TRENDS IN AMERICAN RESEARCH ON COLLEGE **COMPOSITION**, 1960-2005

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Abstract. Any overview of the topic of American Research on College Composition¹ for the forty-five year period 1960-2005 is bound to be at a high level of generality and not comprehensive. What follows is a quick guide to some of the main themes that animated this era of composition research, with particular emphasis on the gap between college professors in newly-formed and rapidly growing composition programs who focused upon college-level writers, and more traditional researchers based in colleges of education who focused upon primary and secondary school students. As my survey will show, these two groups of researchers once talked to each other, but over forty-five years gradually drew apart, much to their mutual loss. The college professors of composition studies have tended to conduct qualitative research, while scholars in colleges of education have tended to conduct quantitative research. In one sense, then, my survey is of a loss of coherence, a parting of the ways in which two rich traditions of research flourished but inevitably grew apart.

Keywords: history of writing research, writing process, assessment, first-year writing, writing in the disciplines.

Dutch

[Translation Tanja Janssen]

Samenvatting. Ieder overzicht van Amerikaans onderzoek naar 'college composition' in de laatste 45 jaar (1960-2005) is noodzakelijkerwijs algemeen, niet uitputtend. In deze bijdrage wordt een snel overzicht gegeven van de belangrijkste thema's in deze periode, met bijzondere aandacht voor de kloof tussen 'college professors' in nieuwe, snelgroeiende schrijfprogramma's, gericht op schrijvers van collegeniveau, en meer traditionele onderzoekers in colleges die zich richten op leerlingen in het basis- en voortgezet onderwijs. Zoals mijn overzicht zal laten zien, zijn deze twee groepen langzamerhand uit elkaar gegroeid, tot beider verlies. De college professors hielden zich vooral bezig met kwalitatief onderzoek, terwijl onderzoekers in de 'colleges of education' zich richtten op kwantitatief onderzoek. In zeker opzicht is mijn overzicht daarom er één van verlies aan samenhang; een zich scheiden der wegen, hoe twee rijke onderzoekstradities tot bloei kwamen, maar onvermijdelijk uit elkaar groeiden.

Brereton, J.C. (2007). Trends in American research on college composition, 1960-2005. L1 – Educational Studies in Language and Literature, 8(2), p. 35-45 © International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education

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¹ For a definition of "composition," see the "glossary of false friends" by Donahue (2008) at the end of the issue.

French

[Translation by Christiane Donahue]

Resumé. Tout compte rendu global du thème de « La Recherche Etats-Unienne autour de l'Ecrit Universitaire » pour la période de 1960-2005 sera forcément très général et incomplet. Ce qui suit est un guide concernant quelques-uns des thèmes principaux qui ont animé cette période de recherches dans ce qu'on appelle « composition », avec un accent spécifique sur l'écart entre les professeurs investis dans des programmes de composition de conception nouvelle, qui se sont focalisés sur les étudiants écrivant à l'université, et les chercheurs plus traditionnels en sciences de l'éducation qui faisaient plus attention aux élèves du primaire et du secondaire. On verra à travers cette brève revue que ces deux groupes se parlaient au départ, mais qu'au cours des 45 dernières années, ils se sont progressivement écartés, au détriment de chacun des deux groupes. Les professeurs de l'écrit universitaire tendent vers les recherches qualitatives, alors que les chercheurs en sciences de l'éducation ont tendance à poursuivre des recherches quantitatives. Dans un sens, ma revue pointe une perte de cohérence, un divorce par lequel deux traditions riches de recherches ont fleuri tout en se distanciant l'une de l'autre.

