The History of Composition: Reclaiming Our Lost Generations

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As I sat in the audience of a well-attended session at the 1991 Conference on College Composition and Communication convention in Boston, I was distressed but not surprised to hear panelists Janet Emig and Janice Lauer, whose contributions to composition studies are unquestionably of the highest significance, characterize themselves as members of the “first generation” of our field. Professor Emig went so far as to accuse her juniors of ahistoricity, claiming that members of the current “third generation” fail to distinguish between the achievements of the first and second generations (“Sisypha”). Professor Lauer accused Karen Burke LeFevre, in particular, of having slighted important work on invention by her predecessors in the 1960s and 1970s (“Disciplinary”). From where I sat, however, it seemed that Lauer and Emig, no less than LeFevre, were participants in the long academic tradition whereby the authors of newer works dismiss previous work as old-fashioned or inadequate. Worse, in describing themselves and others who came to prominence in the 1960s as members of composition’s first generation, Emig and Lauer were claiming not to have had predecessors.

Emig and Lauer are not alone in discounting the contributions of composition teachers who labored in the 1940s and 1950s or of those who taught in the early decades of the twentieth century. Stephen North has chosen to date the birth of the field to 1963, as if nothing before that were worth talking about (15). Although other historians have focussed on the nineteenth century, and particularly on the period after the Civil War when composition courses first appeared in American colleges and universities, the sixty years between roughly 1900 and 1960 have been characterized as a period of stagnation in the history of composition and as a period in which “current-traditional” rhetoric, an approach developed in the late nineteenth century, operated as a monolithic and increasingly obstructive paradigm. James Berlin shrugs off the first three decades of the twentieth century as a period during which current-traditional rhetoric went virtually unchallenged as the dominant paradigm for the teaching of composition (Writing 85; Rhetoric 9). Donald Stewart derides current-traditional rhetoric as belonging to “the Stone Age of our discipline” (“History” 17). Robert Connors
specifically dismisses the period between 1900 and 1930 as the "Dark Ages" of composition ("Textbooks" 189). Richard Young and Maxine Hairston applaud a "paradigm shift" which they say occurred in the 1960s, displacing an old-fashioned and wrong-headed paradigm which might best be forgotten (Young 35; Hairston 15).

Such characterizations of our history have the effect of denying the resources and lessons of portions of the past to many of us currently teaching composition. As Kenneth Burke has made clear, any account in language, including accounts of history, operates as a "terministicscreen," both reflecting and deflecting reality (Language 45, 47). The way we see history affects the way we see our present field. The dismissal of a sixty-year chunk of history is especially problematic because, as Andrea Lunsford has pointed out, we have not yet reached agreement as to our professional identity (72). Lunsford, in her keynote address to CCCC in 1989, called upon all of us who teach composition and especially on those of us who are the historians of the field to "compose ourselves," declaring that we need "to view writing from a variety of perspectives and throughout history" (72-73). I would emphasize that we need to look at all of our history, including that of the first sixty years of the twentieth century, if we are to view writing and the teaching of writing from the full range of perspectives.

In addition to those in the "first generation" who struggled in the 1960s and 1970s to professionalize the teaching of composition and who thus have difficulty looking objectively at the pre-professional history of the field, those historians who have relied narrowly on textbooks for information are especially guilty of promulgating the view that nothing much happened in composition between 1900 and 1960. Regrettably, according to Stephen North, most composition history to date has been based on textbooks or on previously published scholarship. Few composition historians have yet examined student texts, syllabi, or assignments, nor have they gathered oral material to any extent from teachers and students. North argues that textbook-based histories cannot tell us much about actual classroom practice (73-74). Nor can they reveal much about the broad context of issues—including demographic, geographic, economic, social, political, gender, institutional, and departmental issues—which have affected the teaching of writing. Thus we do not know, with regard to earlier periods, the answers to such basic questions as: "Who learned to write? How many of them were there? How much did their teachers get paid?" (77). We do not even know, as Sharon Crowley points out, why most writing instructors since 1900 have been underpaid, part-time, non-tenure-track faculty or graduate students, or why research in composition has generally been assigned a low status (247). Nor, I might add, do we know why most writing instructors have been women.

