Sp(l)itting Images; or, Back to the Future of (Rhetoric and?) Composition

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This article places responses received from an open-ended survey of graduate students and faculty in dialogue with published commentary on the scope of composition studies as a discipline to explore three interrelated disciplinary dilemmas: the “pedagogical imperative,” the “theory-practice split,” and the increasingly complicated relationship between “rhetoric” and “composition” as our field’s titular terms.

In his introduction to A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966, Joseph Harris remembers his graduate school days less than fondly, describing himself as “frustrated by what seemed the planned irrelevance of much [English studies] scholarship,” to the point that he was “thinking of leaving academics altogether.” However, rescue was right around the corner, in the form of a providential introduction to the burgeoning field of rhetoric and composition studies: “coming across work in composition,” Harris recalls, renewed his academic enthusiasm because it “gave him a way to imagine teaching as an integral part of...[his] work as an intellectual” (ix–x, my emphasis). In his preface to The Making of Knowledge in Composition, Stephen North tells a similar tale of rhet/comp redemption, which occurred for him at a meeting during the 1976 CCCC: “Nothing I had studied,” North recounts, “—not Chaucer or the Tran-
scendentalists, not Wordsworth or Coleridge or Blake—had made me an offer anything like this," by which he means the offer, the "irresistible invitation," to become a professional teacher of writing. "That unbearably hot Philadelphia conference room crackled for me with the energy of a revival meeting." North tells us, as he and others were inspired to revolutionize the teaching of writing in the midst of a "national literacy crisis" (preface). Ross Winterowd’s memories of the 1970s convey this revivalist mood as well: "we were 'Pentecostal' in those days," he says, "rolling around the floor in ecstasy" at the thought of developing an academic discipline devoted primarily to teaching—and to producing scholarship about teaching—writing (qtd. in D’Angelo 272).

Though there are other narratives of "coming to composition," this "conversion" narrative is among our time-honored and celebrated ones, part of the field’s lore: fed up with, or not fully inspired by, literary studies, English graduate student or young professor stumbles upon rhetoric and composition, finds it—largely because of its focus on teaching—more political, pragmatic, and relevant than the former pursuit, and "crosses over" with religious fervor. In short, since its inception as a discipline,¹ rhetoric and composition has in many quarters defined itself not only as a teaching subject but often as a teaching subject over and against what Robert Connors has characterized as "the fatuity of an overly specialized and theoretical literary studies" (19).

Yet if the loosely defined field of composition first began to cohere around this notion that we could do more "relevant" work by focusing on and improving the teaching of writing, we proposed to do so—indeed we could only do so—by developing our own brand of specialized knowledge. As North has written, and as his testimony and that of the others cited above suggest, what initiated composition's true "emergence as a nascent academic field more than anything else" were these calls of the 1960s and 1970s not merely to teach writing—that was already being done, of course—but to more thoroughly professionalize our teaching by "replac[ing] practice as the field’s dominant mode of inquiry," and by establishing greater "authority over knowledge about composition" (15, my emphasis). We entered and helped develop composition studies, in Connors’s words again, "to escape the endless reinvention of the wheel," the "what to do Monday morning" syndrome that had long plagued and stalled a less than adequately theorized composition pedagogy (19, 15). Put simply, in and as our disciplinary birth, we collectively set out to reform and focus on practice precisely by making theory.

The nature of this disciplinary birth has led to recurrently documented tensions surrounding the significance of both theory and practice to our field’s
identity and pursuits. It has led to what Lynn Worsham has described as an "ongoing battle over the nature of our work." The "battle," Worsham summarizes—"often abbreviated as the 'theory-practice split'—involves those who maintain that the field's proper work must remain strictly limited to the teaching of writing and the research required for that project, and those who insist that the scope of composition studies includes anything that bears on literacy, broadly conceived" or on "the workings of written discourse." What Worsham calls "a kind of dramaturgy" has developed around this split, with each embattled "side" accusing the other of "retarding the progress of our field" (102).

Members of the field who believe its purview should encompass the study of any and all aspects of literacy or written language decry rhetoric and composition's "continued preoccupation with pedagogy" (Bizzell 1) as "dangerously and unacceptably narrow," "anti-intellectual" (Olson, "Death" xii), and as the utilitarian focus that keeps the field trapped in its service-oriented roles and reputation (Doobrin 21). Meanwhile, those who believe that rhetoric and composition is and must remain a "teaching subject" berate the "other side" for "failing to answer the field's governing pedagogical imperative" (Worsham 102-3)—for producing scholarship that does not seem to bear directly on teaching, and that is therefore, to use Connors's term once more, considered "futurous."

As Worsham's overly simplified (abbreviated) account of "the battle" attests, the theory/practice binary has, as binaries will, often driven the terms (and us) apart in unproductive and reductive ways. Of course, the theory/practice binary has also, as binaries will, driven many of us to try to think the terms together in more generative ways (through discussions of "praxis," for example, which I take up in a later section of this essay), or to clarify what it is we mean when we toss these slippery words around. Yet, as my forthcoming analysis demonstrates, reductive though it is, this account of "the battle" nonetheless reflects a disciplinary reality: after two decades of discussion, there are corners of the discipline in which the conversation remains stalled, where the theory/practice split remains entrenched, and where its resultant pedagogical imperative holds sway.

The study that forms the content of much of this essay originated with my desire to investigate the continued power and influence of what scholars such as those cited above have characterized as the field's longstanding "pedagogical imperative." More specifically, it originated with the desire to ascertain the extent to which some current graduate students still feel pressured, or not, to bend to this implicit (and some would and do say explicit) mandate that any

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research or theorizing they do have relevance, and even immediate, direct application, to the writing classroom. However, the scope of the study quickly expanded as I realized that any question about rhetoric and composition’s pedagogical imperative inevitably led to closely connected, yet more expansive, questions about the relationship between “theoretical” and “practical” pursuits more generally, about the affiliation between “rhetoric” and “composition,” and about what, on the whole, a sampling of rhetoric and composition graduate students see as the future, necessary directions of inquiry in the field. In order to answer these questions, my research partner and I constructed an open-ended email survey, which we distributed to graduate students at two large and long-established doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition—programs I selected because of what I viewed as their very different identities and areas of specialization. We also sent a much more limited, single-question survey to faculty at these two institutions that inquired about their work with dissertating graduate students. The forthcoming discussion gives our survey respondents ample room to speak and analyzes their remarks by placing them in dialogue with some of the prolific published commentary about our field’s identity, its tasks and scope, and attendant dilemmas such as the pedagogical imperative, theory/practice split, and the status of the affiliation between rhetoric and composition as the field’s titular terms. I use this dialogic analysis to three ends: First, I present our findings that graduate students we sampled do indeed experience the pedagogical imperative, and that they experience it as limiting, not only to their own scholarly goals but, more importantly, to the potential reach and impact of the field at large. As my contribution to the efforts trying to release the hold of the pedagogical imperative, then, I make an attempt to reframe the “theory/practice split” in different terms that might help inch us closer to its resolution. Finally, I offer some recommendations as to how we might move away from the types of self-referential discussions of our own disciplinarity represented in and by this essay, in order to further our status as an interdisciplinary, knowledge-making field of study.

This “Unspoken [and Quite Often Spoken] Question in the Air: But What Does That Have to Do with Teaching Composition?”

