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Richard E. Miller

Composing English Studies: Towards a Social History of the Discipline

It has become something of a commonplace—at least for those working in composition—to take note of the fact that Gerald Graff’s institutional history, Professing Literature, excludes the contributions made by theorists, scholars, and teachers of composition to the discipline of English Studies. Graff openly acknowledges this limit to his work in his introduction, where he explains:

I will deal only in passing with the teaching of composition, though the pioneer work of William Riley Parker, Wallace Douglas, and Richard Ohmann has shown that without that enterprise the teaching of literature could never have achieved its central status, and none of the issues I discuss would matter very much. (Professing 2)

Cutting up the field of data, establishing a central concern, creating a marginal zone beyond which questions are not to be asked—such decisions, though never entirely innocent, are nevertheless a necessary and inevitable part of constituting a new area of study. In this instance, faced with the task of simultaneously organizing and containing the sprawling institutional history of English Studies, Graff has to draw the line somewhere—so he eliminates “that enterprise” whose laborers are, more often than not, graduate students, part-timers, adjunct professors, women. The rationale for this exclusion, presumably, is that, while the physical labor of those in composition provides the economic basis for the ongoing production of literary criticism, intellectual work in composition has not significantly contributed to those parts of English Studies’ institutional history
that interest Graff most—and thus, by implication, has not played an important role either in providing any of the central terms for the major debates in English Studies or in helping to define the object and dominant methods of the discipline's research.

Of course, sweeping composition to the margins of the history of English Studies does accurately reflect one aspect of the prevailing organization of most English departments, where the economic importance of work in composition is grudgingly acknowledged, but the intellectual and scholarly importance of such work consistently escapes notice. Nonetheless, given Graff's particular interest in exposing English Studies' internal conflicts, his decision to exclude a discussion of the prolonged conflict between work in composition and work in the other areas of literary studies seems harder to justify or to explain. It is almost as if the gulf between the two areas has grown so wide that those who work in literary studies quarrel only with one another, completely unaware that one of the abiding preoccupations for those of us in composition is figuring out how to position ourselves in such a way that the implications of our intellectual, scholarly, and pedagogical insights might be recognized and more broadly considered by those on the other side of the gulf. By leaving this conflict uninterrogated, Graff's history silently reproduces the longstanding hierarchical division of labor in English Studies, where it is taken for granted that meaningful work occurs in the realm of literary studies and menial labor takes place in the composition classroom.

Since this hierarchical relationship materially influences hiring and tenure decisions, salary levels, and work loads, efforts like Graff's (which, however well intentioned, serve to legitimate this aspect of the departmental status quo) hold more than a passing historical interest for those who work in composition. And, indeed, in the past decade, compositionists have openly begun to combat this all-too-familiar relegation to the economic and intellectual lower classes by attempting to organize and professionalize the field in a number of well-publicized initiatives. Among these has been the steady growth of graduate programs allowing concentration in composition, rhetoric, and/or literacy studies; the proliferation of monographs and book-length publications on the theory and practice of composition; and the elaboration of workers' rights initiatives like the Wyoming Resolution. There has also been a renewed effort to provide an institutional history of composition that moves beyond what Robert Connors has described as "the simple heroes-and-villains narrative" that characterized work in this area prior to 1984 (64). As disparate as the historical projects and methodologies are of this second generation of historians (including Connors, James Berlin, Susan Jarrat, Sharon Crowley, Jan Swearington, Andrea Lundsford, and Stephen North) their work shares the common
practice of placing composition/rhetoric center stage and, turning the tables on the kind of history recorded by Graff, allots literary studies but a shadowy existence.

Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* provides perhaps the best example of the ambitions and limits of this approach. In an effort to organize the “emerging field” into a story of how “composition” is currently in the process of becoming “Composition,” North sets out to catalogue the field’s principal figures and to capture the sweep of its own central conflicts. Although historical and taxonomic work of this kind undoubtedly provides composition with the appearance of a field-coherence it previously lacked and, consequently, may well prove to be of use to those arguing the case for composition’s specialization with administrators and department chairs, the production of such parallel histories does not, in itself, put one in a position to contest either the way the discipline of English Studies has been divided or to disrupt the historical narrative used to organize and explain these divisions. To the contrary, this approach leaves the line separating composition and literary studies intact and uninterrogated, the division of labor in the two areas unchallenged, and the privileged definition of disciplinary specialization unproblematized, leading, at best, to a “separate but equal” status for the “emerging” field.

