

Who Is Teaching Composition?

MY BROTHER AND I ARE BOTH ENGLISH TEACHERS. ON ONE CHILLY autumn evening a few years ago, we sat at my kitchen table drinking coffee and discussing our work. I mulled over the repercussions of my early work in Composition, objecting to the position I had been in as a teacher with only superficial training. I explained how I often felt lost in my early years as an English master's student, teaching writing: Did no one mind that I knew nothing about how people acquire discourse conventions? That I planned my courses with a series of guesses, based mostly on my memories of the writing course I had taken as a freshman? As a graduate student and later a lecturer in comparative literature and foreign languages, some of my brother's teaching experience has been in Composition. My brother's nose crinkled as he leaned back in his chair, the familiar sign that I was in for a debate rather than a discussion. His sticking point: anyone can teach Composition.

"I don't need any special knowledge to teach writing, really," he began, then adding, "No offense. I'm sure you know much more about it than I do." His position was indicative of an opinion many academics harbor. (Thankfully, my brother's opinion has changed over time.) While I worked long and diligently completing a degree in Composition, many believe that Composition Studies is, in a sense, superfluous, because just being a good writer is qualification enough to teach writing. I believe that most teachers do not have any conscious malice or condescension toward Compositionists or the field of Composition; yet, the labor system that treats teaching as generic dismisses and diminishes my studies, my degree, and my scholarship. Moreover, it has negative repercussions for both unprepared Composition teachers and their students.

As the use of part-time and graduate student labor has increased across disciplines, comprising a combined 57.8%, and full-time but nontenure-track has come to account for another 14.9% of all teaching positions in 2007 (Jaschik, "The Disappearing"), academics are becoming more openly critical of the labor system.¹ Institutions with open-admissions policies may demonstrate an even more disproportionate use of part-time labor. While I was unable to locate a study that categorizes labor practices at open-admission institutions specifically, public community colleges and public four-year colleges and universities that do not

1. The percentages reported in Jaschik's 2009 article are from an American Federation of Teachers study; the AFT analyzed data from 1997 through 2007 in order to demonstrate the decline of full-time and tenure-track jobs over time.

grant Ph.D.s are the most likely types of institutions to have open-admissions policies. Public community colleges employ 68.6% of faculty in part-time positions, and another 13.8% in full-time, nontenure-track roles. Almost 44% of teachers at public four-year schools without doctoral programs are part-time; 6.3% are graduate assistants, and 10.9% full-time, non-tenure-track (Jaschik, "The Disappearing"). Much has been written about the challenges of meeting the needs of students at open-admissions institutions; likewise, much has been published regarding the economic plight and poor working conditions of adjunct faculty. Yet, few studies make connections between the two. As a former adjunct and GA, and now as a tenured teacher who values the work of adjuncts at my campus, I can sense why: critiquing the work of faculty already usually underpaid and treated as second class citizens of the university seems to add insult to injury. Despite this awkward position, I not only believe that we should be interested in the implications of the connections between labor practices and teaching practices, I assert that we can no longer afford to ignore them. As education budgets nationwide are slashed and austerity measures become commonplace at public institutions, providing the services and attention non-traditional students need will only become more difficult. At the same time, the trend of replacing "expensive" full time and tenure track employees with a flex-labor force will become even more attractive to administrators. The majority of our at-risk students will be introduced into the culture of the university by passing through a first-year Composition course, a course taught most frequently by temporary faculty. We have here, then, both a potential problem and a potential opportunity.

Pegeen Reichert Powell, in "Retention and Writing Instruction: Implications for Access and Pedagogy," comments on the increased difficulty of retaining students at open admissions colleges, noting that "the more selective an institution, the higher the retention rates, and persistence to a bachelor's degree is affected by whether or not a student initially enrolls at a two-year or a four-year college" (668). The numbers she presents are sobering: "We know that (depending on where we teach) there is a chance that up to 50 percent of our first-year students will never graduate, and that possibly up to 30 percent will not even stick around for sophomore year" (676). Powell further argues that "Composition faculty are especially well positioned to participate in conversations about retention. The unique context of writing classroom as an interface between students' past and future educational experiences, as an introduction to the discourse practices of higher education, and as one of the only universal requirements at most institutions makes it a prime site for retention efforts (669). At institutions where Composition is a gatekeeping course, students' continued access often hinges upon the learning they do there (674). By extension, the teaching they encounter in these courses becomes high stakes as well.

