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## “This Erstwhile Unreadable Text”: Deep Time, Multidisciplinarity and First-Year Writing Faculty Mentoring and Support

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I propose to say a few more words about this erstwhile unreadable text, in order to lay out some thoughts about writing and literacy in what I like to call the contact zones. I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. (33)

Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” 1991.

Mountains are not somehow created whole and subsequently worn away. They wear down as they come up, ... rising and shedding sediment steadily through time, always the same, never the same, like row upon row of fountains” (47).

John McPhee, *Basin and Range*, 1981.

Having worked with a multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty for over ten years now, across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, I am somewhat accustomed to Pratt’s concept of “erstwhile unreadable text[s].” A cultural anthropologist, for instance, suggested I read Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg’s *Righteous Dopefiend* (2009); my prior notions about field notes from having read Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Clifford Geertz (2005) as part of my English Ph.D. suddenly gave way to a much more nuanced understanding, one I have since used with class visits and in several first-year writing assignments. My notions of document design expanded tenfold when an environmental-science colleague showed me the break-out boxes, tables, and images fluidly interspersed throughout articles in such journals as *The Ecological Society of America*. Conversations with a biologist enabled me to teach first-year writers how to create posters as an alternative to text-based verbal presentations and presentation software programs. More surprising for me was when I learned from a musicologist that the Suzuki method of music pedagogy is not entirely about monotonous drills and rote memorization, but is also rooted in strategies I hold central to effective first-year writing pedagogy: encouragement, practice, revision, and collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps of equal significance has been what I have learned from scholars outside of writing studies about our own field’s erstwhile unreadable texts. A religious-studies scholar in our first-year writing program, for instance, once remarked, “I came to teach [first-year] writing and I read an article about process pedagogy, and then one about post-process pedagogy, and I had no idea what any of it meant.” Such a response may seem obvious: Why *should* a religious-studies scholar be able to make sense of Lee-Ann M. Kastman Breuch (2002), Lad Tobin (2001), or John Trimbur (2011) any more than I might be able to understand Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) or Bruce Lincoln (1999)? Surely, this scholar’s teaching and writing ultimately benefited from his foray into the contact zone, despite the difficulties he encountered. However, I have come to believe that unless these (for him) unreadable composition texts are situated alongside texts from his discipline, he will have little-to-no opportunity to position writing within religious studies. For him, writing would then unfortunately remain that which is borrowed or visited rather than nested within his own discipline.

Experiences like these—about which I propose to say a few more words—have enriched my first-year writing pedagogy, my writing, and my approach to first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support. These encounters have convinced me that first-year writing teachers bear a responsibility to approach writing and writing pedagogy through a more inclusive, multidisciplinary lens. Such an epistemological shift has, for me, been facilitated by relying on the geological concept of “deep time,” described in the second epigraph above.<sup>2</sup> A deep-time approach to writing foregrounds the ways in which disciplines—like mountains—shift, erode, meld, and separate across dimensions of time and place: “always the same, never the same.” Placed alongside Pratt’s notions of contact zones, deep time illustrates the longer, deeper, more recursive and complicated histories and relationships that define contact zones around writing.

The concept of deep time emerges most prominently from eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Hutton (1788), but McPhee coined the term “deep time” in *Basin and Range* (1981), deploying it as a way of naming the incomprehensibility and recursivity of geological time.<sup>3</sup> Geologist Henry Gee (2000) and others emphasize deep time as a substantive epistemological tool. Gee, for instance, laments the human impulse to fit geological history into “human terms” (2), a tidy trajectory where fish move to land and then apes gradually morph into hominids. Instead, Gee calls for “a truly

comparative biology of humanity, such that we can understand what being human really means” (225). “What we need,” Gee argues, “is an antidote to the historical approach to the history of life; a kind of ‘anti-history’” (4). In calling for this ‘anti-history,’ Gee demonstrates deep time’s epistemological disruption. Its undercurrent of phylogenetic relationships and cladograms, “branching diagrams [that] represent orders of cousinhood between organisms—patterns of relationship” (Gee 6), shows that human and geological history cannot fit into a linear, compartmentalized trajectory. As such, the way we understand the nature of being human must always be connected to a recursive, limitless past with human relationships moving along various “orders of cousinhood.”

So too, I suggest, with writing.