Polish

[Translation by Elżbieta Awramiuk]

Streszczenie

W czterdziestopięcioletnim okresie 1960-2005 każdy przegląd tematów amerykańskich badań nad pisaniem na poziomie akademickim wiąże się z dużym poziomem ogólności i brakiem wszechstronności. Proponujemy krótki przewodnik po głównych tematach, które pobudziły tę epokę badań nad pisaniem, ze szczególnym podkreśleniem rozziewu między profesorami uczelni w niedawno powstałych i rozwijających się w szybkim tempie programach pisania, które koncentrują się na piszących na poziomie szkoły wyższej, a bardziej tradycyjnymi badaczami edukacji, którzy koncentrują się na uczniach szkół podstawowych i średnich. Jak dowodzą moje badania, te dwie grupy badaczy kiedyś rozmawiały ze sobą ale przez czterdzieści pięć lat stopniowo oddaliły się, ze stratą dla obu stron. Badania nad pisaniem prowadone przez profesorów uczelni zmierzały ku ujęciom jakościowym, podczas gdy badania tradycyjne zmierzały ku ujęciom ilościowych. W pewnym sensie moje badania mówią więc o zagubieniu spójności, rozejściu się dróg rozwoju dwóch bogatych tradycji badań, które nieuchronnie się rozeszły.

Portuguese

[Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto].

Resumo

Qualquer resenha sobre investigação americana em composição (1) no ensino superior relativa ao período de 45 anos entre 1960 e 2005 não conseguirá ir além de generalidades e de visões parciais. O que se segue é um guia breve dos principais tópicos que animaram este período de investigação em composição, com particular ênfase para o fosso entre os professores universitários dos novos e numerosos programas de composição centrados nos escreventes de nível universitário, e os investigadores mais tradicionais sediados em faculdades de educação e centrados nos estudantes do ensino básico e secundário. Como o meu levantamento mostrará, estes dois grupos de investigadores, em tempos, falaram uns com os outros, mas ao longo dos 45 anos em análise foram gradualmente perdendo contacto, com prejuízos para ambas as partes. Os professores universitários de estudos em composição tenderam a fazer investigação qualitativa, enquanto os estudiosos das faculdades de educação preferiram a investigação quantitativa. Por isso, este é, de algum modo, um registo da perda de coerência, da separação entre duas tradições ricas que floresceram, mas que o fizeram separadamente.

Spanish

[Translation Ingrid Marquez]

Resumen

Necesariamente, un bosquejo del tema de la Investigación Estadounidense sobre la Composición Universitaria2 para los 45 años abarcados de 1960 a 2005 se caracteriza por un alto nivel de generalidad. Lo que sigue es una guía rápida para ubicar algunos de los temas principales que motivaban la investigación de la composición en esa era, con hincapié en la diferencia entre dos grupos: los profesores universitarios que ocupaban programas de composición recién formados y que crecían rápidamente, quienes se enfocaban en los escritores de nivel universitario, y los investigadores más tradicionales, de universidades normalis-

² For a definition of 'composition' see the 'glossary of false friends' in this issue.

tas, que dirigían su análisis a los estudiantes de nivel primario y secundario. Como demuestra el bosquejo, estos dos grupos de investigadores se comunicaban en algún momento, pero durante los 45 años en cuestión, hubo una separación paulatina que perjudicó a los dos. En la universidad, los profesores de composición tienen la tendencia de hacer investigaciones cualitativas, mientras que los estudiosos que provienen de las universidades normalistas suelen hacer investigaciones cuantitativas. Por eso, en un sentido el bosquejo muestra la pérdida de la coherencia, una discordia entre dos tradiciones de investigación ricas que florecían juntasc pero que llegaron a separarse.

1. PROCESS

The impetus for this movement came from secondary school teachers and colleges of education, notably Harvard, where Jerome Bruner and the work of Lev Vygotsky were big influences, and Michigan State University, not from college professors in the Liberal Arts or from English Departments. Some of the most influential early work on student writing processes was begun by Janet Emig. Her Harvard Graduate College of Education dissertation became The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders, published by The National Council of Teachers of English in 1971. It provided the first sustained look at what writers actually did as they wrote. Emig interviewed her subjects and had them compose aloud, enabling her to track the thinking processes of a writer as he or she wrote.

