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"Interdisciplinarity After Three Decades: A Conversation"

Conversation on June 27, 2011, with Deborah H. Holdstein about her article in the 1984

SKR: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about your reflections on your 1984 *TWI* article "Using Film to Teach Writing" for the 30th anniversary issue of the journal. I'd like to start with what might be a purely speculative question, but one that I hope will be generative for you. If you were going to write an essay about using film in a composition class now in 2011, how would it be different from your 1984 essay? Or I could ask the question a different way: what do you think anyone writing about the topic today would have to say that you didn't have to say in 1984?

DH: There would be a lot more to say! It was interesting for me to reread my 1984 essay because I could (with the benefit of hindsight) read between the lines. I attempted to be very self-effacing about my interest in film and my interest in composition. At a personal level, I was trying to be very tentative about what I knew both as a scholar of composition and as a scholar of film because I probably wrote this around 1982 if it was published in 1984. So, I would have been barely 30 years old and my Ph.D. was in comparative literature. I probably didn't feel I had a right to speak as at writing specialist because I'm part of that first generation of self-taught writing specialists. I also probably didn't think that I was qualified to think of myself as a film scholar at that point in my career.

In rereading the article, I see that I acknowledge that I already had experience in publication and teaching because I refer to my "developing interest in research" in composition and my "established interest in research in film," yet I seem tentative about referring to myself as a scholar. (And to a great extent, I think that the word "scholar" should be reserved for exceptional people like Harold Bloom and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—and not merely for those of us who are reasonably well-published. I also feel that way about the overuse of the word "diva," which does not, to me, describe Britney Spears.) I think my "developing interest in research" is accidentally prescient, because the great golden age of composition studies (despite the important work of the '70s) had yet to happen. Many of the milestones that we refer to now and view as being part of the heyday of composition studies actually were published in *CCC* and other venues during the 1980s; if I were writing this piece today, I would have an additional wealth of wonderful scholarship in composition to help provide significant contexts that I wouldn't have had then.

SKR: At the time there wasn't the extensive scholarly literature already out there on the topic.

DH: Exactly. But that said, one of the things that I value about having had the opportunity to write that 1984 piece is that it's an article about teaching, and we know, as Joe Harris reminds us, that we are a "teaching subject." Almost of necessity (the evolution of composition studies as a discipline of scholarship as well as teaching, the requirements of the academy for scholarly work, and the like), we have less and less publication about teaching now, and even the journal *Pedagogy* is a scholarly journal. Significantly, we no longer have the Staffroom Interchange section that was an assumed part of *CCC*, which was the opportunity to talk about "what to do in class on Monday morning"—"Here's how I teach this; here's a new way to do that." On the one hand, one doesn't divorce one's teaching from a scholarly context, whether one realizes it or not. On the other hand, I think we have lost our emphasis on pedagogy *per se* and there are fewer recognized places for an article that allows a teacher-scholar to write about something like this: "Here's what I've done in class, and it was very, very helpful for me and for my students." So I think this article would have had to be very different now for a variety of reasons in support of academe as it now exists. But

there's also a wealth of thirty years of scholarly productivity that couldn't have been acknowledged then as well.

SKR: That moves right into my next question about the connections between the two fields. Looking back at the 1984 essay, what strikes you as particularly interesting about the ways the relationship between the disciplines of composition studies and film studies has developed?

DH: That's a very good question. I don't know how much the connections may have actually developed in term of scholarship that explicitly links the two disciplines, and in saying that, I might just be revealing my own poverty, my own lack of knowledge of these connections.

But what strikes me about the article now is that it's better than I remembered! I'm pleasantly surprised that I understood the importance of affirming composition studies as a discipline unto itself. We (the discipline) were still in the early stages of the field, wouldn't you say? So I like the fact that I say, "if writing can go to the disciplines, then film can come over here," in other words, "let them come to us." However inadvertently on my part, I was saying that if writing can go across the curriculum, then film can come over here with recognition of our own theory base(s) and practice(s) and we can try to learn from one another; we can try to find parallels in what had at that time become a somewhat firm notion of what a recursive writing process might be like—prewriting, brainstorming, and so forth.