Composition Histories and Terministic Screens
Let me turn to specific works. Probably the most widely-read of the
composition histories currently available are James Berlin's *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (1984) and his *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (1987), which taken together comprise a comprehensive survey of the history of the field. Berlin's histories are based on other histories, or, as Robert Connors said of the earlier of the two, they are essentially popular syntheses aimed at composition professionals in general, rather than original historical contributions based on primary research ("Review" 247). As such, they are subject to the limitations of their sources.

Berlin claims that one theory of rhetoric, "current-traditional" rhetoric, which he derides as "objective" and "positivistic," has predominated over all other theories for the last hundred years (*Rhetoric* 9). However, his coverage of developments in the early twentieth century is much sketchier than his coverage of developments either in the late nineteenth century, when current-traditional rhetoric was formulated, or since 1960. His lack of attention to the theoretical work of the early and mid-twentieth century is particularly puzzling. Berlin effectively ignores I.A. Richards, perhaps because Richards was British, although he taught for many years at Harvard and is widely regarded as one of the important rhetoricians of his period. More surprisingly, in view of Berlin's acknowledgement that his understanding of both rhetoric and historiography owes much to Kenneth Burke, he avoids discussing Burke either systematically or at length (*Rhetoric* 17-18).

Berlin's work is flawed, moreover, by his use of an epistemological taxonomy that operates as a powerful terministic screen and all too often dominates his narrative. Contending that "to teach writing is to argue for a version of reality," he classifies different pedagogies and rhetorical theories according to their different views of writer, reader, reality, and language ("Contemporary" 47-48). Thus, in *Writing Instruction* he groups nineteenth-century rhetorics under three heads, and in *Rhetoric and Reality* he classifies twentieth-century rhetoric as either objective, subjective, or transactional. His categories allow him to generalize across large spans of time, but also to ignore the immediate contexts of issues and ideas. Berlin takes little account of disparities within any individual's or school's approach, or of changes in that approach over time. The distortions thus created are all the more glaring because Berlin spotlights the categories he prefers. In *Rhetoric and Reality*, his favored class is transactional rhetoric, his least favored, objective rhetoric. Current-traditional rhetoric, or "the most pervasive of objective rhetorics," comes off especially badly, but so does general semantics, which Berlin treats as a minor variety of objective rhetoric (9).

In some ways of course, Berlin is correct in pointing out that Alfred Korzybski, the founder of the general semantics movement and a significant early twentieth-century rhetorician, has positivistic notions about the relations between mind, the word, and the world (*Rhetoric* 95). Certainly, when Korzybski calls for increasing the conformity between language and the
structures of both the empirical world and of the human nervous system, he is expressing these positivistic notions (11). But when Korzybski says that we project the structure of our language upon the world around us (90), he is expressing what Berlin would call subjective views. At other points, when Korzybski says that culture is a product of language (24), or when he suggests that by changing language it is possible to change human nature (lxv), he is expressing transactional views. The very aphorism which is perhaps most identified with Korzybski, "a map is not the territory it represents," exemplifies his conception of the constructed nature of reality (58). Not only are words abstractions from a territory, in Korzybski's view, but different maps represent different features of that territory according to their different purposes.

To dismiss Korzybski as an objective rhetorician seems much less useful than to look at how Korzybski responded to issues and questions within a particular temporal context or to compare his approach to those of others during his period. Korzybski, like many of his contemporaries, may have had too credulous a faith in scientific progress, but he understood the significance of Einstein's revolution in physics and of the contributions of the emerging social sciences. According to Korzybski, Einstein not only provided a new model for explaining the universe, he demonstrated that any such model, his as well as Newton's, was necessarily a "conceptual construction." Similarly, Korzybski concurred with anthropologists in viewing human nature, once considered immutable, as a cultural construct (86). Korzybski's awareness of multiple realities is one of the key factors by which I distinguish his rhetoric from the current-traditional variety Berlin claims was dominant at Korzybski's period. Berlin's lumping of both Korzybski's approach and that of the current-traditionalists within the category of objective rhetoric obscures the key differences between these alternatives.

