

The background is a solid, vibrant yellow. Overlaid on this are several sets of thin, white, wavy lines that flow and curve across the page, creating a sense of movement and depth. These lines are most prominent on the left side and curve towards the right.

# **A MINEFIELD OF DREAMS**

## **TRIUMPHS AND TRAVAILS OF INDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAMS**

**Edited by  
Justin Everett and  
Cristina Hanganu-Bresch**

# A MINEFIELD OF DREAMS: TRIUMPHS AND TRAVAILS OF INDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAMS

Edited by Justin Everett and Cristina Hanganu-Bresch

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# CONTENTS

Foreword ..... vii  
    Barry Maid

Introduction. Toward a Schema of Independent Writing Programs ..... 3  
    Justin Everett and Cristina Hanganu-Bresch

PART I. MYTHOS: THE STORIES WE TELL

Chapter 1. Coming into Being: The Writing Department at  
Grand Valley State University in its 13th Year ..... 23  
    Dan Royer and Ellen Schendel

Chapter 2. An Outsider’s Perspective: Curriculum Design and  
Strategies for Sustainability in a Canadian IWP ..... 43  
    Judith Kearns and Brian Turner

Chapter 3. An Alternative History of an Interdependent Writing Program ... 63  
    Keith Hjortshoj

PART II. TOPOI: THE PLACES WE INHABIT

Chapter 4. TA Training in an Independent Writing Program:  
Revisiting the Old Comp./Lit. Split in a New Venue ..... 87  
    Jennifer K. Johnson

Chapter 5. Integrating Writing into the Disciplines: Risks and  
Rewards of an Alternative Independent Writing Program ..... 111  
    W. Brock MacDonald, Margaret Procter,  
    and Andrea L. Williams

Chapter 6. Still Trying to Break Our Bonds: Contingent Faculty,  
Independence, and Rhetorics from Below and Above ..... 133  
    Georgia Rhoades, Kim Gunter, and Elizabeth Carroll

Chapter 7. Part of the Fabric of the University: From First Year  
through Graduate School and Across the Disciplines ..... 149  
    Chris Thaiss, Sarah Perrault, Katharine Rodger,  
    Eric Schroeder, and Carl Whithaus

Contents

PART III. TECHNE: THE METHODS WE EMPLOY

Chapter 8. Inscribing Justice: IWPs and Inclusivity Education . . . . . 177  
Michelle Filling-Brown and Seth Frechie

Chapter 9. Quo Vadis, Independent Writing Programs?  
Writing about Writing and Rhetorical Education . . . . . 193  
Cristina Hanganu-Bresch

Chapter 10. Not Just Teachers: The Long-Term Effects of Placing  
Instructors in Administrative Roles in an Independent Writing Program. . . . . 213  
Laura J. Davies

PART IV. PRAXIS: THE TRANSFORMATIONS WE ENACT

Chapter 11. Managing Change in an IWP: Identity, Leadership Style  
and Communication Strategies . . . . . 245  
Valerie C. Ross

Chapter 12. Navigating the Minefield of Dreams: Branding and  
Strategic Planning as Conceptual Core for Independent Programs . . . . . 269  
Justin Everett

Chapter 13. The Five Equities: How to Achieve a Progressive  
Writing Program within a Department of English . . . . . 293  
William B. Lalicker

Afterword. Between Smoke and Crystal: Accomplishing  
In(ter)dependent Writing Programs . . . . . 321  
Louise Wetherbee Phelps

Epilogue. Marginalization on the Home Front: The Curious  
Sibling Relationship between English Studies and Composition  
Studies. A Personal Account. . . . . 351

George D. Gopen

Contributors . . . . . 371

## EPILOGUE

# MARGINALIZATION ON THE HOME FRONT: THE CURIOUS SIBLING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGLISH STUDIES AND COMPOSITION STUDIES. A PERSONAL ACCOUNT.

**George D. Gopen**

Duke University

For more than four decades now, the professional study of English in the United States has concentrated increasingly on social issues—or, perhaps more precisely, on perspectives generated on social issues by literary texts. It has concerned itself with the recognition of the wholeness and wholesomeness of the human being and the human spirit: In doing so, it has taken seriously its generic title of the humanities. The dominating foci have been the issues of race, gender, and sexual preference. The theme song has been “inclusiveness”; the perceived enemies have been all the forces that produce exclusion and marginalization. Much good has been done, especially for women and people of color. But without noticing it, many—perhaps most— American university English Departments have themselves practiced a pervasive and continuous act of marginalization. The victim in this case is the community of professionals who teach college composition. This article traces some of what I perceive to be the history—and perhaps the future—of this irony.

One hundred years ago, the study of literature was largely philological. We investigated words which were (we believed) the primary components of texts. Scholars discovered what the words “meant”; students memorized “what happened.” Once the words were assigned their proper meanings, one could then come to know the characters, the plots, and the issues. Knowing these components was thought to be equivalent to knowing the piece of literature. Educated people “knew” the texts that made up the acceptable canon. Literature had a place in society—or rather a place in determining who was who in society.

