

## Studies in Composition and Rhetoric

Leonard Podis  
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## *Who Speaks for Writing*

Stewardship in Writing Studies  
in the 21st Century

Edited by Jennifer Rich & Ethna D. Lay



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## *1. Who Speaks for Writing? Expertise, Ownership, and Stewardship*

DOUGLAS HESSE

Recently, two friends moved to Colorado from Illinois. They bought a house in Louisville, halfway between Denver and Boulder, with a view of the Flat Irons and Longs Peak. During the process of settling in and reading the welter of welcome stuff, from church invitations to trash pickup dates, Susan and Laurence learned that they did not own the rain that falls on their roof. It was illegal to set out a barrel or dig a cistern to gather gutter runoff.

In the West every drop of water is claimed many times over. For example, the Colorado River is divvied out in cubic and acre feet, to ranchers and peach growers, mineshafts and townships, so that famously the river runs dry, leaving it no mouth. It's better to be upstream than down, better to have an old water claim than a new. During his presidential run, when John McCain casually told a Colorado Springs audience that the whole system of water rights probably ought to be revisited, he jeopardized his chances in my swing state more than any policy that he later embraced. He retracted.

The 15 inches of annual rain that falls on my friends' roof, then, is already promised. It's potentially destined for the South Platte River and feedlots in Logan County. To water their responsibly xeriscaped sage, saltbush, and yucca, then, Susan and Laurence buy water from the town of Louisville, rain and snow melt officially dispensed into the economic ecosystem.

This opening promises analogy, of course, water to words, rain to writing. At a conference that revisits the question of who owns writing—who defines and regulates it, who teaches it, assesses it, speaks for the state of it—that's hardly surprising. Modesty and reason surely require me to limit a metaphor that would conjoin a phenomenon of nature to the profession of teaching. I do. In mapping this talk, let me say that today I'm not worrying about copyright, a profoundly important field I'll leave others to till. Copyright has figured interestingly in the publishing history of that talk I gave a few years back on a San Francisco morning. Those remarks appeared in their most original form—that is, with the images I PowerPointed at the convention—in the December 2005 issue of *CCC*. But, simultaneously, Duane

Roen was editing it for publication in a collection of chair's addresses, and Bedford St. Martin's was refused permission to reprint several images. The U.S. Military didn't want me to use an image of a website, nor, surprisingly, did Pearson now allow a computer-generated nonsense essay that scored 37 out of 40 by a computer rating. More recently, when Susan Miller reprinted my talk in the *Norton Book of Composition Studies*, the *Los Angeles Times* declined to yield a screen shot I'd chosen purely to decorate a point, about which I wrote nothing mean or snarky.

While the publishing history of that speech offers a lesson in intellectual and financial control—a lesson illustrated by blogging, Google books, and the death of daily newspapers, I'm not focusing here on the dimensions of ownership concerning copyright. Instead I'd like to explore dimensions having to do with responsibility. Partly this is in the sense of "who owns the dog that just bit the little girl?" but part is also in the sense of "who owns that snow-covered sidewalk?" or "who decides what we ought to do now?" I'm interested, then, in ownership not just as privilege or liability, but also as authority, and, even beyond that, as neighborly duty. The term I'm eventually headed toward is "stewardship," the idea of being entrusted with something, profiting from work done with that trust but ultimately charged with improving and sustaining it.

### *Environments Beyond*

Six years ago I worried that the professional expertise of writing teachers and organizations like CCCC was being wholly ignored by testmakers and profiteers whose common sense appeals and products spoke more comprehensibly to publics and policy makers than anything we were able to muster. I worried about the reduction of writing to job skills, represented by efforts such as the National Commission on Writing's *Writing: A Ticket to Work*, and I worried about our inability—or shyness—to assert our expertise. In the fall of 2008, I learned that my high school alma mater, in rural Iowa, had fallen on the No Child watch list, and when I went to learn why, I found the school's new motto: "Coming together is the beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.—Henry Ford" (Central, 2008). I encountered this slogan in the same week I'd assigned Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives* for a graduate class, so my hometown's invocation of Fordism gave personal depth to Brandt's (2001) argument that literacy as an economic imperative had replaced an older view of literacy as a moral or democratic imperative (p. 26). As I revisit those issues, most of that analysis still seems apt.