I have written elsewhere about how the casualization of Composition teaching may

affect the pedagogical choices in first-year writing programs staffed by those with little or no formal Composition study. I argued that staffing practices have stunted the pedagogical growth of Composition programs; that is, while many Compositionists strive to move the teaching of writing in progressive directions, institutional policies result in the reiteration of theoretically weak pedagogies. When instructors are hired to teach Composition with little or no training in Composition studies, they may make pedagogical choices for reasons of familiarity and efficiency rather than for any strong theoretical rationale—working thoughtfully and hard, to be sure, but often without a solid foundation. On the other hand, some WPAs squelch instructors' potentially effective, locally derived pedagogies with required textbooks and prepackaged curriculum, a measure meant to compensate for the temporary faculty's lack of training ("Filling in the Blanks"). I've been an instructor in both of those positions.

My purpose in this essay is to explore how the academic labor system negatively affects the quality of Composition teaching, the role of compositionists, and the status of the field of Composition itself. That is, I want to unpack the ways in which employment practices reinforce an implicit belief that expertise in Composition Studies gained through graduate study, and by extension compositionists, is unnecessary. In fact, I argue that Composition study must be considered adjunct (pun intended) in order for the current labor system to work. This system has complicated consequences for both teachers and students.

The Transformation of Academic Labor

As the university has become corporatized, part of a global trend towards neoliberalism, staffing conventions have become more often based on cost-effectiveness than expertise. Graduate study and expertise in Composition are threats to this system: systematic study of the theories underlying one's views of writing, teaching, and learning includes acknowledging biases or gaps in knowledge that might disrupt the rationale behind current labor and funding arrangements. If administrators deem knowledge of Composition Studies unnecessary to the teaching of Composition, they may then cheaply staff writing courses with graduate students, adjuncts, and temporary employees who may have little or no knowledge of the field. The budget's bottom line trumps the teacher's subject knowledge.

Certainly staffing across all academic disciplines has undergone a transformation in the past thirty years. Writing for *Inside Higher Ed*, Scott Jaschik reports that in 1975, 30 percent of university faculty were part-time. In contrast, in 2005, "part-time positions made up 48 percent of faculty jobs. . . ." As more full-time yet non-tenure track positions are created, making up "20 percent of jobs in the 2005 . . . tenured and tenure-track positions have become decidedly in the minority" (Jaschik "Rethinking"). This development is part of a larger global trend, as Richard Ohmann observes in "Accountability and the Conditions for Cur-

ricular Change.” Ohmann insists that, “one can see in the casualization of academic labor the same process of dispersal and degradation that capital initiated against the core workforce in almost every industry around 1970” (68). If “the university has become more like a business” (69), it is because administrators are adopting the dominant economic philosophy.

This profit-driven, corporate philosophy may be rooted in the global rise of neoliberalism, which David Harvey traces in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. In that text, Harvey describes the growing dominance of this philosophy worldwide, giving special attention to its evolution in the United States, Great Britain and China. He defines it thus: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Harvey argues that neoliberalism has been the driving force in both global politics and corporate practice in the past forty years. Moreover, he describes it as a system that “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3), further claiming that, “Neoliberalism has meant, in short, the financialization of everything” (33).

Academia’s turn towards part-time untenured labor certainly parallels Harvey’s description of neoliberal labor policy: “Workers are hired on contract, and in the neoliberal scheme of things short term contracts are preferred in order to maximize flexibility” (167-168). In order to maintain this flex-work system, managers attack unions and get rid of tenure systems (168). Faculty’s willingness to fight neoliberal policies in academia is complicated by their now tenuous positions. In *The University In Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*, Henry Giroux notes that, “Faculty power once rested in the fact that most faculty were full-time and a large percentage of them had tenure, so they could confront administrators without fear of losing their jobs” (118). That changed in the 1980s, however, as “the newly corporatized university” began “to limit faculty power by hiring fewer full-time faculty, promoting fewer faculty to tenure, and instituting ‘post-tenure’ reviews that threaten to take tenure away” (118). This situation has escalated recently, as teachers’ unions have been challenged and broken in several states, and public employees generally have been characterized by the Republican far right as pampered burdens on state and federal budgets. Today, “Many faculty live under the constant threat of being downsized, punished, or fired and are less concerned about quality research and teaching than about accepting new rules of corporate-based professionalism in order to simply survive in the new corporatized academy” (Giroux 128). These rules include the increased casualization of labor, which is met with insufficient resistance from a disempowered faculty, resulting in a teaching staff increasingly populated by graduate students and temporary instructors.

