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**THE ETHICS OF IDENTITY:
WHAT IS A COMPOSITIONIST?**

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I have been tutoring and teaching writing for fifteen years, and my mother still has no idea what I do. It's not just her, really; my father has no idea either, and he has been a high school English teacher for thirty-five years. In fact, I have discovered that few people outside of academia know what it is I do. Most often, when I tell people that I am a composition teacher, I am greeted with at best an expression of pity for how much work all those papers must be, and at worst with a banal remark about the sad state of student prose. Many assume I am a *creative* writing teacher.

Despite the rise in composition graduate programs and the improving market for composition specialists, even within the university, faculty from other disciplines frequently have vague notions of my marking essays with red ink; a few seem to imagine my work as a series of punctuation drills. Some professors even express resentment that my composition class did not prepare students to their satisfaction, laying the burden of persistent organizational or mechanical errors on the compositionists' shoulders. "What are you doing in that class?" asked a history professor who shared many of the same students as I. "They can't seem to write a proper introduction!" Once, when a pesky philosophy teacher all but blamed the downfall of civilization on students' inability to use apostrophes properly, a colleague of mine pointed out that yes, they forget their Plato quickly, too. He did not seem to appreciate this comparison, believing, perhaps, that writing is a simpler skill set one can teach (and that students can master) in a single semester. These perceptions may coincide with the positions of some writing teachers, but it is an inaccurate depiction of what a great many of us do—or would like to be doing.

Beyond the classroom door, many administrators are not quite sure what composition is, either. Certainly they may know of scholarship in composition; they are aware that graduate programs in the field exist; and intellectually they may even have considered what its study would entail. Nevertheless, some educators, however dedicated, have yet to move beyond a pragmatic view of composition as a problem to be dealt with, a

collection of required classes to be scheduled, a persistent blip on the assessment radar.

Certainly composition teachers have become respected or powerful at some institutions or within some English departments; even so, many key administrators and researchers have very little sense of what a compositionist is, and this ignorance has repercussions for the field. For instance, at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Louise Wetherbee Phelps reported on her work in The Visibility Project, which aims to convince the National Research Council (NRC) to recognize Rhetoric and Composition as a research field. The NRC surveys and assesses doctoral programs in higher education, affecting funding of doctoral programs, research agendas, and more. Until now, this organization has not included Composition as a field—is it any surprise, then, that “composition” is an ambiguous term to so many?

This ambiguity plays out in the who's who of composition teaching. It may be that writing programs with full-time faculty are on the rise, but the staffing reality remains mostly one of adjunct, non-tenured positions and graduate assistantships. While Schneider reports that Composition graduates are getting jobs at faster rates than Literature graduates (par 26-27), the bulk of Composition positions are still part-time and non-tenure track. The CCCC Committee on Part-Time / Adjunct Issues, working with the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, reported in 2001 that even in freestanding writing programs, part-time employees, adjuncts, and graduate assistants teach 75% of introductory courses, “among the highest percentages” across all disciplines (CCCC, “Report” 340).^[1] In fact, many do not recognize the need for any special training or skills in order to teach composition. In some universities, composition classes are entirely staffed by graduate students of literature or adjuncts who are less likely to hold terminal degrees in either composition or literature (Schneider par 8, 23-24). However I may define myself, many institutions' answer to “What is a composition teacher?” is “a warm body with an MA.”

I will admit that early on I did not know what I was supposed to be doing either, often feeling under-prepared, unqualified, and even at times unwilling to teach composition. Back then, I thought of myself, really, as an English teacher who *had* to teach writing as a condition of my profession, but, just as the actor really wants to direct, I really wanted to teach Shakespeare or Chaucer. Teaching writing exclusively, outside of creative writing, was not a concept I had been exposed to. That option was not encouraged, not even presented to me as an undergraduate or masters student in the English department. The objective was clear: established, successful English professors teach literature.

I have changed much since those days as a graduate student thrown into teaching two while taking three. My experience and study have reminded me that what I do in the course of my work affects real lives in complicated ways; my choice of identity has consequences for students. Therefore, I strive to be the compositionist who, as Bill Readings writes in *The University in Ruins*, sees “teaching and learning as sites of obligation, as loci of ethical practicesTeaching thus becomes answerable to the question of justice ” (154). So, to teach composition in a culture of corporatization and standardization, I have come to believe that we who identify as composition teachers need to reflect upon and declare our own answers to the question “What is a composition teacher?” If we do not assert our own identities, the public, other faculty and administrators will no doubt provide one for us—and not always in ways that do our students justice.

