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Bruce Horner

Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition

The derogation of the “traditional” in the discourse of academic professionalism in composition studies overlooks practices within tradition that may be counter or alternative to the hegemonic. Aspects of the Amherst College “tradition” of English 1–2 illustrate, in idealized form, alternative practices drawing from residual elements of dominant culture.

We should not cede tradition to the conservatives!
—Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems*

In its attempts to establish itself as a professional academic discipline, Composition has distanced itself from what is often identified as its “traditional” concerns with the immediate demands of teaching. Within the discourse of professionalism, such concerns are thought to interfere with the efforts to establish an explicated body of knowledge about writing (in general) that compositionists can claim as the subject of their professional expertise—knowledge that they can acquire, add to (produce), and distribute. As Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt observe approvingly, “Composition studies . . . emerged as a discipline as its focus began to transcend traditional problems of effective pedagogy. During the 1970s, in addition to writing teachers wondering how to teach writing better, researchers began to investigate what sort of phenomenon they

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were dealing with" (272; see also Crowley, "Around" 72–73, "Composition's Ethic" 229–30; Brereton, *Origins* 22).

Of course, recent years have also been marked by attempts to reclaim pedagogy as a site for theory and research and to argue that Composition deserves academic disciplinary status on the grounds that pedagogy represents such a site (Bissex and Bullock, Donahue and Quandahl, Harkin, North, Salvatore, Slevin). But even in these arguments, the discourse of academic professionalism has dominated conceptions of our work. Those arguing for improving the plight of composition teachers insist on teachers' capacity to conduct work defined within that discourse, i.e., to produce and distribute "new" knowledge within the forms recognized by academics. Some argue even to "abolish" freshman composition on the grounds that the work conducted in that course is inevitably alienating. These arguments fail to recognize alternative conceptions of the work conducted in composition courses and trap us in a perpetual, giddy, guilt-ridden drive to establish Composition as a professional academic discipline while at the same time bemoaning the ethics of that same pursuit.

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To free ourselves from such a trap, we need to relinquish the quest for academic professionalism in defining the work of Composition and to construct a sense of tradition in Composition as an active and activating force central to its work. "Tradition" and the "traditional" are almost always terms of derogation in Composition. This is perhaps most evident in the use of the term "current-traditional" to designate those theories and practices against which professional compositionists must define themselves. But it is also evident in the difficulties encountered by those who attempt to defend traditions or the traditional in Composition. To designate a practice or theory as "traditional" is to call forth a powerful opposition to it, whatever one's own professed alignments.

In this essay, I argue that the derogatory connotations of tradition in Composition speak not necessarily to limitations in what is so labeled but to limitations in dominant conceptions of tradition and of academic work. Raymond Williams has warned that "most versions of 'tradition' can be quickly shown to be radically selective," emphasizing certain meanings and practices while neglecting or excluding others (115). Within Composition, dominant conceptions of tradition exemplify this selectivity, overlooking practices *within* tradition that may be counter or alternative to the hegemonic, practices that enact a view of knowledge as contingent and a radical politics of inclusiveness in teaching. In other words, dominant conceptions of tradition may have been preventing us from realizing the full potential of work in composition.

I begin by examining how the terms *tradition* and *traditional* operate in dominant discourse in Composition to name what compositionists must define their projects

against, and the difficulties posed by the discourse for those attempting to reclaim the category of “tradition” for Composition. Using Anthony Giddens’ theory of practical consciousness and structuration, Ken Kusterer’s analysis of “working knowledge,” and bell hooks’ arguments on marginality as a site of resistance, I explore how tradition in Composition might serve as an active, activating process and force for counter-hegemonic work. To illustrate this more active sense of tradition, I consider Robin Varnum’s account of thirty years of the teaching of English 1–2 at Amherst College during the mid-twentieth century. I take the Amherst “tradition” as exhibiting, in idealized form, alternative practices drawing from residual elements of dominant culture largely hidden until recently under blanket assumptions about the hegemony of “current-traditional” practice during this period.

Tradition in Composition might serve as an active, activating process and force for counter-hegemonic work.

Looking to such traditions hidden *within* the dominant can complement recent efforts to recover composition practices marked as *outside* the dominant, such as Anne Ruggles Gere’s investigations of the “extracurriculum” of Composition located in nonacademic writing circles and clubs, often formed by and for those most marginalized. Gere uses her investigations of Composition’s extracurriculum both to challenge the “uncritical narrative of professionalization” dominating histories of the field and to foreground “the importance of learning from amateurs” (86, 88). Recognizing this extracurriculum, Gere argues, both requires and leads historians to “uncouple composition and schooling” (80), and to turn to materials and sites beyond the school to understand past and ongoing traditions of reading and writing. As Jean Carr observes,

[Gere] challenges histories of literacy instruction that have traced too neat a tradition from old world rhetorics to 19th-century elite universities to the current field of composition. . . . urg[ing] us to . . . recognize how many other “traditions” could be located, how many other routes of influence and instruction need to be explored. (94)

In using Composition’s extracurriculum to expose these other traditions, however, there is a danger, Carr warns, in assuming that the academic world itself is “a story already known and known fully” (96), the danger, that is, of mistaking official representations of the academic tradition for its “full story.” To avoid this danger means that we need not only to “open up for scrutiny the rich and boundless cultural materials Gere suggests,” but also to “return to material we thought closed, or empty, to texts we have dismissed as simple” (Carr 97). Further, Carr warns, “We need to rethink the notion that influence and tradition are produced in straight lines, that theories are uttered and then get ‘implemented’ somehow and the influence spreads down and out until it is diffused in the hinterlands” (97). It means, in short, that we need to rethink what constitutes traditions in Composition.



The terms *tradition* and *traditional* carry a variety of different meanings, admittedly not all derogatory. Most innocuously, *tradition* is sometimes used in Composition historiography (and elsewhere) to name a theory, school of thought, or intellectual practice without necessarily signaling any negative (or positive) view of these. A more strongly evaluative meaning for *tradition* begins to obtain in references to practices deemed common or ordinary. The derogatory connotations of such usages arise from the sense that such practices are carried on as unconscious habit, informed at best by mere “common sense” or “false consciousness” that remains uncritiqued, even unexamined, as when Sharon Crowley complains of “the presence in Freshman English of a few pieces of discursive and pedagogical dogma, none of which seem to be organized according to any perceptible fashion, unless it is the order dictated by tradition” (“Perilous” 12). Such derogatory connotations become fully manifest in references to practices or theories as “traditional,” in which the term specifies the identification of what the term modifies with the past and presumes that it must be less informed than the present, or at least than the writer’s present state of knowledge. For example, the seemingly oxymoronic usage “current-traditional” refers to those theories and practices of the past (i.e., “traditional”) that continue to exist (“current”) without benefit of the enlightenment afforded by present thought.

The linking of the traditional with the unenlightened can be accounted for by the association of the traditional with the oral and, by implication, the circumstantial, shared, common, and immediate. For “tradition” refers also to the medium by which a practice or theory is transmitted (*OED*). If traditional knowledge is oral, then the chances of its practitioners subjecting it to studious critique are presumed to be less likely. It is only with the advent of writing, we writing teachers tell ourselves, that the claims of tradition can be examined critically, compared with competing claims for inconsistencies, and judged objectively (Goody and Watt 13–17). The teaching of writing itself is thus intimately invested in critiques of, and breaks from, tradition, at least as “tradition” and “writing” are now commonly conceived. I refer here not merely to the utility of the medium of writing in formulating critiques, and thereby to specific uses for writing which might be taught, but also to the interest many writing teachers have in claiming professional expertise and membership in an academic discipline worthy of respect. For it is through subjecting traditional knowledge and practices to written critique that such status is acquired. Thus Robert Connors describes attempts to question composition instructors’ focus on “mechanical correctness” as an indication that “composition studies are finally coming to constitute a genuine discipline and are no longer a mere purblind drifting on the current of unexamined tradition” (“Mechanical” 71).

