

## Cultural Studies, Rhetorical studies, and Composition: Towards an Anti-Disciplinary Nexus

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At its core the most recent issue of *Enculturation* seeks to parse the nexus of rhetorical studies and composition studies, the conjunctions, disjunctions, and aporias that Cynthia Haynes locates in the rhetoric/composition slash. And yet lurking within and beneath several of these pieces is the specter of cultural studies. Primarily raised as either a partner in or rival to rhetoric's project of invigorating composition studies with a real-world efficacy, cultural studies must be considered with equal weight alongside these other modes of inquiry. While Sharon Crowley doubts the potential of cultural studies to effect any real political intervention by casting it as an unstable platform embedded within English Departments, Krista Ratcliffe argues that a "scholarly awareness of rhetorical theory, along with cultural studies scholarship, must be made overt" (Ratcliffe). We'd like to extend this project even further, elevating cultural studies scholarship from the shadows of the rhet/comp dyad, to imagine the ways that as a triad of modes of inquiry (not discrete disciplines), rhetoric, composition, and cultural studies might invigorate one another in service of an anti-disciplinary politics in the classroom and in our scholarship.

The title of Crowley's "Composition is not Rhetoric" rests upon an astute observation about the state of the field, but also upon a fairly clear insistence that rhetoric and composition remain segregated as disciplinary activities. While her primary concern is the degree to which rhetoric has been pushed out to the margins of actual composition pedagogy, she is also deeply concerned that the possibilities for political intervention are compromised by this fact. Instead, she argues, most teachers who orient their first-year courses towards political intervention are not motivated by studies of rhetoric but learn from cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams who are working within a cultural Marxist tradition. Crowley's concern with this alignment is that in the context of English Departments, where she locates cultural studies pedagogy, this commitment to intervention is "less steady." She privileges rhetoric's "attention to intervention," arguing that this attention distinguishes it from all fields, including, implicitly, cultural studies.

Curiously enough, in their introduction to *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies*, Cary Nelson and Milip Parameshwar Gaonkar make a similar claim: only instead of rhetorical studies, they extol cultural studies. They assert, "unlike traditional disciplines, cultural studies responds consciously to immediate political problems and counts its success, its pertinent progress, partly in terms of its success at interpreting, analyzing, and intervening in local conditions" (6). Like rhetoric, cultural studies places value in analyzing the local (what Gramsci calls conjectural analysis), and therefore is poised to make interventions in the public sphere. However, by alternately claiming either

cultural studies or rhetorical studies as *the* primary academic site for progressive resistance to hegemony, we would ultimately place political work as a site of academic territorial squabbles, not proactive public engagement. However, as we see it, these claims raise important questions about a political, scholarly, and pedagogical alliance that could be forged between scholar/teachers working at the nexus of cultural studies, composition, and rhetorical studies.

Rather than setting out composition studies as the site for a turf battle between rhetorical studies and cultural studies, we would like to suggest that doing so indulges in a sort of disciplinary thinking that limits the possibility of both the pedagogy and the scholarship, rather than illuminating it. These divisions are linked to what Nelson and Gaonkar call the "unwritten and unsigned pact post World War II disciplines made with state power . . . guaranteeing silence and irrelevance" (2). Sadly, discourse around what we do when we study and teach composition has often inured itself to these realities and internalized them instead of resisting them. As Crowley suggests that composition and rhetorical studies are "yoked," we might do well to recognize that both rhetoricians and teachers of writing are the beasts of burden in the scenario. The interplay that these three modes of discourse and scholarship offer, then, must be a source of strength rather than of territorial resistance. The nexus of rhetoric, composition, and cultural studies can create a shared political project to resist the limitations of disciplinarity, rather than serve as the mechanism by which we as academic laborers are harnessed to academic divisions and distinctions that we do not espouse.

It is worth noting that these very same values underpin an enforced disciplinarity that governs intellectual production. Such disciplinarity is a component of a neoliberal public pedagogy that focuses on the production of workers and consumers for the newest phase of the capitalist economy.[1] Interdisciplinary work is valued by departments when it means they do not have to foot the entire bill for paying interdisciplinary faculty, but is rarely valued equally to traditional disciplinary inquiry in questions of tenure, promotion, and grant awards. In this way, disciplinarity reduces much intellectual labor to budgetary line items while minimizing the importance of pedagogy. This reality literally disciplines rhetoric and composition into an enforced partnership, even as it frequently questions the place of cultural studies within any department, and situates it erroneously within English departments (an alliance that Crowley identifies with disdain). Under this rationale, only rhetoric and composition may be a site for discussions of pedagogy, while those who are hired into traditional disciplines don't have to deal with questions of pedagogy and certainly don't have to teach writing.