In an effort to locate just ways of defining myself as a compositionist, I explore some of the most commonplace understandings of what a teacher of freshman writing is. Among the many identities assigned me by others, I count: grammarian, assessment coach and arbiter of academic discourse. As with the anecdotes that opened this essay, these labels certainly do not describe everyone teaching composition today, yet they persist in both belief and practice. I will briefly explore each of these identities as I work to comprehend how they may guide or misguide my teaching. My intention is not to offer a panacea or to suggest that all writing teachers adopt my perspective on identity. Instead, I wish to share where my personal research and reflection have led me.

Composition Teacher as Grammarian

In 1985, Patrick Hartwell asserted in his seminal “Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar” that facility with language, what he calls “Grammar 1” (324), is not dependent on knowledge of grammar’s metalanguage and formally written rules, or “Grammar 2” (327). Hartwell’s analysis of accumulated grammar research flew in the face of the common belief that most writing errors are due to ignorance of grammar rules. He argued that formal knowledge of grammar “has no effect” on one’s writing performance (328). Indeed, even the greatest grammatical stickler must admit that the writing we admire—from Charles Dickens to Ernest Hemingway—is often rife with “misplaced” punctuation and comma splices. One might argue that such writers consciously choose to break rules, but Hartwell suggests that “mature writers” actually do not consciously think in terms of grammar when they compose (333). They do, of course, offer up insightful content and fluid prose where our students are often stumbling about with ideas and phrasing. Still, Hartwell compels us to recognize that when we read student drafts, we often fail to nurture the fledgling content, choosing instead to begin by circling fragments and the like. Rather than focus on grammar instruction, then, Hartwell’s analysis concludes that mastery of print literacy occurs “top down, from pragmatic questions of voice, tone, audience, register, and rhetorical strategy, not from the bottom up, from grammar to usage to fixed forms of organization” (335).

Hartwell wrote that piece twenty-two years ago, yet many still define the work of composition teachers as providing instruction in grammar and “fixed forms.” Nevertheless, in my experience, most students come to college already very able to tell me what the parts of a five-paragraph essay are, to define the term “thesis,” and to choose the right grammatical form in (a, an) given sentence. I have frequently had to work hard to convince freshmen that they may actually begin a sentence with “And,” and that a paragraph is not bound to being three to five sentences in length. The conventional rules of form are familiar to many of them, and while they may not have mastered academic grammar, they can often, as Hartwell asserted, locate many of their own errors when given the chance to read their work aloud. It is in actual *performance* of writing that they stumble, in the clear expression of complex ideas and in nuanced academic phrasing.

Composition Teacher as Assessment Coach

Despite this reality, it seems that composition teachers are shaped by the pressures of *assessment*. The most far-reaching and controversial example of this is the No Child Left Behind Act. Even when its mandated state assessment tests aren’t asking students to recreate the sort of grammar drills that only translate into, well, better drill-testing, they do not measure much to do with writing outside of, well, a test.

Take, for instance, The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment test (PSSA) that claims to test the ability to “Revise writing to improve style, word choice, sentence variety, and subtlety of meaning after rethinking how questions of purpose, audience, and genre have been addressed” (PSSA 5)—in a timed test. In reality, however, the questions aimed at this ability seem to be testing for knowledge of set forms. My favorite example is an item presenting a three-paragraph essay about the octopus and asking: “Which sentence would best conclude this passage?” (PSSA 7). The PSSA guide for teachers indicates the correct answer and then explains, “A concluding sentence should not introduce a new topic....Only Option C revisits the beginning of the passage and remains general enough to be supported by the remainder of the passage...” (PSSA 7). This test, however unintentionally, reinforces the idea that only one correct way of concluding an essay exists: generally restating one’s thesis. Someone should tell that to Montaigne, Ben Franklin, or Dave Barry.

As composition teachers adopt the role of assessment coach, our students’ testing scores may rise, but what happens to their conceptions of writing? What will they recognize and appreciate as good nonfiction prose? Personally, I hope it does not resemble the stuff that passes the PSSA. When we teach the set-forms of a generic “academic discourse,” we seem really to be reinforcing a concept of writing as equal to the school essay: a genre quickly and easily assessed and well-suited, perhaps, for demonstrating that a student has completed a reading assignment. I have yet to see the Norton Anthology of five-paragraph essays, however.

