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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Why This Book and Why Now?

Rita Malenczyk, Susan Miller-Cochran,
Elizabeth Wardle, and Kathleen Blake Yancey

This collection of essays responds to several exigences, among them a set of continuing tensions characterizing Rhetoric and Composition; a set of disagreements about whether or not we are, or should be, a discipline; and a nascent sense that at this particular moment in our history, Rhetoric and Composition is on the cusp of disciplinarity. After exploring this set of exigences, we turn to a rationale for this volume, in terms of why we should consider the disciplinary nature and quality of Rhetoric and Composition as well as the implications of identifying ourselves as a discipline, especially if we understand a discipline not as a site of consensus, but rather, in Ken Hyland's terms, as a context for debate and deliberation. And finally, given this context, we introduce the chapters of *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity*.

EXIGENCES

One of the first exigences to which this volume responds is our ambivalence, if not conflict, about the nature of who we are: are we a field, a discipline, or some hybrid—an interdiscipline or multidiscipline? Opinions on our status, of course, vary (see, e.g., Bartholomae 1989; Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). Identifying ourselves as a field seems preferable to some, in part because a field is understood to be both less hierarchical and more fluid than a discipline. Likewise, some in Rhetoric and Composition resist the idea of disciplinarity because such a status carries with it a sense of being fixed and hegemonic, often more interested in pursuing its own expertise than in teaching students, developing programs, or serving other purposes aligned with the origins of the field, at least as they were identified in 1949, one of the several dates vying for contention. And even assuming one understands Rhetoric and

Composition as a discipline, what kind of discipline is being invoked? As several chapters here attest—among them, Carolyn R. Miller and Gwendolynne Reid’s, and Kristine Hansen’s—disciplines vary, which raises a question about what kind of discipline we might want to be, both foci—how we might *be* a discipline and what *kind* of discipline we might want to be—locating this volume.

A related issue is how we name ourselves: are we Composition and Rhetoric, are we Rhetoric and Composition, are we Composition Studies or Writing Studies, are we, as a recent journal title announced, *Literacy in Composition Studies*—or something else? Ample evidence suggests that we continue to struggle with what we should call ourselves. In 2004, for instance, a double special issue of *Enculturation*—with its theme of “Rhetoric/Composition: Intersections/Impasses/Differends”—highlighted how the historical linking of Rhetoric and Composition is both beneficial and vexed. More recently, we seem to be shifting to calling ourselves Writing Studies, as explained in the introduction to *Keywords in Writing Studies* (Heilker and Vandenberg 2015). In some ways a second edition of *Keywords in Composition Studies* (Heilker and Vandenberg 1996), at least in spirit, *Keywords in Writing Studies* is also a new edited collection. Arguing that the ubiquity of digital technologies and the field’s recent attention to public and civic writing, among other causes, have widened our gaze beyond the (composition) classroom, editors Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg point to Writing Studies as a more accurate description of the field. Similarly, in this volume, Sandra Jamieson, analyzing the relationship of the major to disciplinarity, observes that “writing” is a far more common term than “composition” in titles of the major, which provides another reason to adopt Writing Studies as our name. And of course, as a descriptor, Writing Studies, with the addition of the word “studies” completing it—such that it parallels other fields of intellectual inquiry, including literary studies, cultural studies, and so on—underscores the idea that writing itself is *both* a practice and an object of study (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). At the same time, it’s worth noting that multiple names still coexist, as the chapters here demonstrate.¹

Two other exigences inform *Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity*: concerns about unintended consequences of our disposition toward service; and loyalties toward English, which some identify as our historical home.² Historically, there has been ambivalence about the pervasive service role of Composition (Colomb 2010); many in the field, such as Doug Hesse in this volume, see service as a worthy contribution, while others worry that our service responsibilities can overwhelm or even subsume

research and scholarship. In such cases and looking very *unlike* other disciplines, we can appear to have less legitimacy. Related to this concern is what we might call loyalty or allegiance to our collective historical home, the English department, which certainly saw us, with our initial exclusive attention to first-year composition, as a service endeavor. In this context, declaring ourselves a discipline means breaking with our past. Moreover, such loyalty is often personal as well as institutional: as Barry Maid in this volume observes, most of the early generations of teacher-scholars in Rhetoric and Composition were educated in English—and continued to find a home there. And even today, most of our classes, programs, and tenure still reside in English. Not surprisingly, then, there is something of a reluctance, at least on the part of some, to leave what has been a kind of nesting ground. Even for those who might want to assert more independence, English continues to function as a shadow discipline, reminding us of our historical commitment to service and our struggles for parity, if not equity.³ How all this history might be newly understood were we to designate ourselves as a discipline is another question that this volume, both explicitly and implicitly, addresses.