The shine of No Child Left Behind has been dulled somewhat in the transition from the Bush to the Obama administration. However, something perhaps even more far-reaching (at least for high school and college writing teachers) trails in its wake, the Common Core Standards, whose development suggests that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan believes teachers own their subject matters just about as much as did his predecessor, Margaret Spellings, which is to say not much. The Common Core Standards (CCS) resulted from collaboration between the Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Their aim,

at least initially, was to identify the math, reading, and writing skills that would constitute college readiness for high school graduates. As I'll demonstrate, that aim was expanded so that by February 2010, the chiefs and the governors had "back-mapped" (their term) the standards to create grade performance levels for reading and writing, beginning in kindergarten.

What is most striking is how these standards came into being. Input from experts in writing was missing in the development stages, sought during the end game and pretty much after the fact, then ignored. I observed this progression from a position of close knowledge, having been appointed by NCTE to join a group chaired by Randy Bomer to create an organization response in summer 2009. Later that fall, I was appointed jointly by NCTE and MLA to attend a meeting with a group that had one day to craft a disciplinary response to the Common Core Standards. In February 2010, I was among a group consulted by Anne Gere as NCTE and MLA were being asked to endorse the final version of these standards.

You need to understand that *none* of this process or the standards themselves—which promise to have an unparalleled effect on how writing is taught in America's K-12 classrooms—was owned (or even rented or sharecropped) by expert writing teachers. Not only that, no experts in writing at the college level were involved in any significant way in any phase of the development process. Please tolerate, then, a detailed narrative.

In spring 2009, Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association decided to create "college and career readiness standards" in math and language arts, the ostensible purpose of which was to measure the preparation of high school graduates. Tellingly, they convened a working group constituted by two testing organizations, ACT and the College Board and a "school reform and effectiveness" organization, Project Achieve (<http://www.projectachieve.info/aboutprojectachieve.html>).

David Coleman, founder and CEO of a small consulting company called Student Achievement Partners, served as author/editor of the language arts standards, and while there was a "feedback group" of "content experts and educators," it had no one with college writing expertise. In short order, then, the chiefs and governors had accomplished three important things. They (1) drafted standards, (2) convinced 48 states to sign on to the standards (Alaska and Texas being the holdouts), and (3) attracted the attention of the Obama administration, which tied its \$4.1 billion Race to the Top educational funds to the CCS standards. With Race to the Top announced and calendared (state applications were due in January 2010, with winners announced in April), the chiefs and governors were hitched to the Department of Education train and schedule. So, when they sent an embargoed copy of the first draft to NCTE for official response on July 22, 2009, the organization had nineteen days, until August 10, to form a review committee and write a reply.

Our 21-page response pointed out, among other things, that the document excluded meaningful considerations of reading and writing for civic, social, or

aesthetic purposes and failed to consider the far-reaching implications of texts created to circulate digitally, with all of the affordances of multimodality. It was, we concluded, a document as appropriate for 1950 as for 2009, and we worried that, in its wake, schools, especially those with students from historically marginalized groups, economically and socially would

focus on only the limited skills enumerated in the document, omitting the literacy practices that motivate, engage, and inspire, as well as those that represent real power in civic life, the workplace, and the academy. Restricting their curriculum to the mundane and tedious acquisition of skills whose purpose and value—the pleasures and power of a literate life—they are never invited to see is likely to reduce education, for them, to an exercise in meeting limited literacy standards. (Bomer et al., 2009, p. 3)

Furthermore, we challenged the draft's persistent claim that "these standards are evidence-based" by noting that "none of the evidence has been drawn from peer-reviewed research journals or similar sources. Rather, the evidence offered at present consists of surveys conducted by the testing companies that stand most immediately to gain from the testing of these standards" (Bomer et al., 2009, p. 4). Nor was NCTE alone in its criticism. In its August 17, 2009, letter to Gene Wilhoit, International Reading Association president Kathy Au wrote, "Our overall impression is one of disappointment" (para. 1).

In October 2009, the American Council of Higher Education (the umbrella organization of higher education organizations) convened a one-day meeting in Washington, DC. ACE asked NCTE and MLA to assemble a panel of experts from composition and literary studies, chaired by Anne Gere. Seventeen of us, representing a range of institutional types, met for a day on DuPont Circle, while representatives from the governors, the chiefs, and Project Achieve listened in. The new draft we considered had several minor revisions reflecting some of the specific suggestions the NCTE group had made. However, not only had there been no revisions in major components of the document that had most troubled the NCTE review group, we learned, to everyone's surprise, that the governors' group had gone the next step of "backmapping." Confident in their graduation standards for reading and writing, the governors and chiefs had set up a process to establish specific grade-level standards from kindergarten on, thus dictating at the finest grain what ought to be taught when. We were stunned, and while we generated six objections to the draft standards, we realized that this matter was far down the road, pulled substantially by the horse of Race to the Top.

