

Introduction

Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom is a collection of the most outstanding scholarly articles published in the *Journal of Advanced Composition* over the last decade. As the journal in the discipline of rhetoric and composition most associated with “theory,” *JAC* has promoted scholarly inquiry that crosses disciplinary borders in ways that are productive and useful to composition. Over the last decade, the journal has attempted to push at the borders of rhetoric and composition by encouraging scholars to engage the discourses of theorists in other fields in substantive and significant ways. The result of such encouragement both by *JAC* and by other forums and individuals has been to revolutionize how compositionists view the field, its scholarship, and the teaching of writing. Rather than being restricted to the narrow confines of a field circumscribed by empirical method, composition scholars now engage regularly in important intellectual dialogues across a wide range of disciplinary borders. The essays in this collection chronicle the kinds of attempts made over the last decade to conduct such productive dialogues.

Part One, **The Process of Writing**, contains four essays investigating various kinds of writing and the ways in which such writing is produced. Calling for a “much more comprehensive notion of process,” James Kinneavy draws on Martin Heidegger’s concept of interpretation to expand our notion of the writing process. In an essay that went on to win the 1992 James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding article published in *JAC*, Jasper Neel uses two different conceptions of writing imported from ancient Greece as a framework for comparing and contrasting the kind of writing done by a technical writer with that done by a literary critic. In another article that won the James L. Kinneavy Award (1991), Patricia Sullivan maintains that the graduate curriculum in English departments must be reconceptualized as “a scene of writing as well as a scene of reading” in order to help prevent literature and composition from being perceived as separate intellectual activities, as they most certainly are in most graduate curricula today. In an essay contained in the first issue of a composition journal devoted exclusively to gender issues (volume 10.2), Mary Kupiec Cayton explores how long-term writer’s block contains gender-specific components and how women’s attempts to enter male-centered discourse communities can often lead to writing paralysis for many women.

Part Two, **Theory and the Teaching of Writing**, is a collection of four essays that suggest ways in which theory and pedagogy converge. In his often-

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cited "Some Difficulties with Collaborative Learning," David Smit questions whether the body of scholarly literature used to justify collaborative pedagogies does indeed supply a convincing rationale for using collaborative practices in composition classes. In the first article ever to win the James L. Kinneavy Award (1988), Reed Way Dasenbrock draws on the scholarship of Jacques Derrida to claim that compositionists have overemphasized the similarities between writing and speaking and in so doing have negatively influenced their own writing pedagogies; he contends that Derrida's critique of "presence" will enable compositionists to develop a better understanding of various aspects of the teaching of writing. In a shocking discussion of the consequences of composition teachers' writing assignments, Sandy Moore and Michael Kleine relate a narrative of how a writing student, Sandy, was victimized because of an assignment she prepared for her writing teacher, Michael. Concerned that the educational system is not able to meet the needs of African American students, Thomas Fox calls for a reconceptualization of literacy and composition pedagogy, suggesting that we begin such a reconceptualization by becoming familiar with Afro-American literary theory.

The last decade has seen increased attention in the scholarly literature to the nature and function of "the essay." Some have asserted that compositionists should "teach" belletristic essays in their composition courses as an effective way to sensitize students to sophisticated issues of style and form; others have claimed that this is simply a back-door attempt to return to a pedagogy in which the teaching of "literature" and canonical works displaces true composition pedagogy. The chapters in Part Three, **The Essay and Composition Theory**, address some of these issues. W. Ross Winterowd argues that the essay should be "the central genre in composition instruction," so long as we expand our notion of "essay" in the light of poststructuralism to include exploratory, nonconclusive discourse. Douglas Hesse, however, is highly suspicious of recent attempts to make literary nonfiction central to composition pedagogy, maintaining that it is in our students' and our own best interest to question critically many of the underlying assumptions of this position. In a playful, entertaining, belletristic essay of her own, Lynn Bloom declares that teachers of writing should regularly compose and publish their own literary nonfiction so as to justify their "authority" as writing teachers and to "enliven and enhance" the genre, their teaching, and the profession itself.

Part Four, **Gender, Culture, and Radical Pedagogy**, presents seven articles on the kinds of social and cultural issues that have been central to *JAC* and to recent theoretical scholarship in the field. David Bleich contends that the traditional academic styles of learning are thoroughly informed by sexist values, so much so that even well-meaning people find such sexism difficult to detect and change. Robert Wood goes one step further in insisting that even "radical pedagogy" is informed by androcentric values, often resulting in the suppression of female students' intellectual development. Perhaps

one reason why radical pedagogy can have such an effect is that, according to Henry Giroux, many Western scholars and educators have misappropriated the work of Paulo Freire, denuding it of its profoundly radical and postcolonial nature. Writers such as Michael Murphy, however, believe that composition theory and pedagogy will remain ineffective as a radical discourse so long as it continues to adhere to modernist strategies of resistance; instead, argues Murphy, we must transform composition into a thoroughly *postmodern* discipline focused especially on cultural studies. While Joseph Harris supports this turn in composition toward cultural studies, he cautions those who engage in cultural critique in the composition classroom not to assume that students necessarily are gullible, unsophisticated readers of culture. John Trimbur suggests that composition studies has not paid enough attention to its own "narrativity," and he presents an analysis of the narrativity of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* as an example of how to gain critical insight into the conjunctures of discourses and practices. Finally, Carrie Leverenz examines the multicultural classroom.

The final section, **Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Discourse**, focuses on another important strain in recent composition scholarship: investigations of the relationships among epistemology, philosophy, and discourse. J. Hillis Miller employs Friedrich Nietzsche's early writings on rhetoric as an example of the kind of close connection between reading and writing that he defends in his essay. Thomas Kent is also interested in the close connection between reading and writing and, drawing on the work of philosopher Donald Davidson, proposes an alternative view of how we produce discourse. Joseph Petraglia provides a critique of the basic premises underlying composition's understanding of social construction, and Richard Coe analyzes Kenneth Burke's never-before published revision of his famous definition of *humanity*. This reading of Burke, posits Coe, provides critical insights that have implications for the teaching of composition.

Together these twenty-two essays represent the breadth and strength of composition scholarship that has engaged fruitfully with critical theory in its many manifestations. In drawing on the critical discourses of philosophers, feminists, literary theorists, African Americanists, cultural theorists, and others, these compositionists and others like them have enriched the scholarly discourse of the field, broadened our intellectual conceptions of the multiple roles and functions of discourse, and opened up an infinite number of questions and new possibilities for composition theory and pedagogy. As composition continues through the 1990s toward the new millennium, the discipline will continue to grow and be redefined, but it will owe an important debt to the scholars in this collection and those like them who during the 1980s and early 1990s had the vision and courage to take the bold and unpopular step of engaging with important theoretical discourses.

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