HISTORICAL LEGACY, FUTURE VISIONS, AND CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

Another way of thinking about our relationship to disciplinarity is located in time: past, future, and current. Rhetoric and Composition, in several accounts (e.g., Berlin 1987; Harris 2012), sees teaching as the center of our identity, not only in the past, but currently. Bruce Horner (2015), for instance, conceptualizes Rhetoric and Composition as a teaching enterprise, one especially interested in the labor of composition. In his view, we are best advised to eschew claims to expertise and disciplinarity, a point with which John Trimbur (2011) agrees. For both, a commitment to what Trimbur calls solidarity is preferable to one located in expertise. It's also worth noting that even the more theoretically oriented scholarly organizations within Rhetoric and Composition, such as the Rhetoric Society of America, feature pedagogical sessions at conferences in a way very unlike conferences other disciplines sponsor, which likewise speaks to the central role of pedagogy in the field. Others, such as Sid Dobrin (2011), advise us to abandon the subject—that is, the student—as center of the field so that we might organize it around theory and focus on writing, which would enable us to take on a very different kind of disciplinary cast. And still others, notably Charles Bazerman, have argued that seeking to advance our pedagogy and

curricular efforts in the absence of knowing more about writing itself, which he understands as the historical pattern, is unwise; in this view, research and pedagogy are equal parts of the same field, each supporting and extending the other. In an interview, Bazerman explains precisely why pedagogy, even if it were at the field's center, needs research.

[We need] to take our research much more seriously. We view ourselves as practitioners. Even assuming we knew what writing was and kind of—let me find the right way to say this, it's not flowing so easily—but . . . there is this thing we kind of know what it is and we'll just teach people how to do it. Some people have a hard time getting it but not that we have a really—we also assume that to some degree we all know what it is to write. And that we have the sense of what the full competence is, whereas at the same time everyone still feels insecure about their writing. But we don't have the courage to go and find out what's the full extent and variety of writing, how complex it is. We are very much at the surface of understanding what writing is, so we have a responsibility to investigate it deeply. (qtd. in Craig et al. 2016, 294–95)

And not least, as Yancey argues in the next chapter, some members of the field—especially those participating in projects oriented toward threshold concepts and transfer of writing knowledge and practice—seem to understand the current moment as a disciplinary turn, even if heretofore it hasn't been articulated as such. In the fullness of this temporal context, then, the question that we might consider is whether we are a teaching subject, as Harris puts it, and therefore apparently a teaching (non) discipline, as some scholars seem to suggest, or whether, like Bazerman, we can imagine a Rhetoric and Composition discipline that continues its historical commitment to pedagogy without sacrificing equal (and some might say necessary) attention to other areas of activity such as research and theory. Put another way, are pedagogy, research, and theory mutually exclusive? If not, how might thinking of ourselves as a discipline forward a more fully imagined Rhetoric and Composition?

IMPORTANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF DISCIPLINARITY

As editors, we've had the pleasure of talking to many about the issue of Rhetoric and Composition's disciplinarity. In those discussions, we heard about the issue from yet another angle: the perception of others regarding the rigor and respectability of the field. Although many, if not most, in Rhetoric and Composition would reject the label of remediation for students (see, for instance, Mike Rose 2012), some believe that our concern for our students, especially those most in need, "taints" us; in this view, we seem to be just like our students, that is, without appropriate

scholarly rigor. The remedy for this situation, it was suggested, might be an embrace of disciplinarity, especially at the institutional level, allowing us to work with all students more effectively, precisely because as a disciplinary unit, we would control curriculum and budgets in ways we often now do not. Moreover, given the increasing rise of the major and a reinvigorated MA, the timing for such an embrace would be fortuitous. Put somewhat differently, the very perception of respectability could assist us in moving from positions of responsibility to positions with both responsibility and authority. And put more generally, the maxim here is that each construct we identify to describe us—from general education program reporting to student services to fully developed disciplinary department—brings with it implications and opportunities for our students as well as for us.

The positive implications of such a disciplinary identification are considerable. Although the disadvantages of claiming disciplinarity have enjoyed considerable discussion, we have not experienced a similarly robust or sustained discussion about the benefits of so claiming. Here we identify four.