Written critiques of (oral) tradition, however, confront a dilemma: it is precisely the practice of writing that renders the “traditional” inert and subject to critique. For in traditional—i.e., oral, nonliterate—societies, the “content” of what is “transmitted” as tradition is always subject to transformation through the *process* of tradition; traditions are always mediated by present social concerns, never inert (Goody and Watt 6–7). The seeming unconscious “inertness” of traditional knowledge, therefore, is not inherent in the practice of tradition but arises from the removal of that knowledge from tradition as it is transformed into writing. Within the practice of oral tradition, mediation of the “content” of knowledge occurs “silently” so that its authority *as* “tradition” remains intact (see Clanchy 152; Ong 46–49).

Failure to recognize this mediation instances what Anthony Giddens, in his critique of functionalism, has termed the “derogation of the lay actor.” Such derogation results when theorists fail to recognize that knowledge resides not only in discursive consciousness—“what actors are able to ‘talk about’ and in what manner or guise they are able to talk about it”—but also in practical consciousness: the knowledge embodied “in what actors ‘know how to do’” (73). Recognizing the knowledge in practical consciousness disrupts the notion that “institutions . . . work ‘behind the backs’ of the social actors who produce and reproduce them” (71). In the case of oral as well as other traditions, this means recognizing that social actors participate in producing, reproducing, and changing social relations and conventions through the operation of practical consciousness, of unarticulated knowledge, in their “silent” work on such practices. To do otherwise, Giddens warns, is to see lay actors as “cultural dopes or mere ‘bearers of a mode of production,’ with no worthwhile understanding of their surroundings or the circumstances of

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their action,” and to impute a teleology to social systems imagined as operating behind the backs of these actors (71; 7, 112). This tendency exaggerates the commitment of the dominated to dominant ideologies and neglects the degree to which all social actors “have some degree of penetration of the social forms which oppress them” (72), by mistaking official renderings of actors’ thinking for their practical thought.¹ Further, in such “functionalist” arguments, social structures are treated as existing outside actions, agency, and history, serving only to constrain these, whereas, for Giddens, structure and agency are mutually dependent: “the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems. . . . [hence] structure is both enabling and constraining” (69). It is for Giddens this dialectical relation between structure and agency that makes resistance and change possible (see Herndl 352–53).

While Giddens points to the need for theorists to recognize lay actors' practical consciousness, bell hooks takes such a move further, insisting that the practical experience of marginalization by the dominant offers the potential for producing counter-hegemonic discourse ("marginality" 341). Recalling her own experience of living on the margins of a small, racially segregated Kentucky town, hooks argues that this marginality, while certainly a site of deprivation, served also as a site of resistance, for it gave her and other blacks "a particular way of seeing reality . . . both from the outside in and from the inside out. . . . remind[ing] us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center" ("marginality" 341). She thus argues for the need to "struggle to maintain that marginality even as one works, produces, lives, if you will, at the center" ("marginality" 341). Her aim is not to romanticize the oppressed or the experience of oppression but to tap the potential for the marginalized to use that experience as a site of resistance, rather than defining it strictly as a site of deprivation ("marginality" 341-42).

hooks locates the counter-hegemonic discourse of the margins "not just . . . in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" ("marginality" 341). But identifying counter-hegemonic discourse in this way poses a difficulty. The challenge for a discourse that speaks in more than, or ways other than, words is that it is often not only not recognized by the dominant discourse, it is actually displaced by the dominant discourse. What often happens, hooks warns, is that speech from the margins is displaced by speech *about* the margins: "We are re-written. We are 'other'" ("marginality" 343). She therefore insists on attending to not only "what we speak about but [also] how and why we speak," and who is speaking to whom ("marginality" 343). For, as Jacqueline Jones Royster has warned, interpretations from outside a marginalized community "tend to have considerable consequence in the lives of the target group, people . . . whose own voices and perspectives remain still largely *underconsidered* and *uncredited*" (32, emphasis added).

Know-how on the Job: The Important Working Knowledge of "Unskilled" Workers, Ken Kusterer's study of "unskilled" workers, illustrates both the presence of workers' "practical consciousness" and a similar vulnerability of the "working knowledge" embodied in that consciousness to being rewritten from a dominant perspective. In his study, Kusterer argues that these workers, officially designated "unskilled," in fact had developed a "working knowledge" of the routines, machinery, and use value, or utility, of their work in order to "invest their own work activity with meaning," devoting "a lot of energy in de-alienating themselves, in learning the working knowledge and building the work relationships that add to their own control over work processes, [decrease] their social isolation, and make their work meaningful" (153-54, 161). This working knowledge typically goes unrecognized by management and is not explicitly claimed

by workers, hence the common designation of these workers as “unskilled” (for a more recent workplace study illustrating this phenomenon, see Darrah). However, managers—not recognizing that knowledge, and concerned only with increasing exchange value (profits)—frequently take actions that make “whole subjects of working knowledge obsolete, disrupt communal networks, and thus undermine or eliminate entirely the resources that the workers have used to render their jobs meaningful and to turn their work activity into life activity” (158).

A similar threat to the “working knowledge” of composition teachers and students is posed by those who, concerned with increasing the exchange value of Composition as a site for the production of disciplinary knowledge, advocate the abolition of freshman composition or basic writing. Such arguments do not recognize the significance to academic life and the life of the academy of its teachers’ and students’ working knowledge. And just as the workers Kusterer observed who valued their work traditions and resisted their abolition were viewed as “anti-progressive, anti-technology, anti-change,” so composition students and teachers who value their existing academic practices are liable to be charged with being obstructionist, hidebound traditionalists, and the like.

Kusterer accounts for the failure to recognize workers’ “working knowledge” as symptomatic of Marxists being “overenamored of Marx’s immiseration thesis” (192). For, as he observes, the presence of “working knowledge” complicates the usual view of “unskilled” workers as fully alienated from their work through the commodification of

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their labor. We have to recall, he argues, that “even in the full flower of capitalist development, work is still a unity of concrete and abstract labor, of use value and exchange value production, of real public utility and merely private profit” (192). We fail to recognize the

former only when we fail to see workers as having any agency. The functionalist error of presuming that a given structure operates behind the backs of workers to determine their consciousness results in seeing workers as mere passive “bearers of a mode of production” (Giddens 71). Instead, rather than viewing workers as either fully self-determining or completely alienated, their labor fully commodified, we need to see struggle. While the use value and exchange value of work are rightly seen as in conflict, that does not mean that one inevitably overrides the other. As Marx puts it, *both* use and exchange value reside within the commodity: “. . . nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value” (131). If one cannot forever delay the commodification of work, neither can one deny the continuing potential use value of that work even in its commodified form.

The difficulty in recognizing that potential, however, is that, as Marx warns, “Use-values are only realized in use” (126). That is, like traditional working knowledge, they go unrecognized, appearing and realized only in the instance of their use, in specific, immediate material social circumstances. Moreover, because the use value of a commodity resides in the commodity, it is often mistaken for the commodity’s exchange value. Debates about writing skills exemplify this confusion. Viewing writing skills in the abstract, and sensitive to the commodification of writing skills for their economic exchange value in the labor market, some argue against teaching these skills as pandering to and complicit with exploitative, alienating social relations (as in certain abolitionist arguments). As an alternative, some promote teaching writing as “art” or “process” rather than marketable skills to de-emphasize its use value. As Susan Miller has observed, in such pedagogies, writing becomes “intransitive,” having “no particular products as results” (*Textual* 97). But this de-emphasis of the use value of writing through its effective aestheticization simply substitutes for the economic capitalization of writing skills the production of *cultural* capital and *its* exchange value, and so is no less complicit in the commodification of writing: in place of writing “skills,” we have the production

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of works of “art,” say, or, more recently, the production of politically leftist attitudes. The difference between the two positions, to the extent that there is one, resides in the kinds of capital recognized. One position recognizes (to decry) the *cultural* capital teachers (if not students) might gain, at least within certain economies, from an explicitly politicized or aestheticized composition curriculum. Others, blind or at least inattentive to this form of capitalization, emphasize (and decry as base and degrading) the *economic* capital students gain from a curriculum devoted to teaching writing skills. That is, both positions recognize only the use value of one curriculum and only the exchange value of another. More importantly, neither recognizes the continuing potential use value of the commodity produced, whether it be the writing “skill,” abstractly conceived, or the work of written “art” or “politics.” Instead, *pace* Marx, the commodification of the work of writing is imagined to cancel out such potential.