When I look at the article now I know that one of the reasons I was initially and throughout the years uncomfortable about it was that I was concerned that people would think I was creating a template or a formula for writing. And many people in the profession have never liked the idea of a formula. We've always said, "Let's go beyond the five-paragraph essay, let's go beyond this, let's go beyond that formula." I know that in some ways the article was both retro and prescient in the sense that it really isn't arguing for a formula; it's an exercise, if you will, in interdisciplinarity, pointing out an interesting parallel on the part of a film director and a teaching counterpart in writing. It's a coincidence that Hitchcock happens to have a process we could look at and learn from and say, "Oh that's kind of what we do, too."

Looking at the article now, the plan isn't as formulaic as I remember, and yet it does in some ways prefigure the controversy that we see now regarding the Graff & Berkenstein book *They Say/I Say*, which has been wildly successful and yet flies in the face of much research and much scholarship with what some people believe really amounts to a formula.

The Graff & Berkenstein textbook raises another and very interesting dilemma: I believe that the process movement as it has been interpreted, somehow often wrongly by me and others, has helped lead to the problems I hear about in writing classes. There's been an over emphasis on personal writing—that is, the use of nonfiction in first year writing—instead of an emphasis on argument and on marshalling evidence, about being accountable for what one writes, about evaluating sources. Given the Internet, as we all know, evaluating sources is more important than ever because you can Google the "history of the clock" and instead come up with a site that's "Joe's Discount Watchbands." I'm exaggerating, of course, in this instance. But how does one decide among sources to determine which one is the most critical, the most appropriate, source to use?

I admit that I'm using the pronoun "we" rather promiscuously in what follows, but I say this for the purposes of conversation, and I don't mean to use as wide a brush as it will seem: We have, based on my admittedly unscientific observation of composition classes at a number of institutions, done ourselves in. We've underestimated our students. We haven't demanded of them what we should. I think we have contributed to a decline in what students expect, what we expect. I don't know how else to say that. I think it's similar to the misinterpretation that many teachers have had about reader response criticism, where—and I observed this I my own children's high school—the interpretation of reader response criticism is that "anything goes." My favorite example, which I've written about and love to cite (ad nauseum, I confess) is this: the assignment is to read a poem, and instead of also assigning and asking students to write about social, historical, political contexts that might have influenced the author; instead of having a close reading of the poem itself and looking at the text and wrestling with the text and going outside yourself to look at someone else's thinking; the assignment prompt, instead, is "When did *you* feel sad?" "When did *you* feel sad in your life?" My favorite example is an assignment regarding Matthew Arnold "Dover Beach," given to one of my children. Here's this poet who's agonizing about the state of the world, with historical and political contexts galore and a compellingly written text, and instead of wrestling with that and wrestling with the history and wrestling with the context and wrestling with the language of the poem itself, the prompt is "When have you stood by a window and felt melancholy?" I think that some of what we've done in composition has inadvertently been misinterpreted to make it more of what the teacher was interested in doing (or reading) rather than what our students have really needed. I think that often, we do not serve our students well during the relatively brief time (one term, usually) that we have to work with them.

SKR: You make me think about how new historicism was in some ways an antidote to reader response criticism because people realized that you can only do legitimate reader response if you already know all the historical context. If you'd already trained as a new critic and you'd also already brought all the historical knowledge to your reading, then you could do your reader response reading. But a reader who didn't know, a reader who didn't bring all that, took away something completely different.