I argue in this article that infusing deep-time, multidisciplinary dimensions into first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support—unveiling and creating contact zones within a deep-time framework, where first-year writing faculty can meet, clash, and grapple with the pedagogies, writing, theories, and practices of many disciplines—will enrich the ways faculty and students think, write, and talk about first-year writing. Such a move helps disrupt for faculty and students what Rebecca Nowacek (2009) terms “double binds”: “[T]hose uncomfortable and perhaps inevitable situations in which individuals experience contradictions within or between activity systems (e.g., between the motives and tools within a single activity system or between the motives of two different activity systems) but cannot articulate any meta-awareness of those contradictions” (507). I believe that such a move is vital across nearly all contexts of first-year writing, not only where first-year writing has overtly multidisciplinary features (as in my program), but also where first-year writing exists more firmly in English departments.

This kind of dialectical cross-disciplinary approach has not thoroughly enough influenced first-year writing faculty preparation, despite the otherwise rich multidisciplinary terrain of writing studies—including the multidisciplinary origins of the field, CAC, WAC, and WID programs, and the now-expanding institutional locations for FYW. Instead, the strategies most often used with first-year writing teaching mentoring and support tend to remain discordantly anchored to a comparatively narrow version of writing pedagogy. Although this enables us to share, sustain, revisit, and extend the expertise compositionists have about effective writing pedagogy, it also limits our efforts by igniting some of the same problematic challenges of translation and power dynamics that Pratt describes in relation to other contact zones.

To be clear: I am not dismissing or demoting composition scholarship from being the cornerstone for first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support. Nor am I advocating for multidisciplinary faculty or curricula. Nor am I debating whether writing programs should or should not be housed in English departments. Instead, I hope to encourage more deliberate multidisciplinary dimensions to first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support as a way of enhancing first-year writing pedagogy and forging stronger writing faculty and stronger first-year writing experiences.

My argument builds on and extends the work of a handful of others, such as Janice Lauer (1970), who advocates importing heuristics into composition pedagogy, and Nancy R. Comley (1986), who asserts that good writing instruction should not only be a matter of learning rhetoric. Katherine Gottschalk (2002) makes similar moves through her work in Cornell University’s John S. Knight Institute: “[F]aculty and TAs in the disciplines know a great deal about writing, that indeed they may have insights into writing in their own fields that others do not” (138). More recently, Emily Golson and Toni Glover (2009) strive to cultivate in *Negotiating a Meta-Pedagogy* a multidisciplinary ethos by asking scholars from such disciplines as music and business to describe how their fields shape their first-year writing pedagogies.

However, despite this work, by and large, most first-year writing faculty too often remain relatively separate from these kinds of multidisciplinary efforts. Catherine G. Latterell (1996) notes the homogeneity of most Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) training programs: “What is immediately noticeable about the descriptions of GTA education programs ... is their rough similarity given a wide range of programmatic options” (141). Sidney I. Dobrin (2005), in his introduction to *Don’t Call It That*, suggests that “neither [first-year writing] ‘practicum’ titles nor the approach to these courses has shifted very much in the past ninety years, despite remarkable changes within composition studies” (6). Those who have questioned approaches to the practicum—even many of the contributors to Dobrin’s collection—have done so mostly by debating the balance between theory and methods rather than by unpacking the degree to which most of the theories and methods, howsoever they are balanced, emerge from a somewhat narrowly-conceived disciplinary lens.

This pervasive homogeneity with first-year writing faculty preparation, mentoring, and support can further be seen through the language most often used in these contexts. Many of the terms commonly deployed in preparing and advancing first-year writing teachers—terms like process pedagogy, expressivist pedagogy, post-process pedagogy—may operate on the surface as extra-disciplinary, but are in fact phenomenologically, epistemologically, and semantically anchored in composition and rhetoric. Using such a disciplinary language delimits what could otherwise be fuller conversations about first-year writing with scholars trained in disciplines other than English or rhetoric and composition. In my experience, terms such as these isolate faculty from English and composition and rhetoric, positioning them as insider-experts and limiting their ability to speak effectively about writing with students and faculty from a range of disciplines. Virginia Anderson and Susan Romano (2006) argue that this lack of preparation in how to be more effective “ambassadors” contributes to many composition and rhetoric graduate students sharing “the common experience of dislocation and forced self-reinvention” (6) upon entering the professoriate. Learning more about the writing, pedagogy, and theories of other disciplines would help composition and rhetoric scholars speak more productively with faculty and students in other disciplines and therefore share more effectively the expertise

compositionists do have with writing and writing pedagogy.