This difficulty in recognizing use value is mirrored in the difficulty dominant discourse has in grasping traditional knowledge, a difficulty that renders traditional knowledge simultaneously both vulnerable and impervious to criticism. As I have been framing it, traditional knowledge is located not simply in words spoken but also in the concrete practices with that language, with ways of being in relation to language. Dominant discourse removes traditional knowledge from the immediate circumstances of its use, reifying it. By so doing, critics can easily find the limitations of traditional knowledge—most obviously, its lack of general validity. As a commodity, that is, it lacks exchange

value. But defenders of tradition reject this critique as, in fact, addressed not to what is representative of the tradition but separate—by being separated—from it as part of an ongoing social material process. The practical, nondiscursive knowledge tied to the circumstances of its use—the reciprocity and sharing of accounts, for example, which Stephen North sees as central to Practitioner inquiry—gets rewritten in dominant discourse into something other (see North 52–53). And there can appear to be no acceptable alternative, only silence, to embracing the dominant’s rewritings of that traditional knowledge.

The debate over “current-traditional” composition exemplifies this dilemma in grasping traditional knowledge. In this debate, current-traditional rhetoric has been critiqued in terms of its epistemology—deemed intellectually bankrupt—and its ideology—thought to be consonant with conservative politics (see Crowley, “Perilous” 11–12, “Around” 66, “Composition’s Ethic” 231). These limitations are inferred largely on the basis of textbooks (see Crowley, “Around” 64–65, “Perilous” 11; Connors, “Textbooks”; Varnum 14). Arguments in response claim Composition’s pedagogies and epistemologies inhere not in the commodified form of the derided textbooks but in the ways in which the textbooks are used. Miller, for example, argues that in the composition class, it is inappropriate “to believe in the coherent stability of a textbook apart from its reader’s situational, purposeful, constructive *use* of it” (“‘Is There’” 22). Histories of composition teaching based on the publishing history of its textbooks, she claims, “inadvertently imply that composition pedagogy, classroom practices and methods, and writing courses in general have slavishly followed textbooks and that the way to change the teaching and learning of composition necessarily depends on changes in composition textbooks” (22). In Giddens’ terms, her argument thus charges critics with derogating lay actors (both students and teachers), overestimating their commitment to dominant ideologies, and imagining institutions operating behind their backs to constrain them. Recognizing only the exchange value of the textbooks and textbook knowledge, such critics have been blind to the various uses to which, in practice, those commodities may have been put. As an alternative, she argues that we need to examine “how students have learned to write. . . . assum[ing] that popular classroom practices . . . have depended not on massively adopted textbooks, but on the prior or tacit knowledge and opinions of teachers interacting with students” (23; see also North 73–74; Brereton, *Origins* xiii–xiv). Composition’s traditions are thus here linked with its daily practices and “tacit,” nondiscursive knowledge. Examining traditions so defined would of necessity be far more complicated than researching textbooks, for teachers’ interactions with students, especially those in the past, are not readily accessible.

But there is more at issue here than questions of the comprehensiveness and feasibility of competing historiographic methodologies. There is the inevitability of rewriting those traditions in the process of naming and examining them. Any invocation of

tradition, the present one included, represents part of a “struggle for and against selective traditions” (Williams 117). The identification of some practices as “traditional,” for example, furthers a particular ideal of what ought, and ought not, to constitute the work of Composition. By this I refer not simply to my own interest here in reclaiming certain aspects of tradition. Rather, I refer to the desire to legitimize the work of Composition. Enacted within the discourse of professionalism, and in response to the ongoing, and longstanding, marginalization of composition teachers and students within English specifically and academic institutions generally, this desire has come to be expressed in terms of making Composition a professional academic discipline. In this discourse, tradition is defined narrowly as something to work against. One result is that theory and practice, scholarship and teaching have been set in opposition.

The discourse of professionalism limits how we think of the work of Composition, defining legitimate work as the acquisition, production, and distribution of print codified knowledge about writing: the production and reception of (scholarly) texts. In this discourse, the work associated with such activities as teaching is deemed “labor,” the implementation of the work of professional knowledge. Knowledge itself is recognized only as it appears in textual, commodified form as explicitly theorized. Concomitant with this view of knowledge, the discourse of professionalism assumes a particular work path as one of progress and elevation for individual disciplines and their members, depending on their success in acquiring, producing, and distributing such specialized knowledge. The greater the amount of knowledge produced, and the further removed this knowledge appears to be from lay knowledge, the greater is the stature of the individual professional or discipline. Within this discourse, then, tacit, or working, knowledge is no knowledge at all, nor is “common knowledge” of the sort shared by the (lay) public. Professional knowledge is reified: knowing becomes the known, removed from immediate social, material contingencies through a discursive rendering which is then identified as and with knowledge and owned by the specialist writer, who is thought to have produced it.

Professionalism can thus constitute a strategy for containing, even ending, social debate. In Burton Bledstein’s account of the historical role of American universities in the development of the “culture of professionalism,” universities “quietly took divisive issues such as race, capitalism, labor, and deviant behavior out of the public domain and isolated these problems within the sphere of professionals” (327). Thus isolated, these ideas “could be managed in functional terms rather than radicalized in a socially demanding ideology” (329). Controversial social issues were contained by academic professionals by reducing the problems “to scientific and even technical terms” (327).

As several writers have noted, identifying the work of Composition with such a professional “disinterested” pursuit of knowledge removed from direct engagement

with students, history, and the social is striking for being in contradiction with many composition professionals' professed allegiance to a "radical" politics (see Crowley, "A Personal Essay" 165–70; Gere 87–88), for the process of professionalization requires the containment of any "radical" political impulses, if by "radical" is meant efforts to fight for democratic control of social and economic goods. It excludes laity from a voice in addressing social problems by redefining these as susceptible to strictly technical solutions. Moreover, claims of professional status establish and reinforce the superiority of professionals' class position over the laity (see Zeichner 367; Gere 87).

First, such claims arrogate to the professionals a special status of authority and responsibility for determining the nature and outcomes of work performed. It is Composition's failure to achieve such arrogation that Crowley seems to lament when she complains that in the infamous debate over freshman composition at UT–Austin, "persons who literally had no *professional* or financial stake in the design of the course [at UT–Austin, such as non-English faculty and members of the press] felt entitled to criticize a syllabus developed by the people put in charge of it by the university, people who are *professionally identified* with rhetoric/composition studies" ("Personal" 159, my emphases; see also Bleich 136, quoted in Crowley, "Composition's Ethic" 232; Gere 87). The stake of the composition profession is here set in opposition to the common sense of the laity, which threatens the intellectual property rights of composition professionals over the composition course by treating it as in fact common property in which all have a stake (see Crowley, "Personal" 159, "Composition's Ethic" 231–32).

Second, one's class status as a "professional" is maintained through denying the materiality of one's work—material in the sense of work as both the physical manipulation of a medium and a fully social historical process. Composition professionals' common derogation of any training in or demand for those aspects of writing tellingly named "mechanical" or for teaching the "instrumental" uses of writing, and their almost complete silence until recently on the physical demands of writing (demands on physical materials, the environment, time, writers' bodies), betray an interest in distinguishing the subject of writing, "their" field, from manual work and the low, ordinary business of everyday life (see Williams 160). And as many critics have observed, much of the early research establishing Composition as a discipline has spectacularly ignored the location of the writing process in the social.

There is a slippage in the arguments underlying such derogation. The historical fact of the degradation of those involved in certain forms of "low," "mechanical" work is taken as evidence that such work is inherently and fully alienating and degrading. The historical fact of the dominant commodification of skills used in such work is assumed to exhaust the full potential value of that work. And the effect, historically, of

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the social relations of production in such work is then identified with the actual labor performed. In *Composition*, features in the work of writing taken as analogous to these other types of work—technical skills, attention to physical properties (forms, the “mechanics” of a task)—are then derided as in themselves degrading. And again, to avoid such degradation, emphasis is placed on the “art” of writing: an abstraction that displaces concern for use—for, in short, the social materiality of writing. Encouraged instead is what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the “aesthetic” disposition, in which works are considered “in and for themselves.” But this disposition is clearly tied to class: it is “the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease—that tends to induce an active distance from necessity” (3, 5; see also 54–55).