The Division of Labor In Composition

While the trend towards part-time and untenured positions is systemic in academia, nowhere is it so entrenched as in Composition, so much so that many administrators no longer see anything alarming in a subject being taught almost entirely by contingent labor, albeit supervised by full-time professors. In *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, Marc Bousquet provides an overview of the history of Composition labor:

While the course [freshman Composition] was commonly staffed by full-time lecturers and tenure-stream faculty until the 1940s, the expansion of higher education under the G.I. Bill initiated the practice of adjunct hiring and reliance on graduate employees to teach the course. By the mid 1960s, the casualization of writing instruction was institutionalized and massively expanded in order to fuel cross-subsidy of research and other university activities. During this expansion, a significant fraction of the collective labor of rhetoric and composition specialists was devoted to supervising and training casualized first-year writing staff. (158)

While increases in the number of graduate programs suggest that Composition Studies has achieved some success as a field, the truth is that at most institutions, Composition faculty are untenured and have “little acquaintance with the disciplinary knowledge of rhet-comp” (Bousquet 158). Little seems to have changed in the twenty years since Sledd called Composition teaching “a slave trade” (“See and Say” 138). The continued use of non-Compositionist, contingent workers prompts Joseph Harris to lament that, despite the growing “disciplinary apparatus” of Composition Studies, including “our presses and journals and conferences and graduate programs,” the actual practice of staffing of courses has remained much the same (357-358). Similarly, David Downing notes that while the theoretical work of literature and Composition changes, “What doesn’t change is most often revealed in the perpetuation of exactly the same basic labor practices . . .” (93). That is, the use of temporary and part-time flexible workers. So, while Compositionist Ph.D.s may currently find more tenure-track jobs than those in other branches of English Studies, their numbers do not make a dent in the ratio of casualized labor to full-time, tenure-track faculty.

While some programs do hire full-time, degreed compositionists exclusively to teach, most institutions are more interested in hiring compositionists to be Writing Program Administrators (WPAs). Overall, those with the most knowledge of Composition Studies are often actually doing the least teaching in order to attend to administrative duties, getting alternative work assignments, a.k.a course reassignments or, as they are unfortunately known on my campus, course releases (a term that assumes release from teaching is a reward). One may argue that compositionist WPAs contribute to a system wherein knowledge of Composition Studies filters down to the contingent and nonspecialist faculty working in their pro-

grams. For an exploration of how that structure can be problematic, see Bill Thelin's "Being Written by Adjuncts" in this volume. In addition to the complications Thelin documents, Composition Studies in this model is divorced from Composition teaching, disciplinary expertise instead qualifying one to supervise contingent faculty. Lynn Worsham explains in an interview with Scott Mcleeme that this move "to collapse the work of administration into the work of theory" is "a disservice," making Composition theorists into the rulers of an underclass of part-timers. Bousquet calls this "the problem of 'tenured bosses and disposable teachers'" (158). Bousquet's choice of phrase is homage to James Sledd, who famously critiqued the "boss compositionists" ("Why the Wyoming" 173) who oversee contingent Composition teachers with "contempt" for their lack of disciplinary study (172). Sledd is angry with a system that rewards research but not teaching (175). More recently, Bousquet and Worsham observe that the system rewards research by removing the Composition scholar from teaching as much as possible.

In the model described by Worsham, Bousquet and Sledd, tenured bosses produce research but do not teach (or teach much less); disposable teachers instruct, but are seldom asked to engage Composition scholarship, whether by studying, writing, or reflecting on practice. Indeed, this reflects my own experience. For most of my time as an adjunct, I was not offered significant professional development or support for scholarship. At two of the three schools that employed me, I was never even observed or evaluated by other faculty. I taught much more than I do now, sometimes five or six classes across institutions. Once I began a Ph.D. program in Composition, I was offered a position as director of a writing center. At my current job, I have served as both Writing Center Director and Coordinator of Composition, both positions resulting in a reduction in my teaching load.