DH: Exactly. This relates to a discussion I had last night with some people who are interested in digital humanities and the fact that what the people who are at the forefront of digital humanities are bringing are incredible thoroughgoing comprehensive literacies, and incredible understandings of argument and of evidence, and understandings of deep thinking and wide-ranging reading in all of the fields within English studies and beyond. They're bringing all of this to what's being called "digital humanities." But when I ask others about "digital humanities," the work sounds very simplistic—a digitized version of making information available on printed handouts.

I think our students deserve as much of that broad and wide education as we can give them so that they are equally contributing in very deep ways, as opposed to a more corporate model that says, "What's important is what happens tomorrow and not anything else." If you've ever taught a literature survey, you know that we've always had trouble determining what to include and what to leave out. We've always had way too much good reading to put in a semester—even forty years ago we struggled with the same question. So when a broadly-educated colleague from a major institution says, "Well, we're going to get rid of the survey because there's just too much to include," I'm very concerned, because that's always been a problem, a matter of choice. I started thinking about these much larger issues when I reread this little piece from thirty years ago, because I couldn't have known this then.

SKR: This is about so many issues. In some ways, it's about memory—how much do you need to know, how much is education about teaching content. These are huge questions.

DH: They're very huge questions, and on the one hand I can understand the negative reaction of people to the Graff & Berkenstein book. On the other hand, I can understand why teachers have wanted to use it, just as I understood at the Illinois Institute of Technology (where I held my first tenure-track position and where I was teaching when I wrote this piece) why students felt more comfortable when I said, " OK today we're going to learn how to write a memorandum," and then once they had that confidence of writing a memorandum, which seemed like fairly defined genre to tackle, with that confidence they could go on and perhaps write that more academic paper or write the longer laboratory report for a course that involved far more management of information and complex understanding of how to do what they needed to do. So I can understand the way in which we necessarily rail against formulaic writing; but I'm just so grateful when my students are interested in writing, period. I'd almost be happy with the five-paragraph essay at this point. You have to start somewhere, and I don't know, I just think that I'm more and more concerned when I go to institutions and I find that first-year writing has become almost entirely personal writing. I think that's a misunderstanding of what many smart people have been trying to do for 40 years. I think we need to give our students more than that. I hope that makes sense.

SKR: It does. Before we get too far beyond the composition studies/film studies connection, I wanted to note this: it occurred to me as you were talking about the way that you were connecting those two that 1982 was also early if not pre-interdisciplinary/cross-disciplinary/multi-disciplinary studies—we didn't even have a vocabulary to distinguish between those. There were just not the tools out there already preexisting to do some of this work—so you were inventing it on your own.

You were just now starting to talk a little bit about your students there at IIT. So let me go on to this question: when you wrote your essay "Using Film to Teach Writing" in the Fall 1984, you were the Director of Basic Writing at a technical school and you describe that position briefly in your essay. Now, from the vantage point of twenty-seven years, do you see additional ways that your teaching position at the time contributed to what you had to say on the topic?

DH: Absolutely. Let me start answering, and then please tell me whether I understand your question. That was my first tenure-track position, as I mentioned, and I think I alluded to that in the article. I was really trying to find my way, and I was trying to find ways to link the opportunities that I saw at IIT with what I wanted to do both in terms of learning how to write for publication and how to be a better teacher. I had been teaching for seven or eight years, because I started teaching in graduate school, which began for me in the fall of 1973.

IIT presented a lot of opportunities. There was an Educational Technology Center—I think that's what it was called—and the tech director took me under his wing and got me interested in developing software. So I was an early adopter of what we would now probably call "tutorial" or "drill and kill" software because that was what was possible; and I was part of the then just-starting "computers and composition movement," and my work with software development and

students led to my first book, *On Composition and Computers*, which I published with the MLA in 1987.