Another researcher who was studying at Harvard's College of Education with Emig was James Moffett, who had been a high school teacher of French before coming to Harvard. His work, collected in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (1968), led to a complete writing curriculum for schools, from kindergarten to senior year of high school. Moffett was interested in writing about literature, so he created an anthology, *Points of View* (1965, with Kenneth McElheney), that went on to become one of the most widely adopted high school literature texts in America. Central to Moffett's thinking was the progression from simple narrative to more complex, rhetorically situated writing. His curriculum moves from the simple narrative of 'what happened' to 'what happens' to 'what may happen,' which calls for more abstract speculation.

Other researchers from the 1960's included D. Gordon Rohman of Michigan State University, whose seminal essay 'Prewriting – The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process' (*CCC*, May, 1965) may be said to have ushered in the term 'Process.'

In the early 1970s Linda Flower and John Hayes began publishing their work on cognition in the writing process, work that may have been more widely cited than anything else growing out of the process movement. They, unlike Emig, Moffett, and Rohman, wrote about college students, not high school students. In fact, Flower wrote widely about graduate students in her classes at Carnegie Mellon University's Graduate Business School, essentially business students going for an MBA. The process movement had moved up from the high schools to colleges and now to cover the writing of graduate students as well, but it still wasn't well-received or even sponsored in Departments of English. (Hayes was a professor of psychology.)

Process dominated much American thinking about writing during the 1970s and the early 1980s. Researchers felt if we could just understand what students thought while they wrote, we could fix their problems. That was the idea behind Flower's

famous distinction between writer-based and reader-based prose. Using write out loud protocols, Flower found out what writers thought they were doing and subsequently discovered where they went wrong. Other well-known researchers in the process movement included Mina Shaughnessy, whose book *Errors and Expectations* (1977) was the first to take the writing of underprepared students seriously and to examine it carefully, Donald Murray, whose 1968 textbook *A Writer Teaches Writing* was very successful, Peter Elbow, whose *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) became a guide to millions of students who wanted help with the writing process, Nancy Sommers, whose articles on process proved highly influential, and Sondra Perl, whose dissertation, *The Composing Processes of Unskilled Writers*, was a model of clarity and insight. (Among these scholars, Sommers and Perl did their graduate work at colleges of Education, while Shaughnessy and Elbow did their graduate work in literature, not writing or rhetoric. Murray did not do graduate work of any sort, and in fact was trained as a journalist.)

The 1970's was an exciting time to be a researcher into the writing process. Every new issue of *College Composition and Communication* or *Research in the Teaching of English* contained some important article investigating the writing process. Conferences would witness huge crowds of people attending sessions about process research. British researchers into the writing process like James Britton were also extremely popular in America, and for a while thinkers about composition were feeling they understood the whole story.

Yet the effect of writing process research on the classroom gave many grave doubts. Many textbooks were influenced by process research, of course, but many embodied the process in crude rules and procedures that went against some of the insights of the process researchers. This is evident in the posters that composition scholar David Russell noticed in his daughter's classroom in an Iowa school: 'Prewrite,' 'Write,' Revise,' and 'Edit' served as reminders to the students, and served also to obscure everything else the students had on their mind, like meaning and context. By the late 1980s the Process movement had won: writers' attention was forever drawn to the steps or stages of the composing process. But Process had become ossified as well. It was time for a change, and the change came as an enormous expansion of research's purview.

2. NEW PATHS

One way change came about is reflected in the growth of writing programs in American higher education, and the growth of research not just in schools of education but in colleges of liberal arts as well, usually becoming based in English Departments. In the 1960s there were only ten or twelve universities that offered the Ph.D. in writing, almost all through their colleges of education. By the year 2005 some seventy-five American universities permitted students to conduct doctoral work in composition and rhetoric. This enormous growth of writing research has resulted in many more trained researchers, and a wide variety of dissertations on the subject of writing. (There are still some holdouts, of course, places where one cannot receive a Ph.D. for research into rhetoric and composition: Yale, Chicago, and

Princeton come to mind. These institutions are still operating in the tradition of English departments concentrating their research exclusively on literature, and do not have doctoral programs in the field of education.) It is safe to say that many more composition and rhetoric doctoral candidates take their coursework now in liberal arts departments of English, not in colleges of education. The directions this new generation of researchers began to take, outside of Education programs, influenced key themes in the field in the 80s and 90s.

