

ATD Reviews

## **A Review of *Microhistories of Composition***

Edited by Bruce McComiskey, 2016. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press. [ISBN 978-1-60732-404-1. 336 pages. \$34.95 USD (soft cover).]

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The first graduate-level courses I taught both traced issues related to the history of writing instruction. One course examined the parallel histories of the American community college and the field of rhetoric and composition. The second sketched historical threads in composition pedagogy. As I prepared both syllabi, I was struck by the challenge and responsibility inherent in representing the history of the field for emerging scholars. I noticed the voices that were absent from the historical courses I took during graduate school, particularly the absence of those voices representing community college perspectives. I agonized as I selected specific readings for the courses; I knew that I was making a very political statement through each voice I included and perhaps even more so in whom I omitted.

The grand narratives of rhetoric and composition are full of what we have come to describe as "turns"—the process turn, the social turn, etc. These turns allow our history to weave its way through changing student populations, shifting paradigms within American education, evolving political landscapes, and challenging disciplinary turf wars. Taken together, these turns represent the neatly packaged mythology of the history of writing instruction. While these histories are often a useful starting place for framing our discipline, they fail to reveal the complexities of what it means to be a practitioner of writing instruction or to be a scholar in the field of writing studies. They omit as much as they reveal.

Bruce McComiskey's *Microhistories of Composition* presents both a primer on microhistory as methodology and a series of chapters that use this historiographic approach to introduce nuance to the narrative of rhetoric and composition. The eleven historiographic chapters challenge, broaden, or reframe perceptions of particular moments, categories, texts, and people from within and outside the meta-narrative of rhetoric and composition. Together these chapters offer keen insight into challenges pertinent to academic scholarship, disciplinary history, and the nature of writing instruction in general.

McComiskey begins his introduction by reflecting upon the ways in which his experiences in his own first-year writing course better paralleled the grand narratives of the 1950s and 60s rather than the early 1980s, despite occurring in the latter decade. Histories of the 1980s attempted to paint a narrative that legitimized composition studies; as he explains: "these narratives abstracted, erased, and obliterated, but they also constructed a discipline" (9). As the place of composition studies within the academy began to take shape, new, "revisionary" histories attempted to address erasures and present a more inclusive telling of the field's

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history that better accounted for and included diverse voices, institutions, study bodies, and modalities. All of these histories, canonical and revisionary, he claims, are "individually incomplete" (14). While grand narratives of the field emphasize global concerns at the expense of local experiences, revisionary accounts often must minimize their scope to emphasize local and marginalized perspectives. Drawing on David Gold's "Remapping Revisionist Historiography," McComiskey calls for histories that place the local into productive conversation with the global. Microhistory effectively responds to this need: it is, as McComiskey argues, "neither solely abstract, like social history, nor solely concrete, like cultural history" (17).

The first three chapters of this volume, in particular, focus their microhistorical study on specific primary sources, which the authors read in light of their original context. Annie Mendenhall's "At a Hinge of History" analyzes two key texts published in 1963 that are often cited in the grand narratives of the discipline's formation, *Research in Written Composition* and *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College*. Louise Wetherbee Phelps' piece takes a particular conference, the 1979 Ottawa Conference, and the volumes from its proceedings as its subject. Kelly Ritter uses reports from the *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* journal editors to trace trends in scholarship and the evolution of these two flagship journals. Mendenhall's analysis demonstrates a tension between authorial intention and hindsight. Phelps' examination allows her to trace the ways in which Canadian scholars contributed to the very US-centric discipline of rhetoric and composition. These scholars, Phelps suggests, enriched the discipline while also learning about it themselves. Ritter's examination looks at issues of disciplinary boundaries (and indeed the boundary and relationship between these two journals) along with the responsibility or privilege of speaking on behalf of our discipline. Together, these chapters demonstrate how careful examination of primary documents, with particular care to the context from which they originated, can present a richer picture of disciplinary history, challenges, and values.