Even more frustrating is that English teachers do not necessarily want to turn their classes into test-preparation

seminars, and their assignments into cookie-cutters. The high stakes connected to state tests, including school funding and even continued employment, often give them little choice—the identity of assessment coach is thrust upon them.

College composition teachers are not free from the pressures of assessment, either. The NCTE recently predicted that the SAT will be used as a college placement test (9), assuring that college professors, too, will be likewise influenced to alter their definitions of “good writing” applied to incoming freshman. Soon, freshmen may not be the only college students affected by standardization trends: on August 10, 2006, the federal Commission on the Future of Higher Education called “for public universities to measure learning with standardized tests” (Dillon par 1). I worry that this culture of assessment will lead us to deny the subjectivity and shades of gray connected to our judgment of “good writing.” Compositionists will be reduced to teachers of formulae that, from one perspective, are more easily defensible, teachable, and testable.

And there is some comfort in the easily teachable writing formula. Grammar and formulaic organization are far less time-consuming to teach and easier to test than the complex interplay of skills that comprise advanced literacy. And we naturally long for a sense of accomplishment, one I believe is less easily achieved when we give as much attention to the messier and subjective sides of writing in our composition classes. A tidy, clear-cut path to improved writing would relieve the pressure on all involved. But is it the ethical path? I do not mean to suggest that grammar and common forms should never be addressed by a composition teacher. I do believe, however, that assessment of writing, and more importantly, real student engagement with writing, will never be an easy process tackled with number two pencils and a timed test.

Composition Teacher as Arbiter of Academic Discourse

I further believe that composition teachers are too often positioned and portrayed as the police of academic discourse, as neutral parties enforcing academic forms in our students' writing. When we accept this identity, we may cease to challenge the simplified form of the conventional essay as the best—or only—means of writing in the classroom. [2] Further, adopting or accepting this role buttresses the belief that students will necessarily become “better” writers if they learn and strictly adhere to the rules of academic discourse.

Many educators have struggled with the definition of “better,” however. What English teacher hasn't read a five-paragraph essay, thesis located in the final sentence of the first paragraph, commas and citations in order, that was nonetheless devoid of engaging ideas and critical reflection—that was, at bottom, dull? Yet many composition teachers believe their first duty is to teach the conventional rules of academic discourse. Ann Berthoff famously critiqued what she called this “positivist conception of language as a ‘communication medium,’ as a set of muffin tins into which the batter of thought is poured” as leading “to question-begging representations and models of the composing process” (330). Prescriptive rules are sometimes treated as if they preceded thinking, and therefore must be accommodated at all times; accepted academic models are portrayed as facilitating the processes and purposes of every student writer. The writing process becomes The Writing Process, an observable and repeatable phenomenon alike for all students and equally useful in each assignment. Courses come to employ a variation (albeit creative ones) on the five-paragraph model as the default practice. In addition, more and more composition scholars, such as Anne Beaufort in *College Writing and Beyond* and David W. Smit in *The End of Composition Studies*, are asserting that the generic academic discourse taught in many freshman writing courses is not necessarily a fair and accurate representation of the writing students will have to do in disciplines other than English. Essentially, they argue that the forms we teach are largely not transferable to other courses.

Yet, I believe I would be hard-pressed to find a composition teacher today who would publicly present a positivist, purely prescriptive view as integral to his or her teaching philosophy. We generally accept and propound, as scholars and teachers, that rules should not trump insight or creativity, and that the act of writing differs, sometimes drastically, from person to person and from situation to situation. Despite that belief, however,

teachers are more comfortable with the conventional, and often discourage straying from its predictable confines. Take the Communications professor who invited me to speak to his class about research paper writing. After I noted that several models exist, he stepped in to say that if a student has not mastered an alternative form, he should not attempt it—stick to the standard structure, he warned them, lest you make a mess of your work. I wondered silently how a student could come to master another form if not allowed the freedom to play with it, the time and space to make a mess.

Some teachers have insisted that students simply *must* master academic discourse in order to survive in the university, and that composition teachers, therefore, are *obligated* to focus on initiating freshmen into its conventions. But what of the prose these students actually produce? How often are their thinking and writing something we would want to read without a red pen and grade book nearby? Terry Eagleton addressed this in his book *Literary Theory: An Introduction*; he says of students: “All that is being demanded is that you manipulate a particular language in acceptable ways. It is this that is being taught, examined, and certified, not what you personally think or believe, though what is thinkable will of course be constrained by the language itself” (201). As a result, Eagleton adds, teachers of academic discourses may “remember whether or not you were able to speak it proficiently long after they have forgotten what you said” (201). This dissociation of thinking and writing seems counter not only to the value the university lays on critical thinking, but to the sort of writing truly respected both in and out of academia. No one cherishes the Declaration of Independence for its paragraphing.

