy.

In this essay, then, I will review briefly how research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition continues to expand beyond the concerns of college writing. Such an expansion, however, often seems the result of individual and idiosyncratic interests rather than systemic transformations of the professional focus of the field. At the same time, there are many people, journals, and institutions in rhetoric and composition that continue to regard the study of college writing as the central project of the field. The desire to study writing and literacy more broadly, which seems to be increasing in recent years, can create tensions in regard to institutional realities such as administering writing programs, gaining tenure, or surviving within English departments. Tensions often arise between the institutional and disciplinary forces that reward us for consolidating our identity as a field focused on college writing and the research that reaches out to other literacy-related fields and is exploring a broader, more comprehensive, and more flexible identity as part of a larger field of literacy and rhetorical studies.

A broadening conception of legitimate research in rhetoric and composition that happens incrementally rather than transformationally raises important questions for our field. As the work being undertaken by scholars about writing off campus and outside the classroom through its very practice
expands the boundaries of our field, are we at a liminal moment in how we define and discuss our professional identity? If, as a field, rhetoric and composition continues to expand its research into work off campus, what are the implications for how we define ourselves and our goals? And how do we need to recognize these new focuses of our field more explicitly and systemically? How do we respond to the paradox that even as more scholarship is produced in rhetoric and composition that is outside of college writing, it seems often to take place on parallel lines with similar scholarship in complementary literacy-related fields of K–12 literacy education, of ethnographic and international literacy studies, and media studies (what I, for brevity’s sake, refer to as “literacy-related fields”)? If we are broadening our conception of what it is we study, is it incumbent upon us to engage in conversations and collaborations with scholars in the fields that are addressing the same questions and issues?

My position is that it is important not only that we encourage more research about the writing taking place off campus but also that we use this moment to engage in a systematic and conscious reconsideration of the practices and, just as important, of the nature and perceptions of our field. In some instances this requires new structures and perceptions of our field and, in others, a look back to revive older arrangements and approaches to writing research and education. At the least, such a broader conception of what the field can and should be requires conscious connections to the work and people in other literacy-related fields in ways that broaden our ideas of scholarship.

Though I focus on research and scholarship, I believe that there are connected questions of pedagogy and politics that are also involved. We need to respond more systematically to a world in which the theory and practice of writing and reading increasingly challenge us to recognize the connections between what happens on campus and what happens in other places and at other stages of life.

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Writing Scholarship on Campus and Beyond
It’s important not to overstate how much research by rhetoric and composition scholars is focused on practices outside of the college classroom. As the field has developed a central identity around the study and teaching of writing in college, much of our perception of research, pedagogy, and politics has been able to focus intently on the issues connected to this identity. In terms of schol-
arship, the field continues to develop this focus. A glance at any recent CCCC program reveals far more sessions listed under “Practices of Teaching Writing” and “Composition/Writing Programs” than in other categories, and the sessions in the other categories focus primarily on college writing. A similar look through the issues of *College Composition and Communication* over the past five years shows that most articles are connected to college writing. The range of questions addressed in these presentations and articles, from assessment to placement to service learning to technology in the classroom, is exciting and productive. The chapters included in anthologies of research in the field such as *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* or *The Norton Book of Composition Studies* also largely—though not exclusively—focus on issues of college-level writing. Many of the other journals, publishers, and conferences in the field reveal a similar emphasis on college writing.

I am certainly not arguing against continuing to value research into how and why students write in college. As a field we have responded to issues of writing instruction on campus with creativity and seriousness of purpose. Instead of acquiescing to the popular view of writing instruction as part of a service course with no intellectual foundation, we have responded to the complicated mission of teaching writing with integrity and intellectual rigor. As we have dedicated ourselves to the democratic notions that everyone can and should write, that writing is both a craft and area of scholarly inquiry, and that the composing of texts is as important an intellectual endeavor as their interpretation, the result has been the creation of a body of scholarly work of depth and nuance. The explorations of our field into the influence on college writing of identity, social and cultural forces, cognitive development, language, and rhetorical theory, just to touch on a few issues, have benefited from the intellectual focus of the field on an area of study largely limited to college writing. Teaching and researching college writing is how I, like so many others, came to this field, and it remains an important area of my professional work.

