

# Review

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Shepley, Nathan. *Placing the History of College Writing: Stories from the Incomplete Archive*. Fort Collins, CO, and Anderson, SC: The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2016. 164 pages. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/shepley/>

Since its inception, the field of writing across the curriculum (WAC) has reexamined traditional notions of academic writing and how it travels across disciplinary, professional, and communal spaces. In *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*, David Russell highlights the ideological and institutional contexts surrounding WAC's development as it "challenges deeply held institutional attitudes toward writing, learning and teaching" (292). Like WAC studies, many have responded with alternative and supplemental narratives of the history of composition since scholars began chronicling it in earnest in the 1980s. These narratives and counter narratives often coalesce around the inclusion of diverse perspectives and locations. In *Placing the History of College Writing: Stories from the Incomplete Archive*, Nathan Shepley asks "through what (if any) interpretive decisions are composition historians 'firing the imagination' of readers and giving readers hope about new kinds of histories worth exploring?" (98). Both Shepley and Russell engage in historiography to expand or "challenge" disciplinary attitudes towards the historical, ideological, and pedagogical contexts that have and continue to impact student writing. Shepley complicates previous histories of the field, "pluralizing" accounts of student writing in the twentieth century by recovering the influence of non-academic sites and interactions. He compellingly argues that "historical student writing need not be understood merely as a product of students' interactions with one and only one place, a classroom, and with one and only one kind of engagement, an assignment" (3). In working to broaden understandings of writing in this way, Shepley's study parallels WAC's goal to illustrate the importance of writing (and writing instruction) beyond the context of the Composition classroom.

Shepley aligns his project with other place-based historiographies, most notably that of Patricia Donahue and Gretchen Flesher Moon's edited collection, *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition* (see also Schultz, 1999; Gold, 2008; Ritter, 2009). Addressing Donahue's call for "an expanded analytical framework" (as cited in Shepley 98), Shepley asks "what do we miss if we strive to isolate a classroom of student writers for study apart from related sociopolitical contexts?" (12). While acknowledging the value of previous place-based historiographies, he calls for

more multi-layered and multi-faceted inquiries into how student writing has traveled across academic and communal sites. I found his sustained focus on the multiplicity of academic writing to be extremely effective in substantiating the methodological and pedagogical implication of his historical study. In addition, the networked and “multi-faceted” lens through which he conducts his study can also prove valuable not only to historians, but to a broader audience of Rhetoric and Composition instructors and researchers.

While Shepley does not explicitly identify WAC practitioners as part of his intended audience, I see his work connecting with conversations in WAC. Firstly, the most notable connection is Shepley’s focus on the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary function of writing, as he contends that “college student writing should be seen as an interaction between students and various overlapping and evolving places” (3). It is this interactive and networked view of writing that WAC also highlights in its foundational concepts of *writing to learn* and *writing to communicate* (Emig, 1977; Young, 2006). Shepley expands the definition of composition to account for the “significance of students’ connections to literacy, discourse, and rhetoric” (123), much in the same manner that WAC associates writing with learning. Secondly, Shepley’s inquiry into the dynamics of student writing outside of the academy also resonates with WAC’s preparation of student writers for unfamiliar disciplinary and non-academic rhetorical situations (McCarthy, 1987; Jones and Comprone, 1993; McLeod and Maimon, 2000). This can also be seen in the development of subfields like Communication Across the Curriculum (Anson, Dannels, and St. Clair, 2005) and Writing Across the Communities (Kells, 2007; Guerra, 2008). In recovering student interactions and composition practices within local publics, Shepley effectively blurs traditional boundaries between “concepts of college and community, composition and rhetoric, education and politics, and local and regional, and even among the categories of students, teachers, administrators, and community members” (Shepley, p. 18). I see Shepley’s disruption of these boundaries as his most significant and well-executed contribution to the field, as it establishes the value in expanding scopes of inquiry for studying student writing.

An additional correlation between Shepley’s text and WAC literature is attunement to the contextual nature of writing and writing instruction. Shepley is most concerned with the “sociopolitical contexts” that impacted student writing in his study, while WAC has continued to respond to the shifting exigencies surrounding writing pedagogy in higher education. For instance, beginning in the 1990s and becoming more prevalent in the last decade, WAC scholars have addressed considerations of trans-cultural and translingual literacies (Zamel, 1995; Matsuda and Jablonski, 2000; Cox, 2015). Finally, I see Shepley enacting similar methods as WAC instructors and students do when analyzing the writing of a discipline, organization, or community, as

both focus on how writing and discourse travel *across* different rhetorical situations. Shepley does not directly ground his methods in WAC, however; he uses the historical study that is the primary focus of the text to theorize the pedagogical and curricular implications of his work.

Shepley focuses his historical analysis on two institutions, Ohio University (OU) and the University of Houston (UH), from 1900–1950. He chooses these institutions for their difference from one another, critiquing previous place-based histories as either too narrowly focused on one region or one type of institution. He describes his rationale for selecting these institutions as two-fold: (1) because they “are nearly opposites in terms of their origins, missions, student populations, and geographical locations,” and (2) because he has “taught and done historical research at both institutions, [his] time at each institution immersing [him] in some of the spatial issues discussed in the historical texts” he examines (Shepley 7). Shepley analyzes a wide variety of artifacts, including student newsletters, correspondences, newspapers, and diary entries; instructor and administrator correspondences; and, institutional promotional materials. This variety is very effective, as it further supports his greater goal to “embrace situational fluidity, a blending of categories [that] lets us see student writing relating to others in ideologically managed social and physical places where information is used to further communally understood meaning-making practices” (Shepley 123). This also enabled him to eloquently acknowledge the messiness and unpredictability of studying student writing and its history. Furthermore, Shepley successfully manages the scope of his inquiry, as he employed two case studies to present a larger argument about how knowledge is made and measured in the field.