In *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, the consequences of working within these constraints are evidenced in North’s production of a valuable compendium of information about the range of conflicting concerns and allegiances that define work in the area of composition, which is also specifically designed to meet an institutional need to organize the emergent field of “Composition” into a subspecialty subject to comprehensive examination just like any other. Indeed, as North relates it, it was following the failure of one of his graduate students to pass a comprehensive examination in composition that caused him to see the need to provide “an overview, a syntheses, that the student simply didn’t have—or, more accurately, that Composition as a field seemed not to have” (iv). With this goal in mind, North never questions aloud what it means to provide an “exam-driven” portrait of the field’s history or how such institutional constraints influence what one might call the “exam-friendly” narrative he ends up writing. The seemingly inevitable result of this approach, in other words, is the production of essentially the same kind of history Graff has written, only with a cast of characters and conflicts from composition substituted for those found in literary studies.

Before suggesting an alternative approach to writing the history of the discipline of English Studies, I would like to discuss briefly an entirely different tactic for changing the relationship between the areas of compo-
Composition and literary studies—a plan briefly entertained in Evan Watkins' *Work Time: English Departments and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Towards the end of *Work Time*, Watkins describes the conflict between composition and literary studies as one example of the discipline's ongoing concern with "defining how, in what way, for what end, and for whom work in English is carried out" (258). Watkins goes on to say that, from "a certain angle of entry," such disagreements about the proper work of the discipline would appear to mark "English as a politically charged field, a contradiction-crossed territory whose very instability affords opportunities for political direction and use" (258–59). Thinking along these lines, as Watkins explains it:

Composition teaching, for example, long relegated by the upper reaches of literary theory to simply part of the routine performance of responsibilities for general education in the university—to be assigned whenever possible to graduate students, temporaries, and beginning staff—instead reemerges as singularly appropriate for the practical elaboration of theoretical directions initially worked out across the more familiar domain of a literary canon. For at the point when, as either promise or threat, the boundaries of the "literary text" begin to dissolve into the mobile apparatuses of "textual production," then composition courses, so far from rote exercises performed as a "service" or to distinguish students with sufficient talent and interest to proceed to literary study proper, become the laboratory zone to test the possibilities of a pedagogical expansion of territory. (259)

Restructuring the relationship between composition and literary studies as described here seems, at first glance, to be a singularly worthwhile endeavor. In this new department, composition would no longer appear as the institutional space reserved for "rote exercises performed as a "service,"" but rather as a site for "the practical elaboration of theoretical directions." By dovetailing composition and literary studies in this way, composition courses would offer more students earlier access to the theoretical issues and the textual work most valued by their literature professors, thereby enabling "a pedagogical expansion of territory."

Although such changes might appear to hold out the promise of disturbing dominant assumptions about what constitutes a "literary" text, who should have access to such texts, and how such texts should be read, Watkins provides this example of a restructured English department to illustrate the futility of reform efforts that focus exclusively on what Watkins designates the "work practices" of English teachers. Speaking for students who view these internal conflicts about how and what to teach "from the rather different angles of entry of 'minorities' and an 'old' working class," Watkins asserts that such students are bound to see the
change in teaching practices deployed in the classroom only as "the proliferation of local demands arbitrarily imposed at impossible to predict points whose sole purpose is to generate a shifting configuration of requirements that will preclude successful passage" (260). That is, since these students are primarily interested in getting through English to some other point and thus, like their future employers, are most concerned with neither the new content or methods of these entry level courses but rather with the grades they will receive, they view a shift in their teachers' "work practices" as nothing more than another set of "arbitrarily imposed" hurdles designed to prevent them from succeeding in school and achieving their financial dreams. In the name of these students, then, and in recognition of the way the inevitable circulation of final grades to transcripts serves to erase the content, quality, or character of an individual teacher's work practices, Watkins recommends a program of reform that focuses not on the work practices of English Studies' teachers, but one that instead "uses the position of English in the social circulation of people to build a support structure for multiple forms of resistances diffused throughout multiple locations" (264).

