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Reflecting Back and Looking Forward: Revisiting “Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions” Five Years On

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Abstract: In this Retrospective, we revisit our 2007 *College Composition and Communication* article in order to clarify our primary argument, address some questions and critiques that have arisen, and consider anew the value of composition courses that study writing. We review our core argument that engaging students with the research and ideas of writing studies, building declarative and procedural knowledge of writing, improves learning transfer. Now, using the example of Jan Meyer and Ray Land’s notion of threshold concepts, we argue for the field to better name its knowledge and conceptions and to decide what portion is suitable for first-year students. We clarify the distinction between this broad underlying goal and our personal approaches to accomplishing it, emphasizing the diversity of approaches that have come to embody the study of writing in first-year composition. While maintaining that writing studies lacks recognition of itself as a field and of the value of its specialized knowledge to writing instruction, we revise our original argument to show how writing instructors from other fields and with other expertise can build familiarity with writing studies research without extensive, specialized study. Ultimately, we continue to advocate teaching our field’s knowledge in first-year composition, while expanding our sense both of how to prepare instructors to do so and of the value of such teaching.

In 2007, we published an article in *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) that said, in essence, that writing studies is a field with declarative knowledge, and we need to be directly teaching that knowledge in our first-year composition courses. We argued that, since we know there is no such thing as a one-course writing inoculation, we should stop implicitly or explicitly agreeing that one or two composition courses could “teach students to write.” Instead we should publicly argue for composition courses that are entry points to writing in college, courses which teach students *about* writing and how to learn what they will need to discover to tackle each new and different writing task and situation. Teaching conceptions of writing that align with our field’s research (starting with, “there is no one class that will make you a ‘good writer’”) has real writerly consequences: students feel they can control their writing lives (rather than being victims of shifting writing rules inexplicably imposed by authorities), understand what is happening when they encounter a challenging rhetorical situation, and know a variety of strategies for responding and learning how to respond. In addition, a course that teaches writing studies content requires prepared and trained teachers—preparation and training that cannot be demanded of low-paid, disrespected, last-minute hires. In short, a course that teaches writing studies content should improve awareness of what the field is and does, and increase the professionalized standing of those who teach in it, raising the likelihood of improved student learning outcomes. (These learning outcomes might consist of “better” writing, rather than “good” writing, since writing studies research tends to deny the existence of any such construct as a monolithic and homogenous “good writing.”)

Based on both further experience teaching such pedagogies and additional writing over the ensuing five years, we are able to say this much more succinctly now than we could in 2007. We've come to greater clarity about a number of things we said, or tried to say, in that article, and we'll share our current views in this retrospective. There are also a few things we said then that we now believe were misjudgments, not sufficiently well argued, or just wrong, and we will revisit those, too. In particular, we'll focus on the diversity of curricula that has blossomed in writing courses focused on writing, and how this diversity is dependent on the wide range of people not only with but (contra our article) also *without* graduate training in writing studies who are implementing what have come to be known as "writing-about-writing" courses.

What Were We Arguing For, and How Did That Turn Into "WAW"?

Our central argument in 2007 was this: First-year writing should seek "to improve students' understanding of writing, rhetoric, language, and literacy in a course that is topically oriented to reading and writing as scholarly inquiry and encouraging more realistic understandings of writing" (553). Although we clarified, not very vigorously, that "there are a number of ways to institute" such a course (559), we described a particular way that we had been teaching to this purpose at the time with sufficient emphasis to drown out that ecumenical encouragement. So here we want to be much more direct, and to use language we did not then possess, in order to better describe what we were arguing for.

Which was: a pretty general set of outcomes and practices, not a specific curriculum or a specific subset of knowledge. Rather, we believed then and now that our field has particular research- and theory-based views of writing, how it works and gets accomplished. Some of that research and theory can and should be taught to undergraduates in gen-ed writing courses, and learning *about* writing in this way has a positive impact for student writers.

Put another way, we see our field as having both declarative and procedural knowledge about writing that can and should be conveyed directly to students, so that they are empowered by knowing about the nature and workings of the activity itself and can act from their knowledge instead of having writing done *to* them. Let's clarify what we mean here with an example. Many times students are given writing assignments that ask them to do something (like write a memoir or a report). They are given instructions for how to do this, and then they are given examples of what such texts look like. Yet we know as a field that the writing tasks they are being given are flexible genres that serve various purposes in various contexts, and they change to meet the needs of particular discourse communities or activity systems. So why not help students understand *those things* in a deep way as they engage in a writing task, so that when they encounter situations later that might call for reports or memoirs, they have tools for understanding why these texts exist and when and how they might be more malleable than they at first appear? In other words, why not give students the same frameworks for analysis and the same access to research about how texts work that we have? Why are we teaching (if we are) from our research without sharing that research itself with our students? Why not ask them to engage it and respond to it themselves, as empowered agents? Doing so, we argued, will vastly improve learning transfer of this declarative and procedural knowledge to new writing situations by teaching students both how learning transfer *works* to begin with (what's required for it) and by changing their expectations about how writing works and what they can expect in rhetorical situations. (For the purposes of transferable writing knowledge, the concept of "rhetorical situation" itself seems vastly more applicable to other writing tasks than, for example, learning to write a memoir that will move an English teacher to tears.)