In November, the chiefs and governors announced "The Work Group for K-12 standards development . . . composed of individuals representing multiple stakeholders and a range of expertise and experience in assessment, curriculum design, cognitive development, early childhood, early numeracy, child development, English-language acquisition and elementary, middle, and postsecondary education" (Omeear, 2009, para. 4). Again, no one with college writing expertise. As drafts of the grade-by-grade standards leaked out, critiques became more public, among them observations about the stunted view of writing framed in the

documents (Schuster, 2010, pp. 23–25.). Asked in February 2010 to endorse the K-12 Standards, the NCTE/MLA group demurred. Yet, through all of this, the standards project rolled onward, with enthusiastic support from the White House (Office of the White House Press Secretary, 2010).

I've dwelled at some length on this narrative because I believe the Common Core Standards will have a profound effect on how writing is taught in America's schools and understood by not only American students but also their parents and other publics. While there are several aspects of those standards that many of us can and should support, its overall view of writing is out of sync in vital ways not only with professional writing teacher views but also the expansive literate practices currently in play. I fear that one result will be to widen the gap between writing in school and "writing in life," in ways that will make many students even more cynical about academic writing. While there are roles we should continue playing as the Common Core Standards trundle on, I want to look ahead, to a couple of things that are necessary for us to get better hearings in future policy decisions about writing. I must confess, though, pessimism that these will be sufficient.

First, we need to publish more empirical research, gathering and analyzing student artifacts and attitudes, then relating our findings to writing that matters in spheres beyond classrooms. It's not that empirical research is "better" than the interpretive, narrative, historical, and theoretical traditions now ascendant. Rather, it better facilitates the rhetoric of advocacy, an observation I elaborated in a 2009 CCC article echoing earlier ones by Rich Haswell and Chris Anson. CCC has tried funding strategic research, in several projects between 2004–07, with a renewed initiative in 2009, but this kind of collective action runs counter to our professional ethos. At a 2005 meeting in Pittsburgh, I convened prominent researchers, including Chuck Bazerman, Christina Haas, and Anne Herrington to discuss vital research questions that Cs might pursue. After an energetic and generative debate, the group ultimately concluded that research in our field just doesn't work in a centralized fashion. It was more practical to let individuals follow their own heads. Still, I wonder if the latest testing imperatives might create enough exigency to reconsider organizing collective efforts.

Second, we need to pursue—and value—communicating with publics external to the field. Whenever the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, for example, publishes a shallow article about teaching writing, the Writing Program Administrators list-serv writhes into scorn and handwringing. (For but one example, see the February 2010 thread and "The CHE Strikes Again," generated in response to Rob Jenkins' article "Accordions, Frogs, and the Five-Paragraph Theme.") Our stance is generally reactive, with much of even this energy directed internally, to others in the profession. Of course, expert-to-expert transmission makes sense in any profession where status, merit, tenure, and promotion are determined by contributions to the disciplinary community. One element of a more "external" orientation, though, would be agreeing to evaluate and "count" public rhetorical efforts that are disciplinarily smart, whether ones we've authored or work we've had recognized. By the latter, I mean things like the attention that Andrea Lunsford and her Stanford colleagues received in *Wired Magazine* (Thompson, 2009) for research

on student media writing, a story magnified by bloggers in such venues as *The New Yorker* (La Force, 2009). The National Council of Teachers of English well-regarded “National Day on Writing” represents a different approach to appeal directly to external publics.

### *The Environment Within*

While I think that relatively little has changed in the policy sphere since 2005, there have been interesting movements in the status of writing within the academy. Partly, this is because composition programs have more economic company. Across higher education, substantially more teaching is being done by nontenure-line faculty, and while adjunct percentages in first year writing may still tally highest, writing is less alone in exploiting and being exploited.

For decades, compositionists have decried the subjugation of writing to literature. The loudest call to arms was Maxine Hairston’s famous 1985 image of literature faculty as mandarins earning power and prestige on the backs of compositional peasants. Historically there’s been truth to this comment, though it has always varied among types of institutions and settings, between large universities and liberal arts colleges, for example. Still, comparing average rank and salary for writing teachers vs. literature teachers would reveal a substantial gap.

