theories and methodologies

Composition, English, and the University

JEAN FERGUSON CARR

How much finer things are in composition than alone.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson[1]

THE ROLE COMPOSITION PLAYS IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, PARTICULARLY IN RELATION TO THE ENGLISH DEPARTment, has changed from the days when composition was not an expertise but a duty. Initiated on the college level in the 1870s, as John Brereton has argued, at a time much like our own, when the American college was "in danger of becoming irrelevant to a rapidly changing nation" (3), composition consolidated the many kinds of writing done in the courses (and in the extracurriculum) of universities into a required academic subject, positioned at the threshold of college education. It was charged with preparing students for the rigors of college study and for citizenship and professional life. For many generations of college English teachers, composition was an expected part of the job: everyone, whatever their specialty, taught first-year writing.

Of course, what came to be called composition also circulated from the late eighteenth century on through the many textbooks on reading, writing, oratory, and rhetoric—and the allied concerns of handwriting, spelling, punctuation, grammar, letter writing, homiletics, and elocution.[2] Before it became a university subject, then, composition was the project of authors trained in moral philosophy, rhetoric, or religion and working as university presidents, professional textbook writers, principals, or schoolteachers. Figured as a gatekeeping enterprise and charged with attending to grammatical correctness and to theme-writing practice, it paved the way for the university's more advanced work and addressed a nationwide concern with the state of reading and writing. In the 1880s, this concern focused on such issues as student performance on college entrance exams and the loss of Latin as a language of educated practice. Public anxiety over student writing has shifted its focus, but it still fuels a vigorous public discussion, activated each fall by the reopening

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of public schools; energized by reports about deficiencies in spelling, style, and logic; and circulating through debates about plagiarism, job preparation, and national literacy.

In the last few decades, often to the dismay of professors of English, composition-rhetoric has burgeoned, becoming a significant specialty offering upper-level and graduate work, gaining designated faculty lines, taking center stage at national conferences.[3] At PhD-granting institutions, faculty members who teach composition are usually responsible for teacher training, sponsoring seminars in pedagogy and mentoring graduate students whose research is supported by the work of teaching first-year writing. As the job market for PhDs in literature, film, and theory shrinks, graduate students sometimes take such composition training and teaching more seriously, hoping to use it as a wedge into a faculty position (most contingent positions focus on composition teaching or assume experience in it as a basic credential). Because pedagogy is often not a significant aspect of graduate attention in other parts of English departments, the teaching that graduate students do under the aegis of composition underwrites their work as teachers in literature, film, and creative writing. Composition can frame their subsequent teaching in these fields and, at times, their intellectual projects. Yet, because teaching composition is an experience shared by most graduate students but only a residual memory for their mentors, the influence of composition is often unacknowledged or even disavowed.

Many fields once affiliated with English have broken out as self-contained disciplines, and composition is positioned to do likewise—there is no shortage of universities where new departments of writing studies are emerging. I would argue, however, that a more intentional and articulated relationship between composition and English is still mutually beneficial. Having composition play a more central role in English departments might, as my colleague Don Bialostosky argues, have less to do with the nouns than with the verbs—it might change not so much the content of what we teach but the actions we promote and use to organize study. It might alter how we cluster kinds of writing, bringing together texts that address particular concerns or projects instead of keeping texts in old historical or generic structures. It might encourage English studies to articulate the relation rather than the distinction between literary and other forms of writing.

Composition offers a number of useful dispositions for the current crisis in English studies. It is committed to the work students do rather than to a body of knowledge they are set to master and thus seems more portable, more translatable across fields of inquiry. Writing is central to its mission, used not so much to monitor learning as to construct an intellectual (political, social, personal) position in relation to the "ambient" situation in which students live and move.[4] Like creative writing, composition offers a space for thinking about writing for work and pleasure, for the public and the self. It presents writing as reflection, as a way of knowing or shaping identity, as inquiry. It has investigated its own institutional spaces and practices, and it has brought such scrutiny into its classes, helping students understand the hidden curriculum of writing instruction, of standards and notions of "good writing." It encourages students to think about literacy, about the ways of learning and becoming expert. Over the last dozen years or so, composition has been less invested in serving school genres disconnected from writing in the broader world and more attentive to prompting the emergence of new genres and modes of discourse.[5]

I want to suggest four investments that a more broadly incorporated composition studies might bring to the English major and graduate degree: reading and revising student writing, seeing writing as connected to the world outside or after college (public writ-

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ing), emphasizing making or doing (writing as material culture), and adopting literacy as a frame. These investments have been important in composition's internal discussions over the past decade—they have influenced the shape of composition curriculum and pedagogy, refigured notions of good writing and authority, prompted a wide array of scholarly debate and inquiry, and energized the field. They could benefit the literary project of English degrees and articulate to the public and to students the value of English as a course of study.