Before considering what shifting the locus of reform from "work practices" to "the position of English in the social circulation of people" entails, I would like to draw attention to how composition gets constructed in the brief moment Watkins imagines restructuring the English department. Although Watkins appears to be entertaining the idea of a new department where work in composition and literary studies is not so rigidly divided, under the new structure composition actually continues in its principal role as handmaiden to literary studies. That is, in Watkins' imagined department, composition is the place where theoretical advances "initially" worked out elsewhere are realized in practice, a laboratory for articulating the pedagogical implications of literary theory's dissolution of the "literary text" into "textual production." No vectors of influence are imagined to travel in the other direction, no suggestion entertained that the theoretical and scholarly work of composition might have something to offer literary studies. Thus, even in this momentary flight of fancy, composition remains principally the place of practice and pedagogy, the grateful recipient of the theoretical and scholarly advances of literary studies, an abandoned territory upon which anything might be built. In this moment, then, Watkins' work and Graff's converge, for he, too, seems unable to imagine composition as a field where theory and scholarship might already be active or as an area whose expertise consists in something other than the practical elaboration of theories conceived elsewhere.

Against the prevailing currents of these intellectual and economic histories, which threaten to sweep composition from view, I would argue,
first, for the importance of seeing composition as the institutional site reserved for investigating acts of reading and writing as evidenced in and by student texts. Defining composition in this way (I will address competing definitions shortly) allows composition to surface as the field whose very expertise lies in initiating students into an exploration of how meaning gets made—the institutional location, in short, where student work rather than the literary text serves as the principal subject of study. One of the virtues of defining the field in this way is that it focuses attention directly on students, the work institutionally required of them, and the problems involved in mediating between the desires of the former and the demands of the latter. Had Graff or Watkins taken up the set of concerns I have collected here under the name of composition, they might well have written significantly different books about the conflicts and the organization of work in English Studies. In proposing this definition of composition, I wish to do more than highlight the significant exclusion of work in composition from what I will designate, for the sake of convenience, the broadly intellectual and economic accounts of English Studies' institutional history. My larger concern, rather, is to initiate a consideration of what the consequences are of consistently cutting up the field of English Studies so that work in composition and the concerns that work represents so quickly disappear from view. Such a consideration will, in turn, provide the preliminary grounds for my concluding proposal for a social history of English Studies.

Turning first to Graff, then, the immediate methodological consequence of his exclusion of composition is, as I have already noted, that his history is just another, albeit well researched, story about conflicts between literature professors. More importantly, by excluding composition from his study, Graff effectively places out of bounds questions about how the conflicts he has discussed influenced how teachers taught, the work students were encouraged to produce under the competing literary systems, and how such student work was evaluated. In other words, because he focuses exclusively on conflicts over competing notions of literature, Graff never investigates how such conflicts affected the work required of those people sitting on the other side of the lectern. Given this exclusion, it is not surprising that when Graff turns his attention to reforming the institution he has described in such detail, the result is a proposal that restricts itself to altering the content of and structural relationships between English literature courses. Thus, in Beyond the Culture Wars, where Graff discusses the promise of organizing the English Studies curriculum around the conflicts in the discipline over how to read literary texts, the conflict between composition and literary studies, once again, fails to merit consideration.
As a result, Graff's sensible call for "making a focused curriculum out of [the university's] lively state of contention" (11) entails little more than replacing one kind of content (teaching Heart of Darkness in isolation) with another (teaching the Norton Critical Edition of Heart of Darkness (Beyond 25–33)). Coordinating the university's general education and introductory courses so that they offer a coherent program focusing on this new content not only can be done "without adding to the faculty work load or the college budget" (61), but also, Graff assures his readers, promises to address the "pervasive problem" of "student docility" (9). Throughout this measured analysis of the cafeteria-style curriculum's systematic concealment of academic conflicts from the student populace, Graff ultimately seems unable to entertain the possibility that students might already be deploying a range of conflicting reading practices, informed by different assumptions about what the acts of reading and writing entail, while they sit in their new conflict-ridden classrooms watching their professors put on a show of arguing about what texts ought to be studied and how. The line connecting a history that excludes composition and a reform proposal that restricts itself to course content and course sequences, while trading on the ready image of student docility is thus a straight one.

The relationship between Watkins' primary interest in "English faculty as a labor force . . . located at a decisive point within the larger patterns of the social circulation of people" and the reforms he subsequently proposes for the discipline is somewhat more complex. As we have already seen, in shifting from one "angle of entry" to the next, Watkins concludes that the resolution of English Studies' internal conflicts in the form of a range of competing and contradictory pedagogical "work practices" is experienced by students only as a series of requirements that "look arbitrary and interminable" (260). In light of this, Watkins argues that efforts to make English Studies an agent of political change ought to concentrate on "popular culture practices," rather than individual work practices and the success or failure of such attempts to provide students with access to the activity of literary studies. The difference, as Watkins explains it, is that, whereas traditional English classrooms require students to investigate textual nuances, to explore multiple meanings, and to revel in the "undependability" of the text in any number of ways, in the world of "popular culture practices" outside the classroom "what is involved is rarely a question of how do you know what you know, but what do you need to know in order to focus your resistance to authority at the weakest link" (262).