When asked if they encouraged dissertating graduate students to do work that makes direct connections to pedagogy, the vast majority of our faculty respondents (over 80 percent) claimed to do so only when “appropriate”—that is, when a student’s “project calls for it by its very nature,” or when there are “clear peda-
gogical implications” to the work. Interestingly, however, the majority of students in our sample revealed feelings of intense pressure to create clear pedagogical implications and applications whether their projects led them in that direction or not, and, most tellingly I think, whether they experienced such pressure firsthand and directly or only as some vague sense of what is required by the field. In fact, within the smaller pool of students who claimed not to feel any pressure at all to establish their work’s pedagogical relevance, all but one noted that their projects were conceived from the start as classroom-based inquiries.

Of the students whose projects were not “by their nature” classroom based, then, some reported having been asked directly and repeatedly by faculty to make any potential pedagogical implications of their work explicit: “Whenever I discuss this project with anyone in the field,” Sarah states, “there is an inevitable question: how does this relate to . . . the teaching of writing?” Another student, Sam, whose dissertation focuses on literacy practices within a local group of South Asian immigrants, commented that many “faculty to whom [he has] mentioned [his] project” have often assumed that his dissertation would provide some “set of recommendations for writing teachers to follow” when teaching immigrant students. And another, Ann, who originally wanted her dissertation “to focus on the ways in which literacy transfers around in family systems,” reports having been swayed by faculty to shift her focus altogether to the writing classroom: “after much talk with my advisors and committee.” Ann says, “my dissertation has now become focused solely on the literacy narrative—as a genre, an assignment, a pedagogical teaching tool.” While Ann claims to “feel all right about this shift,” she does acknowledge that she “would have liked to have been more broad in [her] approach—broad about a focus on literacy in families rather than so focused on one assignment”—and reiterates that she feels “professors [she has] had,” and not just on her committee, but “throughout [her] coursework,” have “strongly encouraged this shift.”

Ann is not alone in mentioning coursework as a source of pedagogy pressure. Approximately one-quarter of our respondents claimed that their graduate classes either directly or indirectly influenced their choice to do classroom-based research once they reached the dissertation stage, or at least generated their sense that classroom-based scholarship was the most valued in the field. Emma, for example, said that as she “studied the development of Composition and Rhetoric” in a graduate survey course, “much of the focus was on how theory informed and changed teaching,” and so she “got the im-
pression that [her] work should inform and change classrooms as well." Brenda also got this impression, to say the least, reporting with evident frustration that she felt she had "gotten smacked a couple of times in classes for doing work that evidently hadn't articulated its link to pedagogy in a clear enough way to suit some composition faculty." And like Emma, Paul comments that "one quickly learns through assigned readings and class discussions of them which topics [arguments without obvious classroom applications] are deemed irrelevant or digressive."

Even students who did not evince this type of frustration with coursework, their committees, or their programs at large, and even some students who felt encouraged to do nonpedagogical projects, often reported feeling pedagogy pressure nonetheless—from other faculty members in their departments, at conferences or when reading the field's journals, and, most significantly, in preparation for job interviews. (Not incidentally, among the more than 80 percent of faculty members who said they do not necessarily push students to make direct connections to pedagogy, nearly one-third of these did make the point that "a gesture towards classroom practice" can prevent candidates from being "dismissed as impractical" during job interviews.) Paul, for example, who considers the faculty with whom he has worked most closely to have been "very supportive, encouraging [him] to seek out a project [he] was truly interested in, regardless of its . . . perceived capital within the field," recounts how he came to feel certain (after his coursework planted the seed) that his future success—on the job market and then as a professional—was wholly dependent upon his ability to articulate his work's connections to pedagogy. "While I was fishing about for a possible dissertation topic," Paul remembers, "I spoke with as many people in the department as possible—from fellow grad students to professors new and entrenched," and the message, he says, was clear: during interviews he would need to "throw some pedagogical chum into the water." "Whatever I chose [as a dissertation topic]," Paul elaborates, "I'd best be prepared to answer the proverbial 'why question': Why should the field be interested in the topic? Oh, and the answer to that question must—not should and certainly not could—have something directly to do with the composition classroom." "It's not that I don't like the 'why question,'" Paul is quick to add; "I think it's essential. It's only that there're a whole lotta other whys going on out there."

Job market pressures are real and intense, and thus not to be dismissed. Moreover, and ironically, despite the continued institutional devaluation of pedagogy, and despite the desires expressed by many in our field to do work
that resists application, it is often our graduate students' expertise in pedagogy that is responsible for their comparatively greater success on a tight English studies job market. Yet, as suggested above, there were many students in our sample who did not speak in terms of these institutional realities but instead located their sources of pedagogy pressure in more nebulous impressions of what "the field" wants. They used phrases such as the "unwritten rule" (Brenda) or the "unspoken question in the air: But what does that have to do with teaching composition?" (Kim), or noted that the whole "history of composition discourse," the whole "culture of rhet/comp," provides an implicit form of pressure toward application (James and Paul).

The limits imposed by this "rule"—unwritten, expressly stated, historically, culturally, institutionally enforced or otherwise—are clear and have been much discussed: here we have a requirement that can only "restrict our freedom of inquiry" (Blissell 4) and thus eventually impoverish our knowledge making. "I have seen many instances (both in dissertations and in book manuscripts)," one of our faculty respondents laments, "when authors have taken the 'pedagogical turn' in that concluding chapter [what Dobrin calls the "half-hearted addendum" or "tack on" (86–87)], only to ruin a perfectly good dissertation or book." "It's not necessary," this faculty member continues, "to write five chapters about Heideggerian philosophy's importance for broadening our conception of the rhetorical basis of epistemology only to turn to the last chapter and talk about teaching Heidegger to first-year students. I have seen people try similar moves, [and] have heard colleagues make such demands."

I should note before moving on that some of our respondents, both graduate students and faculty alike (roughly 20 percent each), do remain convinced, as do many veteran scholars in the field, that our close ties to teaching are what have long defined and distinguished our work, and that to erode those ties now is to forget both our history and our enduring, primary responsibilities. "I have to admit," said Emma, whose dissertation examines collaboration among business writing students, "that I do think rhetoric and composition scholarship has a significant responsibility to the writing classroom—we are, after all, charged with (and paid for) helping our students become better writers." Similarly, one of our faculty respondents (who also specializes in business and technical writing), reminds us that "student dollars support our research, and we owe it to [them] to integrate any knowledge we learn to help them. Composing and the teaching of composing are our core foci." While each of these respondents is careful to acknowledge that "pedagogical implications are far from the sole focus" of our work, that not "every project must have di-

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rect classroom application,” the point remains: a significant percentage of our respondents (in both faculty and student pools) finds the pedagogical imperative to be just that—a discipline-defining and ethical obligation that, as such, must remain intact and strong.