"I was never even
observed or evaluated
by other faculty."

The division of labor in Composition is ultimately motivated by the trend Ohmann and Giroux identified in the university as a whole—a growing concern for profitability. Ohmann argues that as universities "look to the bottom line as businesses do," they will assess the English department's value using largely financial standards (71). This is what prompts Michael Bérubé to note that, "What rationale we [English departments] have usually relies on our functions as teachers of writing" (32). English departments are moneymakers for the university primarily because most every student, regardless of major, is enrolled in one, two, or three semesters of required writing courses. Cheaply staffing writing courses with adjuncts and graduate students makes budgetary good sense.

What's more, this system becomes self-perpetuating. In his assessment of neoliberal labor practices, Harvey suggests that, "Employers have historically used differentiations within the labour pool to divide and rule" (168). The workforce is more easily manipulated if placed into tiers. Contingent workers may feel powerless to question their lot; meanwhile, WPAs and full-time professors know that their benefits and status are tenuous in an atmosphere marked by challenges to funding and tenure—an ever more contentious atmosphere given the events in Wisconsin and Ohio in 2010 and 2011, wherein teachers have been demoralized and attacked by anti-union conservatives. As the economy has faltered and unemployment rises, neoliberal politicians are able to drum up resentment of public employees who have fought hard to win a semblance of job security, health benefits, and living wages. Unions have been broken and teachers fired and retrenched.

The resulting, understandable insecurity of full-time professors may keep them from seeking solidarity with contingent faculty. Sledd notes more selfish motivations for tenured faculty's inaction. English professors need Composition courses to bolster their threatened budgets (budgets which, he notes, support their research), but as a whole they have little interest in teaching Composition themselves. Professors may be willing, then, to turn a blind eye to the inequities of the system that allows them to maintain funding while teaching literature ("Why the Wyoming" 166). As a result, the division of labor into full-time WPA Composition specialists and contingent instructors is challenged by a minority of scholars and activists, but otherwise perpetuated.

Some colleges have attempted to solve the problems of a contingent work force by creating Composition programs staffed entirely by full-time but non-tenure-track Compositionists. Doug Hesse has received attention for his initiative in setting up such a program at the University of Denver. At the Modern Language Association Conference in December 2007, Hesse described Denver's program as similar to one at Georgia State University, with "multiple-year, renewable contracts that have resulted in full-time jobs with better pay and benefits than adjuncts could have earned, even teaching many courses." Still, Hesse worries, "whether the creation of these jobs was a form of 'collaboration' with the system that fails to create tenure-track jobs. Was the program, he wondered, 'a composition Vichy regime'?" Hesse ultimately says that since these new programs improve teaching, they are positive overall: "What's best for students trumps everything for me." Hesse concludes, "If academics wait until colleges return to the assumption that every possible position should be tenure-track, 'we'll wait an awfully long time'" (qtd. in Jaschik, "Rethinking").

While the University of Denver and universities with similar programs may have improved conditions and teaching at their institutions, they still contribute to the diminishment of Composition faculty. Composition programs staffed by full-time non-tenure-track

teachers give the illusion of equity, but in reality, the message sent is that Composition teaching is less important than instruction in other fields which merit tenure lines. Bousquet suggests that teaching Composition is still not seen as “faculty work” (183) and distinguishes being “treated like” colleagues from actually being colleagues (182). By extension, Composition Studies is still positioned as a second-class scholarly pursuit when Compositionists are sequestered at the bottom of a tiered system, even a system of full-timers.