So yes, that position had a very strong influence on what my interests became because it gave me incredible opportunities to do things I hadn't done before. I had come to IIT with an interdisciplinary PhD. Comparative Literature was one of the first interdisciplinary PhDs, so that when we studied literature and the visual arts the seminar was called "Literature and the Other Arts." I had come primed to try to bring things together, and I also came out of grad school enjoying being something of a generalist, which made my teaching load fairly eclectic, which I enjoyed tremendously. I had deliberately sought out wide-ranging teaching experiences in graduate school, and I had taken the first pro-seminar in the teaching of film that was ever offered at the University of Illinois and Urbana Champaign (which really dates me!). That pro-seminar had a tremendous influence on me and led to my teaching and writing about film; then IIT, of course, allowed me to develop those interests because of its technological and, as it happens, arts atmosphere. The Institute of Design at IIT was well-known for photography and architecture and other, related disciplines, and so I think that interdisciplinarity came naturally to me. My other undergraduate degree was a double major in French and English, which doesn't seem radically inter-disciplinary now, but it was at the time.

I think that having those types of students who were interested in very different things than I was also encouraged me in a number of directions. The first composition class I ever taught as a graduate student at UIUC was a Rhetoric 105 section in the fall of 1973 and it was an Engineering rhetoric section. At that time (I don't know if they still do), the powers-that-were sequestered the Engineering students into their own rhet comp section and that's what I taught. So maybe the model was set by that first experience.

SKR: Now I want to talk a little bit about *The Writing Instructor* journal itself. *The Writing Instructor* was started by a group of PhD students in Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literature at the University of Southern California in 1980, and the first issue appeared in the Spring of 1981. At the time there were very few PhD programs in rhetoric and composition and very few journals devoted to composition studies, so *TWI* was a way for graduate students to share what they were learning. What personal purpose did publishing your essay in *TWI* serve for you?

DH: It was a tremendously wonderful thing for many reasons. I was thrilled because I felt insecure about whether I could ever know enough to write legitimately about the teaching of writing. Of course, I wasn't that aware at the time, although I began to be aware, that there were many people in a similar situation to mine who had been literature graduate students, who had literature PhDs, who were helping to create, who were helping to build on the important work of Mina Shaughnessy and Janet Emig and others. Many of the people in composition and rhetoric that I respect and admire tremendously, as you know, come out of literary studies. I of course didn't fully realize all that back then.

I heard *a very* famous person in our field several years ago at CCCC emphatically express dissatisfaction with what appeared to be going on in PhD programs in Rhetoric and Composition, saying there wasn't enough substance, it wasn't deep enough, the dissertation topics didn't seem to be weighty enough. I don't know if this is true, but it certainly gave me food for thought. I began to wonder about the value of interdisciplinarity for people learning to be scholar-teachers in composition and rhetoric, trying to emulate what is now the outstanding longevity of good scholarship in composition studies. I know that might be an unpopular thing to say, but I look at people like Andrea Lunsford and Charles Schuster and a bunch of people that you and I could name who have done outstanding work, and almost to a person, they all are literature PhDs. I wonder whether that interdisciplinary perspective—by virtue of their background in literary studies—has turned out to be a productive thing for them and for the field.

But I know we're all very invested—as we should be—in composition in and of itself. I love to use Jeanne Gunner's quote that I heard her use at MLA many, many years ago and it always stuck with me. She said, "I need to always emphasize to people that composition is not an empty vessel into which other disciplines must be poured." And that's true, and yet at the same time, wonderful interdisciplinary connections don't diminish other disciplines. Making a connection between the sciences and the arts doesn't diminish the arts or the sciences. I think we can feel less uncomfortable about these interdisciplinary connections than we have in the past. So we're not giving up anything by having these connections; we are in fact enhancing both areas just as I had hoped to do by taking something to film and taking something to writing in an equal sort of way.

SKR: As you're talking about this, it's striking me that I'm not aware of many inter-disciplinary PhD programs in comp/rhetoric now. The program I went through at the University of Southern California was interdisciplinary. It was a program in Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literature. We had a third of our coursework in Rhetoric, a third in Linguistics, and a third in Literature.

DH: That's why you're a genius.

SKR: No, it was just a good education.