What we did not say very clearly was that writing studies as an interdisciplinary field has some work to do in determining, first, what our core knowledge is and, next, what part of that knowledge is

relevant for all students in a gen-ed course, and then what additional core knowledge is better saved for upper-level students in writing minors and majors—or even for graduate studies.

Five years on, we now frame some of that knowledge in terms of Jan Meyer and Ray Land’s notion of disciplinary *threshold concepts*: “[a] threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (3). Meyer and Land argue that fields have particular ways of seeing the world, particular conceptions about their subject matter, and “disciplinary ways of thinking” (20)—particular ideas and understandings that set them apart from other fields. There are “‘conceptual gateways’ or ‘portals’ that lead to a transformed view of something—‘the world looks different’ when such thresholds have been crossed” (19). Threshold concepts can be exceedingly difficult to grasp (“troublesome,” as Meyer and Land say) for a variety of reasons, including that they can conflict with previously held beliefs and assumptions, or they can appear “paradoxical” (12). While we believe writing studies has threshold concepts, they have not so far been named explicitly. We think, for example, that *situatedness* is a threshold concept: the idea that there really is no universal rule for how to write is both a complete reversal of students’ previous educational experiences, and a crucial principle for building understanding of writing beyond what those educational experiences provided. This example also demonstrates why we believe that at least some of writing studies’ threshold concepts can be of value to more than just disciplinary specialists. We argued this in different terms in our 2007 article when we said that *conceptions of writing matter*. We now believe even more explicitly that teaching our field’s research-based conceptions of writing can radically change what people do and think about as writers. “Jack’s” case, in the 2007 article, pointed this way: numerous writing courses had taught dismal and discouraging and totally wrong conceptions of writing to Jack; when Jack understood writing differently, his approach to writing and his willingness to even try to write changed dramatically for the better. He became empowered and gained agency as a writer.

So, we feel even more strongly now than we did in 2007 that our field has knowledge and conceptions of writing that are valuable to students; we wish we’d argued as well that our field needs to do a better job of naming that knowledge and plainly stating what our conceptions are, and then figuring out what parts of what we know and how we see the world should be shared with first-year students—and what parts shouldn’t. In our own classrooms and programs we have made some choices about what *we* think this knowledge is, and which conceptions *we* think are useful for first-year students to tackle, but we don’t claim (and have never claimed) to be making such choices for the field. In the wake of our article, other classrooms and programs across the country have also been making de facto choices. We all need to join the conversation on this question: What are our field’s threshold concepts, and where and when (and how) should they be taught?

Since we meant to argue for general outcomes and did not imagine ourselves advocating for the whole field either a fixed set of disciplinary knowledge or a fixed curriculum for teaching it, some of what has transpired since 2007 has puzzled us. Writing-about-writing, as this suggestion of *focus and outcome* came to be called, has sometimes been discussed as a single, set curriculum—as when people say, “We do writing about writing, but not the Downs and Wardle approach.” What confuses us in such moments is that not even Downs and Wardle have a Downs and Wardle approach: Our own senses of what might be taught and how to teach it change every time we step into the classroom, and they changed quite a lot as we wrote our 2011 textbook. The curriculum we described in 2007 happened to amalgamate what we were doing at the time but doesn’t look a whole lot like what either of us do now. What part of writing studies knowledge a writing course means to teach, and how, can and probably should vary widely, contingent on student population and instructor expertise.

What we advocate for, and what remains stable in our own classrooms, is simply the underlying set of principles: engage students with the research and ideas of the field, using any means necessary and productive, in order to shift students' conceptions of writing, building declarative and procedural knowledge of writing with an eye toward transfer. That seems to us the heart of writing-about-writing: a basic belief that, as a field, we know some things and should teach them. This belief seems to be shared more broadly and stated more explicitly these days, including by scholars much more experienced than we. In a recent keynote address to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Linda Adler-Kassner seemed to be acting from this belief when she said, "Writing classes, especially first-year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing . . . putting Writing Studies at the core of all we do" (10).