Credit for the change from the writing process to what came next depends upon what one thinks is the natural successor of the writing process research. Some would say it is the turn to ethnography, and those who do think so regard Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words* (1983) as the breakthrough book. Heath is a Stanford University professor of education who took an anthropological look at two communities in the South, places she called Roadville and Trackton, both in rural North Carolina, one black, one white. Her in-depth look at what literacy meant in these communities provided a means of examining writing within its rich social context, and proved extraordinarily influential over the next two decades. One example of Heath's influence is in the work of Eleanor Kutz at the University of Massachusetts, who in her 2003 textbook *Exploring Literacy* has her writing students compile a chart of their own family's literacy development.

Another successor to process research came in with the arrival of theory, mainly by way of French universities in the late 1970s, particularly the work of Michel Foucault, which proved especially attractive to American researchers. (Derrida, Lacan, and Lyotard were considerably less influential among composition researchers, though they had their admirers. Bourdieu was even less influential, though as I shall argue later he represented a road that should have been followed.) Foucault's Discipline and Punish was the breakthrough book for many writing teachers, who saw themselves and their writing programs, with their emphasis on perfecting the surface features of writing, implicated in the system of surveillance that Foucault claims permeates modern society. Another highly influential theorist was Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Marxist educator whose book, The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, was read by every writing researcher and incorporated into many of their writings. Particularly influential was Freire's derisive attack on what he called the 'banking theory of education,' in which items were added to a student's mental storehouse like coins added to a bank vault. Also important to Freire was the notion of 'conscientization,' the coming to critical consciousness which enabled one to understand the forces that operate in social processes. Freire influenced many American researchers, notably James Berlin, Donaldo Macedo, Henry Giroux, and Ira Shor, whose books brought about a movement called critical literacy, which examined individual student progress in light of large-scale social movements, always influenced by Marxism. A final theoretical voice was that of Mikail Bakhtin, whose studies of the meaningmaking process were first translated in the late 1970s and proved highly attractive to many researchers exploring the social situatedness of texts and genres and the multiple voices at play in students' texts.

One area of special interest has been assessment, and this interest has grown dramatically over the recent years. How can we say a piece of writing is successful? What are the characteristics of successful writing? How can we hold large-scale test-

ing sessions that will sort out good writers from weak writers? It was once thought a simple matter, but now it is regarded as a much more complex task. For one thing, researchers now agree that more than a single sample must be collected for each writer before they can come to any firm conclusion about the quality of the student's writing. The work of Edward White and Brian Huot has been extremely influential in this area. A journal, Assessing Writing, has appeared, special attention has grown around statewide assessments, and the new College Board SAT test, introduced in 2005, for the first time collects a writing sample. An unfortunate split has developed in the field of assessment, with commercial enterprises dominating the testing business, hiring their own staffs of psychometricians and testing experts, while schools, colleges, and universities must carry on their research into assessment on their own without commercial support. Colleges of Education, while themselves conflicted about the psychometricians' approaches, find themselves needing to use some of these measures and tools to respond to accrediting agencies' demands. The two groups – those who design the tests and those who ultimately have to teach the students sorted by the tests – have a very asymmetrical relationship and do not spend nearly enough time talking to each other. One outcome of this split is that the most up-to-date thinking among college assessment practitioners is the portfolio, which contains a semester's worth of student work rather than the single high-stakes test, which still dominates the approach of the psychometricians.

An additional area of research is English as a Second Language, a very large teaching field that is just beginning to receive proper attention from the mainstream researchers on the college as well as secondary school level (mainstream researchers in this case are the vast majority of writing researchers, most of whom study writing in the students' first language, as opposed to researchers who specialize in ESL). What kinds of mental operations are necessary to produce effective translation from the home language to the target language? How can those mindsets be best encouraged? American researchers on postsecondary education face such issues because many non-native students arrive in college without knowing English well enough to succeed. They have successfully completed secondary education, but they are now in college and confronted with increased reading and writing requirements, without possessing the necessary skills. One recent approach to the issue has been the cultural immersion approach, bringing the students into richer contact with the culture rather than simply relying on the language study to accomplish the desired goals. It has become accepted practice within the TESOL community to rely on cultural and social context rather than to depend on narrow linguistic criteria as the basis for forming a curriculum.