Where faculty in English or composition and rhetoric suffer “dislocation” and lose the opportunity to be “ambassadors,” terms like post-process pedagogy, as seen in the opening anecdote, befuddle and alienate writing from faculty in disciplines outside of composition, rhetoric, and English. Not surprisingly, these scholars, many of whom may be new to the teaching of first-year writing and composition, look to writing-studies scholars as experts *at the expense and exclusion* of also thinking about how they are already writers and writing teachers. In my experience, they express confusion and dissatisfaction with composition scholarship when it is provided because it seems inaccessible, even with extensive contextualizing, writing, and conversation.

Sometimes this homogeneity reaffirms problematic dichotomies between content and writing. Faculty from disciplines outside of writing studies often approach their work as first-year writing teachers as though they have a firm grasp on the content and, in order to become effective writing teachers, only need a quick dose of classroom tips.<sup>4</sup> As a writing program administrator, I repeatedly hear from multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty (who have already taught in their disciplines) concerns over a purported inability to teach, especially to teach writing: “I’m not prepared to teach writing.” ... “In my field we never talked about teaching.” ... “There’s nothing from my background about leading class discussions. I was never taught how to think about student-centered learning.” I am increasingly convinced that these concerns are not so much confessions of insecurities or realistic appraisals of preparedness as instead reflective of an ingrained and errant set of perceptions about who owns writing instruction in the academy and which disciplines do or do not value and practice effective pedagogy. Such concerns reinforce the difficulties such scholars as David R. Russell (1997) and Michael Carter (2007) have discussed regarding the ways in which writing is too often perceived as “generalizable to all disciplines and therefore distinct from disciplinary knowledge” (Carter 385).

While the dangers of such ownership negatively impact current and prospective first-year writing faculty by limiting their reach as scholars, teachers, and administrators, David Smit (2004) suggests that this ongoing insularity also has a deleterious impact on student writing: “[Composition studies] continues to foster writing in generic ‘writing’ courses with no common curriculum or content; it assumes that teaching the ‘personal essay’ or the ‘research report’ or ‘literary analysis’ is tantamount to teaching writing generally, that to teach any genre in classroom conditions is equivalent to teaching all genres in all contexts” (10). Working against such presumed universalism, I have over the years sought a more expansive and inclusive multidisciplinary language and approach—a deep-time pedagogy for first-year writing faculty mentoring and support: How can I more effectively share the expertise in writing pedagogy from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies alongside a visible inclusion of the scholarship, practices, and pedagogies that other disciplines can bring to first-year writing? What stands to be gained from weaving a more multidisciplinary approach into first-year writing faculty mentoring and support? What might be at stake?

The ensuing sections detail the strategies that have surfaced for me as I have pursued these questions by thinking within a deep-time framework. I share these strategies as a way of spurring more conversations about how compositionists might inflect first-year writing faculty mentoring and support with more multidisciplinary. Again, I am not suggesting that anybody can teach first-year writing; nor am I replacing the invaluable scholarship on first-year writing developed in the last half century by compositionists; nor am I advocating for all first-year courses to have multidisciplinary curricula. Instead, I hope to showcase a language and an approach to first-year writing faculty mentoring and support—a deep-time writing pedagogy—that more effectively dovetails the many other multidisciplinary registers of writing studies and generates more awareness about the limitations of insularity within the context of first-year writing faculty preparation, mentoring, and support.

### Expanding Epistemology

[I]t seems nothing separates humans and animals so obviously as language. ... As a consequence, we tend to play down the richness and subtlety of visual, auditory and olfactory communication found among organisms right down to bacteria. (216)

Henry Gee, *Deep Time*, 2000.

Perhaps the most subtle, but arguably crucial, aspect of expanding the disciplinary dimensions of first-year writing faculty mentoring and support through deep-time pedagogy involves an epistemological shift towards first-year writing and first-year writing pedagogy in disciplines outside of composition. Instead of complaining or abiding by complaints about what faculty from disciplines outside of writing studies purportedly lack in knowledge about writing and writing pedagogy, and assuming out of hand that compositionists are superior first-year writing teachers, a deep-time epistemology would uncover and seek the strengths and perspectives many disciplines can bring into first-year writing. Such a move, to a certain degree, facilitates a “breakdown of sovereignty” (Dimock, 2006) that enfranchises all disciplines into the teaching of first-year writing rather than locating it solely in the provenance of composition and rhetoric or English.