Many educational critics have called for large-scale reforms, or even abolishment of the tenure system as a potential solution, one that can account for economic concerns. For example, Michael Murphy argues in “New Faculty for a New University: Toward a Full-Time Teaching-Intensive Faculty Track in Composition” that the “traditional professoriate” is no longer an economically practical or sustainable model, and says that the cost of supporting research—research required to earn tenure—is the “real expense” of faculty (20). He proposes that writing programs employ “some combination of traditional research-informed faculty and full-time tenurable teaching-intensive faculty—along with a smaller number of regular part-time faculty and temporary part-time faculty” (25). He runs the numbers, and claims that the effect on the budget’s bottom line would be attractive to administrators, necessitating minimal cost increases, while acknowledging that teaching-intensive faculty do indeed already exist (25). Murphy’s proposal prompted some passionate responses in the CCC “Interchanges,” with James Sledd writing that Murphy’s plan “would maintain a five-rank hierarchy rather like the one I knew as a graduate student” (147) and Bernstein, Green, and Ready noting that his numbers are not applicable across institutional contexts (149). They further ask, “who would staff such [teaching-intensive] positions?” (151), drawing attention to the disproportionately large role women still play in staffing basic writing classrooms.

I pose this same question, but with a different answer in mind. Most of us who teach Composition are contingent, most of us are women, and, significantly, most of us have not studied Composition and Rhetoric.

Generic Teaching in the Composition Classroom

This widespread dominance of profit and the belief that almost anyone can teach writing are neither inadvertent nor innocuous. In 2001, the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues reported that 75% of Composition teachers are graduate students [GAs], adjuncts, and temporary employees (340); degreed Compositionists make up a small percentage of this group. I argue that, in order to justify hiring from a pool of persons lacking discipline-specific expertise, managers perpetuate the belief that expertise in Composition is unnecessary. In turn, the actions of administrators encourage many writing instructors to believe that knowledge of Composition Studies is not

vital to their own practices.

Certainly a person with no graduate study in Composition might be an excellent writing teacher. Certainly Literature and Composition are closely entwined fields, so that the majority of those who teach Composition—GAs and contingent labor more likely to have degrees (or degrees-in-progress) in Literary Studies—have some education that can inform their work. On the other hand, most writing teachers lack a foundation of knowledge regarding the acquisition of advanced literacy and are not current with developments in the field. Bousquet puts this situation in perspective:

. . . it is now typical for students to take nearly all first-year, and many lower-division, and some advanced topics courses from nondegreed persons who are imperfectly attuned to disciplinary knowledge and who may or may not have an active research agenda or a future in the profession. (42)

As graduate study in English currently stands at most universities, unless one chooses to concentrate in Composition Studies specifically, a graduate student rarely receives more than a cursory introduction to the field. Sledd notes that graduate students with no background in Composition Studies may benefit from “limited teaching, after careful training and under intelligent supervision.” However, he worries that what is most often offered these new teachers is “surveillance, rather than instruction” (“Why the Wyoming” 168). Some institutions do offer more in-depth teacher training for graduate students in English who teach Composition, and some literature programs offer or even require a full course or two in Composition. Yet I cannot help but object, as Sledd does, that such moves are not enough to excuse staffing Composition “with the least experienced, least prepared, most poorly paid of teachers” (“Why the Wyoming” 167), who, moreover, are also shouldering a full schedule of graduate credits (“Or Get Off The Pot” 85). Moreover, the foundational assumption behind these required courses and training programs is that they result in sufficient expertise to teach writing.

Recently, a colleague asserted just this point when the subject of hiring more Compositionists was raised in a meeting. Her comment was in regards to the many full-time tenure-track professors in literature who teach Composition on our campus. Surely they are better prepared than senior faculty who have never studied Composition, she said. Well, sure. Yet I can't help but note that this rationale would not be accepted in the reverse. The two courses I took in literary theory (one in a master's program, the other in a doctoral program) would never be accepted as sufficient expertise to assign me to teach that course. My colleague was well-intended, no doubt, likely just being supportive of movements to integrate Literature and Composition in graduate programs. But the subtle implication, one many colleagues seem unconscious of making, is that my degree in Composition is an unnecessary

excess. Most of higher education operates on this premise, and it allows graduate students and adjuncts to be used as a source of very cheap labor, and tenure-track professors to be repurposed in lieu of additional hires. Some might be successful Composition teachers despite this system, but it is not constructed to foster good teaching.

In contrast, Murphy claims that the work of part-time instructors of his acquaintance “is probably better than that done in Composition classrooms today by the average full-time faculty member teaching writing, who typically has little training or respect for Composition theory and would prefer teaching literature” (29). He rejects the image of the

“Some might be successful Composition teachers despite this system, but it is not constructed to foster good teaching.”