Reading and Revising Student Writing

In the popular, and often professional, imagination, composition is understood as the guardian of correctness. The teacher of writing is figured as a fussy editor, someone who holds the keys to the kingdom of proper syntax, appropriate diction, and precise punctuation. First-year composition is charged with solving the writing problems of all students for their entire college careers—indeed, for their future roles as citizens and workers. For many English teachers, grading papers is a dreaded and time-consuming act of editing their students' work, marking incorrect and infelicitous choices. It is thankless work—since students' writing does not necessarily improve from being thoroughly edited—indeed, students often do not read the wash of red ink that covers their papers. If they do read it, they frequently accept their teacher's rewriting wholesale—or remove an offending passage, thus correcting an error they do not understand.

But compositionists have developed powerful ways of reading student writing, of intervening in it, of prompting students to do more serious and transformative revision than editing (Bartholomae and Petrosky). Such work is still time-consuming, but it can be interesting, productive for students, and a means of investigating important questions about discourse and communication. Scholars like Nancy Sommers and David Bartholomae have articulated sophisticated practices of reading student texts as projects and as works in progress, of understanding error, and of encouraging students to read their own work toward revision (instead of simply accepting their teachers' substitute prose). Figuring out how to intervene, how to make discursive practices evident, calls for a professorial attention to text like the kind offered to literary or critical texts. The attempt to articulate such practices for and with beginning writers can help graduate students (and faculty members) shore up their own understandings of writing, of reading, of communication. If graduate students take up these pedagogical practices and integrate them into their coursework in criticism or cultural studies, they can connect their labor as teachers of writing with their intellectual projects and careers. They can gain valuable insight into the process of writing dissertations or conference papers. Linking teaching and advanced study can allow graduate students (and their teachers) to reflect on complex issues of citation, intertextuality, discourse communities, address to audience—issues that cross from the space of the beginning writer to the most advanced projects.

Public Writing

The traditional humanities major and PhD program are at a moment of crisis—needing to forge a new sense of purpose and energy. Undergraduate and graduate students are leaving the humanities for study that is more closely addressed to the world outside the academy or to the economic pressures of the job market. The more engaged education of internships, lab experience, or fieldwork that they find in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses can seem more valuable. English studies has not yet articulated how its ways of reading and writing, its modes of insight and categorizing, transfer to the outside world.

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Composition, however, is another story: students (and their mentors and parents) fully understand the importance of learning to write, and fields outside the humanities welcome collaborative projects in which composition "handles" the writing component. Composition has long been connected to the world of business and civic life, through courses in business and technical writing, and through its project of civic preparedness. Many English professors shy away from such interests, turned off by what they understand as narrow, functional, service-oriented courses, lacking the creativity or critical edge of English studies. But they haven't looked closely enough lately. They haven't seen the energy and ambition of courses that take a broader view of what counts as work and that make the more abstract interest in civic education a foray into the public sphere.[6] Courses in "service learning" or "writing for the public" or "writing in the prisons" articulate a powerful relationship between the academy and the broader social world. English teachers should consider how their expertise in creative writing, the visual, reading, narrative, textuality, culture, or criticism could be brought to bear on projects other than literary history or imaginative writing, on projects more explicitly worldly. Writing offers a material way to make strong connections with spaces outside the academy, outside the United States. Investigating how writing circulates in global contexts, in activist projects, or among different socioeconomic classes helps students see their English courses as spaces for significant political or public preparation, as places to hone their interests as activists or travelers.[7] It allows them to imagine how their sophistication about language can be valuable and urgent in the larger world.

Although English professors understand how cultural critique and even literature can connect English with other fields (e.g., the arts, science), they have yet to exploit the connections to be made through writing. By sponsoring university programs in writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines, compositionists explore values for writing that differ from those assumed in the humanities. The frequent advice, for example, to "add detail" goes counter to goals in scientific writing (concision, the use of detail only in specific ways and under particular forms of authority). Writing outside the humanities and the university is also more complexly collaborative and more insistently focused on the most recent discoveries than on a history of change. Experts in language, in rhetoric and discourse, have much to offer (and learn from) the writing that goes on in other arenas.

Making or Doing

What would it mean for English to forge a new relationship with composition, to emphasize not so much the knowledge or reading, the theoretical positions or disciplinary structures, but what students do, what they write or make? English departments historically teach a lot of writing, but much student writing feels like a report on what is learned from a professor or from the readings. Writing prompts call for close reading or analysis of texts, comparison between or arrangement in categories or genres, applications of others' theories or modes of criticism. Or they call for a theoretical critique in which students negotiate worlds far—in time or place—from home. The writing that English students do can feel quite removed from their lives outside academe—from the jobs they might pursue, from their political passions or commitments, from their communities' uses of reading and writing. English majors write a lot of the same kinds of papers during college, but they have fewer opportunities to make things—to put disparate materials together, to compose in multimodal forms, to conjoin the worlds of analysis and creativity, the academic and more public frames.