Geologically, for Gee, deep time challenges the human tendency to define our own sovereignty around constructed matters of difference, such as language. Gee argues that our human desire for sovereignty causes us to “play down the richness and subtlety of visual, auditory and olfactory communication found among organisms right down to bacteria” (216). Such shortsightedness, Gee argues, has made humans feel unnecessarily “alone” (225) and can be offset through deep time’s

epistemological disruption and emphasis on “patterns of relationship” (6) and “orders of cousinhood” (6).

Connecting this epistemology to first-year writing would ask that knowledge construction in first-year writing faculty mentoring and support be similarly connected to a recursive, dynamic past and ongoing, shifting relationships with other disciplines. Another scholar, Wai-Chee Dimock, has drawn on deep time to push against what she identifies as a longstanding insularity and self-defined sovereignty she sees in American literature:

For too long, American literature has been seen as a world apart, sufficient unto itself, not burdened by the chronology and geography outside the nation, and not making any intellectual demands on that score. An Americanist hardly needs any knowledge of English literature, let alone Persian literature, Hindu literature, Chinese literature... I have in mind a form of indebtedness: ... Rather than being a discrete entity, [American literature] is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures... I would like to propose a new term—“deep time”—to capture this phenomenon. (3)

Dimock’s invocation of deep time, therefore, promotes a more relational approach to disciplines, one that I have found to be a useful model for first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support.

One can see a similar spirit in composition studies undergirding Malea Powell’s 2011 CCCC call for papers, where she emphasizes “relations,” “webbed relationality,” and the contestation of “originary stories.” This relationality also informs the approach Anderson and Romano suggest for working against the insularity governing graduate education in composition and rhetoric: “[A] rhetorical education [that] rethink[s] graduate education as a matter of relationships: disciplinary/intra-interdisciplinary relationships; human relationships—hierarchical, labor, gender; and institution-to-discipline relationships.” (7). I aim to extend this focus on relationships deliberately to how we prepare first-year writing teachers and how we construct professional development opportunities, thereby generating increased inclusivity and a broadening of boundaries.

### Fostering Relationships

Even though it is impossible to know for certain whether one species is the ancestor of another, we do know that any two organisms found on Earth must be cousins in some degree. (155)

Henry Gee, *Deep Time*, 2000.

Deep-time pedagogy positions patterns of relation and cousinhood across time not only in terms of writing, but also in terms of human relationships. Maintaining disciplinary plurality within such a framework asks that first-year writing faculty and administrators actively create occasions for scholars from a variety of disciplines, administrators, and members of the larger community around an institution to share space and conversation in the context of first-year writing. Though some might argue that teaching as collaboration is already an established ideal, I would counter that there is still more work to be done, particularly in first-year writing. A more rigorous and expansive collaboration would invite first-year writing faculty to consider in a sustained manner the ways in which our teaching is shaped by colleagues and mentors, students, friends, family, and acquaintances, as well as past, present, future, real and imagined experiences across disciplines and in and outside of the academy.

As a way of encouraging such insights, our teaching seminar for new first-year writing faculty mirrors a first-year writing class as it offers one of the most foundational moments for establishing collaboration and relationships. We ask for active reflection from participants about how and where and why they have written, and what they can bring to writing pedagogy from these experiences. Thus, while the initial template for this classroom may have originated from within a composition framework, it gets rewritten across our time together, enriched by layers of multidisciplinary. Establishing this culture of collaboration and relationships continues beyond that seminar in the form of hallway conversations, social events, symposia, speakers, symposia, classroom visits, and sustained collaborative reflection through assessment and review. While our program’s multidisciplinary offers a natural contact zone, such efforts could also be achieved in other contexts.

Deep time, in fact, unsettles disciplinary identity in such a way that even first-year writing faculty who are primarily in English Studies would be invited to examine their own networks of kinship. Birgit Neumann and Frederik Tygstrup (2009) apply Edward Said’s concept of “travelling theory” to describe a growing interdisciplinarity in English: “English Studies is certainly among those disciplines which have been strongly affected by the dynamic exchange of concepts, most of which have been imported from other disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy or psychology, and so forth.” The 2011-12 MLA *Job Information List* suggests interdisciplinarity in English Studies is growing: According to “Table 3,” the MLA identifies twenty subspecialties within English Studies.<sup>5</sup> The category “Interdisciplinary” first appears in 2004-05; it remained steady at around 10% of all MLA job advertisements for several years, but has jumped most recently to 14.9%. In 2000-01, 16.6% of ads were labeled “Other fields of specialization;” in 2011-12 that figure has risen to 25.7%. Thus, even first-year writing faculty situated in English department embody inter- and multidisciplinary, with scholars connected to the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Deep time would invite conversations between faculty that draw on these multidisciplinary domains.