DH: As you said in your laughter, it was "just a good education," which takes me back to our previous discussion, where we seem to be getting away from the film and writing thing, but it is, "it's just a good education." And you probably enriched literary studies with what you could bring to it from composition and rhetoric and vice versa. We deal in these interesting dualities and there's still after all these years a sort of knee-jerk anti-MLA thing that we do in composition that's ridiculous. We're a discipline, we can get over that stuff, and we do need to get over it!

SKR: Let me move on to one of the questions I most wanted to ask: As one of the editorial board members for *The Writing Instructor*, I'm particularly interested in the knowing whether your work as a past editor of *College Composition and Communication* changes the way you read your own 1984 essay now, many years later.

DH: Yes. I think it relates to something I said earlier when I answered your first question, that of course, the editor in me looking at this would say, "Where would I have put this in *CCC*?" and it would have had to have been in a special section. It couldn't have been in the main part of the journal because it wouldn't have had, back then, the scholarly context one should expect now. I think that the awareness that I have of the profession and a familiarity with many of the important things that have been written in the profession are only enhanced by my having served as editor. I've had the privilege of seeing more of what's out there than I might have seen otherwise. So in that sense, it does influence, and it does make me more aware of controversies. I think it helps to enhance my understanding of exactly how rich and how established and significant and how important our field is. I'm very concerned that in our zeal to create a really good discipline, which I believe we have done, we have forgotten to put what our students need to know first. I don't think that technology or the Digital Age of the Internet or Twitter or Facebook will change that. We're talking about an issue of genre when we talk about tweets and texting, so if we add that to the genres we talk about when we talk to our students, they all still know how to think in a profound and accountable way that helps them vote for President, among other things.

SKR: I'll close with a more general question: in what ways are you now like and in what ways unlike the way you described yourself three decades ago: literature PHD, experienced composition/ literature and film teacher entering an urban private university to direct basic writing.

DH: It's almost as if I've come full circle in an odd kind of way, because I think of myself as being a person who is committed—and has been committed—to working in institutions of opportunity.

The Illinois Institute of Technology, which was both technologically and in some ways artistically focused, had many first-generation students attending college there. Governors State University, where I went in 1985, is a generous admissions institution, a junior-senior-graduate institution focusing on its traditional audience of the adult learner, the returning learner. Northern Illinois, where I went after that as Chair of the Department of English, has a PhD program and is a little more selective, but still is a state institution, another institution, as I see it, of opportunity. And now, I'm back in a medium sized private, very urban college. In fact I'm just up the road from the Illinois Institute of Technology. And I'm not teaching writing right now but we have a lot of writing anxious students and we similarly have a lot of, in this case, arts- and media-focused students, who wonder why they have to take a writing course. This is no different than the freshmen that I taught of the University of Illinois in the mid-1970s, who no matter what the major was, wondered by they had to take a writing course. So that—whether fortunately or unfortunately—has not changed. However, though in one sense I've come full circle, as much as our students may have changed and their ways of learning may have changed, what I believe we all need to learn hasn't changed at all.

In fact, the digital humanities professor that I spoke with last night is exactly as outstanding as he is--his name is Stephen Jones and he's at Loyola—because, as I suggested earlier, he has brought to digital humanities his wide-reaching, and profoundly strong education. As you put it, it's just a good education. And I want to make sure that, as frustrating and as hard as it is to fit everything in when we teach every semester, we don't know what we should include and what we should leave out, that it's important for us to try and make those choices rather than give it up.

I recall a minor epiphany that came about when I taught, probably 25 years ago, a class on Thomas Hardy. I love to tell this story because it was such a depressing class to teach because by the end of the semester we all needed group therapy! If you read enough of Hardy's novels, seasoned with his poetry, there's only so much you can take. But my epiphany came to me when one of my students said to me, "Wow, I didn't know that people worried about these things that long ago!" It reminded me that we all have a lot of work to do to serve our students well.