The accepted national curriculum therefore concentrated on important questions like “Why does Hamlet procrastinate?” The acceptable answers were equivalent to the answers to historical questions like “What were the causes of the Civil War?” in our history classes. Usually the answers would be considered either right or wrong. I encountered a most dramatic example of this while taking a graduate seminar on Dickens taught by the well-respected Harvard scholar Harry Levin. He told us of a minor revolt led by Harvard undergraduates in a literature class given in 1837. These students were distressed because Harvard refused to teach any work of literature not already considered a classic. Since nothing contemporary was, by definition, yet ancient enough to be considered “classic,” it was forbidden to teach anything recently published. Why, they asked, could not one “study” something even if it were new? The professor countered, altogether revealingly, that they would find themselves as burdened and unengaged by the study of such a new work as they claimed to be when they studied *Paradise Lost*.

To prove his point, he agreed to an experiment: They would “study” whatever was that year’s newest bestseller. It turned out to be a long, engaging, comical work by a young British novelist named Charles Dickens—a work called *Pickwick Papers*. The professor contrived a nine-page examination, all of whose questions required short, factual answers, the sum total of which would demonstrate how closely the students had studied the work and come to know it. A copy of this exam was shared with us by Professor Levin. I recall only one of those questions; but it accurately represented the nature of all of them. It was this: “How many times does the fat boy appear in this work when he does not fall asleep?” Such was the state of the study of literature in 1837—and for a century to come.

Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, there was a rebellion against what was perceived to be the intellectual oppression of these philological elders: This movement became known as “The New Criticism.” We discovered we could study texts in isolation, without excessive reference to extensive background scholarly knowledge. We learned and taught techniques of close textual analysis, featuring metaphor and irony, with the complete text—not its words in isolation—as the beginning and the end of our attention. In this new way, we still covered the canon and produced students we called “educated.”

This held sway until the 1970s, when the field underwent a sea change into something available mostly to the academically rich and strange. We discovered and adopted a number of philosophical writers, several from France, whose work led us to focus not on texts but on the act of reading. We generically called this new effort “theory.” To some extent, it was again an Oedipal reaction, a way of overthrowing the set-in-their-ways old New Critics and engaging boldly with the text itself by ourselves. To some extent, it was a response to the

challenge of work by thinkers like Derrida, who gave us something different to think about—or to think with. But I believe the real catalyst that produced the spark—the spark which drove this high-level and exclusive conversion to theory—was no particular thinker or mode of thought in Paris or anywhere else in Europe: It was, I believe, the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973.

That oil crisis began in earnest on October 17, 1973, when the members of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (composed of OPEC plus Egypt and Syria) announced that they would no longer ship petroleum to any nation that had supported Israel in the on-going Yom Kippur War with Syria and Egypt. Not only did gasoline prices immediately rise by almost 50% (from 38 cents to 55 cents a gallon), but the United States had to dip heavily into its stockpiles of oil: Instead of importing our usual 1,200,000 barrels a day, we were suddenly receiving daily a mere 19,000. Rationing was declared: You could purchase gas only on even numbered days if your license plate ended with an even number—and on odd days if it ended with an odd number. Even more distressing, your purchase was limited to two gallons. Lines at gas stations seemed permanent and paralyzed. It could easily take an hour to secure your two gallons. The crisis was vividly available to the eye and mind of every citizen, on a daily basis, at every gas station in the nation. I recall a friend waiting in a long line for 20 minutes without moving and asking a passer-by why the gas line was so remarkably slow. He replied, “Lady, this isn’t a gas line; it’s a funeral procession.” You couldn’t tell the difference, literally or symbolically. The crisis had shaken our national confidence and our sense of economic invulnerability. It threatened our future. It threatened our way of life.

We had long taken cheap and plenteous gasoline for granted. We were shocked—and by “we” I do not mean only the government, but we the people as well. The embargo lasted five months. When it was lifted, in March of 1974, we no longer had to endure the long lines at gas stations; but we all knew we had to take a long, hard look at our economic security for a future that no longer promised the kind of stability to which we had long become accustomed. Every business in the country re-examined its economic assumptions. It was no different for the business of academics—both for administrations and for students.

The administrations called in consultants. The consultants must have howled in disbelief at what they found.

Higher education had been a growth industry since 1945. The figures are staggering. In 1945, with the end of World War II, ten million American service personnel were demobilized. Our instantaneous peacetime economy could not possibly absorb them all; but in 1944 the G.I. Bill of Rights (the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944) had been passed, giving every returning veteran the funds to attend four years of higher education. It was a no-brainer for so many



**Table E.1: Bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees awarded nationally**

	Bachelors	Masters	Doctorates
1945	136,174	19,209	1,966
1966	551,047	140,548	18,237
1985	987,823	288,567	33,653

**Table E.2: Percentage increases in U.S. population and degrees awarded**

Time Period	U.S. Population	Bachelors	Masters	Ph.D.s
1945–1966	35.5%	400%	740%	900%
1966–1985	20.8%	180%	200%	185%

people: Remain unemployed, or take the government's money and go to college for four years, which would produce a far brighter future than could ever have been expected with a only a high school education. Suddenly large numbers of people, who before the war could never have considered college a viable financial option, were filling out application forms.

The rush back to school was on. (See Table E.1.) In 1945, 136,174 people had received a bachelor's degree. By 1966, the number had more than tripled to over half a million; and two decades further on, in 1985, the number was approaching a million.

[All national statistics in this article are taken from *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (I 377–378, 385), (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Washington DC, 1975), and its sequel, *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1970–1995* (II 451), (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006).]

This increase is even more striking when compared to the increase in U.S. population over approximately the same period:

- In 1949, the national population was about 140,000,000;
- By 1966, it had increased to about 197,000,000;
- By 1985, it had increased further to 238,000,000.