“ill-prepared and under-supported ‘freeway flier’” as a “very damaging false stereotype” (“On Buying Out, and Having To” 156). His descriptions imply that adjuncts, in his experience, do have more significant training in Composition; what that training is, however, is left unexamined. They may indeed have more training and desire, but that does not excuse systematic abuse of adjunct labor. It does not mean that we should not want teachers with discipline-specific expertise, the job security, resources, and academic freedom to do their best work. What’s more, as Bernstein, Green, and Ready point out, Murphy’s observations are not so readily transferable to other contexts. As I noted earlier, my own early work as an adjunct writing teacher was problematic, to say the least. I resembled Murphy’s description of the average full-time professor, without the paycheck and benefits to match. Murphy may have worked as one of many adjuncts well-schooled in Composition theory and pedagogy; I was making it up as I went along, and, like the other adjuncts in my bullpen, saw the occasional introduction to literature course as a reward from the WPA for a job well done. I worked very hard at my jobs at three institutions, but toiled under a lot of misconceptions about Composition. I never met a compositionist at any of my adjunct jobs. In fact, I didn’t know the field existed for most of that time, stumbling across it as I considered a return to graduate school. Murphy’s perspectives are further challenged by research in contingent faculty work demonstrating that our teaching conditions *really do* affect the learning conditions of students.

Concerned with contingent faculty across all disciplines, Paul Umbach analyzed data collected in the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, administered to 132 institutions in 2004. He found that “compared with their tenured and tenure-track peers, contingent faculty . . . are underperforming in their delivery of undergraduate instruction” (110). Specifically,

“Part-time faculty interact with students less frequently, use active and collaborative techniques less often, spend less time preparing for class, and have lower academic expectations than their tenured and tenure-track peers” (110). Full-time contingent faculty also spend less time interacting with students and “require slightly less effort from their students,” but spend “more time than tenured and tenure-track faculty preparing for class” (110). Umbach is quick to argue that these results should not be interpreted as a lack of competence. Rather, as many labor activists have noted, contingent working conditions limit what faculty can accomplish.

In the English department, managers and even tenured faculty have objected little to the contingent staff’s lack of Composition study, suggesting that Composition’s disciplinary knowledge is not widely regarded as a professional prerequisite to teaching writing. Until quite recently, I have been one person in an on-call staffing army, populated mostly by persons with little or no expertise in teaching writing beyond having been hired to teach sections of Composition at other schools in the past. This suggests to me that, however I may define myself, many define “Composition teacher” as a warm body with graduate credits in English.

Of course some administrators and faculty may privately believe or even publicly claim that Composition teachers should have studied Composition, but to act openly on this preference would disrupt the current practice of employing persons with little or no disciplinary knowledge. Hillocks describes the situation thusly: “The educationists seem to believe that teaching is generic: Once one knows how to teach, one can teach anything” (3). Managers using the contingent system, then, do not necessarily hire teachers with content knowledge of Composition, as much as those with some experience with teaching in general. Hillocks explains the contradiction at the heart of this preference: “Today, on the one hand, we hear from the writing establishment that writing is a special craft that requires a trained professoriate. But college and school personnel administrators tell us, through their actions, that nearly anyone can teach it” (4). Managers accept the latter stance as it allows them easily to draw from the pool of cheap labor in English Studies.

Moreover, managers’ support of this system tacitly subjugates Composition Studies. In the corporate model, Composition Studies is not a profitable commodity; it is a niche market that does not pay off. As administrators maintain this perspective through their hiring policies, graduate and contingent employees are behooved to agree (at least publicly) that teaching is generic and Composition Studies is superfluous.

For instance, I can speculate why my brother, looking skeptical at me over our mugs of coffee, was not eager to consider the place (or absence) of Composition Studies in his own work. Given that Composition teaching helped to fund his own education in literature and later supplemented his income, he and other employees are naturally defensive of their positions; indeed, they have little motivation even to consider the rationale behind their funding.

Without the assistantships that position graduate students as Composition teachers, many would not be able to afford their educations. While a few English graduate programs are working to integrate the Studies of Literature and Composition, most students must choose one track or the other. If the administration insisted that all writing teachers either be students of Composition or be thoroughly trained in the field, many English graduate students would either lose funding to those on a Composition track, or spend a great deal of time supplementing their already full plate of literary studies with Composition texts or coursework. Contingent faculty already holding degrees but ungrounded in Composition are in the same position; they need their jobs teaching writing and so are not in a strong position from which to admit any detriments their lack of Composition study may bring.