Watkins' insight, succinctly put, is that access to the full range of work practices for pursuing textual studies is restricted by the differential allocation of work time for cultural labor. Thus, within English Studies, pursuing the epistemological and hermeneutic questions that dominate the discipline requires an enormous block of work time that seems entirely dispro-
portionate to the end result, given that hundreds, even thousands, of hours
of reading, research, conferences, revisions, and proofreading may go into
the production of a single journal article. One of the substantial benefits of
being employed in English, according to Watkins, is that it “is a location
where the incommensurability of work and use does not enforce an imme-
diate penalty” (264), which means, among other things, that there is a
relative freedom for individual workers to choose which work practices—
historical, critical, cognitive, theoretical, etc—will fill their work time. Since
the significance of this point is so easily overlooked, Watkins is intent upon
driving home the fact that people outside the academy are not allocated
similar expanses of work time to devote to textual studies and, thus, read
and respond to texts in very different ways, treating them as reliable
sources to be mined for whatever information or strategies might be of use
in making their own working conditions more livable.

It is this recognition of the incommensurability of the locations, condi-
tions, and goals in academic and popular reading practices that leads
Watkins to disregard reforms that aim to get students to more fully replicate
the work practices of English Studies; the power of English Studies to be
an agent for political change rests not in getting students to read and write
in ways that only exist in the academy, but rather in its ability to provide
students with a “support structure” that assists them in realizing the aims
of their popular culture practices—to wit, focusing “resistance to authority
at the weakest link” (262). Watkins provides just three examples of what
these popular culture practices entail: Working class males singing “Be-
Bop-a-Lula” as a way to incite street fights with class enemies; a high school
friend’s use of television commercials about sensitive skin to argue success-
fully with management that he be allowed to grow facial hair; and a
secretary who, owing to a lack of time and freedom, writes nature poems
based on the wildlife shows she has seen on PBS (262–72). Speaking for
students who read in these ways, Watkins asserts that they do not need
English
to invent “the new” that might enlighten and direct their practices, nor to
explain to them the potential significance of cultural work, nor to legitimize
the cultural work they do. To have any political consequences, work in
English needs to forge connections to popular cultures as they exist in these
locations, and to use the connections to educate a support structure for the
next step, the next shift in territory in a prolonged war of position. (Watkins
273)

Unlike Graff, then, Watkins represents students as possessing an array of
talents that allows them to manipulate texts in ways that serve their own
immediate needs in the specific circumstances and situations which give
rise to them. Despite the fact that such practices as treating commercials as
reliable texts and television shows as authentic experiences of nature may be at odds with the general reading practices of English Studies, Watkins, to his credit, urges that work in English "needs to forge connections" with such textual work in the world. Once this is accomplished, English can then provide "a support structure for the next step," a helpful boost that will assist these students in organizing the individual acts of resistance evident in their strategic uses of popular culture into a larger collective effort.

While recognizing and working with the range of reading practices our students have at their disposal both inside and outside the classroom must be part of any project seriously interested in redefining the mission of English Studies, Watkins' proposals run into trouble because they consistently rely on an idealization of students and an uncritical valorization of "resistance." Thus, because students (particularly, for some unspecified reasons, "minorities" and members of the "'old' working class") are seen to experience changes in English as simply the substitution of one baffling, contradictory set of requirements for another, Watkins argues that English must not so much change what it does with its students as alter how it relates to them. This tactic, as already observed, is precisely what allows Watkins to shift the site of reform away from the internal workings of English Studies, including the marginalized position of composition in the discipline, and towards the role English Studies might serve for students in their work places. But what is it, one has to wonder, that Watkins' English would have to offer those students who rely on popular culture to reinforce the hegemonic system and their place in it? And, for, those students who have performed acts that fall under Watkins' generous definition of resistance, what exactly is it that the "support structure" of English would give them that they don't already have? Most importantly, what kind of work would any of these students—resistant or not—actually do in such an English classroom? In the scenarios Watkins describes, it appears that recognizing students' popular culture practices can only serve either to silence the teacher entirely or to restrict her commentary to applause.

