Making the Managerial Conscious in Composition Studies

By Donna Strickland

The field of composition studies rose to full disciplinary status in tandem with the ascent of a more market-oriented curriculum and a more corporate style of management in higher education. The author contends that the discipline's structure and function in higher education reflects that historical circumstance. This reality, however, differs dramatically from the idealistic and democratic impulses that draw most composition faculty to the field. The author urges composition faculty to examine their discipline with an explicit understanding of the "managerial" side of its nature and to take concrete action to improve working conditions for teaching faculty and foster better environ ments for teaching and learning. —Editors

Just last week, a graduate student in my department, one who has done work in both English literature and creative writing, approached me to ask about my field. "For what kinds of jobs," he wondered, "does a degree in rhetoric and composition prepare a person? Mostly administrative?" I confirmed his hunch: the vast majority of PhD-holders in the field can expect to take on some sort of administrative work during their careers. Many, in fact, will be hired directly from graduate school to do just that. They will take positions that include hiring and supervisory duties, typically of part-time/adjunct instructors or graduate employees, and often their position will include other duties involved in "running" a writing program. Some might find employment teaching writing full time, and a very few might find elite positions that involve working with graduate students and conducting research without any administrative duties, but most will assume an administrative position at some point. This near-inevitability of administrative work distinguishes composition professionals from traditional faculty in the humanities, perhaps especially from the scholars of literature with whom they often share departments.

This student's question points to another important reality: people in the university, even in English departments, where most composition scholars are

employed, are not necessarily certain what composition studies entails or how the field functions in higher education. In some respects, composition programs function like a traditional discipline with faculty educating undergraduates and training graduates to produce new research and expand the discipline. However, the differences are more striking. Research scholars in composition studies publish articles primarily on the teaching of writing and on writing itself, and the primary function of composition faculty is to enforce that knowledge on others. Composition professors are distinguished by the fact that they manage other teachers of writing, primarily teachers who are not specialists in composition studies—part-time/adjunct faculty or graduate assistants whose training is typically in another discipline such as English literature, American studies, creative writing, etc. In most cases the part-time/adjunct instructors greatly outnumber the full-time faculty, requiring a non-traditional depart mental structure. Where typically the responsibility for management of adjunct faculty belongs to one person in a traditional department—the department chair—composition programs are often constructed so that many if not all of the full-time faculty have some responsibility for managing others. The disproportionate number of "managed employees" in composition programs also leads often to a more set and managed curriculum in an attempt to ensure consistency and standards. Thus, unlike traditional disciplines in the humanities that tend to be organized on a simple expert/novice hierarchy, composition studies has a manager expert/worker hierarchy that simply doesn't exist in other disciplines.

All of this suggests that composition studies as it is structured today is characteristic of trends traditionally associated with a corporatized model of higher education with its focus more on:

- a somewhat standardized curriculum,
- a very skill-oriented curriculum,
- applied research; and,
- a workforce of highly "managed" contingent faculty

In fact, as we will see, the modern discipline of composition studies arose in tandem with the rise of the corporatized university. At the same time, the pedagogical theory that underpins composition studies (and the histories that are told about the field based on that theory) often reflects a different, "non-corporate" perspective.

Most of the practitioners of composition studies bring very idealistic goals to the classroom; that is, they see themselves as doing more than helping students efficiently acquire the necessary writing skills to go on with their studies and obtain employment. That may be one important outcome, but it is not the only, or even the primary goal. Composition specialists generally see their role as nothing less than empowering students to participate in a democratic society. This includes learning to critically judge information, to weigh facts, to think broadly and to question and challenge "authorized" and "received" knowledge from any quarter. This is especially important because composition serves the vast majority of college students including those who are financially disadvantaged, or first-generation-in college, or inadequately prepared for college—students who do not have a great deal of experience in having their needs met or their ideas honored in the political, economic and social structure. James Berlin discusses this broader perspective in the closing of his history of composition, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*.