Yet a more sizable percentage of our respondents, again both students and faculty, do seem to experience the pedagogical imperative as an imposition and as a constraint upon inquiry itself, describing the mandatory gesture toward the classroom, variously, as “stifling and frustrating” (faculty), “a form of surveillance” (James, student), “a huge obstacle to the intellectual progress of our field” (Kim, student), and “a worn out comp trope” that “arises from a very limited view of what the discipline does and what its work actually is” (Brenda, student). As the last snippets of response here attest, these current and future scholars are frustrated, however, not only because they feel personally constrained but, as suggested above, out of concern for the present and future status and potential knowledge-making contributions of the field as a whole. “Here’s the thing,” Paul explains, “I don’t mean to denigrate pedagogy. I’ve been a teacher for 12 years now in a variety of settings: middle school, high school, college . . ., [but if] we are to avoid the service trap—and I believe we should—and gain respect as a ‘legitimate’ area of study, we must not continue to define ourselves from an exclusively pedagogical basis. Otherwise, I fear we will become nothing more than servants to other causes and outside forces, i.e., preparing better lawyers and business-persons.” In sum, respondents are worried that the pedagogical imperative limits our intellectual and scholarly options, our range of vision and knowledge production, and, most significantly perhaps, our very conceptions of where literacy and writing occur, of what literacy and writing are. As Charles Bazerman has observed, though “[l]iterate activity . . . occupies much of the day of people in modern society,” the study of writing “remains a dispersed enterprise.” Yes, Bazerman acknowledges, “composition has paid primary attention to writing” in a way that no other field has, but he adds that our “core attention has tended to be narrow: on students and classes in a few courses in universities in the United States over the last several decades.” In short, Bazerman makes clear, we have not really studied writing; we have studied “college composition” (32–33). I give our graduate student respondent Kim the last word here, as she summarizes many of the preceding sentiments:

I don’t mean to imply that practical work doesn’t . . . advance our field intellectually. Clearly all good scholarship advances our progress. What I do mean, though,
is that requiring a pedagogical component in theoretical/historical work potentially harms that work by ... insisting that \textit{writing be studied and theorized only as what happens in the [college] classroom}, as opposed to what happens in other places in the university and the world. There's nothing wrong with studying the teaching of writing, but if that's the beginning and the end of R/C studies, our future isn't very bright. (Emphasis added)

This portion of our study, though obviously limited in scope, I believe still has some significant implications. Most immediately, it suggests that these wholly familiar issues and concerns still feel urgent to some new members of the field, and even to some veteran faculty, and thereby suggests that the "ongoing battle over the nature of our work" persists. But this portion of our study might hint at a second, related and more disturbing truth: that at least some young scholars are entering the field—are often beginning their dissertations—not with the sense of heady excitement and unlimited possibility that has marked the coming-to-composition narratives of so many of our "converts" over the years, but feeling preemptively constrained by what they perceive as a still primary focus on classroom-based inquiry. They are joining the rhetoric and composition professional community with a sense of apprehension about a disciplinary future they fear is not "very bright." While this is obviously troubling, the next section of this essay reveals that what is perhaps even more unsettling still is that students in our sample expressed having "crossed over" to rhetoric and composition precisely because they had hoped to \textit{escape} the confining, single modes of inquiry they perceived as demarcating other fields; because they wanted to do graduate work that would allow them to study something like "literacy broadly conceived," or the "workings of written discourse." That is, they expressed having entered the field to undertake interdisciplinary and broadly theoretical work.

\textbf{The New Converts; the "Whole Lotta Other Whys"}

Some of our graduate student respondents, when asked how and why they came to rhetoric and composition,\textsuperscript{3} did tell the "time-honored tale" with which I opened this essay: they recounted a conversion from literary studies motivated in large part by a desire to focus on teaching. "I came to the field through teaching," Emma says. "I began a M.A. program in literature, [taught] first-year composition to finance my M.A., and fell in love with the teaching and the research associated with it." Moreover, the students who told this familiar tale characterized composition not only as a "teaching subject," but, also still and
again, as the pragmatic alternative to literary studies, and as more attractive to them because of this greater practicality. Jonathan and Sarah both, for example, spoke of switching from literary studies to rhetoric and composition because it provided “something practical as opposed to Literature” (Jonathan), because “teaching writing [seemed like] a practical and useful thing to do” (Sarah). However, more often our students told a new story, a story of discovering rhetoric and composition and “converting” from literature because it seemed to allow for, even promise, a more holistic and far-reaching exploration of language than literary studies could. Jonathan, for example, who just above opposed the practicality of composition to (the esotericism, perhaps, of) literary studies, nonetheless mentions that he chose rhetoric and composition over literary studies because “it appeared to be open to . . . the study of literacy in general,” while Paul, too, said he “quickly became enamored” of the field because it seemed to afford more expansive, diverse opportunities for inquiry: “Mine is a love of language,” Paul explains, “of reading and writing, of communication in all its multiplicity of forms. Of meaning and meanings.” Paul also comments that during his M.A. program in literature his “interests had always been more in critical theory anyway” than in “reading the dead white guys,” suggesting, quite significantly I think, that to him rhetoric and composition looked like the discipline that would prove more conducive to “purely theoretical” work than the widely presumed more theoretical literary studies. Kim, as well, attributes her “sudden embrace of R/C” and her general “preference for writing over literature” to a preference for theoretical investigation—for working at what she labels the “meta” rather than “actual” level. “I liked the fact that I was [now] reading about writing, rather than [reading] examples of someone’s writing,” Kim recalls, and adds that she “was never especially motivated by the idea of teaching or application.” Finally, Brenda is most specific about having chosen rhetoric and composition for what she perceived as its broad scope; she is most specific, that is, about having chosen rhetoric and composition for its very nonspecificity:

What led me to choose this field is that I got really tired of being asked what my specialization was. I didn’t want to be pressed into choosing a particular area of literature or body of theory. I still don’t really. So, rhet/comp seemed like a good option to me. What’s not rhetoric? It seemed like a great opportunity to engage any number of literary, theoretical, historical, and philosophical texts while resisting getting caught within a reductive ‘specialty.’ . . . I came into this field because I fully believe that it has the potential to be interdisciplinary.
What, then, do these particular graduate students, these “new converts” who came to the field for what they viewed as its inherent openness, see as the purview and ideal directions of rhetoric and composition scholarship? As suggested by the above, many spoke in terms evocative of Worsham’s, asserting that we are, or need to become, “a discipline that engages in the study and theorization of discourse—period” (Brenda), a discipline that theorizes “language in use,” or “literacy and learning” (Emma; Molly). A few students framed our primary responsibilities in overtly politicized terms, talking explicitly and passionately about continuing what Olson has called “the tradition of ideological critique . . . that has always been a part of our field,” and that has sought to help students “position themselves intellectually to acquire agency in their worlds” (“Ideological” 82, 84). Yet our survey respondents also talked about our own positioning as intellectuals, and, specifically, about our need to produce trenchant discourse analyses that transcend not only the classroom but disciplinary and even academic/ “real-world” boundaries. To quote Brenda again, she thinks that “the necessary path of rhet/comp” is “to invest further in the utility of its work outside of the academy . . . and more fully integrate its pedagogical role with the study of other discursive practices of the public sphere”: “There is a serious need for rhetorical scholars . . . who can critique political rhetoric, propaganda, and the role of dissent,” Brenda urges—and she urges us to become those scholars. Like Brenda, James also states that he “hope[s] to see more intersections between pedagogy and the larger social arena,” and, in particular, would like to see “more scholarly attention to . . . governmental policies” and the “rhetorics of social movements.” In short, these emerging scholars see a pressing need, as Sam puts it, for rhetoric and composition to “evolve into a truly interdisciplinary field doing cultural work with political impact.”