3. PATHS LESS FREQUENTLY TAKEN

What gets omitted among American researchers of college writing? Grammar and language study are no longer considered central fields of study.³ They once were,

³ More recently some attention has been refocused on the study of college students' errors, through longitudinal studies and efforts to replicate earlier studies and compare results, but

and in fact could be said to dominate research into writing until the mid twentieth century. Applied linguistics lay behind some important mid-century research, such as that done by Kellogg Hunt, Frank O'Hare, William Labov, and in Britain Basil Bernstein. The field drew on these scholars' work to reflect on issues of socialization and inclusion or exclusion in dominant language communities. But the subject gradually lost its hold on researchers' imaginations, and very few college composition scholars study language use these days. The one exception is in the area of dialect interference, where dialects like AAVE (African American Vernacular English) conflict with learning the standard dialect. These researchers draw upon their knowledge of different dialects to diagnose the problems.

Reading-writing connections are only just beginning to get the attention they deserve. While substantial educational research has been done about reading and writing relationships in pre-college settings, relatively few researchers of college writing are interested in demonstrating that reading is intimately connected to writing, or in exploring how increases in reading comprehension result in increases in writing ability. Some strong arguments have been made for focusing college writing courses on both reading and writing. There was a controversy about 20 years ago on the importance of teaching literature. Two researchers, Gary Tate and Ericka Lindemann, exchanged theories of the proper role of literature in the college writing classroom, but that exchange has not been explored lately. Most instructors include literature in their curriculums, though it is often disguised as non-fiction prose, called 'expository.' It's the kind of prose that most of our colleagues in the sciences would call literary. Mariolina Salvatori has been a firm proponent of the inclusion of such readings; she argues forcefully for the use of 'difficult' readings.

Classroom teaching techniques never receive much attention from college-level researchers, while they are still the subject of much attention from secondary researchers. It seems to be assumed that we know the best ways to reach students, and that the problem is in the curriculum, not the classroom manner. Or, if we admit that an individual's teaching style matters, we assume that it's innate, a function of personality, and cannot be changed by instruction. The one teaching technique that is the exception to this lack of interest is teaching with a computer, an area where a great deal of interesting work has been done. There is even a journal, *Computers and Composition*, which explores the implications of computers for college writing instruction

Another area that does not get examined by college level researchers is the role of gender in writing. All researchers agree that, in elementary and secondary school, girls do better than boys as writers, but no one at the college composition level seems interested in learning why this is so, or the extent to which it is so. (Boys do

much of this work has not yet been published. A notable exception in the 1990s: Richard Haswell's Gaining Ground in College Writing.

⁴ See for example David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts, Charles Bazerman, 'A relationship between reading and writing: The conversational model,' Linda Flower, The Construction of Negotiated Meaning, or D. Memering, 'The Reading-Writing Heresy.' These are indicative of strong interest in aspects of the reading-writing relationship, but are not actual studies of that relationship.

better on multiple-choice tests, and so the new move to add writing to the college entrance examination, the SAT, can be viewed as a hidden means of bringing up girls' scores.) A very interesting area has thus been going virtually unexplored since the pioneering work of Mary Hiatt in the 1970's and early 1980's, although Elizabeth Tebeaux has looked at the issue, if only briefly, among adult workplace writers.

Finally, the whole area of the subject matter of writing is rarely addressed in college-level research. When students have open ended assignments not confined to a single topic, their success or failure on them rests at least in part on the topic they choose and the way they treat that topic, yet relatively few people study the effects topic choice has on readers in examination settings, and virtually no one studies the effects of topic choice outside of exam settings. Similarly, there are no studies of misunderstandings between readers and writers in school settings. There is no American composition study anything like the Pierre Bourdieu group's 1965 all-toobrief look at the performance of French students on examinations in his *Rapport Pedagogique et Communication*, and in fact American researchers seem unaware of that study.