> We have begun to see that writing courses are not designed exclusively to prepare students for the workplace, although they certainly must do that. Writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants. Writing courses also enable students to learn something about themselves, about the often-unstated assumptions on which their lives are built. In short, the writing course empowers students as it advises in ways to experience themselves, others and the material conditions of their existence—in methods of ordering and making sense of these relationships.[i]

The twin "corporate" and "idealistic" aspects of composition studies are not inherently at odds, but democratic empowerment suggests a much broader vision than training students to become efficient cogs in the education or work assembly line. My contention is that understanding the history of composition studies, and the dual strains that shaped it, is an essential first step toward bringing the discipline's nature and practice into harmony and toward engaging in any kind of disciplinary reform. In fact, the unique structure and position of composition studies suggests that composition specialists may be uniquely qualified to work toward re-shaping corporate trends in the universi-

ty—trends such as a more standardized, narrowly-focused curriculum as well as an exploitative personnel structure.

The Idealist Vision of Composition Studies

Composition professionals tend to see their work as important and, what's more, as *good*: they are connected to basic academic literacy acquisition, and so are necessary, practical and sometimes even revolutionary. They typically see the field as arising from a commitment to democratic ideals embedded in the teaching of undergraduate writing.

The ideal of democratization, in fact, has long held a central place of importance in composition scholars' self-understanding. Many scholars have described the teaching of first-year college writing as a "democratic" enterprise.[ii] The course has a democratic function, many scholars argue, because it provides an introduction to the language of the academy, an introduction that enables even under-prepared students to succeed in college .[iii] Others argue that composition courses serve as training for democratic citizenship: by learning to critically examine various kinds of persuasive discourse and to produce well-reasoned arguments in response, students learn to participate in the democratic process.[iv] Moreover, the college teacher of writing has the opportunity to introduce students to democratic procedures by providing students with opportunities to debate issues and to participate in the selection of texts and topics for discussion.[v] Indeed, for some composition scholars, especially in the early years following the short-lived open-admissions programs at colleges like CUNY in the early 1970s, even such things as teaching the use of prepositions was closely aligned with a democratic agenda. In one of the field's most heavily cited books, Mina Shaughnessy describes her own work in a basic writing program at an open admissions university:

> Toward the end of the sixties and largely in response to the protests of that decade, many four-year colleges began admitting students who were not by traditional standards ready for college. . . . For such colleges, this venture into mass education usually began abruptly, amidst the misgivings of administrators, who had to guess in the dark about the sorts of programs they ought to plan for the students they had never met, and the reluctancies of teachers, some of whom had already decided that the new students were ineducable.

> It was in such an atmosphere that the boldest and earliest of these attempts to build a comprehensive system of higher education began. In the spring of 1970, the City University of New York adopted an admissions policy that guaranteed to every city resident with a high-school diploma a place in one of its eighteen tuition-free colleges. . . , thereby opening its doors not only to a larger population of students than it had ever had before . . . but to a wider range of students than any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting to its campus.[vi]

Because first-year writing is one of the few required courses, and because many open-admissions students were required to take not just first-year writing but often a preparatory "remedial" course, the two came to be aligned with each other. The attention brought to bear on "basic writers" in the wake of open-admissions programs often dominated the discourse of composition studies as it was emerging as a full-fledged academic field with its own doctoral degree in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Rise of the Managerial In Composition Studies

What is often overlooked in the traditional idealistic self-view of composition faculty is that the rise of composition studies brought with it the initiation of many new "basic writing" programs, which in turn led to the appointment of new directors to lead "writing labs" or "writing centers" that would offer tutorial services for these at-risk students. Thus, the discourse that set "democratization" in motion also set in motion various administrative structures.

This setting in motion of administrative structures to meet the needs of students who would not otherwise have had access to a college education, I would argue, is one important factor leading to the formation of composition studies as a field of study. Universities began to offer doctoral degrees in composition and rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s to meet the sudden demand for people who could direct writing programs, basic writing programs, writing across the curriculum programs and writing centers. As Richard Ohmann relates, the job prospects for PhDs in literature had bottomed out in 1968. Increasing numbers of newly-minted literature PhDs, then, took jobs in writing program adminis-

tration.[vii] In fact, such large numbers took these jobs that a new organization formed in 1976 to meet the needs of this group: the National Council of Writing Program Administrators.

It isn't that no one was in charge of first-year composition courses before 1970. English departments routinely appointed someone within their ranks to oversee composition courses and to train graduate teaching assistants. However, before the proliferation of new kinds of writing programs, it tended to be the case that an experienced professor would take on the job. With the new writing programs, new professors increasingly were hired specifically to work as administrators.

