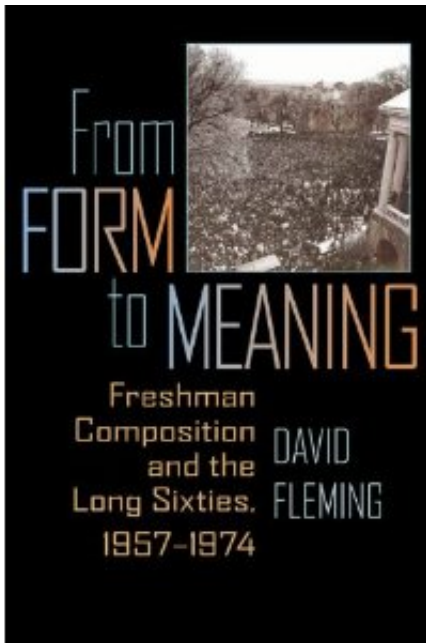

More than a local history: An Interview with David Fleming

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From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition

and the Long Sixties, 1957-1974

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Every department has its lore: stories of meetings that were so contentious that certain faculty members walked out, the infamous rivalry between Prof. Y and Prof. Z, and so on. However, few departments can lay claim to a story as striking and momentous as the University of Wisconsin-Madison English Department's decision—essentially by fiat—to eliminate Freshman Composition in 1969. For over 25 years, the UW-Madison was unique among large public universities in that it had no standard first year writing course. When David Fleming arrived as a new faculty member in composition in 1998, and when I arrived as a new graduate student in 2003, the long absence of Freshman Composition still haunted the halls of Helen C. White. The story that circulated about the strange events of 1969 was this: the huge batch of TAs who had avoided the draft by taking refuge in graduate school had been radicalized by the Vietnam protests, had, in turn, been radicalizing their students, and were teaching politics rather than writing in the first year course. To keep the department together, the faculty had no choice but to eliminate the course.

The story was easy to believe: during the Vietnam War, Madison was the site of violent and passionate student protests that culminated in the 1970 Sterling Hall bombing, and has since been the subject of several, prominent

histories of the period ([They Marched into Sunlight](#), [Rads](#), and the documentary, [The War at Home](#)). Proof of Madison's enduring radicalism can be found in the 2004 TAA (Teaching Assistants' Association) strike over health care and the 2011 occupation of the Wisconsin Capitol Building over an anti-union bill. But in *From Form to Meaning*, Fleming argues for a more complex history of the 1969 elimination of Freshman composition: yes, politics were key, but so was a growing divide between composition and literature, a tense transition from current-traditional rhetoric to process theories of writing, and a heightened research agenda within English departments fueled by post-Sputnik educational funding.

As a result of these forces, Fleming's story exceeds the lore of just one department and tells us something more important about the moment in which Composition and Rhetoric was forming as a discipline. In the late 1960s, when the greater accessibility of higher education had destroyed the notion of college as only for the elite, administrators of the infamously "content-less" freshman year writing course were forced to come to terms with the fact that texts such as "The Joys of Sport at Oxford"—a selection on the UW-Madison's standard syllabus at the time—were no longer relevant to the population the course served, if indeed they ever were. UW-Madison TAs in the late 1960s argued that the dissonance was too great between these formally hermetic essays and the fate of so many in their generation, sent to die in jungles half a world away. Their radical conclusion: writing classes should be "relevant" to the students who took them. This conclusion still drives much of our interest in the pedagogy of freshman composition, and, I would argue, that's a good thing (I think Fleming would agree). I couldn't help but think of our contemporary impulse towards increased "relevance" in undergraduate education while reading the book in the context of the escalating Occupy movement on college campuses.

The historical details Fleming provides in the book are copious and gleaned from the elaborate minutes of departmental meetings at the time, the Oral History archives housed at the UW-Madison, and interviews with perhaps a dozen of the TAs, faculty members and key players in the events. Although at times the names are difficult to keep straight, these details provide a rich context for the story told here. To explain the close-up perspective he takes, Fleming aptly refers to John Brereton's assertion that "in our attempts to understand the past, *theory* is relatively easy to get at; what often gets left out is *detail*, 'the everyday fabric of history'" (Fleming 21).