Neither Brenda, James, Sam, nor any of our other respondents quoted above, I must clarify, want rhetoric and composition to abdicate its commitment to pedagogy or to students, but rather to supplement—“integrate” and “intersect,” as they say—this long-standing commitment with others. Such goals for our future are resonant with Olson’s own clarifying comments in the ominously titled “The Death of Composition as an Intellectual Discipline,” where he writes that “while we all desire to learn more about the teaching of writing, or about our own writing processes, these are not the only intellectual concerns we should have as a discipline” (24). “As a field devoted to how discourse works,” Olson argues, “composition . . . is perfectly situated to participate in the exciting cross-disciplinary investigations of the interrelations between
epistemology and discourse” (24). Our students’ goals for our future are also in line with Kurt Spellmeyer’s calls for work that “travels outside the field” to affect larger publics. In “Education for Irrelevance?” Spellmeyer mentions four books by composition scholars that he considers “notable exceptions” to the insularity of academic work, and that should thus serve as “guides to the future of our field”: Anne Ruggles Gere’s *Intimate Practices*, Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives*, Bazerman’s *The Language of Edison’s Light*, and Richard E. Miller’s *As if Learning Mattered*. These four books “have legs,” Spellmeyer writes; they explore new “constellations” and participate in the larger “sociology of knowledge” (84). In fact, the hopes (and fears) for our disciplinary futures expressed by Olson, Brenda, James, Sam, and Spellmeyer all seem to imply that far from needing to renege on our investment in pedagogy, we actually need to expand our very definition of the “pedagogical.” Though no one I am citing has used the term *public intellectual*, the implication here seems to be that if we could become scholars who study and theorize “discourse—period,” we would be in the perfect position to act and work as such.

These are inspirational and lofty dreams, and while it is encouraging to see emerging scholars holding fast to such expansive visions for the field—especially in the face of their concerns about the continued dominance of the pedagogical imperative—the dreams recounted here meet some rude awakenings when the terms *theory* or *rhetoric* raise their heads. Though our graduate student respondents have used both terms often above, explicit questions about the place or role of theory and rhetoric in the field led them back to their own questions about how those dreams might be realized, and about what the terms mean we should *do* as a discipline. As the next several sections of my analysis will remind us, however, our respondents are hardly alone here. Questions about the meaning, place, and function of *theory* and *rhetoric* (both as they relate to pedagogy and as they bear on our disciplinarity more generally) continue to haunt rhetoric and composition studies at large.

**The Theory/Theory Divide and Another Unspoken (as Well as Spoken) Question in the Air: “Whom Does the Theory Serve?”**

Graduate student responses to the question of how “theory” figures into the field return us again to Worsham’s description of the “ongoing battle over the nature of our work,” and to the pedagogical imperative itself. In fact, though I have focused above on those graduate student (and faculty) responses that argue for a broadened conception of rhetoric and composition (because these were the majority), there was nonetheless a still striking division in our sample.
between those who feel strongly that “theory has a place in its own right,” and those who feel that “theory should be used to benefit students,” or at least is “most meaningful” when it bears on classroom practice in some discernible way. This is old ground—both for this essay itself and for the field as a whole—and so to enter the conversations that are attempting to dislodge composition from this sticking point, I propose that it is first necessary to change—if only in a way that seems very subtle—the terms of the debate itself. Perhaps the “theory/practice split” can be better understood as what our graduate student respondent, Kim, aptly terms “a theory divide.”

“Let me just say this,” Kim begins: “I see a theory divide (among theory-doers, that is): there’s the theory that’s obviously germane to our field” (she goes on here to list theories and theorists of the composing process or aspects thereof, as well as classical and neoclassical theories of invention, *techne*, etc.), “and it exists peacefully in our field because its connections to teaching are clear and it’s not pushing any envelopes. But then there’s ‘imported theory,’ and by that I mean everything from Derrida to Deleuze to Butler and Zizek and beyond. There’s a clear line in the sand between the people who use/do this kind of theory and those who don’t.”

One distinction Kim seems to be making here is between theories we perceive as “ours,” and theories we perceive as “other.” That is, her distinction (especially because it includes classical rhetoric) turns on the word *germane*—“sprung from the same stock; . . . a near relative” (OED). A related distinction she is making is between the theories we perceive ourselves to have “built”—often through reflection upon or observation of writing and teaching phenomena—and Theory (capital-T intentional) we have “borrowed,” in this case from big-name postmodernists. Her distinction here turns on her word *imported*. But a final distinction Kim makes in passing, and the one I focus on henceforth, is between those who “use” theory and those who “do” theory. Her distinction here resides in the telling slash mark she puts between those two terms.

Connors may once again serve as the field’s representative of the “use-do-slash mark-view,” when he argues that the best “possible model for composition studies as a discipline” is one that “puts scholarly research *in the service of action* in colleges and universities,” while the other model, what we might call the “doing theory for theory’s sake” model, would have us “concentrating on . . . sterile intellectual puzzles”; “pursuing our own research in honorable obscurity and bothering no one” (20, my emphasis). Though I admit to holding Connors up as a bit of straw man, his views, and his concerns, are again not his alone. They are indicative that many of us in rhetoric and composition have
separated not *theory* from *practice* per se, but theory from theory. Motivated in large part by the pedagogical (or at least a pragmatic) imperative, we have separated, and valued respectively, theory that we perceive as clearly "of use," "in service to," from theory that is not. In short and, I argue, to our detriment, many of us have asked, and are still asking, Connors's question or some variation thereof: "Whom does the theory serve?" (15), a question that, as North puts it below, "rather misses the point" (97).

Connors defends the question "whom does the theory serve?" as "very practical" (15), and it is. However, with North, I would argue that precisely because it is a "practical" question or, more specifically, a question that makes practical demands of *theory*, it is misguided. As North reminded us twenty years ago now in *The Making of Knowledge*, it is simply not theory's (what he calls philosophy's) charge or nature to *be* applicable. Theory/philosophy "is not instrumental." North says plainly: "it does not move outside of itself for verification" but is instead concerned only with "the operations of reason" and "never-ending debate"—a debate, he emphasizes, which "does not lead to action" (96–97). North acknowledges that sentiments like Connors's—that theory's non-instrumentality makes it somehow "irresponsible" (111)—are pervasive within composition (and well beyond), and to those who would ask philosophy/theory to justify its worth by answering the question "What good does it do anyone else?" North offers the explanation that philosophical inquiry "is good at framing problems... so that other sorts of inquirers have a better sense of what they're involved in." However, he quickly adds that "while that answer suffices for political purposes," it, and the question to which it responds, is "facile," "unnecessarily reductive," determinedly "utilitarian," and, for these reasons, "rather misses the point." Philosophy does not deal "with things in the world, hands on, directly," North perseveres; what it *does* instead is reflect and enact the struggle for "cultural self-consciousness" (96–97). While those other sorts of inquirers might "harness" the products of this struggle— theorized positions—to political/pedagogical ends, theory itself is responsible, at most, for establishing "the preconditions... which might allow us to decide what to do," not for doing "the deciding itself." In the simplest terms possible, theory *might* come to inform our actions, but it is not meant to serve as "a guide to action" (101, 112). North thus concludes his chapter on philosophy in composition by reminding us that "modes of inquiry are in some ways very restricting things; to accept what power they offer," he insists, "is to accept, as well, that there are things they cannot do—or at least, that they cannot do and still be themselves" (115).
But restrictions are also very restricting things, and it would seem that a discussion of theory’s relationship and responsibility (or lack thereof) to what North calls “things in the world” can proceed no further without attention to praxis, and to the many efforts in our field (and beyond) that have sought to complicate, and even overcome, the restrictive theory/practice binary via this term. Understood most often as actions in the world informed by theory, compelled by theory, which then compel changes in theory itself, praxis calls attention to a necessary interdependence of “formal knowledge” and “human conduct” (Phelps 877–78), and to the ways in which this interdependence turns theory itself into an active, social practice. However, while praxis is necessary in any intellectual or political community, and while one could certainly never argue against its effectiveness in the world, I would like to argue against its effectiveness in overcoming the theory/practice split or, more to my point, the “use/do” theory divide and suggest instead that appeals to praxis only reinforce both.