The focus of the field on college writing has never been exclusive, however. There is a tradition of people in rhetoric and composition who are involved with writing and rhetoric outside the college campus. Look in any direction and you find important and creative work by rhetoric and composition scholars such as Anne Ruggles Gere, Thomas Newkirk, Jacquelyn Jones Royster, Debra Brandt, Janet Alsop, Charles Bazerman, and others that crosses into K–12 and daily literacy issues with no explicit connection to college writing. Such
scholarship does not constitute the majority of publication in the field, but it is important. Many people with rhetoric and composition faculty appointments research and publish regularly in books and journals in these literacy-related fields. In addition, there are rhetoric and composition faculty who are active in National Writing Project sites and others who, through organizations such as NCTE, work in complementary fields. New CCC  Committees such as the Committee on Globalization of Postsecondary Writing Instruction and Research also illustrate the changes in what scholars in the field are studying. That we turn primarily to the scholarship in our field also does not mean that there have not been scholars from other literacy-related fields whose work has been embraced by rhetoric and composition. The work in education by Anne Haas Dyson, James Gee, and Lisa Delpit is often cited in rhetoric and composition, as is Brian Street’s ethnographic scholarship or Henry Jenkins’s work in media studies.

It’s also true that the amount of research and writing from our colleagues that focuses on sites and issues outside of the first-year writing classroom continues to grow. A review of current books, dissertations, journal articles, and presentations reveals a field that is also concerned about literacy practices in groups as varied as farmers in Appalachia (Powell), South Asian immigrants (Duffy), young people online outside the classroom (Selfe and Hawisher; Alexander), the homeless (Mathieu), neighborhood centers (Goldblatt), hip hop artists (Hess), international writing practices and policies (Lu; Donahue), and with multiple disciplines and media across campus (Miller and Hammond). The most recent (2010) Conference on College Composition and Communication included a noteworthy number of panels and presentations about writing outside of the classroom and beyond our borders, including sessions titled “Remixing Language and Culture in Transnational Contexts,” “Rethinking the Rhetorician in the Field,” and “Engaging the Community in Developing Inclusive Literacy Practices.” Not only do the themes for each year’s CCC  program usually make explicit gestures toward the study of writing outside the classroom, but there has also been the recent addition of a “Community, Civic, and Public” Area Cluster.

The research on writing in such settings gives weight to the argument that the study of rhetoric and composition is ranging beyond the first-year writing classroom, beyond campus, and beyond the traditional college-aged students. It is particularly interesting to see the issues in dissertation research spread beyond the first-year writing classroom and the university campus to an increasingly wider range of projects. Although there may be a perception in
some corners that in order to land a job it is necessary to make gestures toward pedagogy or first-year writing in a dissertation (Kopelson), the research I am seeing as a search committee member, as a dissertation director, and posted on the dissertation database indicates a much more varied approach by new scholars to their research and theory. Even browsing through the pages of recent issues of *College Composition and Communication*, where the mission statement “invites submissions of research and scholarship in composition studies that supports college teachers in reflecting on and improving their practices in teaching writing,” turns up articles on writing as far from the first-year classroom as in colonial India (Jeyaraj), discourses of race at an all-white high school (Trainor), and migrant narratives in China (Wexler).

Research that examines writing and rhetoric off campus benefits the work of the field in both those settings and the classroom. Studying how and why students have been writing off campus, or in high school, or how they continue to write once they leave college enriches our understanding of the interconnected nature of literacy practices. The kinds of research I mention above remind us how complex the web of reading and writing is in our culture and what important insights we will miss if all we have is research that focuses on writing done in college classrooms. If the claim of rhetoric and composition is to study student writing, it must be in conversation about how writing happens before and after students step on to university campuses. It is hard to make a serious claim about how pedagogy affects student writing in the brief hours they in the classrooms if it ignores the many hours they spend writing at home and at work, with rapidly evolving online media and technology. Understanding more about the literacy practices in which students engage outside of the classroom or before they reach college (or practices in which they may engage after college) complicate and benefit our research and our teaching.