The structural advantage of histories is their natural narrative arc, and Fleming has leveraged that well. We know how the story ends—in 1969, the faculty hastily vote to eliminate the standard Freshman English course, effectively eliminating a major general education requirement. Yet the interaction between the players kept me turning pages: the TA who visits the course director and says he can't teach the syllabus in good conscience; the professional women without PhDs who helped shaped the course and were inexorably caught up in gendered and educational hierarchies of academics at the time; the professors who had lived through the earlier political turmoil on campus in the 1930s and saw contemporary parallels; the science faculty who penned angry responses to the English department's decision; the recognizable names—Lynne Cheney, Ira Shor, and Eric Rothstein—all of whom were involved in the drama in some way. As a composition professional, I connected to the story along pedagogical, historical and administrative axes. Fleming says below that the book was "easy to write," which perhaps accounts for my pleasure in reading it. He wrote the book during a summer in Madison, prior to moving to a new position at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. If it weren't for the fact that Fleming grimaces humbly at the "excruciating" process of writing his first book (*City of Rhetoric*), those of us working on manuscripts of our own might be justified in resenting the way he was able to produce such a compelling and important narrative essentially in such a short time.

Fleming begins *From Form to Meaning* by outlining a long history of freshman composition. It's a story told many times, but the broad, early history cogently sets the stage for his tighter focus on the UW-Madison, which begins in the second chapter. As elsewhere in the book, Fleming's local details serve to illustrate larger trends in education. The UW-Madison was not so different from many institutions that the Morrill Act launched in the mid-nineteenth century, and so its early history effectively stands in for a more general sweep of higher education in the late 19th and early 20th century. The current-traditional syllabus of the Freshman Composition course at the

UW, outlined in the first few chapters, was representative of higher education's approach to composition more generally.

In the late 1960s, composition at the UW begins to look starkly different from its peers—or rather, it continues to look the same as it did in the early decades of the century, and so its relevance to students and TAs begins to wane. Faculty, most of them trained in literature, began to withdraw from the course as they sought to increase the research profile of the department. Lack of interest among faculty and staggering enrollment numbers led to little oversight in the course, which Fleming explains in the fourth chapter. Left to their own devices, TAs experimented with the freshman composition course—eschewing grades, practicing emergent curricula, and swapping out calcified texts with contemporary ones like *Sense of the Sixties*. The chapter “TA Experimentation,” which Fleming co-authored with two former graduate students and research assistants (Rasha Diab and Mira Shimabukuro) was perhaps the richest in terms of pedagogical detail, as it was based on syllabi and extensive interviews with those who were TAs at the time.

The fall of 1969 sees the book's and its subject's narrative climax, when a series of tense meetings about who should control the freshman composition classrooms led to an escalation of tension between TAs and faculty and finally erupted in the faculty vote to end Freshman Composition—a vote so contentious a police guard was called to bar the door. The dénouement traces the aftermath of the vote—other faculty angered by the English department's hubris at undermining a university-wide general education requirement, as well as the long road back to a first year writing requirement, finally reinstated in 1996. In the conclusion to the book, Fleming offers his insight on the protean yet persistent nature of first year writing course—specifically, “its *generality, universality, and liminality*” (200). He makes a strong case for the centrality of first year writing in the field of Composition and Rhetoric as well as in civic discourse more generally.

At the 2012 MLA conference in Seattle, David and I sat down to chat about his book. Below are his responses to my questions about his writing and research process, what the book contributes to our knowledge of education in the 1960s and the birth of composition as a professional field, and the ways he hopes his research might augment our understanding of freshman composition as a course and the centripetal force in our field.

Annette Vee: You mention in the book that this was initially a side project, and then it blossomed into something much bigger. This expansion seems connected to both the vibrancy of the time period and the extent of local resources you were able to draw upon. Can you say a little bit about how it went from a three-week project to a book?

David Fleming: Well, it started just as local curiosity. What was the story behind the elimination of Freshman Composition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the late 1960s? It was just a question that I had; it was not something I thought other people would care about. I wanted to solve a local puzzle, but I started to see something that transcended that program. It was a fascinating period and Madison was a fascinating place. Madison at that time has been the subject of so many interesting projects—*The War at Home, They Marched into Sunlight, Rads*—which I was lucky to have as background. But none of them talked about freshman English, and I thought there was more of a story there that deserved exploration.