More specifically, one could provide a list of events happening throughout campus across disciplines and ask first-year writing faculty to attend and reflect on a symposium or other event in another department. In a future iteration of our first-year writing seminar in teaching writing, I might ask participants to schedule conversations with faculty members in various

disciplines who teach writing-intensive courses to discuss how they approach writing in their courses and how first-year writing might (or might not) intersect with that work.

Moments for fostering relationships across multidisciplinary registers also include developing opportunities to draw on undergraduate expertise after first-year writing. We have invited seniors from a variety of majors to first-year writing faculty focus groups to discuss the writing they've done throughout their undergraduate experience (on and off campus), and what they remember from their first-year writing class. Our institution, like others, also hires undergraduates from across disciplines as peer tutors in the writing center, and undergraduates serve a vital role in our journal of first-year writing and in our annual conference showcase of first-year writing.

Reaching out to scholars across disciplines to expand conversation about first-year writing should in similar ways be more pervasive in order to create more rewarding relationships. I was delighted to see that one of the featured speakers at the 2010 Council of Writing Program Administrators conference was Michael Delli Carpini, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, and scholar of political science and public policy, who spoke about how and why he values writing and writing instruction, and how he sees writing operating across the curriculum.<sup>6</sup> One recent similar occasion at our institution involved faculty members from history and biology joining our first-year writing faculty retreat for a conversation about student writing in upper-division writing intensive courses. We have also created opportunities for senior faculty around our institution to teach first-year writing on an occasional basis. These Faculty Associates are selected because they have already demonstrated an interest in teaching writing within their disciplines, and we ask them to agree to teach first-year writing approximately every other semester for three years.

Inviting faculty from a variety of disciplines into first-year writing, and motivating first-year writing faculty to move around campus extends as well to the larger community. Bronwyn T. Williams (2010) argues in "Seeking New Worlds" for "more research about the writing taking place off campus" and a "systematic and conscious reconsideration of the practices and, just as important, of the nature and perceptions of our field" (130). Similarly, I ask that first-year writing faculty think together in a forum about how their teaching of writing is shaped and inspired by experiences with writing and people off campus. I have asked people at area nonprofits to visit my first-year writing class and talk about their writing. One might also encourage first-year writing faculty to ask members of the larger community about their writing, perhaps through oral history, ethnography, or journalistic interviewing. Any of these gestures would help foster a more multidisciplinary perspective for first-year writing.

#### Reading "Erstwhile Unreadable Text[s]"

An abstract, intellectual understanding of deep time comes easily enough ... Getting it into the gut is quite another matter. Deep time is so alien that we can really only comprehend it as a metaphor. (3)

Stephen Jay Gould, *Times Arrow, Times Cycle*, 1987.

Working toward a more expansive, deep-time multidisciplinary in first-year writing faculty mentoring and support prompts a reconsideration of the kinds of readings offered to teachers of first-year writing for training and/or professional development. Closely reading texts from other disciplines is crucial for first-year writing faculty to move past general abstractions about writing in other disciplines and instead "get it into the gut." This would mean that preparation workshops, conversations, or seminars on teaching writing not necessarily be limited to discussing the *Norton Book of Composition Studies* (2009) or *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* (2003) or *Teaching Composition* (2007) (though each deserves presence), but also include selections from the aforementioned anthologies along with portions of Golson and Glover's *Negotiating a Meta-Pedagogy*, or William Grassie's "Powerful Pedagogy in the Science-and-Religion Classroom" (2003) or Laura Henry-Stone's "Cultivating Sustainability Pedagogy through Participatory Action Research in Interior Alaska" (2010) or Derek Malone-France's "Composition Pedagogy and the Philosophy Curriculum" (2008). Another fruitful reading might include a selection from the inaugural issue of *CCC Online*, "The Turn to Performance," which brings together performance studies and writing studies (Fishman, 2010).