You hear less literature envy in composition studies these days. Partly this is due to the dwindling of literary studies, the expansion of the English major to feature creative writing, professional writing and media studies, and the vertical growth of writing and writing studies, including in freestanding departments or administrative structures. To cherry-pick an example of this trend, I note that Yale University saw its number of English majors drop almost by half from 2002 to 2008, while the writing program at Rowan University increased ten-fold over that same period. As a strong believer in English studies, I take no consolation in the demise of literary studies. The CCCC Committee on the Major in Rhetoric and Composition counted 68 undergraduate majors in writing, excluding creative writing (Balzhiser and McLeod, 2010 p. 416). At the same time that the number of writing majors is increasing, a CCCC task force under the strong leadership of Louise Wetherbee Phelps brought new visibility to our field. The U.S. Department of Education has an elaborate coding system for tracking degrees: the Classification of Instructional Programs, or CIP codes. Historically, degrees in rhetoric and composition studies were obscurely included under English Language and Literature/Letters, where the *Sputnik*-era language represented our field as “23.0401 English Composition. A program that focuses on the principles of English vocabulary, grammar, morphology, syntax and semantics; and techniques of selecting, developing, arranging, combining and expressing ideas in appropriate written forms” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Ouch. Our group proposed a new set of codes. Developing them was a tricky process, as we were asked to speak on behalf of rhetoric and composition studies, defining our field and subfields for a government agency in a way that we believed wouldn’t annoy our colleagues. The Department of Education’s review agency approved

four new subcodes: Writing, General; Professional, Technical, Business, and Scientific Writing; Rhetoric and Composition (for most graduate programs); and Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies (Phelps, 2009).

So as new majors and new departments emerge, they’ll be better able to account for themselves, and we for them. The new configurations come in various guises. Does a new department of writing include creative writing? Loyola College in Baltimore and Grand Valley State do. If not poetry and fiction, what about creative nonfiction? Journalism? What about digital media studies and production? What about rhetorical history and analysis? Technical communication? Pedagogy? Some new departments have responsibility for service composition, like English 101 or WAC, and others don’t. Administrative units other than departments and majors have emerged too. The University of Kentucky, for example, just created a “Division of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Media,” fiscally independent, its leader reporting directly to the dean and sits on the Council of Chairs, yet a unit remaining within the English department. Other writing programs are structured as free-standing entities, such as the ones at George Washington, St. John’s University, and The University of Denver. They have a service mission rather than a degree-granting one, but even these units are promoting significant changes in who teaches writing and the nature of their appointments, from part-time adjunct to full-time benefitted staff.

In 2008, Microsoft launched its “I’m a PC” advertising campaign to answer Apple’s successful commercials. In one of them, a factory worker declares, “this is where I work” followed instantly by a farmer declaring “and these are my employees,” as he points to a pasture of cows (“I’m a PC”). Having grown up in rural Iowa, I recognized the breed as dairy cattle, not steak on the hoof, so that blunted the “employee” reference somewhat. Still, cows as employees gives a new twist to working Maggie’s farm. Historically, and with sad aptness, writing programs were fairly like feedlots led by wrangler WPAs working the English ranch. No doubt this continues in too many places. But the practice is being tempered, especially in programs being filled largely by full-time lecturers or instructors with respectable wages and benefits, even as the number of tenure track positions in rhetoric and composition remains 30% of the positions on the MLA Job List (with technical writing at 8% and creative writing at 15%) (Laurence, 2009).

The ethics of differential staffing—hiring faculty in varying conditions of employment, load, and review—are complex. The American Association of University Professors maintains a strong and principled hard line for the tenure track. However, given current trends, we must ask whether students and writing are better served by a non-tenured, full-time faculty now or by the possibility of a tenure-line professoriate in some remote future? Some will reasonably reject my binary, but this seems the pragmatic alternative. I’m pessimistic that writing programs will soon see tenure lines in numbers sufficient to staff their courses—unless, of course, they drop the requirement, make writing courses purely elective, and either put faith and resources in WAC or stop worrying about it altogether. Given the options, we should pursue what’s available.

As the teaching of writing becomes more professionalized, as writing programs and departments gradually move (albeit glacially) from part-time and transitional faculty to full-time, if not always tenurable, as literary study diminishes in strength and numbers, the politically and disciplinarily useful rallying point of composition's subjugation to literature loses credence. We can less conveniently speak for writing by speaking against Evil English. At least on campuses, then, composition controls more elements not only of its curriculum and pedagogy but also of its workforce. In this environment, we need to be more purposeful about what faculty who teach writing need to know and do. A program of transient, often inexpert part-time faculty might be excused for operating under an enlightened benevolent (one hopes) boss compositionist or oligarchic model. However, as faculty are hired under full contracts for extended terms, they have a more thoroughgoing stake in the curriculum.