If the form and function of this "support structure" remain unclear, Watkins' argument that English is particularly well-suited to provide such a support structure does not stand up to examination. First, Watkins' assertion that "work in English for a permanent labor force does not mark a comprehensive system of humiliation as work does for so many others" (276) requires that one forget about that large sector of the labor force in English that is not permanent—adjuncts, part-timers, and graduate students—working more often than not in composition, for whom labor in English might well be described as just such a "comprehensive system of humiliation." Shifting to this angle of entry, it is particularly difficult to
imagine just what kind of "support" those in the permanent labor force in English might have to offer either the transient labor force in the academy or workers outside its walls, since the working conditions of the academy's permanent labor force differ so radically from those available anywhere else. Or, to put it another way, if permanent members of the faculty have shown themselves generally unprepared to provide the kind of support structure that would meaningfully alter the working conditions of those within the profession but outside the tenure stream, if they have shown themselves remarkably able to hide themselves from the fact, as James Slevin has so compellingly put it recently, that "our profession, as it is now practiced in this country, rests on, is based on, a foundation of despicable inequality" (2), it is difficult to see just what material guidance they could provide students interested in focusing resistance to authority "at the weakest link."

Furthermore, in arguing for this support structure that takes advantage of English's "relatively crucial position in the social circulation of people in the United States" (25), Watkins relies on the commonsensical observation that "at some time or another, just about everybody takes an English course somewhere in the process of education" (24). Although it is true enough that most students are circulated to English at some point during their years at the university and that English faculty function in this respect as "gatekeepers of economic opportunity" (6), this formulation glosses over the reality that most students' experience of English departments begins in composition courses, not the kinds of literature classes Watkins describes, where the subject, more often than not, is the writings of Fitzgerald, Joyce, Pound, or Stevens. In other words, in terms of work time, a much larger number of departmental work hours are devoted to writing instruction than to introductory literature courses, with the number of composition sections offered during a term often equaling or outnumbering the number of all other departmental course offerings, regardless of level, combined.

Thus, within Watkins' own taxonomy, it would be more accurate to say that it is composition, not literary studies, which is crucially located in the social circulation of people, since students usually must successfully circulate through composition courses before circulating on to courses in literary studies—and since potential employers tend to take a more active interest in querying students about their writing abilities than about the content of their literature courses. From this it would seem to follow that, whatever it means to provide a "support structure" for the resistant impulses of popular culture practices, it is composition, not literary studies, which actually occupies the institutional location Watkins deems most appropriate for such work. And yet, despite Watkins' interest in analyzing
English departments in terms of work time and in tracing the circulation of people through its system, a project which should have helped to highlight both the economic importance and the political possibilities of work in composition, it is literary studies that somehow manages to surface as the site of political praxis. The idealization of students, the unproblematized valorization of resistance, the elimination of the teacher's power to engage and respond, the endorsement of working conditions in the academy, the misplacement of figures that would accurately reflect the allocation of departmental work time—all of these seemingly distinct aspects of Watkins' argument align with his view of composition as nothing more than the field of pedagogy and practice.

In offering this critique of how the discipline of English has been studied and of the reform proposals that have emerged from such studies, I began by arguing for a vision of composition that places the field's special area of expertise in knowing how to solicit, read, and respond to student work and, recasting Watkins' analysis, I have concluded by drawing attention to the political possibilities that composition's unique location in the academy affords. This is not, of course, the only way to define work in composition currently available nor one that all others in the field would readily embrace. In this regard, my relationship to composition is the relationship Graff and Watkins have with literary studies: I am as interested in what the field has been in the past as I am in arguing for a vision of what the field might best become. This bent—whether one labels it polemical, political, or strategic—is, as I have tried to show above, an inevitable part of the institutional history and work practices of English Studies: how one reads the past, reforms the present, anddreams the future are all inextricably enmeshed. With this in mind, I would modify Susan Miller's call in *Rescuing the Subject* for “rereading the history of rhetoric and its related fields in light of our chief concern, the act of writing” (1–2), urging instead that we reread the institutional history of English Studies in light of the solicitation and treatment of student writing. Such a rereading might begin with the following set of questions: How, over time, has the student been constructed by teachers of composition and professors of literary studies? What needs have been attributed to the student and how has the discipline seen fit to respond to those needs? What relationships exist between the kind of writing solicited from students and the theoretical and political commitments of their instructors? How are these relationships further shaped by the matrix of local institutional constraints, working conditions, and professional disciplinary demands? Such a rereading of English Studies' institutional history would certainly encompass both Graff's concern with competing theoretical commitments within the department and Watkins' interest in the allocation of departmental work time. It would further
ensure that attention be focused on what is perhaps the single most significant institutional function performed by English departments—the evaluation and assessment of student writing—permitting the successes and failures of composition and literary studies programs to come to light. And this, finally, would provide a common ground upon which the relationship between composition and literary studies might be reworked, enabling, at the very least, the vectors of influence to travel in both directions.