An important source for, and source of distortion in, Berlin's discussion of current-traditional rhetoric is Albert Kitzhaber's groundbreaking 1953 dissertation, *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900.* I should note, however, that Kitzhaber never referred to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century rhetoric as "current-traditional" because that term was not coined until six years after he published his dissertation. Nevertheless, his characterization of the rhetoric developed by the authors of the leading composition textbooks of the 1880s and 1890s informs much of our present-day thinking about "current-traditional" rhetoric.

Kitzhaber bases his conclusions regarding his focal period on an exhaustive survey of nineteenth-century textbooks, but I fault him on two counts: he assumes that textbooks both originate theory and determine classroom practice, and he oversteps the boundaries of his study by making a number of loose and damaging generalizations about twentieth-century composition. He provides no evidence that he surveyed textbooks from the first half of the twentieth century as carefully as he did those of the previous half century. In
the twentieth century, moreover, rhetorical theory has tended to originate in the professional literature rather than in textbooks (see Welch, especially 269).

Kitzhaber begins with a negative premise, declaring that the latter half of the nineteenth century “can hardly be called a particularly distinguished time in the history of rhetoric” (97). Yet it was the period of the first appearance of a distinctly American rhetoric, emphasizing written discourse and designed to serve the utilitarian aims of a newly industrial society and of the emerging American university (80, 344-45). Kitzhaber identifies four rhetoricians—Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, John Franklin Genung, and Fred Newton Scott, whom he subsequently refers to as the “big four”—who through the textbooks they published did the most to shape the theory and practice of composition teaching in the last third of the century. Of these, he says that only Scott can be called an original theorist (97). He shows that Genung popularized the four modes of discourse (exposition, description, narration, and argumentation), Wendell focussed on unity, emphasis and coherence as the bases of style, Hill insisted upon correctness, and Scott developed paragraph theory. Kitzhaber claims that these elements of rhetoric dominated most composition textbooks from the 1890s through the first several decades of our century.

Mechanical correctness, according to Kitzhaber in 1953, received primary focus in most composition texts from the late nineteenth century through the date of his own publication (264). Wendell’s stylistic triad of unity-emphasis-coherence also featured prominently in most texts throughout this period (184). Textbooks were organized around the four forms of discourse, which Kitzhaber derides as “inimical to communicative rhetoric,” until well into the 1930s (221, 240). Finally, Kitzhaber claimed, no one had added anything new to paragraph theory since Scott (242). Kitzhaber concluded that rhetorical theory in America had stagnated and blamed this on the practice of textbook authors in copying from one another (261).

Kitzhaber’s view of the stagnation of rhetorical theory in the early twentieth century has been widely accepted. As I have noted, Berlin both acknowledges Kitzhaber’s dissertation as an important source for his Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges and dismisses current-traditional rhetoric as “the manifestation of the assembly line in education” (3, 62). Similarly, Donald Stewart both recalls having advised a graduate student that Kitzhaber’s dissertation ought to be a basic introduction to the field for anyone planning to teach composition and concludes, “I have become convinced that a writing teacher’s development can be measured by the degree to which that person has become liberated from current-traditional rhetoric” (“History” 16). Similarly, Robert Connors both remembers that during his apprenticeship as a historian, he had little more to go on than Kitzhaber and the National Union Catalog and asserts that “our discipline has been long in knuckling from its eyes the sleep of the nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries" ("Historical" 162; "Rise" 455). Berlin follows Kitzhaber in treating Scott’s work more sympathetically than that of Hill, Wendell, and Genung (Writing, chapters 6 and 7). Stewart, owing perhaps to Kitzhaber’s view of Scott as the only original rhetorical theorist of the late nineteenth century, has made it his mission to reclaim Scott’s legacy ("Fred Newton Scott," "Rediscovering Fred Newton Scott," "Two Model Teachers"). Connors agrees with Kitzhaber both that the modes of discourse dominated composition pedagogy from 1895 to 1930 and that they did not help students learn to write ("Rise" 444, 454). He also agrees with Kitzhaber that most writing teachers were obsessed with mechanical correctness from the late nineteenth century until fairly recently ("Mechanical" 61).