4. SELECTED ISSUES TODAY

There is no doubt that writing research has taken a social turn. The areas that are getting the most attention today from researchers are the social setting of writing, particularly the relationship between the individual writer and the world around him or her. Feminist research has played a part in helping this social turn along, and there is enough interesting research of this type to justify a collection entitled Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy. Genres also play a large role in opening up research to social influences. Bazerman's Shaping Written Knowledge is a key study in this area, and Bazerman has also been an active proponent of high quality research. It should be noted that the type of research that qualifies as high quality is still debated. Bazerman has argued strongly for stricter standards for research. He is opposed to the impressionistic types of research that seem to stem from an inquirer's mind rather than from a close examination of the data. Bazerman is one of the leaders of the new Research Forum at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication meetings, and he is encouraging a whole generation of researchers to pay more attention to data driven studies, which have been harder and harder to find among the leading journals in the college field, though they still have a large place among colleges of education. A key book in this area is Methods and Methodology in Composition Research by Kirsch and Sullivan. And for an example of the kind of research that has been dominant in American colleges, see Lisa Ede's collection On Writing Research: The Braddock Essays, 1975-1998, which reprints the prize winning essay from each year's College Composition and Communication. Most of these essays are qualitative, a fine irony since Richard Braddock, for whom the award is named, was an opponent of qualitative research and insisted on a scientific approach of research, with statistically significant outcomes predominating.

Opposed to data driven studies is the field of rhetoric and rhetorical theory, which has received a great deal of attention in recent years. High quality work has

been done in the field of rhetoric by Kathleen Welch, Richard Lee Enos, and Thomas Miller, to name a few scholars. This work is often historical in nature, making use of ancient texts and drawing conclusions from the ideas in them rather than from observations about collected data. It remains to be seen how much work in rhetoric will affect the other work going on in composition studies, but it will always be there, playing a small but significant role as it devises theory.

A final change in recent composition research can be found in the increased interest in two fields, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID). For the former, WAC, the emphasis is upon the importance of all teachers, no matter what their field, devising written assignments instead of simply giving true-false or fill in the blank standardized tests. This movement has burgeoned in recent years, coming to dominate many college curriculums. A fair number of American universities now require Writing Intensive courses at all levels, courses that have students write papers and essay examinations, a sure sign that WAC has succeeded in alerting college professors to the importance of writing. On the other hand, WID is a movement that emphasizes the distinctive elements of writing within each discipline's sense of itself. It emphasizes that writing for Speech and Hearing Therapy is very different from writing for Chemical Engineering; they have their own generic demands, as Carolyn Miller noted in her important 1984 article, 'Genre as Social Action.' Starting from some close-up observational research in the 1970's, WID work has emphasized careful studies of the intellectual demands of individual disciplines. In some ways it is the opposite of WAC, which can emphasize some simple solutions for all disciplines: essay questions, writing as critical thinking; the importance of generalized writing instruction. On the other hand, WID emphasizes the particularity of each discipline's intellectual sense of itself and the distinct demands placed on newcomers to the work of the discipline. Both of these relatively new movements are bringing new insights to the writing curriculum of many American colleges and universities.

WAC and WID work has yet to have a great influence on the research conducted in schools of education. There the notion of writing having a disciplinary identity has not quite made headway. So we are confronted with two separate strands of research, one emphasizing data being conducted in schools of education, and one with a much more qualitative approach dominating college writing programs. It has come to a point where Ph.D.s graduating from American composition programs have never been exposed to quantitative research and cannot even grasp ideas of statistical significance, while Ed.D. graduates of doctoral programs in American colleges of education rarely have a deep understanding of rhetorical traditions or the liberal arts background of so much research into composition. These two strands of research don't say enough to each other, and we have lost the connection that animated so much research that began in the 1960s and 70s.

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