Professional writing teachers have the ability and responsibility to explain and justify their teaching practices, relying less on being managed or drifting with inherited practices because their employment status "allows" only that, exercising more those practices grounded in the discipline. This means knowing the history of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies, the array of theories that have resulted in different curricula and pedagogies, then and now, and the research that supports and contests them. It means being able to explain how our teaching achieves the goals we claim—and to defend those goals as superior to possible others. It means articulating the relation between our courses and other courses, existing or potential, and between the forms of writing we teach and the forms of writing existing in the universe of discourse. It means doing all of this in concert with others bearing the title of writing teacher, writing and speaking with knowledgeable others, both locally and in the global profession.

On the one hand, the qualities I've just mentioned are modest. I've said nothing about formal credentials (though the levels of engagement I've just described would be difficult without some level of graduate education in multiple areas of composition studies), nor have I outlined an article quota or a conference talk tote sheet. On the other hand, those guidelines exceed many common arrangements, when budget and faculty availability dictate salaries and hiring such that, in tacit exchange for working conditions that shame us, we keep teaching either a private or a robotic practice. That is, we either imagine the best of our teaching colleagues but don't trouble them with discussing their practices, or we imagine the worst, providing more or less obliged syllabi and expecting faculty to stick to them.

Historically, professions have controlled their memberships, ostensibly for the good of society but candidly also for the good of the professions themselves. This is how licensure functions in medicine or the bar exam in law. At programmatic levels, disciplinary accreditation, as in engineering, professional psychology, and social work, serves the same purposes, and from time to time during my years as an CCCC officer, members suggested we explore accrediting writing programs. The reasons for not pursuing licensure or accreditation are both impossibly practical and importantly philosophical. Far short of that, however, we should expect those who teach writing in colleges to be meaningfully engaged in the profession, even as the

outlines of the profession shimmer hazily. Can people be "in" composition but not rhetoric or "in" writing but not in composition? Can they be "in composition studies" but teach mainly concepts and analysis and less often productive arts and skills?

### *Our Teaching Subject*

One responsibility of my current position is to judge courses that students hope to transfer for credit in my program. Increasingly I've been pondering course descriptions that foreground semester-long explorations of rich topics: television sitcoms, race in American education, global warming, tattooing, representations of criminals in films, magic and religion, and on and on. Partly this results from first-year writing disappearing from many institutions, particularly liberal arts colleges relatively higher on the prestige scale that frequently supply DU transfers. Often in the comp slot are first-year seminars or topic driven writing—intensive courses taught by faculty from across the disciplines—perhaps disproportionately from English and the humanities, yes, but often with more seniority and field expertise. Even many schools that retain first-year rhetoric or writing manifest courses that are theme driven, terrific courses, intellectually stimulating, just the kind of stuff one hopes students might encounter in college. When I encounter them in the transfer situation, I have to figure whether they are writing courses equivalent to ours.

Questions about the focus and content of composition courses are nothing new. In 1935, John Crowe Ransom declared, "The whole problem of Freshman Composition lies in improvising a subject-matter. In the ideal university of the future the teaching of Composition will not fall upon the English staff, but will be part of the job of all the teachers of the usual Freshman content-courses; the teachers of English Literature, History, Political Science, Natural Science" (p. iv) Ransom was writing a preface to a thematic reader of current topics. Such readers have obviously been common before and since, constituting one of the mainstays of publishers' catalogs, along with anthologies organized by types of discourse. Thematic anthologies, through their very plurality of topics, with multiple essays on each, imply that the readings exist to serve writing, though if you read the crabby student reviews, you see how students miss our intentions. The move to single-topic courses signals something else. With but one topic, the course more easily can be said to be "about" something rather than about many things, commonly denominated by writing.

I'd like to focus on two possible reasons for the rise of topic-driven writing courses. One is the splintering of generic 101, heretofore understood as a universal vaccine or vitamin, into offerings cleaved one from another by genre or discursive setting—perhaps Civic Argument or Academic Discourse or Writing for the Social Sciences. Alternatively, and more commonly, the division is manifested through topics: The Rhetoric of Reality Television, Religious Fundamentalism, True Crime and Popular Culture. Even in highly differentiated programs, some elements commonly thread the sections, those denominators

differing from school to school. At Stanford, for example, course sections foreground specific assignments in rhetorical analysis and production. At Duke, sections foreground processes and writerly habits impelled by different subject matters.