Connors, like Kitzhaber, bases his studies largely on textbooks. Although he concedes that textbooks cannot tell a historian all that he or she wants to know, he claims they “provide the best reflection we have of what actually was taught as the subject matter of composition” ("Historical" 164). He assumes that composition pedagogy was shaped primarily by textbooks at least until the 1930s when, he says, professional journals also began to assert an influence ("Textbooks" 178). However, since, as he points out, textbooks are “conservators of tradition” ("Historical" 164), I would contend that the view they provide is of a more conservative field than might be inferred from other sources. Connors blames textbook publishers for promoting current-traditional rhetoric in the late nineteenth century and perpetuating it in the twentieth, which may be so, but the degree to which composition teachers followed their textbooks is open to dispute. Perhaps teachers generated materials of their own or used student writing as the focus of classroom activity. Perhaps they compensated for the limitations of their textbooks, as Mike Rose claims “good” teachers do, by skipping around among chapters, by qualifying authorial pronouncements, and by supplementing with handouts ("Sophisticated" 70).

And if textbooks cannot tell us much about actual classroom practice, they also cannot tell us much about the degree to which teachers were aware of pedagogical and theoretical alternatives in their field. Especially after the founding of NCTE in 1911 and of the Progressive Education Association in 1918-19, and after the appearance of English Journal in 1912, composition teachers are likely to have encountered professional ideas from a variety of sources in addition to textbooks. Leonard Greenbaum has traced a series of articles from 1911 through 1969 criticizing the freshman writing course (175-85). Anne Ruggles Gere has compiled a “small but steady list of publications” on writing groups from the years between 1900 and the late 1960s (28, 126-33). Kenneth Kantor has listed a stream of publications from the turn of the century through 1971 on the role of creative expression in the language arts curriculum (5, 27-29). Both Gere and Kantor remark on the similarity between arguments made early in the century and those advanced currently (Gere 18; Kantor 5). Moreover, the existence of the literature which these
historians survey indicates a livelier and more diverse field than those who have looked only at the textbooks of this period have represented. Unfortunately, historians who base their work primarily on textbooks, like Kitzhaber and Connors, and other historians who accept and republicize their conclusions, as Berlin has done with Kitzhaber's, have already done much to promulgate the notion that the teaching of composition stagnated for two-thirds of a century.

Paradigms or Power Plays?
An additional group of scholars has looked to textbooks for support for their view, equally unfortunate historiographically, that a paradigm shift occurred in composition studies in the 1960s. Richard Young, who originated this idea in his "Paradigms and Problems," found evidence for it in textbooks, which he said "elaborate and perpetuate established paradigms" (31). Maxine Hairston added in "The Winds of Change" that "one way to discover the traditional paradigm of a field is to examine its textbooks" (15). But the main reason why Young and Hairston saw the unfolding history of the field in terms of a binary opposition between competing paradigms was no doubt that they hoped to reform the teaching of composition. Young, who wanted to restore invention to its classical preeminence as a rhetorical concern, borrowed the concept of the paradigm shift from Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. He also borrowed a term from Daniel Fogarty's Roots for a New Rhetoric and referred to the conceptual system which he claimed was established by 1900 and governed the teaching of composition for the following three generations as the "current-traditional paradigm" (30-31). Young characterized early twentieth-century rhetoric in much the same way as Kitzhaber had done, but in Young's treatment the "paradigm" which governed the teaching of this period became a straw man and a target for reform. According to Young, the features of current-traditional rhetoric included an "emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences, and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis); the preoccupation with the informal essay and research paper; and so on" (31). One of the chief faults of the old paradigm and a chief reason why it was inadequate as a model for teaching, in Young's view, was its failure to include invention within the province of rhetoric (33). According to Young, a new paradigm was emerging, based on new theories of invention, including Burke's dramatistic pentad, and on a view of composing as process not product (35).

Four years after Young's article appeared, Maxine Hairston, whose reformist agenda was headed by the wish to promote empirical research, seconded his notion that a "revolution" or "paradigm shift" was occurring in the teaching of writing. To Young's list of the features of the current-
traditional paradigm, Hairston added the following three: "its adherents believe that competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; ... that the composing process is linear, ... [and] that teaching editing is teaching writing" (16). Hairston also listed twelve features of the emerging, process-centered paradigm for the teaching of writing. The new paradigm was rhetorically based, it was informed by other disciplines, notably by linguistics and by cognitive psychology, and it was grounded in research into the writing process (24).