Shepley organizes his text with a schema grounded in neosophistic rhetorical theory, which he most clearly outlines in chapter one. He draws heavily from Susan C. Jarratt’s sophistic historiography, employing sophistic rhetoric as a framework to illuminate the multiplicity of places engaged by student writing at OU and UH during this time. Each subsequent chapter after the first is organized around the following rhetorical concepts: *nomos*, *kairos*, *epideixis*, and *dynaton*. The integration of rhetorical theory does much to broaden Shepley’s readership to a wider variety of Rhetoric and Composition scholars, yet I believe the text would remain just as persuasive without it, as I found his principal contributions to be methodological and pedagogical.

In chapter two, Shepley uses the concept of *nomos*, which he defines as “referring to social rules or conventions” (18), to examine the influence of institutional *nomoi* on the writing of OU and UH students. He analyzes the rhetorical agency exercised by students in their writing as they responded to, expanded, and resisted the institutional *nomoi* imposed upon them. To do so, Shepley analyzes student writing not limited to that completed in the classroom for academic credit; for instance, he examines evidence from a student’s diary to support his findings that engagement with com-

munity literacy organizations was integral in students' ability to impact institutional *nomoi*. Shepley's investigation into the influence of institutional contexts on student writing also illustrates another potential area of interest among WAC readers, as it has been a long-standing inquiry in the field. For example, Russell described the "second stage" of WAC as responding to its own internal crises of funding and politics (291). And, inquiries into the formation and sustainability of WAC programs has been a fixture of WAC scholarship for decades (McLeod, 1989; Townsend, 2008; Condon and Rutz, 2012).

Shepley identifies the *kairos* of student writing at OU and UH in chapter three. Shepley draws from Bruce McComiskey's more contemporary explanation of *kairos* to include "responsiveness, whether sudden or planned" (19) to illustrate connections between student writing and social initiatives. At this point in the text, Shepley concisely argues that recovering students' engagement with public writing also contributes to a broader pluralization of "writing's spatial work" (51). In this chapter, he most skillfully illustrates the value in understanding how extracurricular histories and literacies impact how we approach academic writing instruction. For instance, one of the most illuminating examples Shepley provides is his analysis of UH students' response to local issues of access to education in 1926. He focuses on these students' involvement in the founding and operation of the Houston Junior College. As Shepley convincingly establishes, the pervasiveness of student writing that directly responded to public issues in this period demonstrates that students engage more dynamically with public writing than many Composition histories, pedagogies, and curricula recognize.

In chapter four, Shepley analyzes the *epideictic* language employed by non-students when using student writing to communicate an institutional brand. He defines *epideictic* as "to impress by showing one's facility with words" (Shepley 19–20). Shepley examines how administrators and staff re-packaged student writing to target audiences off campus, further demonstrating the multiple sites across which student writing at the time circulated. Most valuable in this chapter is Shepley's tracing of how student writing, through its contact with local sites and communities, disrupted boundaries between the academy and community. Analysis of these interactions works well at further demonstrating the complicated and unpredictable ways student writers exercise rhetorical agency.

Shepley's analysis of student writing at OU and UH culminates in chapter five's focus on *dynaton*, which he defines as "possibility" (20). Shepley posits this possibility as a key advantage in pluralizing perceptions of student writing through alternative historiographies in that he is contributing to a "refram[ing] [of] who and what we mean when we refer to college composition, composition instructors, and composition students" (95). He accomplishes this reframing by exploring the overlooked

spaces, interactions, and processes of student writing. This theme of possibility carries into his concluding chapter as well, which focuses on the pedagogical relevancy of his findings. In this chapter, he addresses questions of writing pedagogy, providing heuristics and assignments that emphasize the extracurricular interactions of student writing. Shepley establishes how inquiries such as his benefit writing instructors by providing them with more complex definitions of what student writing is and the audiences it can reach. As such, I see this section of the text as being the most relevant for those in WAC working with students and writing instructors from different disciplines and communities.

As a researcher, Shepley asks readers to “place generous conceptual parameters around the term archive” (22). After finishing the text, however, I wanted to know more about the specific processes of his archival research. Apart from brief mentions in the first (22–23) and last chapters (135), he does not directly address how his study contributes to conversations surrounding archival methodology. While I can recognize how such ambiguity could potentially aid his larger goal of broadening how the field values archival work, I maintain that situating his archival methodologies more transparently throughout the text may have resulted in more contextual, and therefore convincing, claims about archival work in the field.

While Shepley’s text can appeal to Rhetoric and Composition historians, researchers, instructors, and administrators alike, I will conclude this review by summarizing what I identify as his most valuable contributions to the field of WAC studies. Firstly, Shepley provides WAC readers a viable method for employing historical analysis to disrupt limited views of academic writing. Secondly, his expanded notion of Composition can serve WAC initiatives in their demonstration of the relevance of writing beyond the Composition classroom. In fact, Shepley acknowledges this potential application of his work, as he hopes “readers reconceptualize what composition can mean, what individual, programmatic, institutional, communal, or regional visions it promotes and what opportunities for agency it creates” (23). In a similar fashion, WAC continually asks: “in what ways will graduates of our institutions use language, and how shall we teach them to use it in those ways?” (Russell 307). What Shepley’s text offers WAC readers is a place-based model of historical analysis for addressing this question. Finally, Shepley’s method of analyzing the interactions of student writing may also serve as a method for WAC instructors and students exploring the writing of different discourse communities. Focusing on these interactions, as Shepley does, can aid WAC in presenting writing—as it always has—as a networked process that operates across transdisciplinary spaces.

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