- First, were we to claim disciplinarity, we would have the opportunity to shape the discipline, one paralleling the opportunity that the founders of Rhetoric and Composition enjoyed. We are today a pedagogically focused field in large part because of these founders' energy, values, and scholarship; this history influences who and what we are. Our parallel opportunity would be to consider what kind of discipline we would like to be and then shape it.
- Second, we would have the opportunity to be intentional in our actions. Currently, when we do good, it is almost against the odds; we don't have the benefit of disciplinarity as we plan and act, and we don't have it as a kind of continuing benefit when we succeed. In the context of disciplinarity, we could generate a kind of intentionality that contributes to a future.
- Third, we'd align our pedagogical interest in writing-as-epistemology with a disciplinary exercise of it. One of the tenets of disciplinarity is that disciplines make knowledge; a second is that writing provides the mechanism through which knowledge is made. It's thus something of an exquisite irony that the one field of inquiry whose focus is writing itself does not fully identify as a discipline. Put as a positive, defining our own disciplinarity is congruent with our intellectual activity.
- Fourth, given our research into writing, our theories of writing, and our pedagogical practices in support of writing, it is irresponsible *not* to claim the identity of a discipline. With such a claim, we can speak more authoritatively on writing matters and widen our research efforts to include writing beyond the classroom as we continue our commitment to students.

Among many, there seems to be an assumption that to claim the identity of a discipline, we would need to be in agreement on all these matters—on the balance between pedagogy, research, and service; on the center of the field; on all the values we hold. That isn't our view. Instead, we find ourselves aligned with Ken Hyland, who understands disciplinarity as a kind of cultural context supporting participants' opportunities to debate and to deliberate. As he says,

Most disciplines are characterized by several competing perspectives and embody often bitterly contested beliefs and values . . . Communities are frequently pluralities of practices and beliefs which accommodate disagreement and allow subgroups and individuals to innovate within the margins of its practices in ways that do not weaken its ability to engage in common actions. Seeing disciplines as cultures helps to account for what and how issues can be discussed and for the understandings which are the basis for cooperative action and knowledge-creation. It is not important that everyone agrees but members should be able to engage with each others' ideas and analyses in agreed ways. Disciplines are the contexts in which disagreement can be deliberated. (Hyland 2004, 11)

The chapters within show us something of what such a disciplinarity, our disciplinarity—in terms of deliberations and common actions—could look like.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

The four sections that organize this book reflect both our contributors' interests and our sense of the current major issues: the intellectual and embodied history that led us to this point; the question of how disciplinarity is, and might be, understood; the curricular, conceptual, and other sites of tension inherent in thinking of ourselves as a discipline; and the implications of disciplinarity for the future of our students and our work.

The first two chapters in Section 1, "Where Have We Been, Where Are We Now, and Why Are We Here?" address Rhetoric and Composition's disciplinarity through both intellectual and experiential lenses. The first chapter, Kathleen Blake Yancey's, traces the history of how various scholars have named or marked important moments in the development of the field, the "turns" that have characterized what we might call paradigm shifts in research and pedagogy. Yancey proposes that we are now making a *disciplinary* turn and asks what that might mean for the field. Barry Maid's chapter, something of a companion piece, takes a memoir-like approach to the changes in the field since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a generation of teacher-scholars—many trained in literature PhD programs yet interested in writing and the teaching of

writing—attended writing conferences, heard speakers declare the existence of a new field, and willingly embraced the opportunity to direct writing programs and centers, some of which (as in Maid’s case) led to departments separate from English. Maid’s chapter also addresses, implicitly, the importance of material conditions and local exigences for creating and sustaining programs and majors. Rochelle Rodrigo and Susan Miller-Cochran’s chapter takes up the question of materiality and exigence in more detail but with a different focus: if nearly half of all US undergraduates take their first-year writing course at a community college, and if that number will soon increase, why do the contributions of community college faculty to the field remain underacknowledged? How might the field look different if we were to include those contributions more fully? To close this section, Rita Malenczyk, Neal Lerner, and Elizabeth H. Boquet recover the origins of what’s come to be known as writing (program and center) administration. Recalling the beginnings of that work and scholarship—at least as we think of it today—in the 1970s, the authors call for a continued engagement with students as co-creators of the field, not just as learners within it.