A number of historians subsequently joined Young and Hairston in using the "new paradigm" terminology. James Berlin and Robert Inkster declared that "the current-traditional paradigm represents a danger to teachers, students, the wider purposes of our educational enterprise, and even our social and human fabric" (13). Elsewhere, Berlin contended that current-traditional rhetoric operated as a "compelling paradigm," making it impossible for the majority of composition teachers "to conceive of the discipline in any other way" (Rhetoric 9). Donald Stewart expressed the hope that historical knowledge would "liberate the current-traditional composition teacher from the old paradigm" ("History" 20-21). Janet Emig called on composition teachers to undergo a shift, or "conversion experience," from what she termed a "magical thinking paradigm" to a "developmental" paradigm ("Non-Magical" 139-41).

Other scholars, however, have begun to criticize the application of Kuhn's terminology to composition studies. Connors has observed that the use of the term "paradigm" amounts to a claim that composition studies is or could be a scientific field ("Composition" 17). He also notes that Kuhn uses the term in two distinct ways: in one sense he uses it to mean "disciplinary matrix," or a system of values, beliefs, and so on; but in another sense he uses it to mean "exemplar," or the kind of model that can serve as the basis for solutions to problems. Young and Hairston, according to Connors, overlook this distinction. Connors concludes that composition studies has a disciplinary matrix but lacks exemplars ("Composition" 2, 9). North has pointed out that discussions of a paradigm shift beg the question of whether composition studies is a discipline. If composition was guided by a paradigm at the turn of the century, he asks, doesn't that imply that it had the coherence of a discipline even then? Moreover, the assumption that composition has a paradigmatic structure contradicts North's own assumption that research and teaching in the field is methodologically pluralistic. North contends that the "paradigm shift" explanation should be read as a sort of power play whereby the proponents of the "new paradigm" attempt to assert dominance over the masses of classroom teachers who still presumably teach composition in the tired old way (320-22).

It seems to me that there are also historiographical reasons why Young and Hairston's assumptions should be questioned. In the first place, in their opposition to a supposedly monolithic traditional paradigm, they have not
had sufficient regard for the complexity of the actual historical record or the
diversity of methods which were available to teachers even before 1960. Reformers, as Lawrence Cremin has pointed out, are “notoriously ahistorical” (8). They tend, according to Greg Myers, “to overlook the efforts and the lessons of earlier reformers” (154). Moreover, Young and Hairston imply that history progresses in sudden bursts and make no attempt to account for the causes of the revolution they say occurred. Although Hairston concedes that this revolution must have had causes, she says modestly that “to identify and trace all these complex developments would go far beyond the scope of this article and beyond my current state of enlightenment” (18). She also quotes Kuhn to the effect that “the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made a step at a time, forced by logic. . . Like the gestalt switch, it must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all” (Hairston 26; Kuhn 150). Young concedes that “seen through the historian’s eyes, revolutions are more likely to appear as stages in the growth of a discipline” (46). Indeed they are! It seems to me that what Young and Hairston describe as a revolution could more properly be described as a process of professionalization in an emerging field.

The unfortunate result is that due to the influence of Kitzhaber and his followers on the one hand and of Young and Hairston on the other, the history of composition between 1900 and 1960 has remained largely unexamined. No one has catalogued the methodological alternatives which were available to teachers during this reputedly monolithic period. No one has accounted adequately for the first moves toward professionalization in the 1930s and 1940s. The phrase “current-traditional rhetoric” has become a terministic screen that no one has attempted to see through.

Our Lost History
Yet even a superficial look will indicate that a number of important professional and intellectual developments affected the teaching of composition and that a number of methodological options were available to composition teachers during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. During this period, because of the founding of NCTE in 1911 and CCCC in 1949, and because of the appearance of new journals which dealt directly or tangentially with composition, composition teaching gained a new measure of professional coherence. Fred Newton Scott had begun offering graduate courses in rhetoric at the University of Michigan just before the turn of the century (Kitzhaber 118). Cross-curricular writing programs were introduced at around the same time and subsequently proliferated (Russell 52). Organized freshman composition programs first appeared in significant numbers between 1920 and 1940 (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 65). The first college-level communications courses were introduced at the University of Iowa in 1944 (Connors, “Mechanical” 70). In the period between the two world wars, composition teaching was stimulated especially significantly by the progressive education
movement, the efficiency movement, and the emergence of the social sciences. In the 1940s and 1950s, the general education movement and the communications movement had important effects on the teaching of composition.