**Engaging in Broader Conversations**

The continuing expansion of rhetoric and composition research beyond college writing raises the question about whether this is the kind future people in the field want to pursue. What’s more, does research of the kind I am citing above represent individual, anomalous projects or a conscious repositioning of the field? On the one hand, the recognition that research in rhetoric and composition should range beyond the classroom has been reflected in calls by
scholars for a more capacious approach to our work. Doug Hesse in his CCC
Chair’s Address said, “I’ll just observe that writing in the civic sphere is now
manifest as a self-sponsored activity to a greater extent than it ever has been.
Yet most of us, and that includes me, teach as if the civic sphere were still in-
stitutionally sponsored (353). The year before, in her Chair’s Address, Kathleen
Blake Yancey talked of her proposal for a new curriculum for the twenty-first
century that would bring “together the writing outside of school and that
inside” (308). Cynthia Selfe, a few years earlier, called for “a collective effort to
construct a ‘larger vision’ of our responsibilities as a profession” that includes
“schools, classrooms, districts, communities” (429). Similar sentiments show
up in books: “As long as we elect to write in ways that produce arguments that
never circulate beyond the confines of our field, as long as we devote our ener-
gies to assessing the past without thought of future action, then our political,
cultural, and intellectual irrelevance is self-willed” (Miller 254). And journal
articles: “What would happen if we reconceived of ourselves as ‘writing experts’
working in the public realm instead of ‘composition teachers’ working within
the university?” (Porter et al. 632).
Yet the very frequency of these gestures, the necessity of being reminded
that writing happens beyond college campuses, may indicate the tensions
between the desire to expand our areas of scholarly interest and the concerns
about keeping them focused on college writing. If the field and interests are ex-
 panding, why is there the need to make the calls, time and again, for a broader
focus for our work? Although I agree with these sentiments about the field
engaging with writing and literacy as life-long and life-wide activities, does
the frequency of these exhortations to research and theorize about writing
more broadly indicate that there are still considerable forces pulling the field to
regard itself as primarily connected to issues surrounding writing on campus?
Or is the increase in research about writing and literacy in more varied settings
a response to the calls for an expanding field?
Regardless of how one answers those questions, there are implications
about the future of the field worth pondering. One example is the question
of whether, even as scholarship in rhetoric and composition addresses more
issues off campus, the field of rhetoric and composition should become more
substantially engaged with other fields that also study literacy, writing, and

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rhetoric. At this point, the work taking place in rhetoric and composition is not integrated with the work taking place in the fields of K–12 literacy education, ethnographic and international literacy studies, and media studies. Yes, there are scholars, some of whom I mentioned above, who are active in some of these other fields. And, yes, there are conferences that will invite a guest speaker or two from one of these other fields. Such examples, however, tend to be idiosyncratic and individual exceptions that don’t reflect the larger, systemic practices in the field. To be clear, I’m not talking about the occasional foray into a bit of scholarship from a field such as sociology or psychology that might be necessary to complete a particular piece of research, useful as that may be. Instead there is limited engagement with the research in other fields that deal with the same essential concerns of rhetoric and composition—of both composing and interpreting texts.

An example of what I’m talking about can be found in some of the scholarship taking place in digital media, an area of interest to all of these literacy-related fields. The program for the most recent (2010) Computers and Writing Conference was impressive and exciting, yet there was almost no presence of scholars from either K–12 or media studies. Yet, just three months earlier, at the Digital Media and Learning Conference, the program was filled with scholars from K–12 and media studies, discussing the same issues and ideas that were on the program at Computers and Writing, but with no rhetoric and composition scholars on the program. Similarly, when I look at a journal from the field of education about digital media and literacy, such as *E-Learning and Digital Media*, and then look at *Computers and Composition*, I see articles on many of the same issues, but it is rare that citations or authors cross from one journal to the other, and only two scholars—out of ninety-nine scholars on the two editorial boards—serve on the boards of both journals. Or if I pick up three new (2010) edited collections, one focused on K–12 literacy, such as *Adolescents’ Online Literacies* (Alvermann), one from international literacy scholars, such as *Multiliteracies in Motion* (Cole and Pullen), and then one from rhetoric and composition, such as *RAW: Reading and Writing New Media* (Ball and Kalmbach), I find many great chapters addressing similar issues of literacy in a digital world and a number of common theoretical lenses from theorists such as Michel de Certeau, Lev Manovich, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gunther Kress. Yet in these books there are few common citations from research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition and these complementary literacy-related fields, let alone common contributors.