In calling *Composition* out for the classist implications of its complicity in the discourse of academic professionalism, I don’t mean to ignore the real insights into writing and teaching writing yielded by professional composition research. In rejecting particular uses to which writing research may be put, we need to guard against rejecting the project of researching writing. (Such rejection would provide yet another instance of the false assumption that the commodification of work—in this case, the work of research—eliminates its potential use value.) In fact, some of that research has contributed precisely to fuller recognition of writing’s ineluctable social materiality (see, for example, Brandt, Fox, Heath, Hull et al., Lu, Scribner, Scribner and Cole, Stuckey, Trimbur and Bullock). Nor do I mean to give succor to the *faux* populists of the New Right who engineer attacks like those on UT Austin’s proposed composition course. Rather, I mean to highlight how an allegiance to professionalism can undermine compositionists’ best efforts to make composition courses accomplish politically liberatory work. If we take class to be a process engaging individuals (see Resnick and Wolff 20–21), then we need to be wary of how our engagements in that process, aimed at fighting oppression, may themselves rely on classist assumptions. This means, then, that we will need to learn how to take seriously (which means not uncritically) and engage public demands and interest in our work, whether expressed as a demand for teaching “the basics” of writing or a seemingly nostalgic quest for “traditional” Freshman English (see Crowley, “Personal” 156; for an account of engagement with such demands, see Sullivan et al.). We should not, Giddens warns, cede tradition to the conservatives. To avoid doing so, however, will require rethinking the meaning of what “tradition” might be.



At first glance, what is “traditional” in composition teaching seems an unlikely counter site from which to fight class (and other) oppressions. Most obviously, knowledge deemed “traditional” often does not enjoy the kind of authority that dominant discourse accords professional academic knowledge. Rethinking the traditional thus

requires overcoming these dominant perspectives on what constitutes knowledge, knowing, and academic work. The difficulty of this task is perhaps best illustrated in Composition by attempts to recuperate “lore,” the term North uses for the knowledge and practices of those he terms “Practitioners,” those in Composition not identifying themselves as scholars or researchers, and closely associated with the traditional in Composition. Whatever the ethical merit of these attempts, their foundation in the discourse of academic disciplinary professionalism leads them to eviscerate the substance of that which they would recuperate.

North introduces the term “lore” to name that knowledge Practitioners produce and draw on in responding to the daily exigencies of their teaching in his argument against what he sees as the discipline of Composition’s derogation of Practitioners and their knowledge. He traces that derogation to the fact that lore does not appear to be “acceptable, formal, academic inquiry,” and he dates the birth of Composition by the emergence of efforts to “replace practice as the field’s dominant mode of inquiry” (15). However, he attempts to recuperate lore and practitioner practice by applying to it criteria for achieving academic disciplinary status for Composition as a profession, criteria by which, alas, Practitioners and lore are doomed to measure poorly. Try as he might to dress up Practitioners and their lore as academically respectable, their “low” background shows through.

North argues that Practitioners engage in a “mode of inquiry” involving a series of steps that contributes to a field of knowledge (ch. 2). According to North, at least some of the time, Practitioners follow a regular procedure in order to discover knowledge that can then be put to immediate practical use. Thus they can be said to engage in a professionally respectable disciplinary practice of knowledge production. Unfortunately, the knowledge constituting lore doesn’t stand up to the usual criteria for achieving status as disciplinary knowledge. As North admits, much of it is contradictory, and Practitioners have, or employ, no mechanism for evaluating competing claims. Thus, “While anything can become a part of lore, nothing can ever be dropped from it, either” (24). As a result, as North admits further, “judged against non-lore standards, Practitioners are bound to seem consistently indiscriminating, illogical, and sloppy” (27). To address these defects, North suggests that “Practitioners will have to make the same efforts as other communities to become methodologically aware,” or may be “enfranchised by being trained to make knowledge other than lore” (372). In the end, in other words, it seems the lore produced by Practitioner Inquiry just won’t cut it as knowledge, and so they had better retrain.

I would argue, however, that North’s difficulties in recuperating Practitioner Inquiry arise from applying the template of how the professional knowledge of academic disciplines is understood, constituted, and used to a practice to which such a template is inimical, the engagement in residual experiences, meanings, and practices unverifi-

able in terms of dominant culture, the “practical” knowledge of ways of being and living. First, North assumes the production of a reified knowledge as the practitioners’ goal, a goal appropriate to an academic discipline but different from the understanding of traditional knowledge, which is never imagined outside the context of its immediate use. The need to produce a knowledge, or retain it as a body—even in the form of North’s rambling house of lore—that is then applied to specific cases is counter to the disposition of knowledge in tradition, in which knowledge exists only in its practice rather than representing a storehouse of tools on which to draw. The impossibility of evaluating knowledge claims and eliminating those deemed unsatisfactory that North confronts can be understood as a problem only in terms of the criteria of academic disciplinary views of knowledge. “Traditional” practice, rather than contesting the validity or usefulness of knowledge directly, mediates it silently. In this sense, the contradictions with which lore is rife are present only when it is approached “untraditionally,” as constituting universally valid claims. North thus ends up writing lore out of the work of Composition in the very attempt to legitimize it, because the terms for the legitimation of work he applies are drawn from the discourse of academic professionalism.

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This same dilemma to which North’s arguments lead him in defending lore appears in Patricia Harkin’s efforts to defend lore as “postdisciplinary.” Like North, Harkin hopes to find ways of “getting the academy to change its understanding of knowledge production” (135). Thus she attempts to demonstrate, for example, that Mina Shaughnessy has indeed “produced knowledge” in *Errors and Expectations* (134), and she defends teaching generally as the site where knowledge is produced, however secretly (138). Her proposals, aimed at improving the status of Practitioner lore and “earning the academy’s institutionalized respect” (135), include conferences at which panels of theorists and teachers discuss videotapes of specific teacher practices to explore and evaluate the implications of those practices. But as Harkin admits, this attempt to get the academy to value lore requires its denaturalization (135), for such proposals risk eviscerating the silent mediation of knowledge in the practice of tradition. Noting that teachers “tend to think of teaching as a site or moment when we are free, behind closed doors, to be eclectic, to ignore recognized procedures, to do what needs to be done, . . . to escape the panoptic gaze of the disciplines for a silent, secret moment of postdisciplinary knowledge,” she calls, ironically, for subjecting those moments to just such a gaze: “We should do all we can,” she concludes, “to bring lore to light” (138).

One of the purposes behind such efforts to redefine Practitioner lore as academic disciplinary knowledge is to improve the working conditions of Practitioners. But this

strategy assumes that improvement in working conditions can result only from Composition achieving academic disciplinary status (see Carlton; Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers). Unimaginable in this discourse is the possibility of justifying improvement in Practitioners' working conditions according to criteria coming from non-"academic" spheres. It is noteworthy, for example, that Composition has largely ignored the history of primary and secondary school teachers' efforts to improve their working conditions, despite the close relations between their work and that of Composition. Of course, to admit those relations would risk Composition's further marginalization from the "academy"—i.e., "higher" education. Therefore, efforts are directed instead at demonstrating to the academy that Composition Practitioners produce knowledge according to professional academic disciplinary criteria, so that they will be judged to deserve, and will presumably receive, merit as members of a professional academic discipline.

Such efforts ignore the dependence of the value of one's cultural capital on one's social capital, which Composition distinctly lacks. That dependence is illustrated by the long history of other academic fields refusing to recognize or value as cultural capital

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the knowledge that Composition's Practitioners have purportedly been producing all along; hence the consistent/persistent lack of exchange value granted that knowledge. But of course, in the unlikely event that this strategy *were* to succeed in improving Composition's

professional status, it would mean that the work of Composition would change, becoming more typically disciplinary in its pursuit of "disinterested" knowledge. As James Slevin explains, because teaching is peripheral in current dominant understandings of academic disciplines, in attempts to imagine Composition as a discipline, "We . . . buy into a conceptual framework that makes every effort to change things—even just to see things clearly—impossible. . . . plac[ing] those of us interested in teaching at a serious disadvantage" (158). Efforts to define Composition in terms of its disciplinarity are either doomed to failure, given Composition's identity with teaching, or they will transform Composition into something unrecognizable, a discipline in which teaching is peripheral, not central.