From roughly the late teens, progressive educators made it their aim to cultivate both the individual and the social group and thus to place new emphases on both the expressive and communicative functions of rhetoric (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 59-60). Progressive teachers of composition initiated the use of student/teacher conferences, of editorial groups, of journal-keeping assignments, and of courses in creative writing (Wozniak chapter 5; Berlin, *Rhetoric* chapter 4). The project method, which was first outlined in 1917 and which entailed building curricula out of a series of projects students were to complete or problems they were to solve, was quickly recognized as an especially useful approach to the teaching of writing (Applebee 108-09). Also during the progressive 1920s and 1930s, a number of colleges began to use placement tests and ability grouping in the hope of providing more effectively for individual student differences (Wozniak 187, 198; Applebee 91). At roughly the same time period, advocates of efficiency were promoting empirical research, scientific measurement, and the application of science to education (Applebee 79-80; Berlin, *Rhetoric* 53-54). As a result, a new breed of empirical researchers began to scrutinize composition teaching in new ways. Research studies which were conducted as early as the teens in such areas as remediation, error, and the use of grammar drills provided a new kind of evidence of the futility of traditional attempts to teach correctness (Connors, "Mechanical" 70). For his *Current English Usage*, published in 1932, Sterling Andrus Leonard conducted the first large-scale survey of opinion about usage and grammar, thus producing an impressively scientific indictment of the pedagogy of correctness (Brereton 96-100).

In the 1940s and 1950s, advocates of general education programs argued that because language was instrumental to the formation, organization, and communication of knowledge, writing should be regarded as a basic mode of learning and the writing course as a key component of any core curriculum. The authors of the Progressive Education Association’s *Language in General Education*, published in 1940, held the study of language to be at the heart of general education and recommended developing language instruction “around a concept of language as an indispensable, potent, but highly fluid set of symbols by which human beings mentally put their feelings and experiences in order, get and keep in touch with other human beings, and build up a new and clearer understanding of the world around them (32, 3). In his “Linguistic Approach to Problems in Education,” published in 1955 for an audience of educational theorists, Kenneth Burke used his definition of man as “the symbol-using animal” as the basis of his argument for restoring rhetoric to its central preeminence in education (259). The interdisciplinary communications movement, which was an offshoot of the general education movement,
also helped to rekindle the interest of composition teachers in rhetoric and in the 2500-year-old rhetorical tradition (Berlin, *Rhetoric* 93, 115-19). This movement—which stemmed partly from the introduction of the new media of radio, cinema, and television, and partly from concerns about propaganda and advertising, as well as from the general education movement—led to the creation of courses which linked instruction in writing to instruction in speaking and reading.

The advent of the social sciences in the early twentieth century had a particularly important impact on rhetorical theory and, according to Herbert Hackett, on the communications course as well (290). Because psychologists had begun studying the subconscious, some rhetorical theorists began to take it for granted that there was more going on beneath the surface of any discourse than either the writer or an audience could apprehend. I.A. Richards pointed out that thoughts were often complicated by feelings and intentions (*Practical* 328). Kenneth Burke expanded his conception of audience situations to include the internal dialogue of ego confronting id and super-ego (*Rhetoric* 37-38). Anthropologists, meanwhile, were looking at language as an instrument of culture and society. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, in an essay published in 1923 as a supplement to C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, defined language as both "a mode of human behaviour" and "a link in concerted human activity" (312). Ogden and Richards acknowledged a special debt to Malinowski for the support his field research in the Trobriand Islands lent to their context theory of reference (ix).