By citing these examples I am not criticizing the people involved in these
conferences and publications or this area of research. I’m pointing to these
eamples as illustrative of what I often see in many areas of scholarship in rhetoric
and composition and these other literacy-related fields. The scholars I am citing
are engaged in good and exciting work. That’s the point. The point is that the
already strong scholarship being produced could be enriched if there were more
cussions that crossed the disciplinary lines of these complimentary fields.
Even the places where the interests and scholarship of these fields intersect to
some degree, such as at NCTE or in journals such as Written Communication,
does not change the reality that across the field most of the research and writ-
ing in rhetoric and composition works in parallel rather than in concert with
other literacy-related fields, resulting in rather odd parallel conversations on
the same subjects. As these parallel conversations continue, what is missed is
the particularly valuable difference in perspective that all of these fields can
gain from each other. For example, the work taking place in media studies is
usually not about the composing processes of individuals or issues of writing
at all. Instead media studies scholarship generally focuses on how about how
media, technology, and often popular culture shape texts and how they are
interpreted and used by individuals and audiences. That perspective is one
that should be indispensable to work in rhetoric and composition. In return,
rhetoric and composition provides a perspective on how texts are composed, in
print and with new media, that is of interest to scholars in media studies. The
recent MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, published
by MIT Press, contains exceptional scholarship from people in media studies
and education about how individuals read and participate through the use of
new media. The books focus on issues of interpreting texts, interacting with
digital interfaces, responding to popular culture, and more but give almost no
attention to the rhetorical and process-oriented moves young people make
when composing with new media. By contrast, the Hampton Press series on
New Dimensions in Computers and Composition focuses much more on how
students compose with new media and the rhetorical moves they make as writ-
ers. Both series are excellent, and in reading books from both I have learned
from the two sides of this complex issue. Still, I wish there were more books
and articles that drew from both of these perspectives in order to complicate
and enrich the study of these issues.

To enlarge our conception of rhetoric and composition requires actively
rethinking our research and publishing practices. The point is not that we
should be familiar with all the research in other literacy-related fields, but that
as we conduct research on writing and rhetoric, we broaden our reading lists
and our perspectives to include relevant research on literacy practices outside of campus. Toward that end it would benefit us know that if our research leads us to literacy practices in the home or community or across cultures, there is a body of work in ethnographic and international literacy studies that we should consult including scholars such as David Barton in England or Denise Newfields in South Africa or Ilana Snyder in Australia. Similarly, when we engage issues of student learning, development, and reading, we should pay attention to scholarship in K–12 literacy and important voices such as Donna Alvermann or Kylene Beers or Kevin Leander. Issues of audience reception, technology, and media should bring us to media studies and scholars such as David Buckingham, Mizuko Ito, or Tara McPherson.

For recent examples of what the mix of scholarship from these literacy-related fields might look like in a more expansive vision of rhetoric and composition, we can look to a collection of writing research, such as the Handbook of Research on Writing History, Society, School, Individual, Text (Bazerman) or a journal such as the Community Literacy Journal. The articles in these publications consider writing and literacy across multiple settings and ages—including college—and include scholars from rhetoric and composition and other literacy-related fields. The result is a juxtaposition of research into how writing happens in diverse contexts that challenges readers to make connections about literacy practices at different stages of development, at home, work, or school or in the community. In addition, the diversity of references drawn on by scholars in varied, but related, fields broadens the range of resources for readers of all fields. Examples such as these are productive to scholars and offer intriguing possibilities of how fields focused on the study of writing, literacy, and rhetoric can come together. The question again, however, is whether such books, articles, and journals are intermittent examples reflecting the interests of a small group of scholars, or suggest a more widespread change in the perception of our field and its professional orientation and identity.

As exciting as the kind of cross-disciplinary scholarship I’m advocating might be to those of us who engage issues and ideas beyond college writing, such work can also feel as if we are pulling against the gravitational tide, that we are making individual efforts rather than being part of a more systemic re-orientation of the field.