What's more, as we fall back on teaching academic discourse as the unchallenged medium for intellectual thought, we forget ourselves, and begin to believe the hype. It is as if we are saying to students: *This is how all scholars speak and write. There is no possibility for change, no room for creativity, no bending of the rules. The discourse is beyond reproach.* We may know this is not the case, we may even push or ignore the boundaries of academic discourse in our own writing, but it is nonetheless what we by and large insist our students practice.

So, What is a Composition Teacher?

High-stakes assessment, at least for now, is a reality I must live with. And my desire to bend or even subvert the formulaic aspects of academic discourse are not shared by everyone—witness the wild popularity of the recently published *They Say / I Say : The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. More significantly, my students must matriculate in this culture, so I must weigh my role in light of my responsibility to them. My own best answer to this dilemma so far has been to adopt a critical discourse pedagogy.

Critical discourse pedagogy is based in the practice of constantly reviewing and questioning the often invisible ideological and political forces at work behind both writing and teaching, allowing students opportunities to engage and critique them.

I believe this facet of compositionists' role is especially worthy of our reflection, as we teach gate-keeping classes. We wield the power of labeling a student *literate* or *illiterate*, linguistically competent or incompetent, worthy of college or not. In critical discourse pedagogy, a composition teacher is not solely an assessment coach, a prescriptive grammarian, or arbiter of academic discourse. Our role is to question, along with our students, the ways in which language shapes our perceptions and beliefs, how others use it to such ends, and the multiple means by which we can employ and subvert words, structures, genres, discourses and rhetorics to represent ourselves. Amy Lee describes a similar approach in *Composing Critical Pedagogies: Teaching Writing as Revision*. Lee specifies that critical pedagogies:

interrupt the teaching of a received body of disciplinary knowledge by asking questions about how that

knowledge has come to be sanctioned as worth knowing. Who is authorized to make such decisions? In whose interest...is it to pass on certain knowledge, certain visions / versions of history, writing, literature, anthropology, physics, and even education itself? (34)

Patricia Bizzell, too, has supported this line of questioning, noting that we commonly ignore the “‘hidden curriculum’: the project of initiating students into a particular world view that gives rise to daily classroom tasks without being consciously examined by teacher or students” (407). Statements such as these have the potential to sound paranoid—do they believe that teachers are complicit in an Orwellian conspiracy to create mindless obedience? If so, to whom or to what? I do not believe that anything the likes of *1984* is afoot; however, countless critics have convincingly argued that educational systems have historically harbored agendas—from the theological to the political to the social and moral—and continue to do so today. Lynn Worsham puts this critique in less provocative terms, noting that academia “is inherently conservative in as much as it seeks, first, to fulfill the relatively narrow and policed goals and interests of a given discipline or profession and, second, to fulfill the increasing corporatized mission of higher education” (101). If this is so, I feel ethically bound to acknowledge and explore this dimension of language teaching with my students.

My composition classes investigate where various writing standards come from, who defines them and in what contexts. Students work to improve their writing in a variety of discourses, and discuss the contradictions inherent in the powerful ones—one teacher allows me to use “I”; another forbids it. Why? In this way, my teaching is not merely answerable to a test, or a Middle States Committee, or the philosophy professor who laments the bad prose he collects. Ultimately, I am answerable to my students.

Notes

[1] “The CCCC survey defined freestanding writing programs as those programs that have control over their own budgets and hiring apart from English departments” (CCCC 337-338). CCCC identified 51 freestanding departments. [[return to text](#)]

[2] Assessment and textbooks have focused on the simplified five-paragraph essay, reducing a form that otherwise allows for creativity. Moreover, Composition scholars have called for including other genres and styles outside of the traditional academic essay into college curriculum; yet the renewed focus on conventions seems to be overshadowing this movement. As a result, the “Report from the NCTE Task Force on SAT and ACT Writing Tests” warns that when standards are focused around a “specific conception of ‘good’ writing,” students with “different cultural assumptions about writing” may perform poorly (10). [[return to text](#)]

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Return to the [Table of Contents](#)