With respect to the development of rhetorical theory, the second quarter of the twentieth century was far from stagnant. According to Daniel Fogarty, whose *Roots for a New Rhetoric* was published in 1959, at least three important new theories of rhetoric—those of I.A. Richards, of Kenneth Burke, and of the general semanticists—had emerged between approximately 1920 and 1950 (3-4). Richards analyzed metaphor and the relations between thought, word, and thing (Fogarty 36-44). *The Meaning of Meaning*, published by Richards and C.K. Ogden in 1923, was a groundbreaking inquiry into how words work, how they serve both referential and emotive functions, how they are related to the things they represent, and how they may be interpreted in context. Richards dismissed the notion that words are a medium in which to copy life, arguing instead that they serve as "the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to order itself" (*Philosophy* 131). The general semanticists, including Alfred Korzybski and S.I. Hayakawa, developed a detailed theory of abstraction (Fogarty 100-03). Burke substituted identification for Aristotle's persuasion as the central element of rhetoric, which he redefined as "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (*Rhetoric* 43).
I hope I have shown a sufficient range of developments in rhetorical theory, curricular theory, and pedagogical practice to counter the assumptions that composition either stagnated in the early twentieth century or was governed by a monolithic "current-traditional" paradigm. I believe the period is eminently worthy of renewed historical attention. In order truly to understand the history of this maligned period, however, historians will have to look beyond textbooks, and even beyond the professional literature of the period, for new sources of information. Oral material from teachers and former students is a rich potential resource. Syllabi, assignment sheets, dittoed handouts, student papers and teachers' responses to them, course and teacher evaluations, student journals, teacher's journals, letters, interdepartmental memos, and similar ephemera may also give us new views of writing instruction at earlier periods. Without such material, some of which is still available from the early twentieth century but will rapidly become scarcer, it is difficult to determine how far teachers responded to progressive ideas or how much they were aware of the theoretical work of say, Richards and Burke. Until such material has been considered, it is premature to conclude that current-traditional rhetoric was the dominant and all-pervasive rhetoric of the period.

I am fortunate to have a rich variety of resources—including assignment series, student essays, and staff papers, as well as faculty and alumni willing to talk to me—for a study I am currently making of English 1-2 at Amherst College, a two-semester, freshman writing course which was directed by Theodore Baird from 1938-1966. These resources are indispensable since, except locally, little was published about English 1-2 and since, after the first year, no textbook was used in the course. As Baird explained in 1939, commenting on that first year, "After a few weeks both students and instructors were convinced that the English language cannot be so silly as the three authors of our textbook seemed to require. . . . We demolished the book, tearing out pages (it had a ring binder) as we went, analyzing the conception of grammar and of language implied on every page" ("English 1 C" 329-30).

In the absence of a textbook, Baird and the eight or ten instructors on his staff collaborated in generating assignments and turned to student writing for the material for class discussions. The English 1-2 staff devised a new and hefty sequence of 33 assignments each semester and, because the course was required, collectively administered them to every first-year student at the college. Students turned in one assignment each class period, received another, and then discussed specimen responses, selected and mimeographed by their instructor, to the assignment completed for the previous period.

The assignment sequences asked students to write from experience in order to make sense of that experience. In the fall of 1946, for example, students were asked first to describe a technique they knew how to perform, then to explain how they had learned to perform it, to distinguish between a technique and a fluke, to describe a situation in which they had taught a
technique to someone else, to explain how they knew whether they had succeeded in teaching it, to distinguish between things which can and cannot be taught, and so on. The following spring, they were asked to write about their learning in the several subject areas of Amherst's core curriculum and to work out the ways in which each discipline represented a specialized language and a specialized way of organizing experience. The English 1-2 syllabus, which was generally read aloud to students at the beginning of the fall term, warned them that they would find themselves "in a situation where no one knows the answers." They should not assume they could learn to write by memorizing a body of rules, such as for the use of the comma or for constructing a paragraph, as if a composition "were made of building blocks." The syllabus defined writing as "an action," something students were to do, and as "an art," how to succeed at which, "no one knows how to teach another." It is possible for me to estimate which theoretical works informed the course and guided its teachers because from time to time Professor Baird distributed a list of suggested readings to his staff. One such list, circulated in April of 1946, contained citations to Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, Richards' *Interpretation in Teaching*, Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, Hayakawa's *Language in Action*, Bridgman's *The Logic of Modern Physics*, and William James' *Pragmatism*. In its turn, the course enjoyed a certain influence. Although neither Baird nor anyone on his staff published much about English 1-2 during the years it was a going concern, several of his junior colleagues, including Walker Gibson and William E. Coles, Jr., subsequently wrote about similar courses they designed and taught elsewhere (see Gibson's *Seeing and Writing* and Coles's *The Plural I and Composing*). The course described in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, colleagues of Coles's at the University of Pittsburgh, also has some of the features of English 1-2 at Amherst College, including collaborative teaching and sequenced writing assignments.