If we accept this basic tenet, and determine what threshold concepts to teach in composition, then the remaining question is: what pedagogical strategies are effective for teaching the content you have chosen? Whatever strategies those might be, use them. We both happen to find that having students read about and engage with empirical research can be particularly productive in bringing ideas and concepts to life, and encouraging transferable knowledge-making. But such an approach hasn't worked for all of our colleagues, particularly those without first-hand experience with empirical research. They find other effective means for teaching the concepts, as they should.

Here, then, is a current manifesto: There is no Wardle and Downs approach, and "writing about writing" shouldn't be a confusing and counterproductive shorthand for what boils down to a pretty basic belief: Writing studies is a field with content that should be taught to students, and there are myriad pedagogical strategies for teaching this content. Let's go forth and name our field's content and invent as many meaningful pedagogical strategies for teaching that content as possible. Let's share broadly while we do. This is not some specialized or niche or boutique approach to composition; it is simply an acknowledgement that we are a field and we know things and should teach them. Just like every other field. That's it.

Who Can Teach Writing Courses That Teach the Content of our Field?

Staffing writing-about-writing courses remains no less tricky a question now than it was in 2007. The biggest change in how we consider this question is that now we have experience (our own and others') implementing a writing-studies course in classrooms beyond our own, and we are no longer recent graduate students seeking the holy grail of disciplinary perfection. We'll review what we said then, and contrast it with our current stance.

With great certainty we said, back then, that this pedagogy "cannot be taught by someone not trained in writing studies" (574), and we asked "how FYC students are currently being served by writing instructors who couldn't teach a writing studies pedagogy" (575). We argued that "[o]ur field's current labor practices reinforce cultural misconceptions that anyone can teach writing because there is nothing special to know about it" (575) and suggested that "[b]y employing nonspecialists to teach a specialized body of knowledge, we undermine our own claims as to that specialization and make our detractors' argument in favor of general writing skills for them" (575-76). We didn't expect this to be read as a blatant attempt to gain academic and institutional status for our field *at the expense of student welfare*. Which meant we were very surprised to find people reading it that way and then using that reading to argue against the principle of teaching the field's knowledge about writing *as the field's knowledge*. We did not then, and do not now, believe that writing-about-writing pedagogies are an attempt to seek status *for the sake of status*, as opposed to seeking status toward the end of better writing instruction. Our goal has always been to improve writing instruction. However, we read our tone there now and cringe a bit, not simply because it sounds *too certain* to us, but because we have

found our ensuing experience to disprove our own claim that courses about writing can't be taught by those without graduate work in rhetoric and composition.

We do continue to maintain that writing studies has a problem that most other fields don't: lack of recognition that we *are* a field and that people who teach writing courses can't necessarily do so well with only the knowledge about writing they've developed in earning other college degrees. But we have also come to see that this problem can be understood as a strength, under the right circumstances. People who work with texts and are familiar with genres and conventions in a variety of disciplines, professions, and civic pursuits bring an abundance of expertise to the table as writing teachers, but they can do so more effectively if they are directly familiar with some of the research *about writing*. But our own experiences have demonstrated a wide variety of ways for current writing instructors with degrees in other fields to gain that familiarity in programs where idealistic insistence on rhet/comp degrees would result in gridlock. At the University of Central Florida (UCF), for example, we were given an infusion of money to convert adjunct lines to full-time instructor lines (as well as hire some tenure-line faculty in writing studies). Clearly the 18 or so instructors we needed to hire could not all come from writing studies (in fact only a few actually have). But we were able to recruit and hire enthusiastic, smart teachers willing to read and learn and try new things. As a result, we were able to design a training course and encourage teachers to become familiar with the relevant content of writing studies, and to embrace that field as their own (as many founders of rhet/comp did before them). Although this approach is not without its drawbacks, it has overall been quite successful, and the varied backgrounds of our teachers bring a depth and richness to our program that we would not have had otherwise.

We don't want to completely disavow our earlier view about the telling nature of the need to build instructor expertise in order to make writing about writing work. We said that teaching about the content of the field produces "a truth-telling course; it forefronts the field's current labor practices and requires that we ask how FYC [students] are *currently* being served by writing instructors who *couldn't* teach a writing studies pedagogy" (576, emphasis in original). We still want to press that point. Writing studies, as we have now repeated ad nauseam, is a field with content; faculty members in any and every English-studies-related field don't know (can't be expected to know) that content, and can't be expected to step into a writing class and teach *about writing* without knowing that content. We stand by this claim and continue to wonder what it says about our field that it doesn't make this claim more loudly and more often. Writing students are better served by being exposed to the knowledge-making that writing studies has engaged in during the past 50 years: what field would say otherwise about its own knowledge?