As practitioners of cultural studies pedagogy with a strong emphasis on rhetoric (or vice versa) in an interdisciplinary writing program, we argue for a common project of cultural studies and rhetorical studies in the current conjuncture. Within the current institutional context of writing programs, we support pedagogy and scholarship that is aligned with what Lisa Coleman calls "writing, intervention, and civic engagement." Our work at the nexus of cultural studies and rhetorical studies that is

informed by a Freirian tradition in composition can be a point of communication. A progressive politics that values intervention, activism, and agency emerges from an attention to the social and material conditions of the classroom vis-à-vis Freire and Raymond Williams, as well as active analysis of the social and material circumstances in which texts are produced vis-à-vis Williams and Susan Miller.

This common interest in a progressive politics that emerges from the nexus of cultural studies, composition, and rhetorical studies can, therefore, be the beginning of a pedagogical project that draws from all three fields. Instead of locating the burden of political work within rhetorical studies, a tradition in composition studies that is allied with cultural Marxism can invigorate those efforts. In the field of composition studies, Paolo Freire and his followers in the United States have developed the idea of critical literacy as an investigation of classroom practices that challenges the knowledge (and thus the power) of the bourgeoisie class. Freire locates his pedagogical practices in a capitalist context, asking "how is systematic education constituted and constructed in the overall picture of capitalist development?" (35). Capitalism as a context is essential for understanding Freire's ideas about critical literacy and his pedagogical strategies; he is interested in creating classroom practices that give students the critical capacity to understand exploitation and to challenge both capitalist culture and the authority of the bourgeoisie class.

Furthermore, Gayatri Spivak places this sort of cultural studies work in direct relation to the activities of rhetorical inquiry. In "Thinking Cultural Questions in 'Pure' Literary Terms," an essay included in a collection honoring Stuart Hall, Spivak argues, "I find myself insisting on restoring rhetorical reading practices because I believe, in an irrational, utopian, and impractical way, that such reading can be an ethical motor that undermines the ideological field" (335-336).

Spivak is interested in pursuing rhetoric and cultural studies concomitantly because they both engage a cultural studies practice that focuses on rhetoric, opens up inquiry into political and ethical study, and struggles over meaning. The study of rhetoric with cultural studies, in other words, can be an opening to the sort of pedagogy of contestation and even agency that Freire advocates. Similarly, in Spivak's work, a study of literature, if imagined as a rhetorical inquiry, is a site for struggle as it gestures outside of a text to the world. As Spivak argues:

if what happens in the literary text is the singularity of its language and that singularity is in its figuration, that figuration can point to the depth of the content by signaling that the content cannot be contained by the text as receptacle. To note this is not to say that the text has failed. It is to say that the text has succeeded in signaling beyond itself. It is high praise for the book, no dispraise. (350)

This emphasis on the outward impulse of literature at once suggests

different meanings within language, recognizes language as site of social struggle, critiques existing social and political order, and gestures towards a more complete, complex, and alternative meaning. For example, as Spivak writes about Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Lucy* (citing Hall who in turn is citing Gramsci), "I feel that a rhetorical reading of *Lucy* can be expanded into 'the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase' " (354).

That cultural studies and rhetorical studies in tandem can invigorate composition is, we argue, a sufficient acknowledgement, but we'd also like to suggest how our teaching of composition furthers the same type of political interventions that we encourage in our students' work. To begin, we can let composition pedagogy inflect our understanding of the disciplinarity of our own work. That is, instead of haggling over which disciplinary discourse is better suited to political intervention, we might start with the politically resistant move of working against the very disciplinary distinctions and divisions that underpin this discussion. Cultural studies, composition, rhetorical studies, speaking of any of them as discrete fields will limit the intellectual potential and political opportunities of their interplay while at the same time adopting a position complicit with the reduction of that intellectual work to a corporatized university. [2]

This response, then, represents more than a call for interdisciplinarity; it is a call to anti-disciplinarity. By this we mean:

- Teaching and scholarship that challenges the borders and boundaries of disciplines by attending to how and on whose authority cultural texts are written and valued (as Susan Jarratt asks: "who speaks? On behalf of whom? Who is listening? And how?" (57));
- Teaching and scholarship that actively analyzes the identities and possibilities for citizenship that these disciplines produce;
- Teaching and scholarship that analyzes the social conditions of labor that are produced within and outside of disciplines;
- Teaching and scholarship that gives critical attention to politics that challenge hegemony (as Robert McRuer asks: "What would happen if, true to our experiences in and out of the classroom, we continually attempted to reconceive composing as that which produced agitation?" (49)).

We accomplish these goals in part by drawing upon a more radical tradition within composition studies, one with activist, multi-vocal affinities and histories that intersect with the materialist traditions that we can locate in cultural studies and rhetorical studies.