Therefore, the US population had increased from 1949 to 1966 by about one-third; and then from 1966 to 1985, it increased an additional one-fifth. Compare those increases to the increases in Bachelor's degrees, Masters degrees, and Ph.D.s in Table E.2.

With so many college students matriculating, there was a correlative need for the expansion of graduate programs, in order to produce a sufficient supply of teachers for the vastly and continuously increasing number of undergraduate students. Dramatically, the numbers of graduate degrees rose at an even faster

rate: Masters degrees increased more than seven-fold by 1966, and doubled yet again by 1985; doctorates and their equivalents increased more than nine-fold by 1966, and almost doubled yet again by 1985.

In early 1973 there was no indication that this consistent and vibrant growth would ever suffer a downturn. The provosts and deans seemed not to understand that no business can continue to expand indefinitely—and by such large numbers—no matter how attractive its product. And while Standard Oil and General Motors were handing out one-year or three-year contracts to their employees, academia was handing out 40-year contracts called “tenure.” These newly-created and newly-filled positions would not be newly available to the job market for several decades. Although we should have known that someday the demand had to stop increasing, we blithely continued to allow the supply to expand. The situation was already getting serious by the late 1960s. With the shock of the Oil Embargo in 1973, we were forced to recognize the reality; and it was already too late to avoid the disaster.

My ABD job year was that very next year—1974–1975. Here are the sad statistics. The year before my last year of graduate study, Harvard had placed all of its Ph.D.s in English, but just barely, and in places previously unthinkable for Harvard graduates. The last to get a job got his in August, two weeks before the beginning of the semester, at a college of which he had never before heard. In my year, of the 47 who began with me, only five obtained teaching positions in a college or university English department. Of those five, only three of us lasted to a tenure decision. The MLA Job List for my year posted one position in English for every 19 people in the market—which therefore resulted in 95% unemployment. The disaster had struck.

The Embargo had also scared the undergraduates. Students in the 1950s and early 1960s had tended to be self-concerned; but in the late 1960s, social revolution was raging. You were not to be considered an ethical person (the dominant culture proclaimed) if you did not look beyond yourself and the ivy-covered walls to the problems of the society that surrounded you. Students left the classrooms and took to the streets. A new standard of virtue emerged, signified by the word “relevance.” If what you did in life was not relevant—especially to societal needs—then, by definition, it was not ethical. We believed, and we worried.

But with the arrival of the Oil Embargo in 1973, the nature of these worries changed—especially for our students. Shaken by this new, unsettling economic reality, and with visions of seemingly endless lines at gas stations in their heads, they voted with their feet. They left the study of English for the studies of Business or Economics or anything else that seemed “relevant”—that is, anything that would produce for them a stable occupation and a promising financial

**Table E.3: Ph.D.s awarded nationally and % increase over previous figure**

Year	English No. of degrees	Hist./Social Sci. No. of degrees	English % increase	Hist./Social Sci. % increase
1920	23	75	—	—
1930	96	339	317	352
1940	174	471	81	39
1950	236	890	36	89
1960	431	1,211	83	36
1970	1,339	3,638	211	200
1973	2,170	4,230	62	16
1980	1,500	4,209	-31	<-1
1986	1,022	2,851	-32	-32
1990	1,078	3,010	5	6
1995	1,561	3,725	44	24

future. The production of yet another book on flower imagery in the poems of Wordsworth was (silently) considered “irrelevant.”

Put the two influences together—the academic industry’s inability to keep from expanding recklessly, and the students’ perceived need to study something that “counted”—and a life threatening crisis for English Studies suddenly developed.

The numbers bear this out. Here are the figures for Ph.D.s granted nationally for English Language and Literature. If you compare this with the same figures for Ph.D.s in the category called “History and the Social Sciences” (Table E.3), you will find many striking similarities in the individual statistics, and a notably similar pattern over time.

From 1920 through 1973, English Ph.D.s increased 94 times; and over the same time period, Ph.D.s in history and the social sciences increased 56 times. 1973 was the high point for both before the decline. In that decline, from 1973 to its low point in 1986, the number of English Ph.D.s declined by 1,148, while the number of Ph.D.s in history and the social sciences declined by 1,379.

People had not stopped getting Ph.D.s altogether; they had just stopped getting them in “irrelevant” fields like the humanities and the social sciences. The economic troubles of the early 1970s negatively affected English studies dramatically; but for graduate work in general, the effect was only marginal and momentary. As the next table indicates, the decline in English Ph.D.s alone was greater than the decline for all fields combined, indicating the relative stability in the more “relevant” fields. Here are the national figures for all doctorate and equivalent degrees combined, dating back to the beginning of it all.

**Table E.4: Ph.D.s awarded in all fields nationally**

Year	# of Ph.D.s in all fields
1869	1
1879	54
1885	77
1886	140
1893	279
	<i>Steady growth to 1921</i>
1921	928
1923	1,098
1941	3,497
1945	1,966
1946	3,989
1947	5,049
1950	7,337
1960	10,575
1965	18,237
1970	32,107
1975	34,064
1980	32,958
1985	33,653
1990	39,294
1994	44,464

Table E.4 demonstrates the consistent but moderate growth in the numbers until just before World War II, and then the dramatic effect the war had on higher education. The G.I. Bill sent these numbers soaring after the war. The soaring was halted by the Oil Embargo in 1973. (Note, of course, that the five-year period normally required to obtain a Ph.D. makes sense of the decline in degree awards taking place post-1975.) But the dramatic decline in the numbers for English degrees is not mirrored by a similar decline for all Ph.D.s taken together. If we note that these overall numbers include the decline in English degrees, we can get a realistic sense of how much more English was affected than academia in general.