Our preparation seminar for new first-year writing teachers includes an activity titled "Disciplining Writing," where we ask participants to share a brief piece of published writing from a discipline about which they are familiar that exemplifies what they deem to be effective writing, poses important questions pertaining to their upcoming first-year writing course, or raises some other compelling ideas about writing in that particular discipline.<sup>7</sup> The intent is to generate conversation about academic writing in various disciplines, and about how our program's goals and practices for academic writing emerge across our different disciplines. Such an activity could easily be adapted in the context of an English department: first-year writing faculty could ask a faculty member in another department for such a text, peruse a leading journal in a particular field, or examine a rhetoric tailored to a particular discipline, such as Harold Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists* (1986) or Ann Penrose and Stephen Katz' *Writing in the Sciences* (1998). One could even start a journal club (modeled on those in which physicians often participate), where each meeting features a leading journal from a different discipline. Thus, instead of positioning disciplines outside of English and writing studies as periphrastic, these activities help position many disciplines at the center of writing pedagogy, and help surface multiplicity, difference, and variety between and within disciplines.

Again, I am not suggesting a disregard of composition scholarship in the preparation, mentoring, and support of first-year writing faculty. But, rather, that as we showcase for newer first-year writing teachers the expertise of composition theory, we also avoid positioning it as the only model of writing theory and pedagogy.

#### Translating between Disciplines

If by some fiat I had to restrict all this writing to one sentence, this is the one I would choose: The summit of Mt. Everest is marine limestone. (124)

John McPhee, *Annals of the Former World*, 1998.

Moving toward a more multidisciplinary, deep-time platform for first-year writing faculty mentoring and support also invites a reconsideration of the language used in these contexts. McPhee worked time and again to translate the concept of deep time for various readers. With first-year writing faculty, instead of using a pedagogical language steeped in assumptions about shared understanding of humanities or composition discourse, I try to define discipline-specific terms and encourage parallel terminology across disciplines so writing is positioned more expansively and so scholars from a range of disciplines can approach first-year writing pedagogy from a position of familiarity rather than distance.

Fostering multidisciplinary awareness and sensitivity has prompted an activity in our program we call "Translating Scholarship," where first-year writing faculty briefly share for a multidisciplinary audience the questions that motivate their scholarly writing, their habits of mind, their disciplinary epistemologies. Recently, these conversations gave rise to a wiki on our in-house website (titled "The Tower of Babel") that highlighted discipline-based terminology. Phrases like "the ghettoization of composition," "lyrical sociology," or "synthetic review" then became more widely usable as they were defined, so all participants felt like they were together creating a language, all simultaneously outsiders and insiders to the teaching of writing.

Effectively translating the language associated with first-year faculty mentoring and support means recognizing that course documents are material artifacts that may (and should) be read by people beyond students in a particular class or colleagues in a particular department. I encourage first-year writing teachers to think about teaching documents—syllabi, assignments, reading lists, student writing, course descriptions, teacher response—as having a powerful, longstanding impact, beyond particular semesters, individual practitioners, and even institutional boundaries. This reach is particularly vital in that it enables first-year writing faculty the opportunity to share assignments and course design on a more sustained basis with one another, with faculty in disciplines across the institution, and with members of the more extended communities. We post assignments to a shared or public site whenever possible, be it with the student essays featured in our journal of first-year writing, or on an internal blog to which each faculty member contributes for a week, or in our showcase of innovative teaching materials by members of our program who win our annual award for excellence in teaching writing. In our program, we have also instituted a feedback process on our course descriptions for first-year writing: faculty draft a description and get feedback on it through a committee of peers. This process attends to the many multidisciplinary readers who may be reading the course description.<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion: What's at Stake?

The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end. (80)

James Hutton, "Theory of the Earth," 1788.

My hope in making visible the advantages of and strategies for inviting more earnestly a greater number of disciplines into first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support through deep-time pedagogy is that others involved with first-year writing will deliberately pursue the many multidisciplinary possibilities rather than leaving such discoveries to occasional or situated chance. While there have already been some efforts at infusing first-year writing faculty preparation, mentoring, and support with multidisciplinary, they have been for the most part somewhat isolated and/or directed primarily toward curricular design rather than in what are arguably the most crucial places: epistemology and pedagogy.