Probably the most consequential and widespread development in composition

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over the last decade has been the move toward digital composition. Jody Shipka, for example, argues for a "composition made whole," a mediated practice that joins written text with aural and visual resources (indeed Shipka offers a much fuller list of the "communicative resources" students regularly draw on to make meaning in their worlds—"images, movements, gestures, objects, colors, sounds, scents" [85]). Digital composition invites work with newer modes of inquiry and presentation that circulate outside the academy—multimodal presentations, digital archives, social media, e-journals, collaborative online projects, and so on. In contrast, English seems turned inward, bound to text and print, immersed in older periods and forms of writing. What made English such an attractive major in the 1970s and 1980s—its investment in discussion and essay writing and an earlier form of public humanities—can seem old-fashioned, casual, unfocused, especially to students raised on tightly sequenced, technological, and structured STEM courses. Yet, although literary study may appear to students and their parents a luxury of a past age, writing has a currency and use value. In our information-saturated age, writing is recognized as crucial to the sciences and social sciences, as well as to the humanities. It is widely understood as a mode of inquiry, as a necessary skill, as a credential for almost every postindustrial job or venture. And, of course, writing is an interest—an expertise—of everyone in English.

Students in digital composition make multimodal essays, using sound and image in ways that challenge them to rethink their roles as writers. They go out into the community, or into digital archives, and explore material objects, landscapes, and collections. They write about community activism. They also learn to see composition as a material project—by setting their words on digital sites in conjunction with JPEGs and audio tracks. I recently observed a class in written professional communication in which the students had worked long and hard to produce print-ready forms of their essays. They had created charts and graphs, gathered images, experimented with fonts and layout, written captions, introductions, and headings. The teacher and students worked together to investigate how all this material production furthered the aims of their essays, how it might engage readers, how it represented the research they had done. Students who had spent hours working on the placement of images and graphs now understood writing in terms of space and connection and saw revision as a passionate negotiation between the labor of writing and the labor of material production. They were engaged, ready to argue for a cut or addition, invested in their own productions.

Literacy as a Frame

Composition's commitment to literacy as a frame seems one of the clearest ways to articulate a new relation to English studies. A longtime scholarly project in composition, literacy allows scholars to ask who has access to the material and intellectual conditions of letters, how literature—like other forms of writing—is learned and disseminated as a mode of discourse, how literature instantiates an argument about language and value.[8] Literacy as a frame helps students understand writing as "a technology that restructures thought" (in Walter Ong's words) and as an activity with "sponsors" (to use Deborah Brandt's influential term). It underscores the importance of historical contexts and transformations, of paying attention to the multiple uses of a text. Of course literary scholars also have a tradition of work in literacy, especially apparent in current writing on the circulation of books, on translation and "global English," on the multiple versions of books. John Guillory's study of the literary texts that were used as forms of instruction recalls a shared history, when literature and language

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were seen as mutually informing. The question of language's relation to literature has often been tossed out with the critique of older forms of criticism such as philology. But it is helpful for students who struggle with the unfamiliarity of poetic forms to recognize that rhetorical textbooks from the nineteenth century also figured poetry as a challenge that required syntactic study and elliptical exercises. Contemporary projects in digital humanities—such as "hacking" or "remixing" classic texts—foreground the student as agent, as active producer or (re)writer of texts.[9] Framing writing in terms of literacy might allow students to see literary practice as needing to be acquired, much like a second language, or to see literature as a multilingual project, each text encompassing varieties of language and language practices.

English studies is at a crossroads, needing to rearticulate its place and value in a changed and changing university, needing to remind the public at large of the value it offers students. It has, close at hand, an enterprise that is thriving, that has clear public value and purpose, and that has more students than it can handle. English has long relied on composition's use value to sustain advanced study in literature and criticism. This seems an opportune moment to open a more generous conversation with composition, a conversation that might help English refigure the shape and trajectory of that advanced study.

Notes

1. Emerson came to this conclusion after visiting the Cabinet of Natural History in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris (198).

2. Carr, Carr, and Schultz argue in favor of this alternative origin story.

3. Wlad Godzich's distressed polemic against the "utilitarian" spread of composition studies in the 1980s is only one of many pieces marking discomfort at shifts in academic emphasis toward a "culture of literacy."

4. Thomas Rickert argues for broadening the scope of rhetoric, so that it attends to the widely dispersed human ecologies.

5. Critical books in rhetoric and composition, like Jenny Rice's *Distant Publics* and Rebecca Dingo's *Networking Arguments*, have emphasized this public turn.

6. Programs in business or technical writing have been replaced by programs in public and professional writing at, e.g., Indiana and Auburn Universities and the Universities of Pittsburgh and Alabama. Jean Grace traces the history of the contentious relationship between composition and "professional" writing.

7. See recent books by Suresh Canagarajah, on how writing circulates in global contexts, and by William DeGenaro, on working-class rhetorics.

8. See the 1988 collection *Perspectives on Literacy* and the revised edition, *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook* (2001). The new online journal *Literacy in Composition Studies* makes the relation between literacy and composition more visible.

9. See, e.g., Henry Jenkins and Wyn Kelley's collection on remixing *Moby-Dick* as a classroom project.

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