One of the interesting things that we found in the English department files—I don't know how to explain this except by the inherent interest of that period—was the extensive departmental minutes taken during that period. The department had records of committee meetings going back to the 1920s, and these minutes were typically two or

three sentences long. But there was a three or four year period in the '60s where those minutes depicted each meeting like a novel. For me as a researcher, that was a stroke of luck: the period for which I needed detailed minutes, they were there. But I think there must have been something about that period that produced that kind of volubility and energy. There was obviously a great deal of pain in that period, a lot of it surrounding a devastating war, so none of this was easy or fun for the participants. I have to think that was behind those long minutes; people knew something was going on.

You may have seen this when you immerse yourself in a research project: there's a moment there where you lose yourself. There were times when I—it wasn't that I thought I was back in the '60s—but I got sucked in. It was infinitely fascinating to me. Jean Turner, a former TA who is one of our subjects, talked at length with me about how she went with this group of former graduate students from Wisconsin to settle in a commune in Baltimore. And at this time, the English department had something like 500 graduate students. It was incredible. Some of the old explanation for the enrollment numbers had to do with the draft, but by the end of the 60s, and particularly with the increased numbers of women, that explanation doesn't fit. I think the low cost of living has something to do with it. There was essentially no tuition, there was all this student housing, and they all lived so cheaply. One person I interviewed said you just went to school and you went to the Rathskellar [the UW Union bar, still operating] and got beer at night, and you went to parties, and you slept on people's couches.

There was something that ended soon after that, which I probably overplayed in the book: the 'hinge of history' in 1969, which I got from Ira Shor [a TA interviewed for the book]. My current project on the Great Recession and higher education keeps turning up people talking about the early '70s as the beginning of our current period of stagnation. Particularly as I was finishing up the book during the beginnings of the Great Recession, and reading to provide historical context for what I had seen in higher education in the 1960s, I saw something that felt like the end of an era. Students in the late 1960s were probably in the last generation that was not saddled with debt from higher education. So I think there was an economics that facilitated this kind of vibrant intellectual life where people without huge debt and without enormous need to take on all these jobs were able to foment revolution.

I think that rich history at least partially accounts for the project's transition from just a question for which I wanted an answer to an exercise that I thought would be good for a graduate research methods course, where we would learn about this history. Then I thought it was going to be an article or a chapter. I was going to edit a collection of articles, including some of the other people who had done historical work on writing at the UW: Rebecca Nowacek, Marty Nystrand, Brad Hughes. So it went through these stages. I think the real turning point was when my graduate research assistants (Mira Shimabukuro and Rasha Diab) and I finally presented it to the department in 2006. It was clear just getting ready for that meeting that we had too much stuff. And it was stuff that we thought was fascinating. When we went to the meeting, it was clear that people in the room thought it was interesting. And there were some who disagreed with us.

Annette Vee: I remember that meeting in 2006. I remember finding it very interesting. I know part of why I found the book fascinating was my own connection—I recognize some of the names, I know the places, I knew some of that history, I remember those rumors, and I remember you doing the research. But that narrative thread, the arc of the book, makes it inherently intriguing.

David Fleming: There was something about this book—I hate to say this, and it's a bit of an exaggeration—that made it easy to write. Maybe part of it was that those departmental meeting minutes were so rich, and it was just a matter of reading them, taking notes, and then piecing together a story. I think there's probably a narrative in any research project, and in my first book (*City of Rhetoric*) I completely missed that. That book was excruciating to write; it took me a very, very long time. This next book (*From Form to Meaning*), I guess you could say it was more narrative research. But for whatever reason, I felt like I learned a lot about writing from it, and it was, in some ways, extraordinarily easy to write.

Annette Vee: I think you make a compelling case at the end of the book that freshman English seems to have had a central place in this kind of civic engagement, and the absence of it, too, was important at that time for various reasons. Many of us who are composition professionals end up running programs like first year composition. If you think about your book making an intervention in how we think about first year comp, what would that be?

David Fleming: One intervention might be to help us understand that the very thing that makes the course so vulnerable—its ‘contentlessness’—is, in many ways, the very thing that gives it this kind of power, that keeps giving it this validity, that keeps it from disappearing.