It may appear that, in plotting out this new territory for an institutional history of work in English Studies, I have effectively staked out an area that includes everything. It may further appear that I have proposed a drama wherein composition promises to star as the hero, ever attentive to the student writer, while literary studies is sure to emerge only as the villain lost in the etherized realm of theory. I could further be accused of having reified and idealized composition, transforming the field into a static object with a unified set of commitments it simply does not have currently. I will address these concerns in turn in order to show why I think they are unwarranted here. First, the kind of institutional history I have proposed here would, with its focus on the treatment of student writing within English Studies, necessarily exclude a good deal of material that currently preoccupies institutional historians: Conflicting theoretical commitments among warring parties would appear only to the extent that these conflicts ended up having an impact on the ways student writing was solicited, read, and responded to; disciplinary “stars” would figure only insofar as their influence could be shown to have shaped the work done in, around, and about the classroom; discussion of frequently cited books and articles would have to be balanced against, on the one hand, the countervailing effect of the mass distribution of grammars, stylistic textbooks, and readers, and, on the other hand, the successful institutionalization of specific teaching practices and pedagogical commitments. In short, this brand of institutional history would concern itself with theoretical and critical conflicts over reading and writing practices only insofar as these conflicts influenced the work students and teachers did in the classroom and how that work was discussed, theorized, and evaluated. Such a shift in focus would, without question, push some of the popular debates about textuality to the margins, but it would do so in order to sharpen attention on the relationship—sometimes fractured, sometimes supportive, sometimes usefully contentious—between the theories we espouse to the profession and the range of pedagogical practices we deploy in our classrooms.

With regard to the suspicion that such a history would promote composition uncritically as unified in championing student work, even the most casual reader of the major journals in composition would readily acknow-
ledge that the field offers no unified approach for negotiating the relationship between theory and practice, nor does it have a uniformly agreed upon set of procedures or philosophical tenets for soliciting, responding to, and evaluating student work, nor, finally, does it have a single, universally acclaimed position with regard to the ideal relationship that should exist between work in composition and work in literary studies. However, before accepting Watkins’ assertion that students experience the wide variety of requirements under these competing systems of instruction as equally baffling and useless, it is important to trace out how, specifically, student work differs under such conflicting systems. How was student work under the regime of sentence combining distinguishable from the student work currently being produced in response to the rising interest in hegemony and resistance? How has the recent revival of appreciation for personal voice influenced both the kind of work required of students and the evaluation of that work? How do assignments in multicultural readers differ from those in texts devoted to the great ideas of Western civilization? Answering questions such as these in terms of student writing will not only show that composition’s interest in texts produced by students has been uneven and, at times, unproductive, it will also make it possible for those moments when student writing figured prominently in literature classrooms to surface. Keeping in mind, for instance, that I.A. Richards’ practical criticism was born, in part, out of a desire to get students to write about poetry in a different (Richards would say more “discriminating”) way, it should be clear that an institutional history that focused on the range of ways student writing has been solicited, read, and responded to would serve to break down the ready binaries that separate literary studies, theory, and reading from composition, practice, and writing.