Two competing logics underlie fracturing. One—call it Process Triumphant—believes that numerous roads lead to the same destination, each of them more or less equivalent; teach or take the one most scenic and you'll arrive at the same writing skills. The other—call it Discourse Triumphant—believes that multiple roads all lead different places; take whichever the teacher/surveyor makes most interesting or practical, but don't assume you'll end some common place. A cynic might regard this second view as the composition program covering its back, disavowing that students can leave English 101 as universal rhetors. A strategist may recognize segmented composition as a harbinger of the writing major or department, solving through a curriculum expanded both horizontally and vertically the folly of a single course standing for all of writing.

The second main development is a more complicated function of two powerful converging disciplinary weather systems. One is the latent impact, sort of like the rain remaining after the hurricane, of cultural studies on English departments and the English curriculum. If, in its heyday, cultural studies had specific political orientations, it has since moved to "cultural analysis" more broadly and less politically understood. What has been retained—indeed, what has triumphed—has been a focus on popular artifacts: television, movies, advertising, fashion, sports, music, workplace practices, schooling, and on and on. The goal has less been to effect social change than to produce interesting readings of those artifacts. I think that's a perfectly fine goal that resonates with some of the tenets of academic rhetoric. I also think it represents a curious retreat to interpretation (part of Richard Fulkerson's critique) and to a more "public" focus of our work, but that's a subject for another time.

The second imperfect storm trails post-cognitivist, post-process precepts that writing can't be taught as widely transferrable strategies and competencies because individual writing acts are embedded in genres, discourses, and activity systems (Russell, 1999, pp. 80–95). This opens the way to—perhaps even invites—a stronger presence of a subject matter in a writing course, to allow students to dwell within discourses and, also, professors to profess them. Some post-process proponents would have the composition course disappear, realizing 75 years later John Crowe Ransom's dream.

One step shy of abolition is thematic composition. By extending the realm of texts worth interpreting, it carries greater face validity for contemporary students and readers. That extension is fueled by our energetically bricolagic disposition to pursue the composition of, the rhetoric of, anything, and it consoles a sometimes reluctant category of teachers. These faculty may be unenthusiastic about teaching mere freshman comp but perceive in thematic courses curricular space for a supra-disciplinary category of objects and practices that are less easily housed elsewhere in the undergraduate curriculum. Are they writing teachers in any sense different than historians or psychologists who assign lots of writing?

Is a writing course like music theory, or is it like a cello lesson? Is it art history or painting? Is it anatomy or orthopedics? Historically, the content of composition courses is the development of students' writing: the guided production of texts to foster a repertory of specified practices. The thinking was to teach concepts and strategies to facilitate progress, along with examples as illustrations, but as we've tended to lose faith in strategies or practices as distillable and transferrable, we take consolation in themes and bodies of knowledge.

It was sort of inevitable, then, that a course like the one Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007) described would emerge. Instead of taking its content from issues and disciplines "out there"—globalization, the politics of water rights, the films of the Coen brothers—Downs and Wardle's course takes its subject matter as the field itself. Students read articles from our journals and chapters from our books to start learning something of what we know, in a pedagogy that foregrounds the social sciences side of our field. They do primary research along those lines, gathering observational data, for example, to create a study of writing in a particular situation. I'd much rather we have our students be budding Deborah Brandts than be formulaic five-paragraphers, but as an introduction to the field, Downs and Wardle's course raises questions. Is their field mine? My own preference is to emphasize craft, writerly options, and rhetorical strategies for various civic and popular audiences than to cast students as apprentices to a research discipline.

How students understand writing matters, after all. If they little perceive the relationships between the types of writing that they encounter inside school and out, their cynicism should surprise us. Many of you were probably as amused as I was by students' efforts in spring 2008 to tweak the Advanced Placement exams. The deal was to randomly write the phrase "This is Sparta" on their exams, then neatly cross it out with a single line, as the AP folks directed for such corrections. This is a refreshingly cheeky form or protest especially given the serious folks at ETS. Students shared their efforts on Facebook, providing not only examples from obvious exams like the AP Lit but even in calculus (Xu, 2008).

It's a commonplace that more people are now generating more text than at any previous time. Yet the gap is immense and growing between the ostensibly ludic world's self-sponsored social networking and the obliged world of academic essaying. A joint study by the Pew Trust, as part of its Internet and American Life Project, and the College Board (alas, not NCTE or CCCC) finds that students make scant connections between school writing and social writing (Lenhart et al., 2008).