First, by the most general definitions, as we have begun to see above, praxis is action driven by and resulting from theory. It is perhaps for this reason, and according to this basic definition, that Jasper Neel, in the opening sentence of “Reclaiming our Theoretical Heritage,” refers not to the field’s theory/practice split but to that “intractable conundrum, the theory versus praxis split” (3, my emphasis). Like Neel, Paulo Freire himself, whose work has so informed our field’s understandings of praxis, conflates the terms, and upholds the separation of both from theory, stating in a 1992 interview with Olson that what allows him to intervene in the world “is praxis; it is practice,” and encouraging us “to experience the tension between theory and praxis without denying one or the other” (“History” 6–7, my emphasis).

Perhaps the fusion of “praxis” and “practice” is somehow “wrong,” even when made by the likes of Freire, for certainly there are important distinctions to be made. And perhaps most important is the oft-repeated distinction that practice need not be critical—that is, consciously informed by theory—while praxis is explicitly theorized, politicized intervention, what Freire calls “reflection plus action” (qtd. in Olson, “History” 6). But, even before these terminological conflations, and even before the overt divisions between praxis and theory drawn by Neel and Freire, the recurrence of the word action alone in its definition suggests that—according to Connors’s, North’s, and Freire’s understandings alike—praxis would seem to uphold the theory/practice, and theory/theory, splits rather than ameliorate them: In contradistinction to theory/phi-
losophy, praxis puts intellectual inquiry in the service of acts; it deals with things hands on in the world directly, inserts itself into political "struggles in order to intervene in reality" (Freire qtd. in "History" 6). Again, I am not arguing "against praxis," which would be a ridiculous thing to do; I am not arguing against putting our hands on the world to change it. Rather, I am making a theoretical argument that, though heralded as the resolution to the theory/practice debates, praxis is actually symptomatic, not necessarily of a demand for application, but of a continual, overarching separation of use, service, intervention, and action, from and what North calls "reasoning and never ending debate," or what Freire, echoing Connors, calls "mere intellectual exercise" (6).

A better resolution, I would argue then, might come not from redefinitions of the relationship between theory and practice, but from a redefinition, or reunderstanding, of terms such as action, intervention, service, and use. Put simply, I would argue that the practice of theory is itself a useful doing—and not (only) when it is enacted in the world in the form of praxis, but as it acts in itself. Theory "worries the world," as Worsham wrote in "Coming to Terms" (103), or as Charles Schuster explains more elaborately, it "sets itself against the normative; its thrust is almost always to defamiliarize what we think we know, to compel us to reconsider what we assume we no longer have to think about" (41). While we can, and, according to North, Freire, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps, must acknowledge "the radical incompleteness of formal knowledge as a set of practical instructions" (Phelps 863), that acknowledgment need not, must not, translate into an understanding of theory as itself incomplete, inactive, or somehow not "useful." Theory performs the invaluable service of tracing, often in order to fracture, the very consensus around "reason." This seems to me to be neither a "mere" nor a "sterile" exercise.

In sum, and in order to facilitate the types of inquiry our "new converts" seem hungry to do, the types of inquiries they seem in many cases to have come here to do, we may need to ask a question wholly different from Connors's; we may need to "ask not what we can do with theory, but what theory can do to us." But even if we do come to embrace what has often derisively been called "theory for theory's sake," come to value theoretical inquiry for its own unique and indispensable purposes, and as complete in itself, what will we make of it? And I mean that quite literally: what theory will we make? In the next section, I again place student remarks in dialogue with published commentary that explores this issue.
Philosophical Foraging: Where Is the Making of Knowledge in Composition?

When asked about theory's place or role within the field, Brenda is yet again among our respondents offering some of the most thoroughgoing commentary. After defining theory as "the absolute center of rhetoric and composition," Brenda goes on to express her own confusion as to what, exactly, constitutes that center: "I often wonder what the discipline as a whole considers its subject to be and the role of theory within it," Brenda states. "After some thought, it would seem that the only theory rhet/comp claims as its own is 'process theory.' What else have we really constructed? Personally, I think we're post-process and the discipline is in the midst of an identity crisis." While the questions attending process/post-process theory are outside the scope of this essay, Brenda's "what else" question is one I would like to take up.

Obviously, compositionists have theorized the composing process and its teaching/learning in distinctive, ground-breaking ways. It is not arrogant but simply accurate to claim that we have forever altered writing instruction. Yet it is also not harshly accusatory, but again simply accurate to say—as Brenda has, and as Dobrin also has—that other than this discipline-founding innovation, "we have very few theories that we can label true 'composition' theories" (Dobrin 156). In fact, it is striking that, again and again in their responses to the question of theory's place and role within rhetoric and composition, graduate students consistently located and defined theory, not as Brenda does—as the center of the field—but as outside the field. They defined theory, variously, as something we "draw on," "borrow," "import" from other, "different fields of knowledge" in order to "apply" and "use." James for example, who above characterized the pedagogical imperative as "a form of surveillance" and spoke passionately about our need to produce scholarship that travels outside the field, nonetheless maintains that one of the most "exciting" features of rhetoric and composition studies is that it "draws theoretical insights from a variety of conceptual frameworks . . . and tests the applicability of those insights to our classroom practices, departmental negotiations, and institutional positioning" (my emphases). That is, James seems to find our import-and-apply approach a testament to the very interdisciplinarity that he and so many other of our "new converts" desire for the field. And in a way it is. But this approach attests to a certain, limited kind of interdisciplinarity only; to what Ellen Barton calls a "one-way interdisciplinarity" (245), and also to a formulaic mode of inquiry that has for too long characterized composition's relationship to other fields of study. It is perhaps indicative of just how long we are talking about
here that North's 1987 work once again best illuminates this dilemma. Surveying the state of theoretical/philosophical inquiry in the field to that point, North observed that our dominant philosophical activity (to the extent that it is "philosophical" at all according to his schema) had thus far proven to be what he called "foraging." The "Composition Philosopher," North explained then of this hallmark process, "makes a foray into some field outside Composition itself, works to reach some degree of expertise in it, then returns, ready to work out an argument about the nature of doing, learning, or teaching writing on the basis of the foraged premises." As a result, "the majority of Philosophical arguments [in composition] have followed a single pattern," North says: "Recent Research in ______ and its Implications for the Teaching of Writing." North notes that, to a certain extent of course, "all philosophical premises are borrowed," but adds that in composition, "borrowing has been such a distinctive activity that ... it warrants the special label" (102, 105). While it is certainly the case that we are now borrowing from far different, more radicalizing theories than we were when North wrote his book—for example, into the slot he leaves open we now insert aspects of feminism, queer theory, postcolonial theories, etc., etc., rather than cognitive psychology—the formula itself has remained intact. Kim's elaboration of the term imported theory, and of the process that attends it, is especially revealing of the enduring power (and current configuration) of the pattern North describes, and of her desire to do work that exceeds it: "I think we need work that seriously engages theory, rather than merely using it to make some preconceived point. ... Maybe what I'm saying is that we need to do scholarship for scholarship's sake. As humanistic as that sounds, I'd like to see more rhetorical theory [and] newer forms of rhetorical criticism ... rather than [work] that produces the same results each time with just a different text." In short, Kim concludes, we "need to stop asking what Zizek has to do with first year comp."