The numbers of undergraduate English majors are harder to come by. I can offer only anecdotal evidence from two institutions at which I have taught that were similar in size—Harvard University and Loyola University of Chicago. In the mid-1960s, they each had about 800 English majors; by 1977 they each had 125. Students were voting with their feet. English had become a luxury.

What to do? All those tenured English professors—and now so relatively few students taking English courses. The answer: Declare a crisis in writing ability. Johnny and Janey (suddenly, somehow) could not write as well as “we” did when we were their age. The causes?—television, the disappearance of Latin, poor grammar instruction, a decline in foreign language instruction. The responsible and proper response to this newly discovered crisis? Require college composition courses for all freshmen. We would do the job no longer (presumably) adequately done in previous times by the high schools. By the way, this would (aha!) give our English professors something to teach, producing a fresh supply of students to fill their classrooms. You can almost discern, even now, how serious the English crisis was at a given school by noting whether the Composition requirement there is still for one semester or two.

The economic solution to the English Studies crisis was two-fold: (1) create required English classes in Composition for the undergraduates; and (2) drastically reduce the number of graduate students in the English pipeline.

The reduction in English graduate students accepted at Harvard during this period was positively draconian. (These statistics, only anecdotal, are the ones available to those of us who were there to witness the decline.) Until the late 1960s, Harvard had for some time been admitting 120 students to begin the Ph.D. in English. In 1967 that figure had been reduced to 90. In 1968 it dropped to 58. The next year (my year) it declined further to 47. By the time I graduated, six years later (1975), it had sunk to 16; and two years later it hit a low of 7. From 120 to 7 in a decade is a stunning reduction—and Harvard still had trouble finding jobs for the seven students.

That was the economic solution. The intellectual solution was to stop doing what we had been doing, now that it had become labeled irrelevant. The French theorists appeared just in time to save the day. We might well have been interested in them even if our intellectual identities had not been threatened by the shocking change in the economy; but given the timing, this presented the high end of our field not only with a new challenge but also with a way to reclaim “relevancy.” We could change our focus from the canon of “literature” to the nature of “text.”

At first we asked whether or not there was a text in this class, trying to discern whether the “text” consisted of the words on the page, the nature of individual readerly responses, societal contexts, or some combination of these three. (There is no better introduction to this intellectual development than the first 17 pages [entitled “Introduction”] to Stanley Fish’s strikingly clear and engaging book, *Is There a Text in This Class?*, 1980.) When we added these new concerns to our traditional skills—the ability to analyze how words function—we found we could invade almost any other Humanistic or Social Science field. So we became new historical readers and psychoanalytic readers and Marxist readers

and women's studies readers and queer studies readers. An incursion into more well-grounded fields by this hedging of our intellectual bet seemed a good way to restore our claim to "relevance."

And in 1984, Terry Eagleton published a widely read and well received book on literary theory, *The Function of Criticism*, in which he declared, near its end, with a sense of surprise, that, when you come right down to it, Theory was all about Rhetoric. This was what the high end of the English profession decided to do in response to the crisis. Those new theorists became the people who produced the majority of the most highly regarded books published in the field on a yearly basis for the next three decades.

What did most of the other English professors do? They might still give a conference paper or two, and maybe produce an article here or there; but for the most part, their days were filled with teaching. And now they were teaching freshman composition—to such an extent that it made sense to try to create out of this activity a new "field," by which the activity might be invested with a far greater sense of dignity. And so, sprung full-grown from the mind of Zeus Academicus, appeared the field of "Composition Studies."

Its practitioners knew they were certainly *relevant*; but they feared they were not yet *legitimate*. True, they already had a well-established yearly conference (CCCC—the Conference on College Composition and Communication) and a few professional journals (notably *College English* and *College Composition and Communication*); but where oh where were the honorable ancestors, the long-admired great minds of our field? The answer came slowly at first, and then with the clarity of revelation, when we perceived that really, Composition Studies was (also) all about Rhetoric. And so the name was changed to "Rhetoric and Composition Studies," and the CCCC sponsored sessions on Greek and Roman rhetoricians, on the history of the teaching of composition, and—yes, you could see it coming—on "Theory."

So there were the two fields—Literary Studies and Composition Studies—having taken markedly different roads, staring at each other across an intersection called Rhetoric; and yet they have almost never spoken to each other. They turned around and walked away. The compositionists tended to want autonomy and feared being co-opted by their seemingly more sophisticated elders. The literary folk tended to want nothing to do with the teachers or the teaching of seemingly drudgery-ridden writing courses. The ironic result of all this has been a serious and ongoing marginalization of composition faculty by literary faculty—the very human flaw which has been attacked by English studies since the rush to relevance in the late 1960s.

I haven't the space here to trace the details of the recent history of these two uncomfortable siblings, born of the same academic parents, yet so different

looking, so different sounding, and so differently respected. In general, over the past 40 years or so, the trend has been towards sibling divorce. The teachers of composition, who used to inhabit the English department, are now often in a separate administrative structure altogether, usually called something like “The University Writing Program.” When still located in the same department, these two forces have tended to feel antagonistic. They vie for power and control, with the battle usually but not always going to the literati. But whether the rock hits the pitcher or the pitcher hits the rock, it’s likely to be bad for the pitcher. Once the two populations were separated into autonomous realms, the English department could easily forget entirely about the composition program. It is quite remarkable how many university writing programs have been housed in basements or other equally sub-standard housing. Out of sight, out of mind.