That compositionists should continue to pursue professional academic disciplinary status—despite the history of its failure to improve their working conditions and despite the dilemmas to which it leads—attests both to the hegemonic force of professionalism and to the apparent paucity of alternatives to embracing it. For the only apparent alternative to achieving professional academic disciplinary status by producing commodified knowledge seems to be full submission to the dictates of the labor "marketplace" and complete, concomitant alienation from one's work: the proletarianization of teaching, on a stereotypical model of industrial unionism, in which, through collective

bargaining, teachers surrender to bureaucratic rationalization of their work in return for the right to a chance at better pay (Carlson 91–102). As I have suggested above in my discussion of Kusterer, however, the poverty of this vision of alternatives arises out of blindness to the agency and working knowledge of such “proletarianized” workers and the potential use value of their work. Recovering such knowledge will require rejecting, as incomplete, official claims made about that work and its value and, more to the point, deflections effected through designations of that work as merely “traditional.”



At least some work deemed “traditional” could pose alternatives to the alienation of both professionalism and proletarianization because of the particular relationship to knowledge and structure its practices enact, a relationship that counters its reification. More specifically, these practices may allow for carrying out, rather than simply subscribing to, a view of knowledge as contingent and a radical politics of inclusiveness in teaching, both of which many in Composition have said they are committed to. These practices do so by transgressing the limits of formal representations of knowledge, rejecting the claims and class status of professional expertise, sharing responsibility for any work accomplished as widely as possible, including sharing responsibility with students and the public, and turning institutional structures to ends alternative to those of officially prescribed.

A sense of what some such practices might look like and the conditions for their enactment is suggested by Amherst College’s English 1–2 course, taught between 1938–66, and exhaustively described in Robin Varnum’s *Fencing with Words*. I pose this course, it should be understood, not as a fully realized example of counter-hegemonic practices, but as pointing in idealized form to the potential in practices blanketed by the term *tradition* as sites for work alternative or counter to hegemony. In pursuing that potential, I am of course engaging in explicitly utopian thinking—not as escape or self-delusion, but as a necessary element complementing critique (see Bizzell 54–56). Approaching the course in explicitly idealized form is my attempt to resist subjecting it to the panoptic disciplinary gaze that Harkin risks in calling for bringing teaching “lore” to light. While acknowledging the susceptibility of the work of the course to commodification, I am foregrounding the continuing potential use value, at specific instances, of its specific practices. What is crucial in pursuing this ideal, and what Varnum’s extensive interviews with teachers and students and reproduction of assignments

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and student papers at least makes possible, is to focus on the work practices themselves rather than claims made about them from the outside, just as, for Kusterer and other critics of abstract accounts of work and workers, it is crucial to look at actual workers and work practices “on the floor” rather than in the abstract (see Darrah 253, 267; Kusterer 190–94).

Of course, despite the exhaustiveness of Varnum’s study, I can here do only very partial justice to the work practices at Amherst indicative of a residual tradition involving resistance to the commodification of work and knowledge. Those practices at Amherst I highlight include teachers’ principled resistance to published accounts of their work, an understanding of their teaching as an ongoing activity rather than transmission of a codified philosophy, explicit disavowals of any professional expertise on the teaching of writing, and a treatment of the work of the course as a common activity shaped by the collective efforts of the teaching staff and students. These practices were enacted within the common institutional structure of a required first-year English course taught by a staff that was required to use the same set of assignments, a structure which, on its face, would seem to preclude anything but the most perfunctory work by teachers and students alike.

I approach this ideal of Amherst’s English 1–2 practices not simply in terms of the immediate institutional and larger social and historical conditions in which they were enacted, nor just in terms of the teachers’ ostensible allegiance to a specific epistemology, but also in terms of how these practices may be seen as constituting a tradition on the margins of the academy. In naming this course a tradition, however, and so linking

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it to what is deemed “marginal,” a caveat is in order. Of any seemingly marginal tradition we need to ask what it is marginal to, to what effect, in what social historical circumstances, according to

whom. We cannot simply label cultural practices marginal or central, dominant or residual, outside history and circumstance. For example, in *Yearning*, hooks recalls her illiterate grandmother’s practice of insisting that her children and grandchildren tell the “particulars” of their names and kinship relations when entering her home. In many ways this was a “dominant” part of hooks’s lived experience of her home culture, something that, as a child, she experienced as “frightening,” an “interrogation” (116). And indeed, if taken out of its material context, it may seem to instance not counter-hegemonic practice but an insidious disciplining of children through enforced rote recitation. However, within the dominated culture of African Americans, and specifically the history of being denied their kinship relations, this tradition can have counter-hegemonic force, enabling the participants to recall and maintain their history in the face of dominant culture’s efforts to erase it.

Conversely, the tradition on which the Amherst course draws was a residual element of dominant culture (an element valuing independence, spontaneity, individuality, anticommmercialism). As residual, however, it may still effectively oppose or represent an alternative to the dominant—for example, in the way it opposes the dominant’s insistence on planning, uniformity, and the interchangeability of both parts and people. Teachers and students associated with the Amherst course were not “on the margins” in the sense that, say, hooks and her family were “marginal” (or marginalized) in Kentucky. They were part of a socially dominant male, white, upper-class elite. Any understanding of the course as part of an alter- or counter-hegemonic tradition on the periphery must confront this. Rather than being marginalized, they used the freedom granted to them by virtue of their dominant social position to maintain and practice a type of residual marginality (Varnum 140). hooks argues for a marginality delegitimized by the center that can be “a site one stays in, clings to even,” struggles to maintain “even as one works, produces, lives, if you will, at the center” (“marginality” 341). Those at Amherst, on the other hand, sought out, or produced, their marginality from a residual position legitimized, but not dominant, within the center. The tradition they established was residual *within* the dominant, operating in the relative isolation of a small, elite liberal arts college committed to generalist rather than specialist knowledge (on this isolation and its potential, see Varnum 12, 29). Specifically, they used the relative autonomy afforded by both their dominant social position and their geographic and cultural isolation “at the top” to maintain teaching practices at odds with mainstream practices and beliefs. It would be a gross distortion to equate the marginality of those at Amherst with the marginality of African Americans, like confusing pleasure camping with the makeshift living arrangements of the homeless. Nor is there any hint that the specific marginality achieved at Amherst represented an attempt to “stand with” the marginalized. If it distinguished itself from the dominant, it was a distinction that set it “above” rather than “below” the dominant, risking preciosity, as its critics have suggested. At the same time, the marginality enacted at Amherst suggests the potential of tradition as a site for counter-hegemonic pressure, realized or not. Composition is learning to draw on the strengths of oppositional traditions of the dominated. It can now learn to draw as well on alternative practices blanketed under the notion of dominant traditions, not ceding tradition to the conservatives. If hooks illuminates the potential of margins as the site of resistance, her work also poses the challenge of looking to alternatives *within* the dominant.

Of course, however one links Amherst practices with tradition, they clearly are part of a literate rather than an oral culture. We can nonetheless identify their practices as traditional in the ways in which they practiced literacy. As critics of the literate/oral distinction have observed, claims made on behalf of either literacy or orality have tended to confuse a particular oral or literate practice with the medium as a whole, attributing the effects of that practice to the medium itself (Graff, Scribner and Cole,

Tannen, Williams 159–60). We can see this confusion operating when North, for example, claims that “writing is, by definition, the medium least amenable to representing the results of Practitioner inquiry” (52). For by “writing” and its reading, North means, it turns out, a specific use of writing to provide teaching instructions to Practitioners, which is then equated with the “medium” of writing as a whole (North 52–54; see Horner 510–12). The Amherst tradition does not abjure writing. It does represent a different literate practice that resists using writing to instruct students, teachers, and those who would know about the course.

Those practices associated with the Amherst course that have proved most troubling to historians illustrate the specific form such resistance took. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty the course has posed to composition historians is the paucity of any formal discursive representations of the course. I refer here not only to the almost complete absence (until Varnum’s study) of any published account of the course, its methods, or any “theory” behind those methods, but also to the studied indifference of those associated with the course to attempts to make such representations. The almost complete absence of first-hand accounts of the course, Varnum notes, meant that in studying the course, she “had no choice but to adopt the *Annales*-style of historical scholarship” (11–12, 6–7). Theodore Baird, the director of the course, has published a few descriptions of it, but they appear in such obscure, local venues as the *Amherst Alumni News* and the *Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly* (see Gibson 152, 137).