Dobrin, like James above—and despite his own indictments of the pedagogical imperative and calls that we must construct new and different forms of knowledge—nonetheless also seems to view our penchant for borrowing as no less than a coup for interdisciplinarity, asserting that precisely "[b]ecause we have very few theories that we can label true 'composition theories,'" because "we have depended upon various fields for supplying us with knowledge," we have "perhaps done more to further speculation from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds than any other field" (156, my emphasis). Even North—despite his corrective explanations of theory—offered his description of our "borrowing" practices "mostly without disparagement" (102). But I find
Dobrin's and James's laudatory comments about "borrowing" to be generous reads of our theoretical endeavors and would like to suggest that if not disparagement, at least some concern is by now in order. Though we have long foraged about in other bodies of knowledge—and, yes, to some innovative and crucial ends—we are still primarily importers only, consumers, an "interdisciplinary" field, if it can be said that we are one, with little to no interdisciplinary influence. (Exceptions to this trend are perhaps our influence on assessment as a field and, in some locales at least, on secondary English education.) As Spellmeyer reminds us in "Marginal Prospects," even within the confines of the academy, "College English and CCC cannot truthfully be said to circulate in the same universe as Critical Inquiry or Cultural Critique" (163).

To a certain extent, I would like to add immediately, this one-way interdisciplinarity is not our "fault," for, sadly, Maxine Hairston's indictment from 1985 is still relevant today: even our closest neighbors, literary scholars, often "don't know writing theory" and apparently "are making no attempt to learn" (qtd. in Barton 245). What is most distressing about this situation, moreover, is not that such willful "ignore-ance" is damaging to our disciplinary status (or egos), but that it takes place even when our academic neighbors would seem to have a vested interest in what we could teach them, and not only about "writing theory" but about teaching itself. In fact, to revisit Brenda's question about "what else we have constructed besides process theory," it seems an obvious answer would be that even if few people outside the field are paying attention, and even if we have done so by "borrowing," and via instrumental formulae such as North's that take our work out of the realm of "philosophy-proper," we have constructed many sophisticated theories of teaching and of teaching's sociopolitical dynamics and implications. Indeed, our field's discussions of teaching—in the very journals mentioned by Spellmeyer—are not only what have helped define us, for better or worse, but are what should have positioned us perfectly to be an interdisciplinary exporter with, as James says, "much to offer... teachers and students throughout the academy." In short, then, it is by no means only a testament to our own limitations, or to the potential interdisciplinary value of our work, that College English and College Composition and Communication do not circulate in other universes, but a testament to the perpetual devaluation of pedagogy itself.

With that extended caveat in place, however, in another respect we have perhaps not achieved a multidirectional interdisciplinarity because we have been constrained by our own willful adherence to formulae such as North's, and by a continued mistrust and, as I have argued, misunderstanding of theo-
retical investigation. Thus constrained, we have perhaps not achieved interdisciplinary status because we have not as yet, at least not en masse, got on to the business of theorizing “discourse broadly conceived,” but more often on to the business of infighting and calling upon each other to do so (or not to do so). In the concluding sections of this essay, I suggest two possible, related paths out of this seemingly insurmountable imminence. One of them has to do with looking to our rhetorical past in order to see a better future—a future reflecting and keeping what Theresa Enos has called “our two faces”—and the other has to do with looking away from our faces altogether.

**What’s Not Rhetoric?**

“It’s not too early,” C. Jan Swearingen wrote in 2002, “to observe an institutional consequence of strained relations between rhetorical theory and composition practice,” nor even to predict their impending “segregation, or divorce” (21). Six years prior, Gerald Mulderig claimed that the 1990s had thus far ushered in “a shift in and a narrowing of the field,” away from the “integration of rhetorical history and writing pedagogy—indeed away from a scholarly interest in the history of rhetoric altogether”—and “back to our unsatisfactory past,” to “an earlier time when composition pedagogy dominated the field” (167, 169, 171). And, to return to North once more, he forewarned in 1987 that though the connection between “rhetoric” and “composition” had thus far proved “quite durable,” it was even then not too early to detect tensions he thought could sow the “seeds of the field’s dissolution” (65).

Another kind of “dramaturgy,” to reinvoke Worsham, has developed around this particular split, with each “side” accusing the “other,” not necessarily of “retarding the progress of the field,” but of being at least of increasingly marginal relevance to the field, and often just of being a different field altogether. Swearingen, for example, claims that “[m]any rhetorical theorists now want nothing to do with writing programs and have joined the theory elite within English departments generally” (which is the outcome North forecasted), while compositionists are identifying with (or lured by) distinctly professionalizing programs or tracks in WPA or business and technical writing (21; see also Mulderig). Or another prevalent understanding of the rhetoric/composition split is that compositionists, who see themselves as specialists in *contemporary* theories of teaching or composing, are disassociating from the term *rhetoric* not because of its “elitism,” but because it has not managed to disassociate *itself* from what Spellmeyer calls “the ponderousness of The Classics” (“Bigger” 278). As Enos summarily puts it, rhetoric has come to be
associated with "the theoretical and historical study of texts," and composition with undergraduate instruction and/or "the theory and practice of the writing process" (247).

But whatever your particular version of the divide, and wherever you lay the blame (or praise) for it—with the elitist, ponderous, past-dwelling rhetoricians, or the professionalizing, pragmatic, present-dwelling compositionists—there is evidence that the seeds of dissolution are indeed being sown. According to scholars such as those I have cited above, and in the perceptions of students I cite below, the field of rhetoric and composition is, in the most extreme cases, gradually evacuating itself of its first term (if not explicitly in name, then implicitly in institutional practice) or, in other cases, is undergoing an interesting inversion of its titular terms. As Swearingen and Mulderig both have commented, while the renowned "rhetoric revival" of the 1960s helped lend intellectual/disciplinary legitimacy to the dispersed, disparaged enterprise of composition instruction, it is possible that now "the prejudice is going in reverse," with graduate curricula offering fewer (or omitting) courses in rhetorical theory and history, and job searches advertising for what Swearingen calls "true comp" hires (Swearingen qtd. in Ramey 217; see also Mulderig 164, 169).

Student comments about the place of "rhetoric" in our field echo such sentiments and describe institutional realities in exactly these terms. Across the board of our responses, students identified "rhetoric" with both theoretical and historical inquiry and "composition" with the pedagogical and applied aspects of the discipline. Many students also identified rhetoric with and as "the classics," even if only to clarify that rhetoric is "not just classical rhetoric" (Paul), "not simply . . . a pile of classical texts" (Sam), and that to (re)conceive of the field as "Rhetorical Studies" would not "mean that the classics have to be or should be the basis for what we do" (Kim). In fact, Sam tellingly recommends that if we want to retain the term, "we might have to reinvent 'rhetoric' to make it sound more appealing to different constituencies within rhet/comp and outside."

Predictably then, with these divergent terminological associations in place, our students talked of "sensing the possibility of a rhet/comp split in a few years" (Brenda), and in many cases spoke of the split as already established: "Rhetoric and composition seem to be . . . two distinct areas though the title of our field tries to persuade us this is not the case," Sarah says, while Ann remarked that she "almost feel[s] deceived" by such persuasive tactics, having found what she calls a "huge discrepancy" between the title of her program—which includes both terms and foregrounds "rhetoric"—and its actual course
offerings, which, in her view, are almost exclusively devoted to "pedagogical scholarship and composition." (One student, echoing Mulderig and Swearingen's concerns, said she was "embarrassed" that she would earn her degree without having taken a course in classical rhetoric.) Many students noted the split between our "rhetoric journals" (RSQ and Rhetoric Review) and our "composition journals" (CCC and College English), and finally, perhaps the most striking testament to the "reversal of prejudice" noted above, is Paul's observation that "[t]here should be place for [rhetoric] within our field, and not just as the redhead stepchild to composition" (my emphasis).