The traditional histories that trace the origins of composition studies back to the establishment of a required first-year course in English composition in the late 19th century have it only half right. That is, while the required course in first-year writing has certainly functioned as a necessary condition for the emergence of composition studies, the establishment of such a course at Harvard in the nineteenth century by no means represents a single, pure point of origin.[viii] Rather, the discipline never really emerged until after the 1960s, simultaneous with the emergence of the corporate university.

I consider it essential to understand the significance of composition studies' emergence within the corporate university and to understand that emergence within the context of the field's clear *desire* to align itself with a democratizing agenda. In other words, I recount the "myth" of composition's democratic agenda not to unveil it as "false" but as limited, limited precisely by the lack of attention to the administrative imperative within the profession.

While composition scholars may align themselves with the opening of access, such access did not happen in an institutional vacuum. While generally aligned with student protests, basic writing programs were also very much part of the emerging corporate university. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, apart from the program that Mina Shaughnessy famously led at City College, most basic writing programs show little evidence of being aligned with open admissions, much less with student protests.[ix] If anything, they seem often to have been prompted by a conservative emphasis on returning to the "basics" of education.[x]

In fact, the dominant managerial logic in higher education as the corporate university was emerging put a premium on the establishment of programs and increasing administrative control. "Planning Programming Budgeting System," a management strategy first used by the federal government and then inconsistently transferred to higher education during the 1960s and 1970s, "required the identification and classification of all activities into discrete programs," programs that "were to be stated in objectives and outcomes".[xi] At the same historical moment, positions to lead writing *programs*, basic writing *programs*, and writing across the curriculum *programs* began to proliferate. People who could lead these programs were in demand—so much so that new PhD programs began to appear, programs that would certify specialists in rhetoric and composition studies.[xii]

The increasing trend toward administratively heavy institutions of higher education has led to a situation, according to Gary Rhoades, in which faculty work is increasingly managed, made subject to more oversight and granted access to less decision-making. At the same time, a new kind of academic worker has emerged—what Rhoades calls "managerial professionals," those academic employees that "do not do not fit squarely into the category of *faculty* or *administrator* but constitute an occupational type that bridges conventional categories" :

> They share many characteristics of traditional liberal professions—a technical body of knowledge, advanced education (and in some cases certification), professional associations and journals, and codes of ethics. Yet they also mark a break with the liberal profession of faculty, being more closely linked and subordinate to managers and indeed being very much managers themselves.[xiii]

Managerial professionals include specialists in student services, instructional technology, grant writing and institutional development. Composition studies represents a discipline built on this concept of managerial professionals.

Composition professionals inhabit a liminal area: they generally teach and do research, like traditional faculty, but they also are "very much managers," like the new group of managerial professionals.[xiv] They are also, as I have previously noted, often hired specifically to take on administrative duties, even right out

of graduate school.[xv] This dual status has often conferred a conflicted self-awareness in the field: many in the field align themselves closely with teaching, often against research, and rarely is the field self-described as an "administrative" or "managerial" subject.

But composition professionals are managers precisely because of the emerging trends in the corporate university. This university is increasingly formed around the corporate notion of the "flexible workforce" where a smaller corps of full-time tenured faculty function more as managers over a growing number of contingent employees. While first-year composition is one of the few required courses in college and university curriculums, it is also one most prominently taught by part-time and non-tenure-track faculty.[xvi] Writing programs are, in fact, workplaces that depend on the labor of contingent faculty who are typically not trained as composition specialists and then are routinely under-supported, both financially and professionally. For example, contingent faculty often carry heavy teaching loads and teach at multiple institutions to make a living. They are routinely subject to last minute teaching assignments. They typically have less of a professional community to interact with about the discipline and teaching of writing. They rarely have any institutional "place," either physically in terms of an office where they can work with students or figuratively in terms of a voice in departments or the institution. Despite the qualifications of contingent faculty and in many cases the heroic efforts they make to teach these courses, the very real and unfair working conditions with which contingent faculty must cope cannot help but negatively impact the quality of instruction and the education of our students. Composition specialists and institutions alike must face and address that issue if they are truly committed to empowering students.