The beginnings of this institutional shift brought with it thorny problems, especially concerning academic politics. My own situation back then is a revealing example of the new field’s growing pains. In 1978 I was hired as a tenure-track assistant professor to be the Director of Writing Programs at Loyola University of Chicago. They told me to concentrate my efforts on the Writing Program and not to bother publishing in literature. Ten months before my tenure review, they informed me they had made a mistake: They never should have offered tenure for an administrative position. In order to get tenure, I would have to produce a contract from a major academic press for a book in medieval literature. When I managed to accomplish that—(a book on a fifteenth century Scottish poet with the Notre Dame University Press, with a European edition published simultaneously by the Scottish Academic Press)—the chief medievalist objected to my occupying one of “his” spots. Tenure was denied. The next year I received an offer from Duke University.

In 1984 Duke University decided to create a free-standing University Writing Program (UWP), “separate” from the English Department. I put the word “separate” in quotation marks because no meaning found in any dictionary could entirely embrace what it did and did not mean at Duke—or at any other institution that embarked then on the same unstable journey. I was to be the founder of the UWP; and my job was to make sure that effort did not founder. Definitional boundaries were unclear from the start. On the one hand, I was entitled “Director of the University Writing Program”; and on the other hand, I was at the same time a tenure track “Assistant Professor of English.” For my administrative duties, I reported directly to the dean of the college; for my teaching and committee responsibilities, I reported to the Chair of the Department of English. I would be tenured, I was assured, on the basis of my success as the Director of the UWP, without regard to publication in literature; but my tenure would be located in the Department of English, since one could not, by

definition, be tenured in a mere program. My yearly raises would be calculated in competition with other English professors, which required me not only to teach well but to publish a certain amount in literature and appear as a speaker in numerous conferences of any kind. These literature-connected efforts were therefore essential to my yearly evaluations, but would not count for or against me in my tenure evaluation. This was further and seriously complicated by the loss the English Department suffered of \$586,000 from its budget, all of which was deposited in my UWP budget, with which I could hire the graduate student teachers for the composition courses and for the freshman seminar series in literature. Thus the graduate students in English suddenly had yet another boss to look to, bringing the number to three: (1) the Chair of English, (2) the Director of Graduate Studies, and now (3) the Director of the UWP. And beyond their functioning as new teachers of composition (the courses all being taught in the fall), they also reported to me for their teaching opportunities in literature (the freshman seminar series taught in the spring). And when I started hiring graduate students in many other departments as well—both for the fall composition courses and the spring freshman seminars—it got yet more complicated. Just where were all those previously English-marked dollars going?

Being tenure track, and not yet tenured, I myself had a number of masters to please. It was always difficult for me to take a stand on an issue that produced conflict between English and the UWP, since I had to protect my existence in both. I remember clearly the day an angry Director of Graduate Studies in English stormed into my office and demanded I fire an outside appointee who (brilliantly) taught Advanced Composition courses for the UWP, insisting that he needed the money for other matters. I told him she was great, the money was mine, and he couldn't have it—even if I did fire her, which I wouldn't. When he stormed out of the office, I wondered how long either she or I would survive. (Almost 30 years later, I have just retired, and she is still there—still doing a wonderful job.)

But mere survival does not tell the rest of my story. After six years, the time for my tenure review arrived. My chair was the inimitable Stanley Fish himself. When he and the appropriate deans tried to figure out what my tenure procedure should look like, they became terribly confused. How is it possible I had been told not to bother publishing anything? (I had published two books and 20 articles, but mostly not in anything the English department would call a “field.”) I had brought to the UWP an entirely new way of teaching composition (on the basis of which I had been hired); but it looked nothing like what other universities were doing with their writing programs and therefore was difficult to evaluate. Almost no one in the English department had paid the slightest bit of attention to what the university writing course was teaching or trying to



teach. I had given 12-hour or 16-hour faculty writing workshops every semester, attended by hundreds of Arts and Sciences professors—but only by two English professors. (Thirty-one years later, these workshops, many of which were sponsored by the Medical Center and the Office of Research Support, have enrolled 18,000 participants, without the addition of a single extra English professor's presence.) When Stanley Fish and I discussed my tenure procedure, he said to me, "It's as if I had been sleeping for six years and had just awakened."

The review proceeded, somehow or other, with seemingly acceptable results: The Department vote was in my favor, but just barely; but my teaching evaluations were first-rate, the quantity of my not to-be-counted publications by definition adequate, and of the astonishing 219 letters received on the issue by the chair of my committee, 217 were positive. What could go wrong?

It did go wrong; but the wrong was righted, at least for the most important concerns. The university informed me that it had been mistaken in making my position as UWP Director tenurable. They explained that they had not thought the issue through clearly enough back in 1984. Just think of the problem: If I were tenured, I could drop my administrative duties 10 minutes later and become just a regular tenured member of the English department. Then a new Director would have to be hired. Following this procedure through the years, the university would wind up with a sizeable coterie of ex-directors—which is no way to build and maintain an English department. They were apologetic; but they just could not confer tenure upon me. Echoes from Loyola resounded.