Finally, concerning the possibility that by locating composition’s expertise in relation to student writing I have, of necessity, erased the host of competing commitments in the field, I would argue that the directive I have proposed here begins by eschewing the master fiction of comprehensiveness, acknowledging from the outset that there is not an institutional history of English Studies, but rather a series of institutional histories. From this it follows that there is not one set of commitments for composition, but a range of competing, conflicting, and indeed, contradictory commitments to be found in the field, producing a range of similarly entangled ideas about how best to solicit, read, and respond to student writing. Acknowledging this tangle, the kind of history I have proposed here would have to ground itself in local, institutional settings and seek to explore the rationales, resolutions, and sustained tensions achieved at these separate sites. This shift in focus would help move the discussion of the possible
missions for composition and of the potentially most productive ways of changing the organization of work across English Studies from the realm of the hypothetical to a discussion of how and why those missions and relationships have actually worked themselves out in real institutional settings. By placing particular representations of students and their writing in specific, local institutional settings in this way, the methodological approach recommended here sets out to fulfill Said's injunction in The World, The Text, and The Critic that critical work begin "with concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory" (242). That is, by investigating the kind of "concrete instances" most often neglected by current theoretical and historical approaches—instances such as the actual work of reading and writing students are required to do within a given educational system, the textbooks produced by educators alongside their reforms, personal accounts of the educators' teaching practices, and moments when educators quote student writing in their texts—this kind of institutional history would help to rescue the student from theoretical oblivion, make possible a critique of departmental and curricular reform proposals on pedagogical grounds, and provide a record of the range of local solutions to the problems all English departments face in teaching students how to read and write in the academy.

Work along the lines I've outlined here has been carried out for some time in isolated pockets of the field. If Richard Ohmann's English in America is the most well known effort in this regard, there are other, more recent ventures that provide insights into the benefits and pitfalls encountered when pursuing this work. Susan Miller's Rescuing the Subject and its sequel, Textual Carnivals, together provide a powerful rubric for thinking about the theoretical, institutional, and historical forces that have influenced the formation and location of composition as a field of study. On a more local level, Robin Varnum has begun work investigating the assignment series, actual student papers, and staff essays related to Theodore Baird's influential English 1–2 course at Amherst. Margaret Strain has argued for a "hermeneutic model" of composition history, which she illustrates by resituating Robert Carlsen's 1961 NCTE inaugural address in relation to a series of institutional constraints, funding requirements, and political demands that surround, inform and speak through the address. And David Bartholomae, offering a vision of English that includes "librarians, educators, publishers, and public policy makers who are concerned with the organization of reading and writing in American culture" (16), sets out to detail how this loosely confederated group invented the "adult reader" in the early 1930s.
The goals set for these disparate projects are by no means identical with one another or with the goals for the project I have outlined here. In arguing for her approach, Miller states that by treating composition as a "unique entity" separate from rhetorical education, a field unto itself with its own distinct set of ties to literary studies, she hopes to "make the field available for more than merely cosmetic re-formations of its situation and results" (Textual Carnivals 80–81). Varnum, on the other hand, argues that her work may help in "solidifying our academic identity" (51), and Strain speaks of her project as having been motivated in part by an "internal effort by composition studies to identify itself as a professional community that regards the teaching of writing as a serious endeavor" (217). And, finally, Bartholomae asserts that his findings about the construction of the adult reader "suggest that we (we as representatives of English) should be cautious of certain instincts, certain predictable gestures or conclusions, certain unconscious practices, like the practice of determining for others the right books—good books, readable books" (26). These conclusions, however incommensurate when taken together, nonetheless show that investigating the institutional history of English Studies is not a neutral activity done for the pursuit of abstract historical knowledge, but rather is an activity motivated by a desire to use the past in order to argue for the construction of a more viable field for the future.

This, it seems to me, is an altogether appropriate way to understand the overall importance of wresting the project of rewriting the institutional history of English Studies from those who would present that historical landscape barren of students and composition instructors. The motivation for pursuing such a project, in short, is not to produce an institutional history that represents composition as the place where the problems surrounding student writing have somehow magically been solved, nor is it to reclaim the field's lost heroes and heroines, nor, finally, is it to fulfill that old bromide about knowing the mistakes of the past in order not to repeat them in the future. Rather, the kind of institutional history I am proposing here would be pursued with a view towards developing a critique of the teaching of composition and literary studies, a critique that takes into account the social, intellectual, and economic relationships that in conjunction define the working conditions of English departments. One of the goals of this work is to help in the design and development of a version of English Studies where the idea that writing instruction is incompatible with theoretical sophistication or political agency figures only as an historical curiosity, having been supplanted by a more equitable principle for allocating departmental resources. However remote this goal of intellectual and economic parity may seem now, a social history of English Studies might contribute to its eventual realization by powerfully demonstrating
that learning how to solicit, read, and respond to the reading and writing done by the student populace—those people who stand inside and outside the academy simultaneously—has been and continues to be the most pressing challenge confronting those who work in English Studies.

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Works Cited