**Institutional Realities and Scholarship**

As exciting as the kind of cross-disciplinary scholarship I’m advocating might be to those of us who engage issues and ideas beyond college writing, such work
can also feel as if we are pulling against the gravitational tide, that we are making individual efforts rather than being part of a more systemic re-orientation of the field. The reality is that work published in venues outside of rhetoric and composition journals or publishers is often invisible to colleagues in the field, as work published in rhetoric and composition goes unnoticed by colleagues in other literacy-related fields. Many such scholars lead multiple professional lives, publishing for different audiences who never read their work in other fields.5

The lack of intersection among literacy-related fields is not the result of malevolent or willful parochialism, at least not usually, but happens more because of the ways in which the institutional realities of professional lives in the academy shape the possibilities and perceptions of scholarship. Such institutional conditions encourage people to reproduce scholarship, and consequently the professional identity of the field, in particular ways without always taking the time to reflect consciously on the implications individual choices about research have for the larger field.

As any field establishes an identity, along with journals, conferences, anthologies of reprinted works, histories, and databases, it is inevitable that scholars turn primarily to those works for the scholarly background on which to base new research. The ever-growing volume of research to be found in the field is large enough to keep any scholar fruitfully occupied. Drawing from and building on research within a field provides both a useful epistemological structure and scholarly depth for research as well as a further consolidation of the intellectual identity of the field. It also means, when putting together collaborative projects such as edited collections, scholars may look first to familiar names or familiar publications for ideas and contributors. There are also practical reasons for structuring research toward a particular, familiar focus to others in a given field, including limitations of time, access to students, and the space available in an article to cover ideas in depth. What’s more, journal reviewers, readers in general, and dissertation and promotion and tenure committees expect to see a familiarity with the research in the field, including certain works that have gained a canonical status. People publishing in venues outside of rhetoric and composition run the risk of not being read by colleagues, hired by search committees, or promoted by institutions.6 Such an approach, however, does limit the scholarly perspectives one encounters. It is also the situation that as the field has grown and developed more venues for publishing, more conferences, and more anthologies of canonical texts, the more recent generations of rhetoric and composition scholars have been educated and worked more fully within the field than many of their predecessors
who, because rhetoric and composition was smaller, often drew more from, or perhaps came from, other fields such as education, literature, or linguistics.

I am more than sympathetic to objections that suggesting further engagement with scholarship outside of rhetoric and composition may tax already busy people beyond the limits of their time and sanity. Everyone is working full tilt, and that is before considering family and lives outside of work. It’s hard enough to keep up with the literature and journals and books in our own field without being chastised for not keeping up with the scholarship in other fields. Still, though we may not have the time or resources to expand our own research, making any attempts to draw on the research in other literacy-related fields, when relevant, can provide a fruitful, broader perspective for our work.

Another institutional condition that complicates a systemic re-orientation of the field involves the professional identities that many in rhetoric and composition hold on individual campuses in departments of English or involved with college writing programs. For example, this is a fairly young field, and one that is still not always given legitimacy in some corners of the academy, so it often feels like full-time work just to maintain the professional identity that has emerged for rhetoric and composition in the past sixty years. It has been no small feat to move from a little-considered and much-maligned “service course” at the edges of literature departments to a robust field marked by all the recognized academic accoutrements from journals to conferences to doctoral programs.

It has been no small feat to move from a little-considered and much-maligned “service course” at the edges of literature departments to a robust field marked by all the recognized academic accoutrements from journals to conferences to doctoral programs. The need to carve out this identity in the face of indifferent, or even hostile, literature departments and campus communities has required an explicit discussion of the nature of our scholarly field, as well the will to defend that definition. There are many in rhetoric and composition still pushing against indifferent colleagues in literature as well as college administrators and others who misunderstand and devalue writing pedagogy and research. Though proximity to literary theory has provided rich resources for rhetoric and composition, the historical evolution that placed the field in English departments also separated it from perhaps more natural affiliations with other, literacy-related fields.