While this lack of publications can be explained partly as the result of the absence of pressure on the teachers to publish, or the lack of time they had for writing, given the demands of teaching the course, it can also be seen as principled resistance. Walker Gibson, who taught the course for several years, suggests as much, observing that according to the “Amherst position,” “the course is an ongoing activity . . . not a body of knowledge to be readily laid out on paper. It is an action” (137). Skeptical of formal representations of the course, the teachers associated with it—dubbed the “Amherst Mafia” by Ann Berthoff—have resisted any efforts to codify their teaching in terms of a philosophy, “school” of thought, or “following.” James Broderick, in one of the few published studies of the course, echoes Gibson, reporting that its “originators and practitioners . . . disclaim any philosophy; for them the course just happened, it evolved, it is their changing ways of handling certain problems in class. They are firm in their insistence that the course is not the reflection of any philosophy they know of” (44–45). Richard Poirier, who at Harvard taught Humanities 6, designed by one of the Amherst English 1–2 teachers, Reuben Brower, when Brower moved from Amherst to Harvard in 1953 (Varnum 72–75), describes his identification with other figures associated with the Amherst course as “temperamental” (Poirier 22). Varnum writes that in her interviews with several of these figures, they “displayed what I took to be a desire to disabuse

me of any notion I might have had that they were acolytes of Baird,” reporting that William E. Coles, Jr., informed her “Baird had made it impossible for others to imitate him” (Varnum 224). Baird himself has claimed, “I don’t think I ever had a clearer motive [for English 1–2] than the determination not to be bored and everything as far as I was concerned followed from that” (quoted in Gibson 137). And in an interview with Varnum, Baird dismissed the linking of the course with any particular philosophy, insisting the course “was homemade; that’s the truth of the matter, and it was no better, no worse than we could make it at home” (quoted in Varnum 49).

This resistance to codification has not, of course, prevented others from attempting to represent the course in just such ways, as the “Amherst Mafia” epithet itself suggests. The course has been linked, for example, to the ideas of such thinkers as Alfred Korzybski, Wittgenstein, Henry Adams, Percy Bridgman, I. A. Richards, and Robert Frost, among others (see Varnum 46–55, Berthoff 72). Yet these efforts ignore the teachers’ own repudiations of such codifications (Varnum 49–50) and have proved difficult to sustain. Varnum herself admits that Baird’s relation to such figures is “difficult” to characterize, and confesses that in her attempts to trace Baird’s influence on others, “there seems to be no one essential element of English 1–2 that ‘Mafia’ members carried away with them,” each of them having “to work out his own relation” to the course (228, 229).

While this refusal to acknowledge influence has itself been taken as evidence of a masculinist ideology of self-reliance (see Varnum 3, Catano), it can also be seen as a repudiation by the teachers of attempts to view themselves as possessors of specialized professional expertise and their teaching as the transmission of commodified knowledge—as, say, sly instruction in the precepts of positivist operationalism. Baird’s account of the course as “homemade” and of himself as “no philosopher” suggests such a repudiation, as do his and others’ statements insisting on their own lack of expertise in the teaching of writing. Baird has linked himself with “a long tradition” at Amherst of “one man after another who was concerned about how you reach a class,” but he has also insisted, “Teaching is a mystery. Nobody knows how to teach. Nobody knows how to learn” (quoted in Varnum 55). While this might be taken as false modesty or an attempt to preserve guild “mysteries” from the laity, other of Baird’s statements suggest that in fact it is a rejection of any codification of teaching, since any knowledge about it exists, and has validity, only in specific circumstances. Asserting, “There are no methods which will succeed in teaching everyone to spell correctly and to think straight,” he insisted that any such methods “are means to an end, and come to life, if at all, only because of the energy which they generate in teacher and student” (quoted in Varnum 68). In a memorandum to his staff, he suggested his and their use of their location within the dominant to take such a stance toward professionalism: “We take for granted that *at Amherst College* we can say boldly to everyone interested that no one knows how to

teach writing” (quoted in Varnum 130, my emphasis). In other words, such resistance to commodification of knowledge may well be a strategy affordable only to those in material social circumstances of significant privilege, and may even serve as a display of such social capital. I point to such circumstances, however, not to dismiss such resistance for its preciousness but to recall and insist on understanding resistance in terms of the material specificity of its instantiation. “Resistant” traditions cannot be understood outside the circumstances of their practices; or rather, to remove those practices from those circumstances is to reify and commodify them, a point which Baird’s statement also makes. To acknowledge the exchange value of the social privilege displayed through such practices is not to deny their continuing potential use value in specific circumstances.

The Amherst rejection of professional expert knowledge explains in part the scarcity of written accounts of the course; if one rejects the abstraction of methods from the specific circumstances of their use by a teacher or student, then one has nothing to “sell” an audience; and, if one is in a dominant social position, one has no need to. Hence, while Baird seems never to have been bothered by others’ attempts to describe the course—actively participating in Varnum’s own efforts, for example—he had no professional investment in such projects, except to discourage efforts to turn accounts of the course into commodifications of it. This same rejection of any commodification of teaching knowledge may also account for how he and the other instructors treated the work associated with the course as communal property. First, all sections of the course in any given year used the same set of sequenced assignments. While an individual staff member produced the initial draft of the sequence, the staff as a whole was responsible for selecting and revising the assignments before they were given to students. At weekly staff meetings, teachers were to debate ways of addressing the students’ papers and teaching the next assignments in the sequence. But the aim was to treat the course as a common project (Varnum 43, 65). As Baird put it, “the course would be as good as the instructors in it, working together. Ideally no one person would dominate. It would be a common action” (quoted in Varnum 66). Thus, at least ideally, neither the assignments and other course materials nor the ways of employing them in class were the property of anyone; rather, they belonged to all. The almost verbatim use of some of them, such as the course descriptions in subsequent, published books by individuals, attests to this view of them as common property (see Varnum 230–31).

Second, the practice of giving all first-year students in the college the same assignment the same week effectually rendered the students’ own work part of the collective project. On the face of it, this structuring of coursework across sections might seem to be a prescription for alienated, alienating rote work. Neither students nor teachers had the choice of what they would be working on, either in individual assignments, class meetings, or the course as a whole. But this view assumes structure to function only as a barrier to action and agency rather than, as Giddens has it, “essentially involved in its

production” (70). For in practice this “constraining” structure of assigned assignment sequences was also simultaneously potentially “enabling,” highlighting as it did the dependence of the structure on agency—on what individual teachers and students made of the sequences, in individual class meetings, course sections, and papers. Varnum herself takes the Amherst pedagogy to have been intended to “spur student self-determination, to empower student resistance to normative pressures, and to promote a student’s growth as a responsible personal agent” (3). In terms of my argument, the sequences can be seen as posing to both teachers and students the question of what use they might make, and how, of what otherwise would appear to be a call for the production of uniform themes, the ultimate in commodified writing (see Coles). Further, while the giving of identical assignments to all students might appear to encourage competition among individual students, the sequencing of the assignments would undercut treatment of individual papers as more than segments of a larger, term-length process and project (Varnum 137). And just as the course was not identified as belonging in its shape or meaning to any one instructor but as a “common” project, so responsibility for the “outcomes” of the course would belong to both teachers and students. As Baird warned in a description of the course given to students,

The best we can do is treat writing—and the writer—with respect and imagination, and in our conversations about writing and the writer hope to say something. In the classroom we shall have good moments and moments not so good.

Every year, this teaching staff makes a new sequence of assignments, dealing with a new and different problem, so that for all concerned, teacher and student, this is a new course. . . .

Whatever answers you reach in this course, they will be your own. You will do your own learning. (quoted in Varnum 250–51)

This awareness of the work of the course as specific to particular actors and historical circumstances again accounts for the otherwise curious failure of its teachers to advertise their methods through publications, and for the resistance offered by those teachers who have published accounts of courses inspired by the Amherst course to taking those accounts as prescriptions (see Horner 499–502). For the methods employed do not in fact “translate”: their effects are not commodifiable but are tied to the circumstances in which and uses to which they have been put.



