

Compositionality, Rhetoricity, and Electricity: A Partial History of Some Composition and Rhetoric Studies

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Since 1949, when the Conference on College Composition and Communication was founded in Chicago, the terms composition and rhetoric have been linked in a social-constructionist move that is now ubiquitous in many United Statesian English departments as well as in many free-standing composition-rhetoric programs.¹ Many compositionist-rhetoricians see ourselves as thoroughly and equally identified with these two terms. One background for this identification can be seen in the volume of essays *Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline* (edited by Duane H. Roen, Stuart C. Brown, and Theresa Enos), among other locations. In particular, the volume includes important histories by first-generation scholar/teachers of composition-rhetoric, Edward P.J. Corbett, Winifred Byran Horner, Janice Lauer, and Richard Lloyd-Jones, to name four who are included in the collection and four whose publications and program building were thoroughly connected to the two terms being advanced here. In this paper, I keep this first generation in mind as I write about the published identities of three other scholar/teachers who negotiate the terms composition and rhetoric as pedagogical and research fields and as performances. The three scholar-teachers are 1) Roxanne Mountford, a scholar/teacher in composition-rhetoric and a self-described third-generation scholar-teacher in the field; 2) Laura J. Gurak, a second-generation scholar-teacher of rhetoric and technical communication; and 3) Nan Johnson, a second-generation scholar-teacher of composition-rhetoric. All three of these scholar-teachers have recently published single-authored books or books in press that demonstrate not only how richly embroidered composition-rhetoric studies now are but whose scholarly/pedagogical identities affirm the claim that the two terms composition and rhetoric can be made to constitute one word, composition-rhetoric, the stance that I would like to promote in our institutions as they normalize composition-rhetoric studies in English departments and in stand-alone departments. In the analyses, I will briefly glance at the strong graduate programs in which these three scholar-teachers were trained because that specific training is crucial for advancing literacy in our current technoworld as well as in Real Life.

Mountford, in her forthcoming book *Engendering the Word: A Cultural Analysis of Preaching*, demonstrates how thoroughly composition and rhetoric are entwined in the third generation of composition-rhetoric studies. She identifies herself, in another location, as a third-generation rhetoric/compositionist (presumably the second generation would be that of her Ohio State University dissertation director, Andrea Lunsford, and the first would be that of Lunsford's mentor at Ohio State University, Edward P.J. Corbett). Indeed, Corbett, Lunsford, and Mountford represent a cascade of composition-rhetoric teachers and students who cross three generations). Mountford works on the rhetoric of space and gender and a reinterpretation of traditional histories of rhetorics of the West; she strongly questions the foundations of traditional rhetorics in general and the relationship of traditional rhetoric and regendered rhetoric as they arise in the writing practices of Christian sermons. She looks closely at *ars praedicandi*, or the art of the Christian sermon, a kind of writing and rhetoric that reaches back of course to Roman male classical rhetorics and writing and speaking practices and forward to the present time as the significant story of composition-rhetoric unfolds. Mountford, crucially, boldly moves away from

what she calls the "ethnocentrism" of male dominance in the art of preaching (in her encyclopedia article "Ars praedicandi"). The book, which has five chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, interrogates the dominant male history of rhetoric (also interrogated in different ways by Cheryl Glenn in *Rhetoric Retold* and by Krista Ratcliffe in *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich*, as well as by many other third-generation composition-rhetoric scholars). Composition-rhetoric beats at the heart of Mountford's book which focuses on gendered speaking. One could say that this book is about communication as well as about composition and rhetoric (a connection that can be seen more clearly in my discussion of Gurak below). Composition-rhetoric (one word) defines and shapes Mountford's book. It is part of a strong and growing movement, reaching back to the early 1960s, of composition-rhetoric.

Laura J. Gurak's 2001 book, *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*, reveals a careful merger of rhetoric, writing, and, in this case, technical communication (she also has an excellent, theory-based textbook, *A Concise Guide to Technical Communication*, co-written with John M. Lannon, published by Bedford St. Martin's; I recommend interacting with it in tandem with *Cyberliteracy*). In *Cyberliteracy*, Gurak analyzes the rhetorical issues of speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity (connecting to David Kaufer and Kathleen Carley's *Communication at a Distance*, a book that also privileges the term "communication" over the word "rhetoric," even as they seem to me to be used interchangeably).² Gurak seems to resist using the word "composition" and to privilege the terms "rhetoric," "technology," and "literacy": I see these words as strong terms that can help us make our way into the gendered technofuture or technopresent. Composition-rhetoric flowers in *Cyberliteracy*, as it does in Mountford's book; in fact, I see composition-rhetoric defining the project: by understanding new technologies via composition-rhetoric theories. Gurak's subtle difference in emphasis could derive from her graduate program in Literature, Language, and Communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where the traditional speech communication discipline is housed with a traditional English discipline and where composition-rhetoric has flourished dramatically and has had the influence on the profession over three generations not unlike that which Ohio State University's composition-rhetoric program in English has exerted.