In addition to examining primary documents in context, microhistories also present characterizations of the "exceptional normal," which "is a particular case in history that is exceptional from the perspective of social history but may reveal a hidden normal from the perspective of cultural history" (19). Two chapters from this collection take care to frame their analysis in light of the "exceptional normal." Douglas Eyman and Cheryl E. Ball's chapter is the first of these. This chapter examines digital publication and the ways in which the unstable, transient nature of the Internet can impact this form of publication and at times even threaten to erase contributions if they are not effectively archived. Eyman and Ball trace elements of "exceptional normalcy" that persist in digital publishing as they were presented through a special issue on digital publishing, which was co-published through five online journals and then present a set of best practices for moving forward with online publication. In this way, they use their chapter not only to interrogate a particular moment (specifically when a 2002 special issue on electronic publishing was simultaneously published by five online journals) but also to argue for correcting challenges in digital publishing as we move forward as a discipline. Suzanne Bordelon's chapter uses the "methods of clues" (in a very Sherlock Holmes sense of the word) to locate the "exceptional normal" within the context of the School of Expression, a professional school founded in 1879 that emphasized elocution and expression. Bordelon's analysis challenges the dominant perspective of elocution "as peculiar, something that doesn't quite fit into the larger history of rhetoric narratives" (155) by demonstrating the ways in which these schools integrated intellectual, emotional, and bodily practices. This characterization situates elocution within the scope of rhetoric and, in fact, suggests that rhetoric itself might be, as Hawhee suggested, "a *bodily art*: an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind" (qtd. in Bordelon 156). Thus, these chapters demonstrate the potential which can be found within the exceptional normal while also examining the challenges these othered entities face as a result of perceptions fostered and, perhaps, encouraged by grand narratives within the field.

The remaining chapters focus specifically upon the contributions of particular people. The subjects of these chapters were often mischaracterized or overlooked by the grand narratives of the field. Neal Lerner's

chapter on Roger Garrison's contributions is a particularly rich example of the new perspective gained from these remaining microhistories. Lerner examines the way in which Garrison's name is relatively unknown compared to his contemporaries who have been heralded as pivotal to the transition toward the process-oriented writing pedagogy. Though Garrison is named by Charles Moran as one of four scholars (the others being Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, and Donald Murray) responsible for this transition, he is decidedly the least known scholar. Lerner then investigates this anomaly. Lerner's treatment of Garrison's contributions demonstrates the way in which voices from four-year research institutions are better positioned to become "stars" within the field while two-year voices, writing centers and other community contexts are often obscured by our history. In reading this set of chapters, we come to see the ways in which outliers, who don't conventionally support the argument for academic disciplinary status, are often erased by efforts to construct the field's genealogy. Likewise, even in cases where figures are included within the field's history, this inclusion is not without its troubles. These characterizations often fix scholars within particular cultural moments within the field, rather than acknowledging the ways in which a scholar's perspective and interests evolve over the course of their academic career. Together, these chapters help us to unfix scholars from the pages of their articles and books, free them from the confines of particular historical moments, and see how our histories fail to capture the nuanced relationships between the local and the global.

This collection, though not exhaustive in its coverage, is an important contribution to the discipline of writing studies and our sense of disciplinary identity. It complicates our history and offers insight that will be new, and at times, surprising for those well versed in the field's canonical history. It challenges assumptions we might have about whose voice matters, what it really means to be a voice within a complex discipline, and where our disciplinary boundaries begin and end. Additionally, and quite importantly, this collection presents an excellent introduction to microhistorical methodology. In presenting a rich description of this methodology and situating it in the field of writing studies, this collection opens spaces for additional microhistories that further investigate sites unstudied in this collection. Because no single volume can cover everything, there are, quite naturally, subjects not addressed by the collection, such as the contributions made by contingent faculty, and other subjects that are addressed only briefly, such as two-year college faculty, writing centers, and writing across the disciplines. Teachers, scholars, and administrators in sites unexplored in these pages would do well to engage with this collection, become students of this methodology, and then consider the ways in which the methodology might bring new understanding to moments, categories, texts, or people from their particular niches within the field. Graduate professors and others involved in disciplinary mentoring will do well to draw from this collection as they introduce the history of the discipline. I, for one, know that this book will serve as a foundation for future historical courses that I teach. It will help me to challenge the mythology of the grand narratives, even as I present some pieces of them, and it will help me to invite students to conduct their own short-term microhistories, bringing the global narratives into conversation with their local realities.

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