Of course, in a sense, the students are right in disparaging the connections. When students encounter few correlatives outside of school to the writing within (and, I mean, how often do we encounter MLA "works cited" pages in reading outside our careers?), then we should expect dissonance. The question is what we make of it. Do we continue to teach traditional school forms of writing in isolation from or in conversation with the other forms out there? Or do we ignore them altogether for continuously emerging forms and channels of communication: visual, digital, aural, ephemeral? How far do we take Todd Taylor's call to teach video production as composition or Cynthia Selfe's (2009) advocacy of aurality?



These aren't simply questions of dissonance for students but rather a challenge for our field. Creating some happily universal map of our teaching subject is perhaps premature, maybe impossible. However, I suggest we embrace that enterprise not as a fight over turf, an ownership matter in which I aspire to claim what writing is against all comers, but as a stewardship orientation in which we foreground how "outsiders," students foremost among them, understand writing.

### *Stewardship*

Because I've developed ideas fairly essayistically, in the last third of this chapter I'll congeal these seemingly disparate topics around the idea of stewardship.

I grew up in a Lutheran church when late October and early November traditionally formed the budget commitment season, typically ending on stewardship Sunday, the day when everyone brought pledges for the next year. In DeWitt, Iowa, this was marked by a congregational dinner, which, if you're from the Midwest and of a certain age, you know happened at noon. The night meal was supper. During the 10:00 service, I'd be vexed by smells of roast beef and coffee coming from the church basement, made by the Ladies Aid Society. After the dinner there would be a slide show by a missionary or an imported pastor who'd been to the Holy Land. I'd nearly forgotten those days until October 2005, when I gave the annual Gribben lecture and workshop at Labette Community College, in Parsons, Kansas. The college inhabits a big old high school, and after the morning session, we adjourned across a hallway to a large classroom for lunch. There the four members of the English department had donned aprons to stand behind big porcelain roasters, lading potatoes and gravy and corn.

The basis of church stewardship is that as earthly sojourners, we're merely loaned resources and expected to use them well. While it's fine to profit, we don't own material possessions in any permanent sense. In terms of the church fund drive, the rhetorical power of stewardship stems from being asked to give money that ultimately wasn't even ours but, rather, entrusted us by God. Giving is less painful that way. A good steward maintains or increases the owner's holdings, leaving them in better shape for passing to the next steward. For those of us growing up in farm country, the persistently invoked image is of farmers rotating crops and tilling fields for the promise of profit not only for their own lifetimes but eventually for their children's, and, in a more cosmic perspective, the good of creation. This is all very Wendell Berry, I know, and very feudal, too, but the principle resonates with secular environmental imperatives. The goal is not to exploit and exhaust but to tend and preserve.

To imagine ourselves as stewards of writing as a profession is perhaps an odd thing. Who is the absent owner whose field we tend and return we dread. Ed Corbett? So, that's silly; but it's true we work in a field that predates and, we should hope, survives us. Now, there's potentially a self-serving imperative, the goal of having writing and composition studies survive, so that some future versions of ourselves have jobs and we live through them in published proceedings of days like this, the First Epistle of Doug to the Hofstrans. Fair enough.

But what I'm exploring is how we might understand ourselves as stewards of the profession, hinging in some fashion our individual well being to the collective vitality of those also engaged in this work. This stance goes against our core. Many of us fiercely embrace an energetic tradition of independence, following research and teaching agendas for reasons personal and opportunistic. In this fashion, we're entrepreneurial Protestants, embracing professionalism as an individual matter, between me and the vernacular texts, without some priestly intermediary. If we're to speak as stewards of writing, I suggest three practices.

First, let's work harder to explain writing and writers to constituencies who are not us, using rhetorics that are compelling to them. This has implications for some of the research we do and some of the ways we explain our teaching and research. Because there are individual professional risks involved for empirical work for the good of the profession, we need to mitigate them. More senior members of the profession might take on research agendas whose status vis a vis tenure and promotion might disadvantage newer faculty. Our professional organizations should support, both financially and with greater publishing opportunities, strategic studies important for helping external audiences understand writing and teaching. We need to value excellent writing for nonexperts in popular venues as much as we value disciplinary scholarship.

Second, let's expect all writing teachers to know the field's history, research, practices, and contestations and be able to justify their teaching within that knowledge. Historically, the dismissive treatment of writing and its teachers may have blunted this expectation. Especially as we finally see some progress in programs' status and hiring, following prescribed syllabi or charting one's solitary course no longer suffices. This means working more in conversation with others for some ends bigger than our own interests. To do otherwise results in a fracturing of our field that makes it—and us—seem capricious.