The positions many in rhetoric and composition hold in either administering or being substantially involved with college writing programs, such as first-year writing, WAC, and writing centers, has benefited our field intellectually, pedagogically, and materially. The institutional growth of college writing
has resulted in exceptional scholarship and pedagogy in all of these areas, as well as often one of the few tenure-track rhetoric and composition jobs in a given department. Administrators, trustees, legislators, parents, and many of our faculty colleagues in other departments may think we don’t know how to teach writing, but the cultural consensus remains solid that there should be writing instruction for college students. If the administrative or teaching parts of rhetoric and composition jobs focus on college writing, a logical response from faculty, both intellectually and in terms of managing research time as efficiently as possible, is to conduct research on college writing. For example, I have seen a significant number of graduate students, both from my institution and others, whose dissertations engaged sites of writing outside the university, take first jobs where their duties included writing program administration. As a consequence, their scholarly focus shifted to issues connected to college writing. This is not, of course, necessarily a negative shift: being a WPA or conducting research on writing pedagogy is important pedagogical and intellectual work. Still, administrative work or heavy teaching loads can keep people busy, on campus, perhaps too busy to read and research outside the university. It is difficult to imagine expending the kind of energy to expand the vision of rhetoric and composition when there is so much energy needed not just to do our daily work but also to fight the institutional battles that never seem to end, about the best practices for teaching writing, about the labor conditions of most first-year instructors, and about the intellectual value of WPA work.

Although these are only some of the more common reasons that explain our current orientation as a field, they do offer a glimpse of the real challenges in thinking of our field as encompassing work outside the writing classroom. Such challenges should also give us pause when thinking about how we, in rhetoric and composition, envision our intellectual mission. An argument can certainly be made that there is enough work to do in research, administration, pedagogy, and politics regarding writing on campus and that’s where we should keep our focus. Others might argue that the current situation, where people in rhetoric and composition research writing both on campus and beyond but have only sporadic intersections with other literacy-related fields, is workable for the field in expanding our vision but also recognizing limits on time and resources.

A Moment for Reconsideration
There seems, however, an interest, perhaps a moment, for an explicit reconsideration of how to define the contours of our field. The lively discussions provoked by articles such as Karen Kopelson’s about the focus of graduate student
research and education, for example, reflected the degree to which people in
the field are asking questions about the nature and focus of the field in general.
Also, the recent move toward creating independent departments of writing
studies has led to further discussions of the nature and identity of the field
(Trimbur; O’Neill, Crow, and Burton; Downs and Wardle) as well as its proper
location in the academy. These discussions and the creation of stand-alone
writing programs are exciting and productive and offer another opportunity
to consider the definition of the field. For example, should new writing studies
departments limit their concerns to college writing or define their missions in
terms of writing both on and off campus? Should new writing studies programs
create explicit connections to scholarship or programs of complementary
literacy-related fields such as K–12 education or media studies? Should a re-
imagining of the field look to the past when the connections between rhetoric
and composition and fields such as K–12 literacy education and communication
were more fluid? I am convinced that the field of rhetoric and composition is
seeing more scholars involved in researching and theorizing about writing in
multiple settings because there is a recognition of the scholarly, pedagogical,
and political benefits to such work.7 If some in our field often feel isolated or
misunderstood in their departments and colleges, then one response is to reach
out to these other fields that can support their intellectual work. Having
strategic partners in the other literacy-related fields on campus and in
a local region can provide increased numbers and
multiple perspectives on the best literacy education practices. Such alliances
can be productive with upper-level administrators, community members, and
public officials.

This does not mean abandoning college writing, yet our field is secure and
healthy enough to allow us to rethink and rearticulate our identity in this more
expansive way. As a field we are not averse to writing histories and reflecting
on our professional identities (Kopelson). Now is a time to think about whether
we should explicitly redefine our focus on writing more broadly as well as our
position with regard to other literacy-related fields.

My position, clearly, is that if we are going to expand our study of writing
beyond the college community, then we should think more carefully about such
an expansion of our interests in changing the identity and mission of the field and consider the
systemic changes involved in a broader vision of research about writing, including connections to other literacy-related fields.
an expansion of our interests in changing the identity and mission of the field and consider the systemic changes involved in a broader vision of research about writing, including connections to other literacy-related fields. Such a change in perceptions requires more than just the anecdotal noting of the rhetoric and composition scholars who publish in complementary fields or who might have a degree in education. For example, to begin more fully engaging scholars and their research from other literacy-related fields, we could start with some direct, practical steps. Rhetoric and composition scholars could consider publishing research in journals and with publishers beyond those traditionally associated with the field as well as encourage and accept more work in our publications from scholars outside of rhetoric and composition. When circulating a call for papers we could imagine scholars beyond rhetoric and composition who would be interested in the subject, and we could send the call to places where they will see it. We could make it a practice every year, or every other year, to attend one conference focused on another literacy-related field. Perhaps more radically, a more expansive view of our field could include a practical shift in institutional promotion and hiring practices, such as being open to job candidates from these complementary fields when their work fits our search criteria. When considering promotion and tenure we should also reward publication in related fields and, perhaps more important, educate colleagues in departments of English and colleges of arts and sciences that publishing in journals in the areas of K–12 or international literacy or media studies is a legitimate demonstration of scholarship in our field.  