What I would like to focus on here, however, is not simply that such comments again seem to reflect an overarching tension in the field, but that they also (and again) reflect that these graduate students might want something new in and for our future. And in this case, what they seem want is something old: they seem to want rhetoric—back—and they seem to want it back not to preserve what little status composition has garnered through its affiliation with the term, but because they find rhetoric to be an ideal framework for the diverse, divergent, inquiries into "discourse broadly conceived" they would like to pursue. "Rhetoric is what links my work with business writing students with someone else's work on Aristotle's Rhetoric and another's work on coming-out narratives," Emma argues. "We are all studying the use of language. [Rhetoric] is what both unifies the field and allows for such a diversity of inquiries." Though North forewarned that "rhetoric" and its "followers" would drive the field apart, "rhetoric," in many of these graduate students' views, is instead a disciplinary title that allows us to preserve what North has also described as the "pluralism that was responsible for creating Composition in the first place," and that must "remain its vital core" (369).

Interesting, though, is that while students celebrate rhetoric for the pluralism it affords, their definitions of the term, and its purview, are actually fairly consistent (if broad). They speak of rhetoric simultaneously as "the very power of language to shape our lives" (Paul) and as the way to critically examine that power; as both the "politics of language use" (Sarah) and as a body of knowledge that supplies a metavocabulary for studying those politics so that we might "challenge dominant discourses" (Molly). And finally, and of particular significance to this discussion, students connect rhetoric—and argue that rhetoric is a term that allows us to remain connected—to teaching; they note that it has what David Fleming reminds us is a decidedly "pedagogical past" (173), though they also suggest that its advantage over "composition" is that rhetoric takes us beyond a focus on writing pedagogy, and even beyond a fo-
cus on writing itself, in ways that “composition” can not, thereby allowing us to study language in a wider variety of instantiations and contexts. “If rhetoric were the field’s key term,” Kim states, “if we were Rhetorical Studies, not rhetoric and composition, the teaching of writing would obviously remain important, but would be one component of a larger study of language, broadly conceived.” In short, graduate student responses seem to suggest that it is what Janice Lauer has called the “spaciousness of rhetoric” that can provide an ideal designation for all of what we (could) do, an appellation around which an array of disciplinary inquiries and pursuits might best coalesce, and not because it best contains those inquiries, but because it permits them to disseminate and disperse. As Brenda asked earlier, “what’s not rhetoric?”

Though I will not attempt to offer a definitive answer to Brenda’s question, I will point out that she is in some two thousand years’ worth of good company in asking it, or in asking its obverse: What is rhetoric? Rhetoric was born in “a kind of identity crisis,” John Mucklebauer reminds us in “Returns of the Question.” At least since Plato, a primary task of rhetoric, what North calls “its adherents’ major preoccupation” (63), has been the work of defining and redefining itself, of asking questions about its scope and province, for example, and about its relationships to other modes of inquiry and knowledge production—of asking questions about what rhetoric can do and “still be itself.” One might therefore respond to the question “what is rhetoric?” Mucklebauer concludes, only “with the answer, ‘The art of never finally answering that question.’” While overwhelming from a theoretical standpoint, this question immediately gives rise to an equally disorienting practical question, which is this time not “beside the point” for being so, and that question is: Is rhetoric too spacious, is it inevitably beset by its own too-muchness, to constitute (or unify) a field of study? While many rhetoric and composition scholars over the years (and students quoted herein) have suggested that rhetoric’s spaciousness is its disciplinary strength and have argued for the necessity of keeping rhetoric “flexible and indeterminate” (Bazerman, qtd. in Fleming 174), just as many others have wondered how a term born in an identity crisis can possibly serve to unify a field that is purportedly experiencing one. As Susan Jarratt suggests, it is quite a significant practical problem indeed that when we introduce ourselves to colleagues as “rhetoricians,” they often “[greet] the announcement of [our] academic field of specialization with as much puzzlement today as twenty years ago.”

As the preceding discussion could not fail to make clear, I share these concerns about rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary viability, and while I
tend to "side" with our graduate student respondents in finding "spaciousness" a particular strength of rhetoric, I understand as well the problematics that attend what "spaciousness" stands for, or perhaps more to the point, what it does not. Yet, as suggested above, despite students' confusion about rhetoric's place in—or as—the field, they have offered some coherent, historically legitimized definitions of the term, as well as some fairly clear, if again broad, characterizations of what rhetoric as a disciplinary marker would allow and encourage us to do. In my view, they have implicitly offered definitions consonant with Burkan understandings of rhetoric as a "globalized metadiscourse oriented to the interpretation and criticism of symbolic inducement in all its forms and settings" (Fleming 171). In noting this commonality, I do not mean to offer Burkan's definition of rhetoric, or our students' Burkan-inflected definitions of rhetoric, as the final answer to a two-thousand-year-old question, but I would like to propose that we curtail our question asking. In fact, rather than continuing to participate in the rhetorical tradition's tradition of endlessly belaboring definitions and demarcating spaces, I propose that we might better honor what is best in that tradition by continuing to revive and reinvent it, honor it by moving out into all the spaces left and doing definitive work. The students I have quoted extensively herein seem to have some ideas as to how to get there, and as to what that work might be. They seem to have some clear ideas about the "whole lotta other whys" they want to address, as they study discourse broadly conceived, symbolic inducements in a multiplicity of forms.

**Conclusion: Banishing Echo and Narcissus**

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There was little agreement about how the purpose of the organization should be described. . . . There was agreement that we should, as quickly as possible, finish worrying about what we are and get on with being it.

—Robert Gorrell, CCC 1961

The content of much of the foregoing has been familiar, but the familiarity is a large part of my point: after thirty-some years of self-reflexive questioning, both veteran and new scholars are still speaking in terms of the potentiality of the field or, more pessimistically, in terms of its paralysis or dividedness, and they are speaking with a sense of urgency, a sense of freshness almost, that would seem to belie the very familiarity of these discussions. Composition studies is a "less unified and more contentious discipline" now than it was in 1990,
Richard Fulkerson pronounces in 2005's "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century"; we are "in for a bumpy ride." And the causes of the bumps in our road? Fulkerson outlines a few, but one is the "importation of cultural studies from the social sciences and literary theory" (654–55, 663, 681); another, according to one of the many respondents to Fulkerson's article, Jeffrey Zorn, is that we have abandoned "pragmatism" for "professional distinction" in the form of "bogus name-dropping expertise," that "we lost our way" when we began "grasping at theory" (Dickson et al. 754, 752). In short, the causes of the bumps in our road seem to be the usual suspects.

In her 2002 essay "Rhetoric and Composition as a Coherent Intellectual Discipline," Swearingen characterizes our field's developmental years as marked by "a preoccupation with anxious self-definition and redefinition" and notes that the "current scene bears an uncanny resemblance to the scenes . . . that started conversations twenty-something years ago" (13). Olson, in the same year, writes that "since the beginnings of composition as a field we all have been struggling over how to define it, over its very heart and soul," and while his concern in this passage is that the struggle is becoming increasingly "malevolent and mean spirited" ("Death" 30–31), my concern is that the struggle itself, even when genial, rigorous, and provocative, is becoming at least wearisome and is actually what might prove deadly to our intellectual endeavors. My concern is therefore more in line with Swearingen's: that we preoccupy ourselves with anxious acts of definition "sometimes at the expense of focusing on theoretical and critical issues" (13, my emphasis).