**Reclaiming Our History**

I am interested in English 1-2, among other reasons, because the course used student writing as its text, because its students wrote from experience, because its instructors taught collaboratively, because it addressed the issue of writing in the disciplines, and because it seems very different from the kind of "current-traditional" course said to have been standard at its period. Other studies similar to mine of other early and mid-twentieth-century courses, if enough of them can be completed, may show that current-traditional rhetoric was not so monolithic nor composition theory and pedagogy so stagnant as textbook-based histories have indicated.

We need to reclaim all our history, including the history during the period before our field achieved its current professional status, if we are to have any hope of solidifying our academic identity, answering detractors,
evaluating the appeals of reformers, and guiding students and the profession wisely into the twenty-first century. We need to know where we have been in order to know who we are and where we are going. The successes and failures of our predecessors can and should inform our teaching. Since the central function of history is to promote dialectic, and since the field of composition studies has now moved beyond its infancy, its historians should be exercising the critical self-consciousness that is a mark of any mature field.  

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Notes

1 Compare Berlin's disregard for institutional and social factors that shaped the teaching of writing with the careful attention Mike Rose and David Russell give to such contexts. Rose examines evolving institutional attitudes and policies concerning basic writing courses ("Language"), and Russell explains that because of the compartmentalization of knowledge and other structural problems within academia, WAC programs have had only limited success (52-53).

2 In 1990, thirty-seven years after its completion, Kitzhaber's Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900 appeared for the first time in a published edition. It is now available from Southern Methodist University Press, which is promoting Kitzhaber's study as "the most-quoted unpublished dissertation since T.S. Eliot's" (see the advertisement at the back of College English 52.6, October 1990).

3 The term is Daniel Fogarty's and appears in his Roots for a New Rhetoric (118), but it was popularized by Richard Young who borrowed it for "Paradigms and Problems" (30).

4 Berlin, who concurs with Kitzhaber in regarding Scott as an original theorist, finds that "after considering Scott's theoretical statements" about rhetoric, his textbooks are a bit disappointing" (Writing 81). It seems that even Scott used the professional literature rather than his textbooks as the vehicle for introducing theory.

5 Young cites Kitzhaber's dissertation as a valuable work on the history of current-traditional rhetoric (46).

6 For a chronological list of journals dealing with composition and composition pedagogy, see Connors ("Historical" 163).

7 Andrea Lunsford reports that CCCChopes to sponsor oral histories of its past chairs (77).

8 A summary of the assignments for 1946-47 is included in Baird's "English 1-2: History and Content, August, 1946," a twenty-four-page description of the course which can be found in "Eng 1, 1946/47, Sec E [Gibson]—1946 Sep-1947 Jan" in Box 1, English 1-2 collection, Amherst College Archives. These assignments are also reproduced in a 1971 dissertation (Louis 163-75). The version of the English 1-2 syllabus from which I have quoted is an undated, four-page document entitled "Excerpts from description of English 1-2, usually read aloud on second day of class," in Box 1, English 1-2 collection, Amherst College Archives.

9 A copy of this reading list can be found in "Eng 1, 1945/46, Assignments, 'Brower and Castle',—1946 Spring" in Box 1, English 1-2 collection, Amherst College Archives.

10 I wish to thank Charles Adams, Robin Dizard, Peter Elbow, and Anne Herrington for critical readings of earlier drafts of this paper.

Works Cited


The History of Composition


Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 10 of *JAC* was awarded to Joy S. Ritchie for "Confronting the 'Essential' Problem: Reconnecting Feminist Theory and Pedagogy." Professor Ritchie received a cash award and a framed citation.

Richard M. Coe received an honorable mention for "Defining Rhetoric—and Us" and also received a framed citation.

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by him at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Boston.