One thing that surprised me and, in some ways, made me change my view of freshman composition, is that we never found evidence for the overt politicization of the course that we were led to believe would be there—that teachers were substituting Marx for the class reading, or that the teachers were going in and indoctrinating students against the Vietnam War. Maybe I’m creating a straw man, as if the TAs would have said: ‘We’ve got Freshman English tomorrow morning at 10 o’clock, I want all of you to meet me on the street and bring your placards.’ It’s not to say it didn’t happen, but we never found evidence for that kind of politicization. I think that some of the faculty veterans who were still around the UW while I was researching were critical of this: just because we didn’t find this overt politicization doesn’t mean it wasn’t there. But it did not come up in any of the interviews and I didn’t see it in any of the documents. If you look at what faculty are saying about the TAs up until the course is abolished, there is very little evidence that the faculty at the time were genuinely concerned about this course being used to ‘indoctrinate young people against their country or against the war.’ That seemed to be a story created after the fact.

Instead, what I felt were the most radical moves by those TAs were *pedagogical* moves: they happened in the classroom. TAs weren’t denying that this was a freshman English class and saying ‘I’m going to make this class about the war.’ Instead, they took the class to heart: ‘this is a class in writing, and we’re going to write.’ Some people might think that the TAs didn’t go far enough to radicalize composition, and yet, in a certain way, they were as radical as you can imagine. Some of them taught a writing course without a master in the front of the room, they taught a writing course without a syllabus, and they taught a writing course without grades of any kind. We don’t do any of those things now. We still have grades, we have syllabi, and we have teachers in the room.

So what we found in our research was both less and more politically radical than what we were led to believe. Pondering that and trying to figure out what that meant got me thinking about the role of *content* in higher education. As I mention in the book, Jim Gee talks about the content fetish of education. I think in some ways this is a book about people wrestling with content: teachers, perhaps not fully aware of what they were doing, trying to imagine a course that took its curriculum from the ground up. But was still a classroom, and it imagined what could happen if 25 people met at the same time three times a week and took education hyperseriously. What kind of emancipation, what kind of change could happen with that?

I wanted to represent both sides of the content issue in the book, reminding the comp/rhet community of the historic vulnerability of this course. Contentlessness has been present since this course began, and it has come up again and again and again; it isn’t always fully taken advantage of, but it was always there, and it bothers people. It bothers people in the modern academy, which has been, since the late 19th century, since the birth of freshman composition, devoted to this content fetish. So part of my project was reminding the field of what is at stake in freshman composition, reminding us that even with that vulnerability of ‘contentlessness,’ enormous power is possible.

Annette Vee: Composition as a field looks very different than it did in the late 1960s, when the administrators

running the program were generally trained in literature. We went through a period when composition people were hired to run composition programs; that was part of the exigence of composition as a professional field. That happened at Wisconsin, for example. One of the alternative explanations that you offer for the elimination of Freshman English at the UW in the 1960s, other than the politicization of the course, is that the English department was elevating their research status and basically wanted to remove itself from the 'dirty business' of educating freshman about writing. I see a trend now in our field away from first year comp. In composition, there seems to be a pull away from, again, the 'dirty business' of educating freshman writers. And whether that's a good thing or not, I don't know, but there is a professionalization in the field that means that not everybody is an administrator anymore. Do you see your work speaking to that trend at all?

David Fleming: Well, I think part of what I wanted to do here was to bring freshman composition back. That was personally meaningful for me, being at Carnegie Mellon in the '90s, and feeling like I was part of a group that wanted to move the field away from freshman composition. At the time, there was something embarrassing to me about being in a discipline whose center of gravity was this required, universal course between high school and college that didn't seem to have any content. Here, it was important for me to recall the kind of potential of that course.

I make an offhand argument in the book that the proliferation of work in the field of Composition and Rhetoric has been, in some ways and for some people, a reaction against the primacy of freshman composition. But all these other things came about precisely *because of* the size and centrality of this required course. I'm not the only one who's said this, but I'm a little worried that if we don't take care of this course, some of these other projects might lose some of their solidity. The more projects we have and the more people in our field who don't have to be tied to one particular thing we do is good. There is a kind of commonness to the course—the notion that this is something that all students experience. Some of that feels bureaucratic and troubles us, but then I think there are parts of it that connect to democracy.

Annette Vee: I was reading about the TAs' concern with the 'relevance' of education, I couldn't help but think of the Occupy movement (although this began after the book was published), and the rising costs of higher education. It's different from the late 1960s, but there is a kind of foment on the university campuses, a kind of antagonism between administration and students, with students having legitimate concerns about what happens when they graduate. They're not being sent off to war, but their future is uncertain and education is expensive. What do you see then when you look at these current trends in light of your research?