What Duke did manage to do was highly imaginative. While not without its attendant future problems, this solution handled the situation admirably for all concerned; and perhaps it stands as a signal of times to come, since tenure seems to be heading towards a natural death. Duke asked if I would be content to be switched to the new teaching track, labeled "of the Practice" in the title, created for people valued for their teaching but not expected to produce the kinds of published volumes normally associated with tenured positions. The tenure track, the "of the practice" track, and the research track (given widely to scientists, who were not expected to do much or any teaching) were all to be considered full-fledged, regular faculty positions, with all the attendant voting rights, benefits, and parking spaces. In return for my accepting a switch to this new track, Duke promoted me to full professor (without subjecting me to the usual, arduous process), gave me a substantial raise, and created for me a highly unusual contract. Under that agreement, I was to receive a new six-year contract every year, with a review in the fifth year. The review, the contract explicitly stated, would be limited to my teaching performance. Should the review be positive, the string of rolling six-year contracts would continue. Should any review be negative, I would have the rest of that year's six-year contract before being

required to leave. In other words, I had an 11-year contract which was reviewed at the mid-point—thereafter expanding again to 11 years or counting itself out over the next five years. I was also guaranteed a paid semester's leave every seven years—something my literary colleagues no longer had. I agreed to the deal and retired 21 years later, at the age of 67.

I have bothered articulating these details not in an autobiographical fervor but rather to demonstrate what kinds of problems have attended the separation of writing programs from English departments, and to advertise one interesting new form of academic contract that may be of use as tenure begins to fade out in the academic world. Now that universities are run primarily as businesses, contracts that have no end-date on them are likely to be discontinued as a matter of good business practice. If that in turn results in a limiting of academic freedoms—the evil intended to be eliminated by the creation of tenure—new responses to that new problem will, I am sure, be quickly contrived by the world's most highly educated workforce.

As I am writing this in 2014, however, I have been witnessing, for five years now, a student flight from the humanities worse than the one created by the Oil Embargo 40 years earlier. It bears mentioning in this context, because I believe it will leave independent writing programs in a different place altogether than they have tended to occupy since their founding.

In 2008, the world's economy was shaken almost to its core. While there has—as yet—not been a complete meltdown like we experienced during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the present effects have been far-reaching and deeply enough felt to impose on our young people a vision of a world unlike anything established adults in this country have ever encountered. Most of our students believe that the old protocol for producing success no longer functions effectively. The road one should travel used to be clear enough: (1) do well enough in high school to go to a good college or university; (2) secure there a broad, liberal education, ingesting much from all of the four major food groups (sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts—plus engineering or business for those so inclined); (3) do well enough in college to secure a further professionalized education in law, medicine, business, and other equally prestigious fields like academia; (4) do well enough in graduate or professional school to get a good job in a prestigious institution; (5) find a spouse; (6) have the appropriate number of children; and (7) live happily ever after. Such was the dream.

Such is no longer the dream. Many students do not go on to post-graduate education immediately; many never go on. Finding a job straight out of college is a competitive nightmare. Once found, the job itself often turns out to be a nightmare. Many of my students graduating in the past five years have

already held multiple positions; none that I know of seems committed to doing what they are presently doing for any longer than the time necessary to discover what the next and better step might be. Most of the best English students I have had recently at Duke have gone into investment banking or consulting. Almost everyone at Duke now carries at least two majors, keeping options open. Yet with all this double-majoring going on, the number of English majors has not increased. Neither has it declined, since many have learned that businesses, law schools, and medical schools regard the English major applicants favorably because of their (supposed) superior training in language and in the study of human character. Without that support from the business world, our majors might have already dwindled to a precious few.

But it is not the numbers game which troubles me the most. For more than 35 years, I described myself as the happiest of professionals. I put it this way: "I am usually happy whenever I walk into a classroom and almost always happier when I walk out." That, I am sad to report, is no longer the case. My students have disappeared. The bodies are still there; but the students have evaporated. Example: I've taught Shakespeare for 42 years. Shakespeare's texts have not decreased in quality since 2008; nor has my pedagogical approach, energy, enthusiasm, or mental power dimmed since that date; and yet I can no longer penetrate the glassy facade of the face on a majority of my students. They have lost their interest in education and have inserted in its place a fervor for accreditation. They are no longer willing to attend to the needs of mind or soul with anywhere near the energy with which they attend to the needs of brand. I have grown to detest that term "brand." My undergraduate alma mater's slogan was "Truth, Even Unto Its Innermost Parts." Today's universities—and their students—seem now to ascribe to the slogan "Brand, Even Unto Its Outermost Reach."

This has become a comfortable collaboration between the school and its students. Each cares more now for what will produce dollars, what will produce reputation, and what will produce upwards motion in the rankings. The bottom line has become the top concern. This has long been the case in the research sciences, where even tenured professors will find themselves out of work if they cannot secure sufficient funding from grants. A tenured neurobiologist who cannot get a grant will find herself without space, making continued research impossible. One would assume this administrative technique could not be practiced in the humanities, where so few people ever get grants, and where the few grants they might secure are so small. As our students are rigidifying internally and beginning to reduce in numbers, there seems no clever new tactic to call upon equivalent to the post-Oil-Embargo declaration of a literacy crisis. How then will these university-businesses go about saving the money now absorbed by these huge humanities faculties?