Nan Johnson's *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866-1919*, also scheduled for publication, sets forth the following idea: that constructions of nonacademic pedagogies of rhetoric and the propriety that accompanied them formed, in the post-Civil War United States, new spaces for women to perform writing in a number of genres, genres that, for a number of generations, were regarded as invisible or as not part of reliable genres. Chapter One, "Parlor Rhetoric and the Performance of Gender," sets up the theoretical scaffolding for this thesis, including the rhetorical possibilities of genre to gender in this space. She goes on to illustrate her theory by presenting a deep analysis of conduct manuals for women and how parlor rhetoric reinscribed the cultural status quo. (In some ways, Johnson's book is hypertextual because of her inclusion of graphics within the realm of print; and all these books use endnotes or footnotes, both of which are hypertextual by nature). Johnson discusses how women were "written out," as she phrases it, and how the genre of letter writing was enacted to maintain a status quo, in this case for White women of the middle class. She explains the power reconfigurations that occurred in the period she reviews, especially the 1880s, for White middle class women. She works on the idea that newly-won rhetorical spaces were subsequently appropriated by a larger conservative

cultural movement that minimized these spaces by reinscribing them. The use of archival material shows how important the erasure of women's achievements were. The reinscribing of history by subsequent commentators led to particular erasures of women's contributions.

Johnson, like Mountford and Gurak, was trained in one of the strongest composition-rhetoric programs of the 1970s, the program at the University of Southern California; the program, as *JAC* has listed, produced a remarkable number of scholars, of whom Johnson is one.

Aside from Mountford, Gurak, and Johnson, I could analyze many other examples of how composition-rhetoric flourishes, including Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African American Women*. Royster identifies her project as "within the field of rhetoric and composition (the arena that seems most appropriate for this project)" (xi). Her index contains nine listings for rhetoric and eighteen for literacy. Under the entry for writing, the reader is referred to the entry for "literacy," further demonstrating, in my view, the richness of the term literacy for all our activities in composition-rhetoric and, in fact, as a new hegemonic term to replace, or coexist with, the term humanities.

On another occasion, I could discuss exciting new work in composition-rhetoric by Susan Kates in *Activist Rhetorics and American Higher Education, 1885-1937*, and Jane Greer's project, *Scripting Solidarities: Working-Class Women Learn to Write, 1830-1940*, and many essays in *College Composition and Communication*, almost all of which seem to me not only refer to rhetoric and of course to composition but to deploy its theories with great sophistication.

In short, we live at an amazing time in our history of composition-rhetoric; we can see the histories of the first generation such as Corbett, Horner, Lauer, and Lloyd-Jones, three of whose graduate programs remain, and we can see the startlingly intelligent present, some of which, based on in-press manuscripts, I have juxtaposed here.

I hope that Horner, Lauer, and Lloyd-Jones will write longer autobiographical accounts of the earlier days of composition-rhetoric.

To conclude for this *Enculturation* moment: my deeper concern here is not the disappearance of rhetoric that some of our colleagues have discussed; rhetoric is in fact booming and rightly so across many disciplines. Rather, my concern is the erasure of composition by many English departments—or the hiding of composition in the famous basements. (I know of two more composition-rhetoric programs recently assigned to basement real estate at leading universities, making one realize that we have a lot of persuading left to do; it may be that brand-new composition-rhetoric programs have to go through a rite of passage in the basement before they are elevated to airier locations.) Many departments now feel it is safe to recognize rhetoric or even literacy and possibly even technology, but they continue to marginalize those who work in writing programs without tenure lines, without the perks that fuel scholarship and pedagogy. Or, more commonly, these universities and colleges subsidize tenured faculty members who claim to be compositionists-rhetoricians and have constructed fiefdoms that effectively exclude people trained in the field of composition-rhetoric. In this regard, many universities and colleges that could easily support trained compositionist-rhetoricians do not do so because folks from other fields control the lower-division required courses in composition and rhetoric and the budgets

that go with them. (I would like to say that the medical profession calls self-credentialed physicians "quacks," people who practice medicine without a license, and maybe we should discuss quacks in our field of composition-rhetoric, too). The term retread has been around for at least twenty-five years: a retread is a person with no training in composition-rhetoric who presents him/herself as an expert.³

So rhetoric is not only fine; it's flourishing and nourishing. And composition is thriving and driving. Any binary such as composition and rhetoric may be bound to have a privileged term and a deprivileged term. So adding a third term may be the way to go. I like the term "literacy" that exists at the University of Oklahoma and other places. Other third terms work as well; the University of Arizona's third term is the Teaching of Writing, for example. What we need to think about collectively, in my view, are the institutional practices that prevent a number of people from doing their work in composition-rhetoric. It is among the non-trained professors where the current-traditional paradigm thrives, promoting writing as inevitably a secondary activity, as a weak representation of thought that exists prior to writing and within the mind. Fortunately, the growth and strength of composition-rhetoric programs in English departments and in stand-alone units makes the future of composition-rhetoric bright and thrilling. The centrality of technology in every composition-rhetoric graduate program I can think of makes the current moment electric.

Endnotes

1. Many excellent histories of composition-rhetoric have been written. See, for example, Robert Connors's *Composition-Rhetoric*.
2. In an earlier draft of *Cyberliteracy*, Gurak named these four functions (speed, reach, anonymity, interactivity) "noun-verbs," a description that reveals the rearrangement of much of cyberculture.
3. Of course I am not referring to autodidacts of composition-rhetoric, colleagues who had no opportunity to study in the field in graduate school because none were in existence; rather, I refer to those who had ample opportunity to study in the field and chose not to do so. In addition, some colleagues did not discover an affinity for composition-rhetoric until after they completed graduate work and worked up the field independently and effectively.

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