David Fleming: I'll return to the 'hinge of history.' Christopher Newfield's new book [*Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class*] takes this trend in higher education back to Reagan. He sees everything that happens then as a reaction from the political right against the material gains that had taken place in the post-war period and that were, in some ways, epitomized by the extraordinary growth of public higher education. The 1960s was a flowering of higher education—low costs and an expansion of proportion of the population that was going into higher education. That period didn't last very long. It was, at least in the story that I tell, quashed very quickly. What the book focuses on in the 1960s was a very different model of the more recent events you mention.

The end of that particular era also marks the beginning of the rise of our field. That's the big question I've been trying to figure out, according to this picture of history. Our field flourishes during this time when the democratic potential of higher education begins to close off. I don't know what to do about that.

Annette Vee: Do you think it's a coincidence?

David Fleming: I think it has something to do with the service economy, but I don't know. I do think part of the growth of our field has to be connected with deindustrialization, with rising technology, and that's a little troubling. But I haven't been able to wrap my head around that one yet. That is what I want to do with this next project. Writing *From Form to Meaning* got me fascinated in the history of this country over the last 60 years or so.

Annette Vee: So tell me a little bit about your next project. Where is it going, and what are the threads you're following from this project?

David Fleming: Well, I found myself more and more interested in general education. I think this book opened that up for me. One thing I like about working in first year writing at large, public universities is that I like my academic neighbors. I liked that at Wisconsin, too. I loved working with people who are outside the orbit of the content fetish. And those people exist—despite the fact that higher education in this country has been devoted to content for 100 years, and that you and I have benefitted from it. We are content specialists; that's what the PhD means.

Annette Vee: Although you can also be a generalist in composition.

David Fleming: This is true. This is the weird thing about freshman composition; it's just constantly straddling between things. I think our profession does, too.

Writing this book and continuing to work in first year composition in a large public university has awakened me to the history of general education—the history of the parts of campus that are neither resisting specialization nor are providing a cushion around it. I'm increasingly interested in the post-war period, when the bachelor's degree in much of U.S. higher education was a kind of compromise between the major and general education. It was an unstable compromise, and the story I told about Wisconsin was a story about the vulnerability of the general education part of that. That part, as vulnerable as it is, just keeps coming back.

Those aspects of higher education have become incredibly interesting to me, so I think the third book is going that way. The Great Recession has to be a close second to the 1960s in the kind of changes that are taking place in higher education. I want to try to figure out if that turns out to be true—that this period I wrote about in the first book, and this period that we've all just lived through, may both be watershed moments in higher education. I want to figure out what happened in between those two periods, which was, for us, the rise of writing studies. Then I want to understand where we are going next.

I think the curriculum in higher education is going to be changing. The most interesting things happening on my campus right now are outside of the major: residential first year programs, capstone programs. At UMass, we must be one of the only public universities in the country that has just added a new senior level general education requirement; we call it an 'integrative experience.' It requires seniors to depart from their major right at the moment where they're graduating—to integrate their general education with their major, and to synthesize what they've learned to prepare for the world. I don't want to say that UMass is a bellwether, because we're not the only ones doing this, but there's a lot of energy in those things. In contrast, I think there's a great deal of footdragging and even just plain aggressive status quo-holding in majors.

That's where I'm heading for this next project. I'm trying to figure out how we got to this point of non-specialized higher education, which is internationally unique, and freshman composition is the epitome of it. And yet, academics don't often think about general education. At a grant-writing workshop recently, I told someone I wanted to write a book that was partly about the history of general education in this country. This was a professor from another department, a smart person, and he says, 'General Education has a history?' I thought that was just

a box you checked when you were doing a course proposal.' So I think there's a sense that this is the way universities are by nature. But they're not.

Our field is, to me, this incredible example of general education that has never quite fit the picture. I've always been such a comp/rhet person, someone with a chip on my shoulder about general education, and there's some of that in that book. But part of what I learned running a big program at UMass is to value the friends I've got on campus, people working in residence halls and writing centers. It's very unsung work and in some ways marginal—yet it's extraordinarily powerful. And I think it's only growing. So I feel myself moving away from just thinking about comp/rhet, and thinking about general education. 'General education' is not a perfect phrase; it means different things to different people. But there is something in general education that I want to keep ahold of, and freshman composition remains one of its vital elements. I'm learning more about these other potential partners for us and potential outgrowths of what we've done in comp/rhet. That's where this next project is heading.