If Section 1 narrates a range of disciplinary histories, then Section 2, “Coming to Terms: What Are We Talking About?,” addresses the sticking points in those histories, in particular the definition of disciplinarity and how that might affect our perception of what it means to be a discipline. If we worry about disciplines as hierarchical and hegemonic, how might we conceive of disciplinarity in a way consonant with what Rhetoric and Composition has historically valued: openness and fluidity? Gwendolynne Reid and Carolyn Miller’s chapter takes up that question by troubling traditional conceptions of disciplinarity. Arguing that categories, taxonomic codes, and other closed systems fail to “represent our best thinking about disciplinarity,” they offer other (existing) conceptions of disciplines as inherently dynamic and active, depending on their participants—who interact with other disciplines as well—to continually invent and reinvent them. Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs reinforce this point in their chapter, calling attention to how Rhetoric and Composition has already achieved a disciplinarity that includes attention to the values of “inclusion, access, . . . difference, [and] interaction, localism, valuing diverse voices, and textual production.” Claiming that disciplinarity, they suggest, would only strengthen those values. Coming to disciplinarity from another angle, Kristine Hansen introduces the term “profession” to underscore the role of teaching, labor, and students in any disciplinary formation and especially in ours. Failure to claim a disciplinary expertise many of us already have, she

argues, is damaging to our first-year composition students as well as to the (increasingly) contingent labor force employed to teach them. She proposes another model, that of the professional/paraprofessional, to address this issue in ethically and pedagogically sound ways.

Section 3, “Coming to Terms: What Are the Complications and Tensions?,” builds on the previous section by exploring particular sites of tension within the field. Jennifer Helene Maher’s chapter employs Aristotle’s conception of virtue to justify and embrace disciplinarity, again juxtaposing that concept with perhaps better-known ideas of disciplines as exclusive clubs, and suggests through a local narrative how an acknowledgment of expertise might benefit both us and our students—particularly where course content is concerned. The issue of content is explored more fully in the next chapter: where Maher’s chapter focuses primarily on English department politics, Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak take up the vexed issue of the universal first-year composition requirement and the content of composition. Given what we now know about the role of content in supporting student writing development, they ask, how do we square the reality of writing teacher preparation, especially given the prevalence of contingent labor, with what are emerging as best practices in the field? To complicate matters further, Christiane Donahue explains the current move toward a translingual approach to teaching writing, shows how that approach differs from earlier orientations toward second-language writing, and speculates on how it might inform and influence the discipline. In the last chapter of this section, Whitney Douglas, Heidi Estrem, Kelly Myers, and Dawn Shepherd describe the process of a curricular revision on one campus, demonstrating how threshold concepts can anchor a program while providing room for colleagues with varying theoretical and pedagogical backgrounds to contribute their expertise in their own ways.

Section 4, “Where Are We Going and How Do We Get There?,” speculates on what the future might look like for Rhetoric and Composition should it continue to move in a disciplinary direction. Sandra Jamieson charts the landscape of the Writing and Rhetoric major and how the major, which varies among institutions yet has certain commonalities, might ground the discipline while demonstrating its capacity for multivocality. Jaime Armin Mejía traces the history of Mexican Americans within the field, arguing that a truly rich discipline needs to be more inclusive intellectually and pedagogically than it has to this point been. Doug Hesse’s chapter suggests that any disciplinary status we achieve within the changing university won’t mirror the way disciplines looked twenty or even ten years ago—yet we can, he suggests, engage

institutional exigencies so as to emphasize our strengths. Linda Adler-Kassner closes the section by broadening the significance of disciplinary to the larger US educational landscape, offering “landscapes of practice” and “knowledgeability” as ways to engage larger publics by looking outward—as her title indicates. We then conclude, pulling the disparate threads of this book together and showing ways we might imagine the future of the discipline.

We ended the book on an “outward” note on purpose. As we’ve already suggested, collegial encounters at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), online, and elsewhere sparked thought-provoking conversations that, in the end, raised more questions than any one edited collection can address. We know that conversation will continue, that this book is only a part of it. We also received more fine proposals for chapters than we were able to accept, and reading and responding to those—as well as the chapters that came to comprise the collection—showed us how vital and energetic the discipline—whether called Rhetoric and Composition, Writing Studies, or something else—will always be. We hope you’ll learn as much from reading this book as we’ve learned from assembling it.

Notes

1. Throughout the book, chapter authors refer to the discipline in a range of ways: as Rhetoric and Composition, as Writing Studies, as Writing and Rhetoric. We felt these differences in nomenclature reflected the current state of the discipline, and so didn’t attempt to regularize the way that the discipline is referred to in the book.
2. Several sites compete for the founding of the field, among them English education. See, for example, Patricia Stock’s (2011) edited collection *Composition’s Roots in English Education*.
3. Interdisciplinary efforts are important as well, but they do assume a set of disciplines.

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