What our 2007 argument failed to account for, due to our own inexperience, was instructor professionalism and open-mindedness. We have been learning during the past five years how possible it is to invite willing faculty members to learn about writing studies research while bringing their own expertise to bear at the same time. We didn't know what the systems would be by which people could gain that expertise, but as we got into WPA work we learned that such systems can be created wherever goodwill and intellectual curiosity and a supportive environment exist. *Of course*, instructors can learn about and teach about writing, even if it's not their graduate training—we're already maintaining that it is possible even for college freshmen to do so at least at some level. Now, if instructors simply want to keep teaching literature and insist that writing studies does not have disciplinary knowledge that they could benefit from, then our earlier statement holds: such teachers are not serving students in composition classes, and their presence in composition classrooms "reinforce[s] cultural misconceptions that anyone can teach writing because there is nothing special to know about it" (575). But we've found that to be true with vastly less frequency than we anticipated. We've learned that another truth to tell is the optimistic one that professionalizing large corps of instructors without rhet/comp backgrounds is neither impossible nor far out of reach.

A Community of Teachers and Researchers

The most direct consequence of our 2007 article so far appears to be how it gave language, voice, and community to principles of teaching that had been happening in various places for a long time but in fairly isolated ways. It seems that we were able to structure the problem and embody the pedagogical principles we were forwarding (such as providing radical transparency, giving students voice, and taking writing studies seriously) in a way that allowed it to come to print and strike a chord with many readers.

The strong response to the article was a surprise to us. Many people responded that they had been teaching this way for a long time and were pleased to find they were not alone. Many others responded that they would like to try it and asked if we could supply ideas for texts, assignments, and syllabi. We did not, however, see a lock-step response in which interested readers went out and did what we did. Most readers seemed to latch onto the basic argument—teach the knowledge of our field—and run with it. The resultant Writing about Writing Ning currently has 235 members from across the US and Canada; the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) “Writing about Writing” Special Interest Group continues strong with its own peer-reviewed newsletter. Writing programs in various institutions around the country are experimenting with whole-program deployment of writing courses about writing. There is strong diversity among those approaches; our chapter in Kelly Ritter and Paul Matsuda’s 2012 collection *Exploring Composition Studies* surveys approaches being taken to writing-about-writing just two years after our article came out and found many different emphases and approaches; there are even more today, as we’ve discovered in talking with programs that draw on our *Writing about Writing* textbook in whole, in part, or in a supporting role. The textbook itself—or rather, the publisher’s conviction that there would be a market for the textbook—is another direct result of the conversation generated by and community that coalesced after the CCC article.

What we are *not* finding is one of the direst predictions of critics of the about-writing writing course: bored students. Many people responded to our article, and continue to respond when the occasion arises, by saying they could not imagine a writing-focused class in which students wouldn’t be utterly bored. We were initially surprised by this criticism because, while there are some difficulties with teaching this way, we have never found student boredom to be one of them—at least not in any greater degree than any other pedagogy we’d used before. In fact, we often find our students to have significantly greater enthusiasm, excitement, engagement, and investment with this focus once they understand what it means: that they are going to be engaged on issues with which they have experience and some degree of expertise, and that they will be challenged in meaningful ways. Some who designed writing-about-writing courses let us know how it went; they report a variety of responses, but overwhelming student boredom doesn’t tend to be among them. This may also be because courses about writing seem better able to create genuine rhetorical situations within a concrete activity system (inquiry into writing), thus seeming less put-on than the typical course. Or it may be because this course is, at bottom, about students’ own experiences and the questions that come from them—and what students aren’t engaged by thinking about their own experiences? We do know from research at UCF that more than 90 percent of students who finish our writing-about-writing composition courses consider them to be useful or extremely useful, in direct contradiction to the findings about composition’s usefulness reported by Linda Bergmann and Janet Zepernick.

Where to go from here? We continue to conduct research on the effects of making writing the studied object of writing courses; we continue to try different ways of teaching different knowledge in our own courses; we continue enthusiastically to assist individual instructors and WPAs thinking about bringing writing-studies courses to their own programs. But we hope that the primary result of our article is that it will push the field toward more clearly and explicitly naming its knowledge and

expertise, and that this work will improve writing programs and courses of all kinds. Ours are just two of many voices in this ongoing endeavor—what we hope will be a clearer embracing of who we are as writing studies professionals, and what our field has to offer to national discussions of issues of writing instruction, assessment, testing, and policy. Teaching our field’s knowledge in first-year composition is only one of many necessary steps in this direction.

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