Though the focus of this essay has been the field's entrapment in three of our oldest and endlessly recycled debates, there is evidence of our movement, and of movement into precisely those more expansive terrains repeatedly described herein. At the time of this writing, the theme for the upcoming Feminisms and Rhetorics conference, for example, is "civic discourse," and new doctoral programs are emerging, and old ones reconceiving themselves, as programs in "Rhetoric and Writing Studies," "Composition and Cultural Rhetoric," "Cultural and Critical Studies," "Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing," "Rhetoric and Political Cultures," etc. Perhaps our "new converts" will find their homes in such places. Yet, despite such indications that the calls for broadened conceptions of the field are being heard at last, there is equally ample evidence that we are continuing to preoccupy ourselves with ourselves. Articles such as Fulkerson's still appear with some regularity, as do edited collections with titles such as Living Rhetoric and Composition: Stories of the Discipline (Roen et al.), or Composition Studies in the New Millennium: Rereading the Past,
Rewriting the Future (Bloom et al.). I would like to acknowledge that, as the title of the last collection mentioned (and of Fulkerson's article) suggests, the stock taking reflected by these works is to some degree a response to a "millennial imperative" to reflect and reassess, and, moreover, will allow that the dawn of the millennium happened to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of CCCC, certainly another impetus for disciplinary reflection. I would further acknowledge that various other disciplines struggle with returns of self-reflexive questions, and have recently written at length about their own changes and crises, and some have even declared their own "deaths." The entire university as we know it, after all, is purportedly "in ruins." Yet, as composition studies is distinct in its penchant for "borrowing," we are also, in my view, unrivaled in our proclivity for self-examination. I am not arguing that this is an unimportant activity, but only that the costs are indeed high when self-scrutiny comes at the expense of taking up other critical concerns and of making other, more innovative and far-reaching forms of knowledge. I am arguing that composition studies has paid and is paying the price for our disciplinary self-indulgence, and that the time has come to forge a disciplinary identity by leaving our identity crisis behind.

In closing, I must note the deep irony that this essay is yet another instantiation of the very work I am suggesting is detrimental to our disciplinary growth. Nevertheless, I am suggesting that we make a concerted, collective effort to release ourselves from the pattern reflected here: from the pattern of producing so much scholarship about ourselves, from the pattern, which is perhaps our rhetorical inheritance, of attempting to determine what our current and future intellectual work is as a primary facet of our intellectual work. A living rhetoric and composition, it seems, demands nothing less.

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Appendix A: The Future(s) of Composition Studies Questionnaire for Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Students
The following survey seeks to ascertain how a representative sample of Rhetoric and Composition graduate students currently working at either the prospectus or dissertation stage perceive and feel about the future directions of inquiry and scholarship in
Rhetoric and Composition. If you are a Rhetoric and Composition graduate student currently working at the prospectus or dissertation stage, please respond as thoroughly as you can to the following questions. If you'd like, you may pick and choose from among the questions that speak most directly to your particular concerns about the future(s) of Rhet/Comp., but all respondents must answer questions 1–2. The results of this survey will form and be included in an article that will be submitted for publication. All names will be changed and your institutional affiliation will remain anonymous. Thank you for your time.

1. Does your current project have direct application to the composition classroom/ the teaching of writing? Explain.

2. Regardless of whether or not your project has direct application to the teaching of writing, have you felt (either directly or indirectly) pressured or obligated in any way to translate your project into pedagogical terms, or to demonstrate its relevance to in/to the writing classroom? If yes, can you briefly explain the sources of your feelings of “pressure?”

3. (a) What do you see as the purview, or perhaps particular responsibilities, of rhetoric and composition scholarship?

(b) Where/How does theoretical work fit into your current conception of rhetoric and composition studies, and what do you think theory’s place should be in our field? That is, how and to what ends do you think we currently “do”/use or create theory in rhetoric and composition, and do you see the current role and production of theory in our field changing or in need of change? Why?

(c) Similarly, where/how does rhetoric fit into your current conceptions of rhetoric and composition studies, and what do you think rhetoric’s place should be in our field?

(d) What, in general, do you see as the necessary future direction(s) of rhet/comp scholarship? That is, what kinds of scholarly work do you think rhetoric and composition studies will and/or should be pursuing in the near future and why?

(e) What particular trends do you see in our field that you find encouraging in regard to your above predictions and/or goals for our future(s)? And, what trends do you see that might suggest obstacles to the future(s) you envision and hope for?

Appendix B: The Future(s) of Composition Studies: Questionnaire for Rhetoric and Composition Dissertation Directors/Committee Members

The following single-question survey is part of a larger survey-study that seeks to ascertain the directions of future inquiry and scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition Studies. More specifically, the study seeks to do so by learning what kinds of culminat-
ing projects a representative sample of graduate students in the field are doing, and what kinds of work they are being encouraged to do. The results of this survey will form and be included in an article that will be submitted for publication. If you have served on multiple prospectus or dissertation committees for (at least) the last 2 years, please take 5 or 10 minutes to answer the following question. All names will be changed and your institutional affiliation will remain anonymous. Thank you for your time.

When you serve on a rhetoric and composition prospectus/dissertation committee, do you require or encourage your graduate students to do work that makes direct connections to, or at least gestures toward, the composition classroom/teaching of writing? Why/not?

**Notes**

1. It has often been argued that rhetoric and composition is not a “discipline” or, at best, is a “mixed” or, as Janice Lauer put it, “dappled discipline,” because of its lack of methodological unity. Many of us have therefore relied on the descriptor “field of study” instead. However, if we define an academic discipline as a branch of knowledge considered distinct from other branches and marked as distinct by the existence of graduate programs, journals, professional societies, and the like, rhetoric and composition would seem to have disciplinary status.

2. See Appendix A.

3. See Appendix B.

4. All graduate student names are pseudonymous.

5. We asked graduate student respondents why they chose rhetoric and composition as a field of study as a follow-up question to our initial survey; hence its absence from the appendix.

6. I am comfortable using the terms *theory* and *philosophy* interchangeably with regard to North’s particular definition of philosophical inquiry as that which “derives its identity from its method, not its subject matter,” and which traces premises to a conclusion in order to reason through problems (95–96).

7. Earlier in this section I used Kim’s comments to draw a distinction between theories we have “built” through observation and Theory-capital-T, and it would seem to be according to this very distinction that North separates “researchers” from “philosophers”: in direct opposition to his definition of philosophical inquiry, those whom North calls “researchers” develop or build “theory” by working with “empirical phenomena,” so that they might, in turn, “discover generalizable ‘laws’ which can account for—and, ideally, predict”—those phenomena in the future (136–37). This is “theory” that moves outside itself for verification, and so, in North’s schema, actually becomes something other than theory or philosophy.
8. Thanks to Daniel Smith for this quotable comment.

9. In “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” Fleming cites Lunsford, Enos and Brown, Bizzell and Heritage, and Bazerman as proponents of flexible conceptions of rhetoric, and Cole, Gaonkar, Leff, Moss, and Vickers as some representatives of the view that too much flexibility stretches “rhetoric” to meaninglessness.

10. In order: Michigan State, San Diego State, Syracuse, Pittsburgh, University of Minnesota, University of Maryland.

11. I borrow this phrase from Bill Readings’s influential book, *The University in Ruins*.

**Works Cited**


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