Conclusion

Since composition in many ways encompasses conflicting values in the modern corporate university, it is not surprising that it should be a subject of contention in the academy. Once composition studies began to be seen as an important cog in the "production" of successful college students, it also became the subject of unwanted attention and controversy. Some viewed composition faculty as "technocratic" opportunists attracted to the "lucrative areas of composition theory and 'pedagogy'" (Guillory 1993; Bové 1992, 163) when more traditional tenured positions in English departments disappeared.[xvii] Since the scholarship of composition was tied to what Ernest

L. Boyer called "the scholarship of teaching," rather than traditional scholarship, it was often held in lower regard. Many outside the field tended to view composition as arising simply to meet the consumer demand of large numbers of students requiring writing skills for vocational purposes and thereby lacking inherent academic value.

Some, on the other hand, blamed composition studies practitioners for not being "instrumental" enough. For example, Stanley Fish (2003) has recently complained of composition classes that "leave the students full of banal and useless opinions but without the ability to use prepositions or write a clean English sentence." This complaint is linked to a larger issue with academics who try to do more than their professional affiliation calls for: "If your planning and efforts are not task-specific," Fish warns, "the task will simply not get done, although you may be telling yourself that you're doing something higher (saving souls, saving the republic, saving the world)." Specifically, he continues:

> In the case of composition courses, what won't get done is the teaching of writing, absolutely the only thing an instructor should be interested in. Here is something the world really needs and something an academic with the appropriate training can actually do. But he or she won't ever get around to doing it if the class is given over to multiculturalism or racial injustice or globalization or reproductive rights or third-world novels or any of the other "topics," which, as worthy of study as they might be, take up all the air space and energy in the room.[xviii]

Fish is not alone in thinking that composition scholars who hope to "save the world" are overreaching their duties and missing the chance to do "something the world really needs"—teach students to write. Composition scholars, for their part, would be likely to tell Fish that he oversimplifies just what teaching students to write involves—it certainly involves more than attention to prepositions. At the same time, Fish overlooks the historically significant connections between democratization ("saving the republic") and writing instruction.

In re-telling the story of composition, my purpose is by no means to discredit the discipline: indeed, it is my discipline. Rather, I hope to make the manageri-

al a conscious part of the discipline's history so that the discipline can take a better look at itself, getting away from the romanticized history that has been the dominant disciplinary narrative. This is not to suggest that I want to abandon the larger project of empowering students and, by extension, of working toward a more democratic society. In fact, I want to make the democratic hope and possibility of composition instruction visible to those outside the field, including those who might dismiss it as hopelessly entangled in the instrumental logic of the corporate university. However, if composition studies is to have a role in democratization of the university and society, composition specialists will need to honestly confront the field's own participation in a hierarchical, managed university and, more specifically, address its own labor practices and what those practices mean for the discipline and its students.

Composition studies is hardly an aberration in that sense, although it is something of a hybrid, its specialists occupying a place between traditional faculty and managerial professionals. But this hybrid status is precisely the potential of composition specialists, who tend to have alliances with critical studies in the humanities *and* with the administrative apparatus of the corporate university. By working with both affiliations, composition specialists are in a position to critically examine the labor situation that makes the field possible and to work in alliance with other labor organizers to strategically engage with university administrators for change. In fact, many composition specialists are already engaged in just that kind of work.

Eileen E. Schell's 1999 book, *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*, has done much to bring the problem of part-time labor—a labor force made up in large part by women—to the fore in composition studies, but it is too little known outside the field. After carefully examining the material realities of contingent labor, Schell works through various strategies for changing their working conditions, including the possibility of converting part-time positions to full-time, tenure-track positions, as well as the potentiality of collective action among adjunct instructors. In a follow-up edited collection, Schell and Patricia Stock offer stories and strategies for "moving the mountain" and transforming the conditions of contingent labor in higher education. They acknowledge that doing so will require something more than a "dogmatic or single-minded agenda"; what's needed, they maintain, is an understanding of the complexities of the contingent labor problem and also a recognition of the "work of a variety of faculty and academ-

ic administrators who are striving to effect productive and ethical change in the working conditions of non-tenure-track faculty at diverse institutions."[xix] They hope that focusing on this work will "encourage the development of the kind of discourse we believe must be constructed if those of us with vested interests are to shape policies and practices that ensure quality education."[xx] Their focus, in other words, is highly pragmatic: What has worked? What might work?