I sense a change in the air: There is an answer to this question that is already occurring to some administrators. While they cannot fire an individual tenured faculty member without an egregious cause of misbehavior, they can, by fiat, do away with a whole department. If the department is dissolved, the tenured professors are no longer tenured *anywhere*, thus invalidating their contracts. I predict universities will seize this opportunity to economize on a major scale by disbanding non-profitable departments, thus jettisoning large numbers of faculty who are incapable of generating income for the university. These departments will include those in all the humanities, all the arts, and some of the social sciences. Universities will be likely to conclude that while there might remain a moral requirement to attend to students' nurturing in the humanities, the arts, and some of the social sciences, surely the substantial number of courses based primarily on the current intellectual interests of individual faculty members need not be sustained. In order to continue serving its supposed moral commitment to fine education, the universities will then create new conglomerates—like a Department of Humanities—which will house perhaps 20–25% of each of the previous humanities departments—the branded stars the university has decided would be worth keeping. I also predict that the only program in the humanities that will remain intact and continuously funded will be the university writing program. Writing, after all, will always be relevant. The marginalized will have outlasted the marginalizers. But the old proverb “He who lasts laugh laughs best” does not apply here: There is nothing to laugh about.

One might well ask, where should we go from here? It is curious that English Literary Studies and Composition Studies have once again developed parallel problems, despite having virtually no contact with one another. English courses study texts primarily as breeding grounds for the issues of the day that seem most pressing to the individual teacher. Composition courses have students produce texts primarily as breeding grounds in which to discuss the issues of the day that seem most pressing to the individual teacher. Once again the two fields are at a crossroads, staring at each other but saying nothing. My suggestion for both: Re-elevate the text to a position of primacy. Look at the text not with the question, “How can I say what I think Shakespeare ought to have been saying by these words?” Rather, look at the text with the question, “What about this text makes function in the ways it functions?”

I have taught literature for 44 years. I have tried to ask my students *not* “What did Shakespeare mean by this passage,” but rather “What did Shakespeare do with language in this passage that made you respond the way you responded to it?” In teaching writing, I do not emphasize what society requires of a writer for a text to be acceptable; but rather I investigate how readers go about the interpretive process.

I was much influenced, in the years just before I began teaching, by the anecdote Ezra Pound narrates at the beginning of his remarkable *ABC of Reading* (1934). He is speaking of reading texts; but what he says applies equally well to writing texts. Since the *ABC* is rarely encountered any more, the anecdote is worth quoting in full:

The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one “slide” or specimen with another.

No man is equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish:

A post-graduate student equipped with honors and diplomas went to Agassiz to receive the final and finishing touches. The great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.

Post-Graduate Student: “That’s only a sunfish.”

Agassiz: “I know that. Write a description of it.”

After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the *Ichthus Heliodiplodokus*, or whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family of *Heliichtherinkus*, etc., as found in text-books of the subject.

Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish.

The student produced a four-page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish. At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it. (Pound, 1934, pp. 3–4)

When I teach Shakespeare’s sonnets, I spend no time (if possible) on the old substantive questions of the identity of the young man and the dark lady; and I give no more than a passing glance to the critical questions of when the sonnets were written, in what order, nor to whom they were dedicated. I start the course with a single question: “Why have these poems survived 400 years?” I add to that the questions, “What effects do they have on us today, and why?” I spend 14 weeks trying to explore answers to those questions, constantly looking at the way his language is functioning. Unlike Agassiz’s sunfish, the poems do not decompose under our stare; but, like Agassiz’s post-graduate student, by the end of the term my students know something about the poems.

What *do* I explore? I look as hard as I can at the relationship between substance and structure. I probe the rhetoric as best I can—the figures of speech, the rhythms, the effects of the rhymes. I even treat the poems as if they were pieces of music. I look at the poems.

I would argue this is what we should be doing in our writing courses. Across the country, from what I can tell, writing courses no longer talk about sentences and paragraphs, but only about argument. But how can one argue other than through the construction of sentences and paragraphs? Grammar disappeared in the 1970s, making something of a comeback in the last 15 years; but it is now being taught, if at all, by people who had little or no education in it themselves. We have, I fear, responded to our dislike for the details of language by doing away with the way writing used to be taught, substituting in its stead something that feels better, more modern, more *relevant* to our present interests. Well, I agree the way it used to be taught failed to do the job well enough. All that prissy detail about error and awkwardness—solecisms and barbarisms! The late 1960s taught us to undermine the authority figures, and we did. But what have we put in their stead?

The teaching of writing was essentially codified in eighteenth century Scotland. Hugh Blair published his 18 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* in 1783, with little idea, I would wager, that the furrows he laid down in the field of teaching writing would last for centuries. When America began the teaching of writing at the college level in earnest, towards the end of the nineteenth century, all the different textbook authors plowed right in back of Mr. Blair. Look at any of them—Adams Sherman Hill, Fred Newton Scott, Barrett Wendell, or John Franklin Genung (to name only the most prominent), and they all sound like Dees and Dums to the same Tweedle. Even the radical Gertrude Buck, who spoke so eloquently of recognizing the “organic” nature of good prose, succumbed, at the insistence of her textbook publishers, to the same Blairistic hymn tunes as her colleagues.