The understanding that literacy is a set of socially constructed and culturally mediated practices, rather than a stand-alone set of skills, means it is vital to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on how reading and writing are learned and used than is available through the study of college writing alone. The growth in rhetoric and composition research on writing across places and ages reflects that understanding. It may seem obvious, or perhaps old-fashioned, to be arguing that because writing happens everywhere, if we are going to claim to study writing, we need to study it everywhere. Still, to broaden our mission and our outlook and have the kind of impact our field should have, we must consider and implement more systematic changes of policy and perspective. There should be an explicit restating of what the work of the field should be as well as conscious steps to alter the perceptions and deeds of our professional work. I believe that while the actions and research we conduct are the most important reflections of how we define our scholarship,
it also matters that we discuss explicitly—as is happening in this issue—how our interests and practices are developing. Changes in technology, culture, and institutions of education make this an exciting time to study writing in all its forms and settings. As media and culture make writing more fluid and borderless—part of the daily work of life—our responsibility is to follow, as researchers, teachers, and advocates, those literacy practices wherever they lead.

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**Notes**

1. One such representative animation can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBkxzY061nU.

2. The conversion narrative, of entering a master’s program to study literature or creative writing and then to find rhetoric and composition through teaching writing and taking a writing pedagogy seminar, is a narrative I share with many of my colleagues. I have Tom Newkirk, at the University of New Hampshire, to thank for introducing me to the field while I was working on my MA in fiction writing. Tom also emphasized that he felt we should all envision the study of writing as taking place at all ages and all places and connected all of us to work in K–12 literacy education. I owe him a continuing professional debt that is reflected, once again, in this essay.

3. For those who are skeptical I suggest a comparison of journals or books in other areas of rhetoric and composition next to scholarship on similar issues in other fields to see where the scholarship intersects.

4. College writing pedagogy could also benefit from more engagement with scholarship in literacy-related fields. The approach to much first-year writing pedagogy is to treat students on the first day of class as if they have shown up without having spent the past twelve years reading and writing. Though many instructors have students write literacy narratives that provide some insights into previous writing experiences, generally instructors do not pay much attention to what the students may have been writing or reading a mere three months before, unless it is to dismiss the experience and caution students not to rely on what they learned in high school now that they are in college. What is missing is a thoughtful, informed understanding of both the local conditions of high school writing pedagogy and
assessment as well as the larger discussions taking place about writing pedagogy in K–12 teacher training and development.

5. I’ve lost track of the times that a colleague in one of these fields has read my work in a different field and then contacted me to say, “I had no idea you published all this other work.”

6. It is interesting that often it is senior scholars, or at least those with tenure, who become most active in engaging with other literacy-related fields. Possible reasons for this might include both more professional job security and the time and resources to make the connections to other fields.

7. In political terms, the complementary literacy-related fields are our natural allies when it comes to public discussions of writing. There are ongoing conversations about how best to educate the public about writing scholarship. We should ally with our colleagues in other fields and work together to present to the public a more comprehensive view of recent research and theory on literacy practices throughout school and outside the classroom. Some of this political work happens through NCTE and the WPA Network for Media Action, but more can and should be done at a local level to join forces in how we can educate the public about reading and writing and effective literacy pedagogy.

8. Unfortunately, our position in English departments sometimes leads to a perception of superiority, specifically in relationship to K–12 literacy studies. My evidence is only anecdotal, but I have heard a lot of dismissing of scholarship and scholars who write and publish about elementary and secondary reading and writing. There is not much to say in response to such attitudes other than I believe they are both incorrect and particularly unbecoming given our own struggles to be taken seriously as a field. We can learn a great deal from our colleagues in education and have much to offer them in return.

Works Cited


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