And similarly, when I wrote what is considered to be the first scholarly article on music video, which was published around the same time that I published this article, I remember having to

explain to students that Michael Jackson wasn't the first person to put a group of dancers behind him--a chorus line--and neither was Fred Astaire and neither was Gene Kelly. There was vaudeville and there was probably other stuff before that, but unfortunately I didn't have the resources of the Internet and You-Tube and the other things that I have now to show them rare films of vaudevillians doing the same things and setting the prototype for things that we think were inverted twenty years ago.

So that made me realize that our privilege and our burden are even greater than we think, that even as we are more immersed technologically, that what we might relegate and then disparage as being traditional still contributes to our decision-making and use of these technologies.

SKR: It's all there.

DH: It's all there.

SKR: Do you think that your work as a Dean gives you a perspective on these issues that you wouldn't have had if you'd continued to be strictly in the comp classroom?

DH: I hope it does. I know that we have a Department of Science and Mathematics at Columbia College that is filled with outstanding faculty members. Many, many years ago . . . and I only know this because my husband was a Columbia College graduate in the 70s—and the following is no longer the case—faculty members in science and mathematics felt that they had to capitulate to the fact that all of the students here tended to be artists and the mantra, of sorts, from elsewhere in the college—I'm just told this by a number of people—was, "well they're just artists—they don't really need real science." My husband always loved science, and at the time, in the early 1970s, he was really disappointed with his science classes because of that capitulation. He wanted these to be real science classes. He didn't think that everything had to be connected to art. And it's fine to connect science to art as long as you can say you had the fundamental, real science behind it. If all you get is a sort of surface, dilettantish science connected to art, it's not going to work that well for you—at least I don't think so. So I carry this perspective over to the other disciplines that are taught in my School because think that of course on the one hand we have wonderful courses--advanced courses like the Physics of Musical Instruments and Physics for Filmmakers--but you also need to have introductory physics and the physics after that and the physics after that. We now have calculus courses at Columbia College Chicago, and we had never had those before. We've had them for a little over five years. Our students wouldn't have taken these courses years ago and might have been discouraged had they wanted to, but now our students are interested in disciplines outside of the ones that inspire their direct passions. More and more, and they want these difficult, challenging, wonderful courses, and know that if they major in the arts, which many of our students do, these challenges of additional contexts outside of their chosen disciplines will make them better artists. Interdisciplinarity is most effective when one comes to them from strong disciplinary contexts. It's all for our students, right, Shirley?

SKR: Yes. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about as you look back at the 1984 article?

DH: I was and still am very grateful that I had the opportunity to publish that article in *TWI*. It meant a lot to me, and it still does. It helped solidify some of what I was teaching and what I was doing in the classroom, and the article allowed me to reflect my interdisciplinary leanings and interests. I was trying to make sense of many of the things I was interested in, trying to figure out what it meant to be a good professor, and trying to find a way to make teaching and writing work together. I was so grateful. I forget how this opportunity came about and I genuinely don't remember—whether I just sent the article unsolicited to the journal or whether I'd spoken to someone about the article and they'd said, "yes we're interested."

But it was just a very pivotal piece for me, and I'm especially glad to read it now and see that it prefigures many issues with which we're concerned today, however inadvertent that prefiguring might have been.

SKR: I'm pretty sure it was unsolicited. We didn't go out and approach people and ask them to send us articles. We just worked really hard at marketing the journal and making sure everyone was aware as we were just getting started then.

DH: I probably got a flyer in the mail back in those days.

SKR: We had a table at CCCC. They gave us a little table at a discount price and that helped. It was important support.

DH: It's great to think about this and realize that there might have been some continuity to one's life, that things do get wrapped up and tied together in some useful way.

SKR: There's a direction there.

DH: Yes. There's a direction there. But I hope that I've answered your questions. This was fun for

me.

SKR: Thanks so much, Deb, for taking the time to talk with me this morning.

Provenance:

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