This continued until the 1970s. James McCrimmons’ *Writing with a Purpose* (1950) had gone through so many editions that he finally farmed out the editing process (and part of the resulting royalties) to younger hands in the field, so tired was he of his own textbook. In the furor that was the late 1960s, radical texts appeared: Dick Friedrich and David Kuester published, *It’s Mine, and I’ll Write It that Way*—on yellow paper with dozens of different typefaces; William Sparke and Clark McKowen created *Montage: Investigations in Language*, in which the illustrations seem to outnumber the pages of text; seductive readings collections appeared, like Adams and Briscoe’s *Up Against the Wall, Mother*, and Broer, Karl, and Weingartner’s *The First Time: Initial Sexual Experiences in Fiction*. There was a brief and interesting attempt to harness the business school’s case approach to

education, led by John Field and Robert Weiss' *Cases for Composition*; but it failed to catch on. When the furor died down, and students in the mid-1970s wanted once again to know how not to embarrass themselves in the business world, the texts turned elsewhere—but mostly backwards. Write shorter sentences. Avoid the passive. Sometimes longer sentences and the passive are acceptable; but most of the time, write shorter sentences, and avoid the passive.

All along, interesting work was ongoing in the field of linguistics. Unfortunately, the composition teachers were intimidated by the linguists; and the linguists had no real interest in translating their work into something useable by the common person. The most interesting work of all, at least to my tastes, was being done in the 1950s and 1960s by a group of linguists in Czechoslovakia who identified themselves as The Prague School of Linguistics. Half of their work studied Czech; the other half studied English. The person responsible for bringing what they discovered into the writing classroom was Joseph Williams, of the University of Chicago. With his colleagues Gregory Colomb and Frank Kinahan, he created what is still known as The Little Red Schoolhouse, teaching a new approach to sentences and paragraphs. From this work, Williams produced his successful Advanced Composition textbook, *Style: 10 Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, now in its eleventh edition.

In 1980, I joined Williams, Colomb, and Kinahan in a consulting group called Clearlines. Through the efforts of the skillful and resourceful Joel Henning, we secured contracts with many of the country's leading law firms and corporate legal departments, trying to give these high level practitioners a firmer grasp of the language with which they had to struggle on a daily basis. They punched holes in our theories left and right for several years, leaving us to limp back to Chicago to bind our wounds and to try to prevent similar attacks in the future. Eventually the hole-punching decreased; and finally it stopped altogether. We apparently had discovered something about the language—although we did not yet know what. For several long years, we looked very hard indeed at that fish. Over time, I developed my own analysis of what we had discovered. I have taught this approach to students and faculty at Duke for 30 years, and across the country—and around the world—with highly successful results. It is one way that works. I do not claim it is the only way; but at least it focuses on the language itself. It explains how sentence and paragraphs from a page become thoughts in the mind of readers. If you are interested to see what this is all about, you can access my article, with Judith Swan, "The Science of Scientific Writing" at [www.americanscientist.org](http://www.americanscientist.org): click on the "Past Issues" button and, when there, on the "American Scientist Classics" button. (As part of American Scientist's centenary year, they chose the 36 articles from those 100 years they considered their "classics.") If further interested, see my book for teachers, *Expectations*:

Teaching Writing from the Reader's Perspective (2004a) and my textbook on the subject, *The Sense of Structure: Writing from the Reader's Perspective* (2004b).

Whatever we do, I feel sure that our salvation lies in turning to a contemplation of how language actually functions. Becoming a writing consultant to a law firm for the first time in 1978 led me to understand why there has been so little real progress in the teaching of writing since the eighteenth century. If you teach English 101 and fail miserably, what is your punishment? You have to teach it again next semester. If you teach it brilliantly, what is your reward? You get to teach it again next semester. There is no accountability. As a result, we have expended most of our developmental effort in making the course less burdensome and more attractive for student and teacher alike. But if you present yourself to a law firm as someone who can help lawyers write better, and you fail, you will not be invited back. Necessity indeed became the mother of invention.

I also believe we should give careful thought to devoting a segment in writing courses to the history of our language. Part of the inherent difficulty with the English language is that half our linguistic predecessors were German and half were French. The French and the Germans have historically not gotten along at all well with each other; so why should a hybrid language coming from them not be-fraught with difficulties? My students have always been grateful to learn something about this heritage. It explains many things that otherwise remain mysteries.

If both literature teachers and writing teachers turn their attention to text and how it functions, I predict English studies will once again flourish, and Composition Studies will assume a place of respect that it has always desired. As an important added bonus, both efforts will equip our students well to secure careers in all those "relevant" fields—law, business, banking, consulting, medicine, academics—that will deliver for them the status and security they so eagerly seek. We will be able to insert once again some education into their accreditation process.

I have often thought, during this humanitarian downturn, during this ascent of the brand, of that wonderful educational pronouncement of that still under-rated—but not as under-rated as he used to be—founding mind of this country, who single-handedly wrote (several years before the U.S. Constitution) the first state constitution that separated the powers of government three ways into a Congress, an Executive, and a Supreme Court. He was a principled lawyer, who defended the British officers who killed five people in what became known as "The Boston Massacre"—and he (appropriately) won. He argued for independence long and hard and even obnoxiously years before 1776. He instilled the urgency of education into his children and into anyone else who would listen. His son became the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard University



in 1808—having to abandon his three-semester course in rhetoric three lectures before its end in order to take up his post as Ambassador to Russia. The man I refer to, if you haven't figured it out already, was John Adams. His son was John Quincy Adams.

Here is what John Adams said about education (letter to Abigail Adams, 12 May 1780):

I must study Politics and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematics and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematics and Philosophy, Geography, natural history, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Music, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelaine. (Adams & Adams, 1963, p. 342)

His namesake, historian James Truslow Adams, added, "There are two types of education. One should teach us how to make a living, and the other how to live" (Adams, 1929, p. 321).

Neither should be marginalized.

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