“Every instance of the use of language,” Giddens observes, “is a potential modification of that language at the same time as it acts to reproduce it” (220). While Giddens

makes this observation in accounting for how oral cultures change through tradition, the observation applies to language users in all societies. Students and teachers have a practical knowledge of their role and capacity both to reproduce and change language, and so culture. Composition can draw upon this practical knowledge embodied in the practices of traditions of writing and the teaching of writing, rather than displacing it with knowledge sanctioned by academic discipline. For compositionists to do so, however, means foregoing the distinctions between professionals and laity, renouncing intellectual property rights over writing instruction, and sharing responsibility for and control over our work with the public in ways for which academic professionalism has not prepared us, indeed which it has actively worked against (see Zeichner). It means, in short, redefining the work of Composition and ourselves as workers working with, rather than for, on, or in spite of, students and the public. Composition would have to recognize, and realign itself with, its teaching—not in opposition to research or theorizing, nor to embrace martyrdom, nor as a new strategy to achieve distinction from the public as professionals—but as the primary site where Composition work takes place, in concert with students.

In a critique of careers in Composition, David Bartholomae suggests the possibility of such a realignment when he observes that he regularly teaches the first-year writing course at his university not as a sacrifice or service, not as a gesture of solidarity with TAs, with students, or with teaching in opposition to research, but out of commitment to “a certain kind of intellectual project—one that requires me to think out critical problems of language, knowledge, and culture through the work of ‘ordinary’

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or ‘novice’ or student writers. . . . a way of working on the ‘popular’ in relation to academic or high culture” (24). He proposes that we see Composition as undertaking just such projects, but he warns

that while, so defined, Composition can be a “good field to work in,” it means “you have to be willing to pay attention to common things” (28). This view offers an alternative to dominant definitions of intellectual work in composition as the disciplinary production and increase in exchange value of publications, academic credits, or writing skills, understood purely as commodities. It takes Composition’s non-disciplinary status, its location on the margins between the academy and the “popular,” not as a lack to be corrected or fate to be condemned, but as the basis for intellectual work that involves both students and teachers in realizing the use value of their classroom writing in (re)producing and changing language and culture.

I have been posing an ideal of English 1–2 at Amherst as a tradition of teachers and first-year students aimed at also carrying out a project of such collective intellectual work that can stand as an alternative potentially disrupting the domination of

professionalism in Composition. Other courses might carry out similar projects very differently, in different material and historical circumstances. For example, Dennis Lynch, Diana George, and Marilyn Cooper have described first-year writing courses at Michigan Technological University that teach argument as inquiry. Unlike the Amherst course, these courses involved students in using argument to explore an issue of current public concern and debate—the use of water resources, for example—in increasingly complicated ways. The courses required students to write far fewer papers than the Amherst course—four essays in one version, three of them essentially drafts for the final essay—and involved students in extensive research, again unlike the Amherst course (Lynch et al. 77). At the same time, the process engaged students in learning not only the formal modes of argumentation but in rethinking their knowledge about and positions on these issues, ultimately redefining them, and so treating knowledge as contingent (80). Further, it provided students with an occasion to connect their academic work with their everyday lives, and their everyday lives with their academic work, in ways far more dramatic than the Amherst course encouraged (82).

But recognizing tradition not as a fixed body of knowledge but an action and ongoing project of reworking knowledge means that we must not advocate the dissemination of MTU- or Amherst-like courses, whatever we might admire about these courses or specific features of them. Instead, we must pursue the ways in which specific practices in given circumstances enact the contingent knowledge characteristic of tradition, whether at Amherst, MTU, or other teaching sites as yet unstudied. Any practice defines the work and the worker in relation to that work. For example, the Amherst practice of using a new assignment sequence each year was, according to Baird, a way of “always facing a new problem, and a problem that you didn’t know how to solve. That way you never felt you were just a damned section man, or whatever, teaching a required course” (Varnum 112–13). Other traditions might well evidence different ways in which teachers operating in different specific conditions have defined their work, the work of their students, and so themselves and their students as workers in comparable terms, resisting reification of work and knowledge and the alienation attendant on such reification.

If tradition as a practice is characterized by attention to the contingencies of immediate circumstance, then the various practices of various teaching traditions cannot be understood apart from the conditions of their employment. But this is not to equate the practices with those conditions. For example, while the teaching practices at Amherst cannot be understood outside the conditions of its relative isolation from pressures of research professionalism (Varnum 12, 29, 62, 140), nor outside the conditions of class,

We must pursue the ways in which specific practices in given circumstances enact the contingent knowledge characteristic of tradition.

race, and gender privilege obtaining at Amherst during mid-century for both its professors and its students, those conditions do not in themselves inevitably render the course ethically noxious—for example, turning it into an elite game of college-wide “boot camp” hazing used by those already in positions of social power to reinforce their positions of privilege (see Varnum 213–20)—for such an analysis would again derogate the actors by assuming that institutions “work ‘behind the backs’ of the social actors who produce and reproduce them” (Giddens 71). Rather, we can see the tradition embodied in certain practices of the English 1–2 course as resulting neither simply from allegiance to secretly held epistemological beliefs imposed by the teaching staff on students, nor simply from the conditions of Amherst as an isolated elite, all-male, effectively all-white private college, but also as an attempt to mobilize existing residual values and conditions for alternative work resistant to the commodification of knowledge. What distinguishes the course is the specific response of these teachers to conditions similar to those prevailing at many other colleges, just as the courses in argument described by Lynch et al. demonstrate a specific response to conditions presumably similar in some ways, different in others, to those prevailing at other schools. The Amherst course made possible not simply the reproduction of specific conditions—the enactment of ritual male hazing, say—but also a dialogical, communal relationship between and among students and faculty that was the antithesis of the masculinist authoritarianism that boot camps are intended to foster, and an alternative as well to the increasingly dominant pressures to engage in research professionalism. Similarly, the MTU course makes possible not just students’ enactment, or re-enactment, of *Crossfire*-like mudslinging, nor just a conservative’s worst nightmare of students’ conversion to PC positions on issues of current public debate, nor just exercises in writing generic research papers, but also the use of conventions of writing argument turned to nonconventional ends, as suggested by the authors’ unconventional terms for argument as “agonistic inquiry” and “confrontational cooperation.” The overdetermined possibilities of these courses are demonstrated by the significant differences in the experiences reported to Varnum both by the students who had taken the Amherst course and those who taught it—some decrying it as an exercise in humiliation, others avidly recalling its liberating effects.

Realizing the potential of such traditions of practice means both addressing the conditions that make such work possible and developing a variety of ways, given specific local circumstances, of engaging in such work with and against such conditions. None of this will come about as a byproduct of achieving academic professional disciplinary status, since the terms and conditions for achieving that status militate against such work—leading, for example, to composition “specialists” who never teach composition (see Bartholomae 23). It will require, instead, insisting on a variety of different definitions of our work and the work of our students, definitions which may draw significantly and effectively on the authority of tradition as a continual process of collectively reworking,

and rewriting, our knowledge. And it will require sturdy resistance to pressures to commodify that work, whether in such forms as publications, student test results, or teaching evaluations, or “accountability.” (Again, this is emphatically not to oppose the practices of publishing or evaluating, necessary to any reworking of knowledge, but to specific forms and uses of these practices that contribute to the reification of knowledge and work—most obviously for people “in” Composition, the use commonly made of these in reappointment and tenure review.) And finally, it will require steady critique of the material conditions in which all teaching practices take place: admission standards, financial aid policies, and other factors producing student populations; class size; job security and salary; clerical support; computers, libraries, offices, paper, time.

Those pressures that appear to threaten the privileges and rights of Composition as an academic specialty might be harnessed instead to forge a different definition of our work and its worth. Composition courses are one of the few sites where those most marginal to the academy have a space—first-year students, especially those deemed “unprepared” for college, the “basic” writers thought to lack “the basics.” It is also one of the few sites where these students and their writing are given serious, sustained attention, where the teacher is likely to know both students’ names and their writing, and where the students, in turn, are likely to know their teacher in more than a superficial way. And it is, therefore, not surprisingly the course that the public most remembers and with which it most identifies (see Bazerman 255–56). The public’s claims on Composition can and have been mocked as merely “sentimental,” evidence of their foolish commitment to a degrading initiation ritual or fond nostalgia for Mr. Chips figures (see Crowley, “Personal” 156).

