

Conjunction Function Reduction: A Too-Brief History of Rhetoric and Composition

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Rhetoric and composition. Damn the conjunction, simultaneously yoke, virgule, hinge: a sign of constraint and restriction, as in what might Rhetoric be were it not leashed to composition?; a mark of breadth and possibility, as in what might composition be without Rhetoric? Yet one version of disciplinary history implies that the conjunction was born of neither linkage nor division, but a simple, benign coordination of degraded elements in the new English department of the late-nineteenth century, as in, rhetoric, that tired concomitant of the old classical curriculum, and composition, that eminently avoidable but necessary project of remediation.

Consider textbook titles. Somewhere between E. O. Haven's *Rhetoric: A Textbook Designed for Use in Schools and Colleges* (1873) and Donald Davidson's *American Composition and Rhetoric* (1939) the uneven surface we navigate today was scored. Drawing in part on classical pedagogies such as imitation, Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (1965) made an explicit link between rhetoric and composition that books like Davidson's implied in name only. Corbett reflects the focus of those we now credit with founding the discipline of rhetoric and composition, a set of autodidacts who discovered rhetoric on the route to improving their teaching. In 1968, Harry Crosby and George Estey intensified the claim for rhetoric in their textbooks bold subtitle, *College Writing: The Rhetorical Imperative*. In the Preface, widening their search to the twentieth century, Crosby and Estey authoritatively ground Freshman English in the New Rhetoric. If the terms rhetoric and composition ever enjoyed a period of uncontested unity, it was do doubt between 1965 and the early 1980s; while the only scholarly outlets that seemed to matter, *College Composition and Communication* and *College English*, continued to provide little more than assignment descriptions and testimonial essays (Goggin, *Authoring* 46), textbooks were presenting an apparently seamless correspondence between theory and practice.

In retrospect, the rupture into which this issue of *Enculturation* inquires was inevitable. The twin functions of disciplinarity and professionalism, which grew legs under rhetoric and composition in the mid-1980s, would not have allowed much else. Already by 1985, the Venn circle representing the teaching of writing (composition) was rapidly shrinking inside the much larger one, rhetoric, which for some delimited the broadest circle possible. Students of Corbett and his contemporaries adopted their mentors' commitments to history, criticism, and academic rigor, but redirected it away from imaginative literature and toward the rhetorical tradition, a step shy of grace in the eyes of many colleagues in the English department, no doubt, but a quantum leap above composition. Some of these new scholars of rhetoric would continue to search for theory and method to authorize practical activity, but increasingly the research was becoming its own end (Vandenberg); the institutionalized reward structure would stimulate not only the dissemination of theoretical claims, but the formation of discursive authority. Composition retained its association with the act of writing, while rhetoric was loosed from its surly bonds to mean much more.

The increasingly apparent division between composition and rhetoric bears a remarkable resemblance to the history James Berlin tells of the bifurcation of literature and writing, and this should not surprise us. Since the rise of the German model of doctoral education in the late-nineteenth century, such relationships between theoretical discourse and practical activity have been written into the order of things. In retrospect, who among us should have expected the observation of an activity such as writing, unmediated by a self-conscious way of looking, to explain much of anything with authority? Had composition been born somewhere else in the university, science (or some corollary) would likely have smothered the authorizing potential of rhetoric. The more recent bifurcation of rhetoric and composition is a subset of a larger fear that has recently come to occupy our collective scholarship: the notion that the activity of teaching, and the desire to do it better by asking what theory of all stripes has to offer it, somehow poses a danger to the pursuit of scholarship uninterested in writing pedagogy (Olson; Dobrin; Goggin, "Disciplinary"). These claims strike me as untenable for two, interrelated reasons.

The body of scholars contributing to rhetoric as an intellectual discipline is now larger, more productive, and better endowed than at any other point in human history. Whether one refers to the authorizing principle for composition as rhetoric, theory, discourse or more simply, research, it is difficult to imagine a pedagogical imperative that would threaten its intellectual priority over composition. Not only is the pursuit of scholarship in rhetoric, writ large, remarkably robust, but the vitality of that enterprise is made possible, in large measure, by college writing instruction. How many of the dozens of Ph.D. programs housing scholars who consider themselves rhetoricians would persist absent their ostensible function of preparing teachers of writing? If writing instruction were declared irrelevant tomorrow, how many who identify themselves as rhetoricians would remain employed in the American academy?

It's important to remember that at a large state university, rhetoric may be taught as rhetoric in several departments and programs; the rhetorical tradition does have life and meaning beyond English and its dis/connection to composition. Yet the good health of rhetorical inquiry in its broadest terms might best be insured by well informed, critically theorized curricula in writing. By this I do not mean that we should cling myopically to required first-year writing; we can thank Sharon Crowley and others whom Robert Connors has called the New Abolitionists for exposing this American institution—the enterprise of sorting 18-year-olds on the basis of their facility with someone else's discourse—as a remarkably resilient vestige of colonialism. Rather, we might consider working in service of curricular revision that will reflect what our rhetorical training has offered us.

We might resist the enduring perception—among some deans, vice-presidents, and less informed colleagues—that a vision for writing instruction at the undergraduate level is the sole responsibility of a WPA rather than an expression of the intellectual pursuits of rhetoric and composition scholars. We might all take up the task of composing curricula that will better reflect what rhetoric has taught us. For example, to say that certain theoretical pursuits may lead to a better understanding of the operations of discourse without leading to immediate pedagogical development (Dobrin 63-64), may reflect an unrealized opportunity to compose course work that makes operations of discourse available to students in the contexts of their lives. To avoid doing so allows the inference that there is knowledge which benefits our capacity to act productively in dominant social institutions that should remain off limits to others. Even as

the scholarly presence of advanced composition has evaporated from our journals, two recent books, *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum* and *Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs*, frame possibilities for reconceiving writing instruction in ways that begin to open up the spaciousness of rhetoric within the vast gap between first-year writing and graduate education.

We might consider a future in which the study of rhetoric continues to intersect with the verb form of composition, but extends beyond that by developing curricula to account for the noun form: writing as a subject of study (Trimbur), the broader concerns of rhetoric that Maureen Goggin describes as discursive practices (*Authoring* 196). A thorough elaboration of what specific courses might look like escapes the bounds of this short essay, but we may take a cue from the Introduction to *Coming of Age*, which promotes the idea of a writing major who is both prepared and motivated for highly rhetorical participation in public life by a theoretical and historical understanding of writers, writing, and writing studies (Shamoon et al. xv).

Might such a goal be understood to simply ratchet up the pedagogical imperative, create even more defensiveness among those who produce scholarship that doesn't work its way out in curricula? Probably. Will pursuit of this goal draw one away from the word processor and into messy, protracted local debates about what it means to take a degree in English studies, slowing down a publishing career in the process? Almost certainly. But it strikes me as a goal befitting an ethical rhetorician. By widening our audience to a body of upper-division undergraduates through major programs in rhetoric and composition, we might imagine a future very much like our disciplinary past—one in which the study of rhetoric can be valued for and by its contribution to the composition of an articulate citizenry engaged in the pursuit of a more just and human social order.

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