Third, let's articulate our professional interests with those of our students. Our students aren't only academic beings but civic and social and vocational, too. They have pasts and futures that may be nothing like ours. They may be interested in things we find shallow and aspire to roles in which we'd cringe. But ignoring how they experience textuality risks rendering students cynical about writing except in those self-sponsored forms that already engage them and, eventually, those obliged forms mandated by work.

Should that happen—and I'm afraid much in our culture already supports the most meager view of writing—then we'll have failed our most fundamental role as stewards of writing itself. To speak of writing in this fashion, seeming to think it requires our tending, seems odd, even idolatrous. What can writing need from us, who can own it any more than we might own rain? I simply believe that the potential of writing, for creating ideas and creating relationships, for making sense and making right, for cajoling and consoling, defying and delighting—this inexhaustible potential for writing is nonetheless oddly fragile. While we might abjure stewarding this rich view of writing, rightly thinking that we can no more control its forms or conceptualization than Samuel Johnson thought a dictionary could fix the English language, other interests have fewer qualms. As I illustrated

with the Common Core Standards, test- and policymakers are confidently promoting a stratified and regimented view of writing. They're acting primarily out of economic concerns that are no doubt important but hardly exclusive. And while we might seek solace in the fact that enormous numbers of people produce writing outside truncated school or work lives, even the channels of Web 2.0 are subject to constraints, whether Twitter's character limit or Facebook's incessant probes of privacy, its advertising-driven games, its subtle shaping of short discourse.

Of course, for us to act fully in the interests of the profession, of our students, of writing itself may not be enough. During the past few years the Rocky Mountain region became infested with pine bark beetles that will eventually kill the Western pine forests. Already hundreds of thousands of acres have died, leaving rusty trees tinder for massive and inevitable fires, as mountain treelines morph into false tundras.

The beetles hardly fell from space. They've been here, but cold winters historically suppressed their populations. Not lately. At this point it would take five successive days of thirty below temperatures to kill them off, common enough in the past, unthinkable in the present. Those of us living in the mountains have contributed our generous share to global warming. But climate transcends borders, and even had we cut consumption earlier, China's factories or Chicago's commute would have soldiered on sufficiently. Had we been able in the past to shape not only our behavior but the larger world's, perhaps things would have been different. For now, the beetles chomp.

To fancy ourselves as stewards of writing, then, may seem as foolish as tending a timber against uncountable bugs. There is so much popular misunderstanding and so much inherent complexity. Parched reality withers will. Still, I hope we will accept full responsibilities of stewardship, speaking strongly for writing, and in so doing, giving it and ourselves a voice.



## 2. Who Stole Our Subject?

SCOTT STEVENS

### *Larceny*

In a song recounting the story of how his car was boosted late at night in Pittsburgh, folk singer John Gorka (1992) describes his stomach-sinking discovery of dispossession: "there was just a pile of window where the ride home used to be."

Theft sickens. Before the anger, there's disorientation—you look up and down the block, stare at the impossible emptiness of parking spaces or familiar rooms—then outrage sweeps in behind that passing front. If it happens enough, the novelty of insult gives way to perpetual disappointment. Robbed again.

When you live in a high-crime area, you learn a certain detachment. You also "buy low" to minimize the effects of loss. This is the disposition described by Richard Miller when he counsels writing teachers to cultivate "'the arts of contending with disappointment' for surely, there is nothing so dependable in this line of work as disappointment, rejection, defeat" (as cited in Micciche, 2002, p. 442). I'd like to add theft to the list—and I am trying to report a theft here. It's complicated because I can't say precisely what was stolen and I have leads pointing to multiple suspects with divergent motives. If I could find any authorities who would listen, I would explain that "writing," generally tagged "nonfiction, student-produced," was left in our possession some generations back, but increasingly it turns up missing where we thought we left it. Or worse, standing by the curb, bearing looks of foolishness and recrimination, we see others joyriding around in it on the road to their MFAs.

My vehicular metaphor, echoed by Bishop's idea that composition got "rear-ended" by creative nonfiction, merges recklessly with territorial tropes in the pages that follow, images of land regulated by deed and fenceline, because there is no perfect analogue between real property and intellectual ownership (Bagley and Clarkson, 2003, p. 365). In "Who Owns Creative Nonfiction?" Hesse (2003b) directs our attention to ownership issues as he documents the growth in nonfiction creative writing programs and courses over the past 20 years. Prior to the now-dozens of MFA programs in nonfiction, *noncreative nonliterature* (to coin a phrase using Robert Scholes's designations for writing at the second-lowest rung of the English apparatus) was interesting mostly to compositionists and perhaps a few technical writers,