Surely there are costs. Fostering deep-time pedagogy, cultivating relationships, seeking out collaboration, translating, and embracing the materiality of first-year writing requires a disposition toward loosening control and relinquishing some expertise. In effect, a deep-time approach toward first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support embodies what David Seitz (2004) terms the "pedagogy of humility": "Humility in my role as a teacher of critical writing is ... a willingness to lie with and learn from the unpredictable" (xi). This unpredictability amidst shifting ground can leave us vulnerable to competing approaches to and values regarding the teaching of writing.

However, one can see much value through instances of multidisciplinary in the larger field of composition studies, as in J. Blake Scott's "Civic Engagement as Risk Management and Public Relations: What the Pharmaceutical Industry can Teach Us about Service Learning" (2009) or through Charles Bazerman's work with education (2006). Other examples include Neal Lerner's *The Idea of a Writing Lab* (2009), which shows intersections between science education and writing, and Kathleen Blake Yancey's intention to borrow the "Patient Page" concept from the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and adapt it for *College Composition and Communication* in order to facilitate better conversation between scholars of writing studies and others.<sup>9</sup>

Such efforts as these underscore the gains that can be attained through multidisciplinary cooperation and conversation, and highlight what seems a general receptivity to multidisciplinary approaches that remains discordant to the mentoring and

support in which many first-year writing faculty participate. What I hope to have achieved in this article is to push against the monolingualism, the *lingua franca* of composition, that still dominates so much first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support, and instead create more space for translanguaging, for a pidgin dialect—a deep-time pedagogy—that could facilitate a culture of first-year writing that permeates disciplinary boundaries across, within, and beyond the academy.

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### Endnotes

- 1 Stephanie Stein Crease (2006), for example, describes the Suzuki method as including both individual and group practice (29), low-stakes opportunities to share and present one’s work with others (29), “incremental ... development” (30), daily practice (30), and “continual positive reinforcement and feedback” (30).
- 2 The term was first introduced to me by my colleague and co-presenter, Rebecca Walsh, at the 2007 CCCC.
- 3 McPhee in *Basin and Range* offers deep time as a way of mitigating the incomprehensibility of geological time: “Numbers do not seem to work well with regard to deep time. Any number above a couple of thousand years—fifty thousand, fifty million—will with nearly equal effect awe the imagination to the point of paralysis” (20).
- 4 Russell articulates succinctly the dangers involved with such “a conceptual split between ‘content’ and ‘expression,’ learning and writing” (5): “If writing was an elementary, mechanical skill, then it had no direct relation to the goals of instruction and could be relegated to the margins of a course, a curriculum, an institution” (5).
- 5 This grouping of twenty includes disciplines that are sometimes separated into a discrete unit, such as composition and rhetoric, creative writing, and technical and business writing.
- 6 Delli Carpini’s talk, in fact, generated a disciplinary version of the “code switching” discussed the day before by another plenary speaker on the program, Keith Gilyard.
- 7 I also discuss this activity, as well as the “Translating Scholarship” activity mentioned below, in another article: “Translation and Transfer: Interdisciplinary Writing and Communication” (2013).
- 8 This material approach, buttressed by a notion of translation, is also illustrated by an initiative currently underway by the American Sociological Association: “TRAILS—the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology Web site—will be an archive for peer-reviewed classroom innovations, including syllabuses, class activities, individual assignments, bibliographies and Web sites—all focused on teaching. (Jaschik 2010)
- 9 The JAMA Patient Page is a one-page feature in each issue that focuses on a particular medical condition or disease, including a definition of the condition, diagnosis, and treatment options. The patient page has perforated edges and a “Copy for your Patients” box in order to facilitate increased communication between patients, the general public, and medical providers. cf. Janet M. Torpy, Alison E. Burke, and Richard M. Glass’s “Depression” in the 19 May 2010 issue of JAMA.

### About the Author

Denise Comer is an Assistant Professor of the Practice of Writing Studies and Director of First-Year Writing in the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University, where she works with a multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty. She teaches theme-based first-year writing seminars on topics such as illness narratives, civic engagement, and travel writing. Her scholarship, which has been published in such journals as *Pedagogy*, *Writing Program Administrators Journal*, and *Composition Forum*, explores writing pedagogy, writing program administration, and the intersections between technology and the teaching of writing. She has two books forthcoming from Fountainhead Press in 2014: *Writing in Transit: A Multidisciplinary Reader* (ed.) and *It’s Just a Dissertation: The Irreverent Guide to Transforming Your Dissertation from Daunting to Doable to Done* (co-written with Barbara Gina Garrett).

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