We offer as an example of this conjuncture the courses we teach within the First-Year Writing Program at The George Washington University. We (like so many compositionists) are working under a number of administrative constraints, and must note that the administration constructs us as a program, and not a department, or within a department. This limits resources and self-determination to a degree, but also frees us

from a variety of disciplinary strictures. While we can talk about various administrative expediences here, we instead prefer to talk about potentials. The program is divided into a "pre-disciplinary" first-year course (UW20), and several Writing in the Disciplines (WID) courses housed within the academic departments, of which each student must take two.

We have struggled against conceiving of the pre-disciplinary course as one that prepares students to enter into certain specified, disciplined modes of thinking, since this model privileges the same disciplinary discourse that we argue needs to be critiqued more rigorously and more thoroughly. We've also resisted views of composition as producing efficient, well-composed documents that, we would argue, enable the university to produce technically proficient middle-class workers for the neo-liberal system. Instead, we use the space opened up by pre-disciplinarity to reveal ways that disciplinary thinking is limited. We offer students critical research paper topics as opportunities to explore with more intellectual latitude than later WID projects will allow, constrained as they are by the conventions of their own disciplines. Cultural studies work informs this, as does rhetorical analysis. This approach prompts us to ask important pedagogical questions that a focus singularly on rhetorical studies or cultural studies doesn't give us easy access to: how do we get students to recognize language as a contested site? How do we encourage language as a strategy for contesting social and political meaning? How do we illuminate language as it is used to mystify and demystify the circuit of capital? How do we advocate for critical reading as a strategy for entering into social and political struggle? How do we encourage students to recognize counter-publics, communities that construct through their language oppositional ideas about voice, authority, identity, writing, and even democracy? How do we empower students to construct language strategically in the service of social and political struggle?

On the one hand, these are questions that emerge from rhetorical studies because they tap into what Susan Jarratt calls a "discursive act that also simultaneously configures a material relationship of power and difference" (58). These are simultaneously cultural studies questions because, like Raymond Williams' work in *Keywords* and *Marxism and Literature*, they are grounded in culture as a site of intervention, and they foreground language as a signifying practice that is an opening into culture. James Berlin who has written on the intersection of both fields argues for a social-epistemic rhetoric that is centered on the signifying practices of a text that can lead to an understanding and an intervention in cultural practices:

The work of social-epistemic rhetoric, then, is to study the production and reception of these historically specific signifying practices. In other words, social-epistemic rhetoric enables senders and receivers to arrive at a rich formulation of the rhetorical context in any given discourse situation through an analysis of the signifying practices operating within it. Thus, in composing or

interpreting a text, a person engages in an analysis of the cultural codes operating in defining his or her subject position, the positions of the audience, and the constructions of the matter to be considered. (84)

Berlin's work brings together an analysis of language and audience that is rhetoric's strength with an analysis of the material, cultural conditions that cultural studies scholars have developed.

To return this discussion to our own pedagogy, let us offer up an example of how we advance students' thinking through this nexus. Take, for example, five critical activities we developed with our colleagues Robert McRuer and Carol Hayes and that we teach alongside the long research paper. Ryan's final position paper assignment contains the following language:

We write in part because we want to contribute to the world, and audiences read our work in the hopes of finding a new perspective. Therefore, make your perspective new, stake out a territory that requires your voice. Accordingly, below are five paths to help you reach beyond the boundaries of the traditional college paper.

The description goes on to suggest 1) historicizing the debate and 2) questioning power relations (both activities associated with cultural studies), 3) employing theoretical self-reflexivity and 4) engaging in critical interventions (which can be read through both cultural studies and rhetoric), and finally, 5) engaging in anti-disciplinary inquiry.

Rachel's reading and writing assignments participate in these same modes of critical inquiry, positioning writing as a way of thinking outside the authorized (state, university, disciplined) locations. Writing projects in her class emerge from readings of the Zapatistas, a revolutionary group based in the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico who, in their written communications to the outside world, challenge common sense ideas about voice, agency, and even democracy itself. These writing projects push students to rigorously investigate authorized versions of writing and of language use and to investigate how activist writing is used to challenge these authorized versions.

In both of these composition classes, students are doing work informed by both cultural studies and rhetorical studies as they are asked to recognize boundaries of disciplines and other sites of authority. As critical intervention goes in writing and research projects, students use both fields to think through the public dimensions of their writing even as we encourage them to question the power relations invoked in doing so. Furthermore, by promoting an anti-disciplinary space prior to, but not subordinate to the disciplinarity that they will later be taught, we are enacting our own critical intervention against the disciplining processes of the university. Such an anti-disciplinary pedagogy is itself a political gesture, one that implicates labor structures even as it addresses audiences both in our classrooms and within the university.

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## Notes

1. For discussion of neoliberalism and universities, see *Cultural Studies Pedagogy*, by Kevin Mahoney and Rachel Riedner, forthcoming from Lexington Press. ([Back](#))
2. It is also important to acknowledge that the university is one site in which political and intellectual work takes place. There are other social locations where political and intellectual labor is accomplished that this response does not have time to investigate. ([Back](#))

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