For my part, I would add to this pragmatic discourse a historically-grounded theoretical insight: composition studies as a field has historically depended on the very labor conditions that Schell and Stock seek to address. They note that although composition studies has developed into a "promising new research field," composition specialists "have been less successful in changing exploitative working conditions."[xxi] The promising new field, I contend, exists because exploitative working conditions exist. What happens to a field that sets out to rectify a situation that makes it possible? Will only temporary reform happen, reform that ultimately changes little? Or will composition specialists face the daunting challenge of chipping away at the very foundation that has made the field possible—the foundation of the managed, corporate university?

My own view, of course, is that committed composition specialists need to be willing to risk the disappearance of that foundation. They need to first recognize the working conditions of their own field and work within their institution to improve those conditions. But they also need to recognize that attending only to the working conditions of those they manage will do little to change the corporate university itself: the struggle needs to be broader. That is, composition specialists can't stop at being advocates for writing teachers alone: they, like all full-time tenured faculty, must be advocates for all contingent faculty. And they can't stop at being advocates for contingent faculty: they must work to critically understand the forces shaping the corporate university and to participate in the shaping of policies that might bring about change.

ENDNOTES

[i] Berlin, J. A. *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 188-9.

[ii] Berlin, J. A. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Culture*. Urbana, Ill: NCTE, 1996; Lunsford, A. A. Rhetoric and Composition. In Gibaldi, J., ed. *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern*

Languages and Literatures. 2d ed. New York: MLA, 1992; Harris, J. *A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966*. Upper Saddle River, Nj: Prentice, 1997.

[iii]Shaughnessy, M. P. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977; Bizzell, P. *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.

[iv] Berlin 1996; Paine, C. *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

[v] Shor, I. *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

[vi] Shaughnessy, 1-2.

[vii] Ohmann, R. *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*. New York: Oxford University Press,1976. Reprint, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1996.

[viii] A few scholars have, like me, located the origin of composition studies to the 1960s and 1970s, but for very different reasons. North, for instance, traces the emergence of composition studies to the spate of research in writing during the 1960s, while Nystrand et al. emphasize the appearance of a number of peer-reviewed journals in the 1970s as evidence that a new field had emerged. Research and journals in composition, however, while symptomatic of a new field, do not by themselves indicate the material conditions that made the emergence of a new field of study possible. Nystrand, Martin, et al. "Where did composition studies come from? An Intellectual history." *Written Communication* (1993) 10, 267–333.

[ix] Strickland, D. Errors and interpretations: Toward an archaeology of basic writing. *Composition Studies* (1998) 26, 21–35.

[x] Trimbur, J. Literacy and the discourse of crisis. In Bullock, R., and J. Trimbur, eds. *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1991.

[xi]Birnbaum, R. *Management Fads in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, 35, 39.

[xii] In *Rhetoric Review's* most recent directory of PhD programs in rhetoric and composition, only three of the sixty-five programs listed indicate an inception date earlier than 1970 (Doctoral 2000). Most were begun in the 1980s, after the founding of the National Council of Writing Program Administrators.

[xiii] Rhoades, G., and S. Slaughter. Academic capitalism, managed professionals, and supply-side higher education. In Martin, R., ed. *Chalk lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 49-50. See also, Rhoades, G.

Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

[xiv] Strickland, D. The managerial unconscious of composition studies. In Bousquet, M., T. Scott, and L. Parascondola, eds. *Tenured Bosses, Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University,* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

[xv] Schuster, C. I. The politics of promotion. In Bullock, R., and J. Trimbur, eds. *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1991, 85–95.

[xvi] Schell, E. E. *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction.* Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1998.

[xvii] Guillory, J. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; Bové, P. *In the Wake of Theory*. Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1992, 163.

[xviii] Fish, S. The same old song. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 11, 2000). http://chronicle.com/jobs/2003/07/2003071101c.htm 2003 November 1.

[xix] Schell, 6.

[xx] *Ibid*, 6.

[xxi] *Ibid*, 8.