But I wonder if those claims might be engaged seriously. Dominant public discourse identifies the course strictly as remedial, providing skills training for future workers. It is this “official” public demand on the course that has most fed calls to abolish the course, or the universal requirement to take it, usually out of either elitist disdain for such matters or rejection of the possibility of teaching “General Writing Skills” (see Russell; Petraglia).² Such arguments, however, slide into the error of functionalism, attributing to the course on the basis of its institutional curricular location the performance of some function in relation either to other academic work or to nonacademic work. In these arguments, the “function” of the composition course is posited as static, both transhistorical and uniform. One way of accounting for such arguments is that their focus on the dominant or “official” origins, features, purposes, or effects of academic institutional and discursive practices blinds them to aspects and effects of such practices outside the ken of such “norms.” So, for example, while many freshman composition courses have historically been viewed officially as the site for “General Writing Skills Instruction,” the actual material work practices of that site may well differ significantly from or go well beyond that official purpose (see, for example, Chiseri–Strater 158). As Charles Bazerman observes in a critique of some abolitionist arguments, “Just

because we have been funded with a reductionist notion of our task has not meant that we have been bound to follow through in a reductionist way” (252). It will not do, then, to dismiss the potential use value of first-year composition work because of its institutional location. Nor will it do to identify that work strictly in terms of whatever are claimed to be its official purposes. We need to recall, as Bazerman observes, that the postsecondary school experience is in practice associated not only with training in pre-professional or official disciplinary discourse but also with “personal, developmental, educational, reflective, philosophical, cultural” discourse (Bazerman 256). That is to say, in addition to the officially sanctioned curriculum, there is also a range of other curricula as “hidden” from official academic institutional view as Kusterer’s workers’ knowledge was hidden from managers, but nonetheless forged by teachers and students out of the material conditions of academic life.

Against such functionalist tendencies, we need to insist that the significance of an institutional form or structure cannot be read outside the specificity of its material instantiation or use. What we can do is examine the specific ways in which a particular form has led to certain effects—to see, in other words, how such forms, in specific instances, have worked or been used strategically—the uses to which, under what circumstances, they have been put. As suggested by the account of the Amherst course, the specific structure of a freshman composition course *may* provide an academic institutional framework for mobilizing students’ “working knowledge” and practical consciousness of their position, of institutional structures, and the potential of both.³ In this sense, the academy as an institution may enable students to make active use of their working knowledge. That is, the freshman composition course, or other courses or academic forums, may be used to support and sustain students’ working knowledge about their position, the position of the university, and the ways of the world at large, strengthening that knowledge and increasing its potential for radically transforming the “normative functions” promoted in and outside the academy, and thus, the academy itself.

That potential could be aligned with strands of public discourse other than those demanding the production of writing skills, strands less “official” and strident, that recognize writing as also an occasion for critical re-thinking of one’s life experience and the culture at large. For example, Karyn Hollis reports that in responses to autobiographical writing assignments given to students during the 1920s and ’30s at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers, many students chose to use the assignment to reflect on difficulties in their work lives, the value of education, their experience of economic deprivation, changes in their relations with other ethnic groups, and their changing sense of themselves as leaders and activists (39–40). Gere reports that members of the Tenderloin Women’s Writing Workshop and the Lansing Iowa Writer’s

Workshop have valued writing especially for its ability to give them courage, improve their self-esteem, help them think about their personal relationships, and alter the material conditions of their lives (76–77). As one member of the Iowa writer’s workshop explained, he used his writing as “one way for me to understand how I felt. . . . to reconcile some differences I had with members of my family” (Wagner; quoted in Gere 77). And the stated purpose of the workshop was to address local problems by building community. For example, public readings by members of that workshop, Gere reports, led to consideration of alternatives to chemical farming (Gere 77–78).

It is difficult to imagine a public that would reject its own capacity or right to engage in this sort of intellectual work, refuse an occasion to engage in such work, given the necessary material support, or discourage teachers from such engagement. The freshman composition course is one site where students and teachers could take up such work—attending critically to the material practices of writing, and providing training in and critique of those practices, but simultaneously, and in the process of doing so, engaging them in the kind of practical criticism of and work on popular culture in relation to academic culture for which Bartholomae calls and at which courses like those at MTU aim, making use of the material resources available to them as students and teachers in a college composition course.

The public’s claims on the freshman composition course could also provide ammunition for improving the material conditions and resources of its teaching. Rather than pleading for improved working conditions on the basis of Composition’s putative status as a professional academic discipline involved in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, I am arguing that we should align ourselves with the majority of those most at risk because of those conditions, the students who have experienced the overcrowded classrooms, overworked teachers, limited computer access and supplies, and so on (cf. Modern Language Association 28–29). As Karen Thompson has argued,

[S]tudents need to know *who’s* in front of the classroom; they need to know how we’re treated, how much we’re paid, how insecure we are. They need to see where their money is going, or not going; how their issues are connected to our issues. (A23)

In making such alliances, we can educate ourselves on the history of strategies employed for improvement of our working conditions, especially unionization, by those teachers with whom we are simultaneously closest in our work (and in the public imaginary), yet put at most distance by our “professional” aspirations: primary and secondary school teachers. We might, in other words, mobilize the clash between sentimental public memories of traditional composition teaching and existing conditions to justify an improvement in these conditions, in the public’s own interest as participants in, rather than objects of, the work of Composition.

On the basis of his analysis of “social movement” unionism and the public workplace, Paul Johnston argues that, far more than workers in the private sector, public workers “are constrained to frame their claims as ‘public needs’ . . . and to align with and even assemble coalitions around these public needs, turning bargaining into a political debate over public policy” (12). For the fact is, such workers are always involved in public issues. They confront them, Johnston observes,

face-to-face—at the point of production, so to speak, of society itself. . . . Thus, they are participants in the never-ending argument over “what is the public good” and join—and increasingly organize—coalitions on behalf of politically defined public goals associated with their work. (12–13)

While Johnston focuses primarily on such public workers as nurses, city streetsweepers, clerks, and librarians, college faculty, like primary and secondary school teachers, can be seen as confronting, at the point of production of society itself, the question of “what is the public good.”⁴ Rather than defining themselves as academic entrepreneurs pursuing private interests or engaging in purportedly “disinterested” scholarship, Composition faculty who understand writing classrooms as working at the point of production of society could align with public constituencies in redefining and pursuing the public good in their work with students, resisting reductively utilitarian definitions of those goods in terms of “growth” and the production of exchange value—e.g., in terms of the production of marketable skills or other forms of privately held cultural capital—and fighting for education’s—and writing’s—use value for and by the public.⁵

Composition has traditionally occupied a marginal position in the academy, justified by the lack of distinction between its knowledge and lay knowledge, by its focus on teaching, by its association with the public’s mundane interest in finding and keeping work. But margins, hooks reminds us, “have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance” (342). Rather than simply taking Composition’s traditional marginality, a marginality intrinsic to its status as a tradition rather than a profession, as a site and sign of deprivation only, of our oppression and means of oppressing others, I am arguing that we can take tradition in Composition as also a site of resistance, a means of recuperating the wholeness of our work as it mediates academic and nonacademic knowledge. We can take tradition as a site, not of acquiescence, but of radical possibility.

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Notes

1. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott points to a parallel phenomenon in failing to acknowledge discrepancies between “public” and “hidden” transcripts among and between members of dominant and subordinate groups (3–4, *passim*).
2. Other arguments for abolishing freshman composition, or at least the requirement that all students take the course, emphasize the specific teaching practices thought to occur there, practices often tied to material conditions of employment, such as the exploitation of adjunct and part-time instructors (see, for example, Crowley, “Personal” 167–70).
3. Amherst alumni and poet Robert Bagg attests to such a possibility in his claim that “At the heart of the course’s painfully yielded secret doctrine was the news that each human being must create reality and even sanity for himself in the act of writing or speaking” (quoted in Varnum 195).
4. In light of government funding for research and tuition at all types of postsecondary institutions and in light of the public good to which all such institutions are thought to contribute (which is the justification for that government support), I take the common distinction between “public” and “private” postsecondary schools to be one without a difference for the argument advanced here, however significant in other regards.
5. On the political difficulties of defining these goods, see Johnston 30–31.

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