Many tenure-track and tenured professors have become entrenched in this system as well. For instance, Joseph Harris argues in "Thinking like a Program" that writing teachers need not be compositionists. While he values Composition scholarship (362), he does not believe that compositionists have any "unique skill in teaching students the moves and strategies of academic writing" (360). Armed with that philosophy, Harris has created a first-year writing staff at Duke University comprised entirely of post-doctoral fellows from "a wide range of disciplines" outside of English Studies, the majority of whom have not previously taught or studied Composition. These non-tenure track employees are not required to engage Composition Studies in any great, extended depth, though Harris works with them on designing assignments and defining course goals (360). Yet, I suspect his willingness to employ teachers ungrounded in the field has more to do with his worry that the labor system and the status of Compositionists cannot be changed. Harris admits that:

If . . . more than a few American universities were willing to support the work of first-year writing teachers as a separate discipline, with the protections and privileges of departmental status and tenure, then I would gladly sign on the cause. But that is not a choice most of us have been offered, and I don't see how accepting a subordinate status in an existing discipline is preferable to working as a valued member of a multidisciplinary program. (362)

Rather than challenge the administration, then, Harris has adopted its position that the teaching and study of writing are separate endeavors. Harris does not quite embody Marc Bousquet's claim that tenure-line faculty choose to ignore concerns with Composition labor "as a managerial responsibility" (20)—he does, after all, make the effort to try something new. But he also chooses to "reform" labor by accepting as inevitable management's policy of generic, contingent teaching.

I believe that one serious consequence of Composition's labor system, whether it takes the form of graduate assistantships, temporary contracts, or WPAs, is that it may dis-

courage teachers from exploring or even acknowledging the assumptions at work behind their positions as writing instructors (or their role in hiring instructors). In turn, instruction may stagnate. Karen Thompson argues, “When academic freedom is weak, quality education becomes threatened by conformity, mediocrity, and the safest approaches..., grade inflation, and choosing to protect one’s position rather than extend students’ horizons” (45). Gwendolyn Bradley adds, “Largely unprotected against sudden termination of their employment, contingent faculty have every incentive to avoid taking risks in the classroom....”

In my own case, when I reflected on my limitations both as an adjunct and a writing teacher, I returned to graduate study in Composition; however, I had the significant benefit of a supportive, well-employed spouse who could shoulder the burden of the cost. Many persons teaching writing do not have the resources to study Composition; after all, they are already graduate students in English literature, or living on contingent-worker salaries. Just as significant, I had the desire to pursue Composition as my primary field. Many writing teachers are not interested in getting a Composition degree—they teach writing as a condition of their employment or funding, and are actively working for jobs focused on teaching literature or cultural Studies. They may enjoy teaching writing and certainly can be good teachers. A few may even do scholarly work in Composition. At the same time, there is little motivation for such teachers to upset labor and funding arrangements by attaching any great consequence to a lack of disciplinary knowledge. Rather, they are more likely to see teaching Composition as “dues paying” in the English Department and to do their best. They need the job, after all, and their employers rarely demand further study beyond an introductory course. WPAAs, who must find multitudes of teachers willing to work for contingent pay or with temporary contracts, cannot afford to make expertise a deal-breaker, given that most of the people applying are not degreed Compositionists.

Contingent Teaching and Professional Development in Composition

The combination of a philosophy of generic teaching, a contingent labor force, and disregard of Composition Studies can be detrimental to professional development. That is, Composition teachers under this system have a much more difficult time pursuing their own scholarship in the field—once they are in place, their working conditions do not nurture further study. Maureen Murphy Nutting reports that they often do not qualify for professional development programs (36). Moreover, teaching an overload of courses at more than one institution to make ends meet makes staying current with scholarship in the field extremely challenging (36). The American Association of University Professors reports that even when in full-time but non-tenure-track positions, such faculty’s larger course loads provide “less

time . . . to pursue scholarship or even keep up with developments in the field" (Curtis and Jacobs 7). Moreover, these positions often do not have research requirements, making it less likely that administration will even consider supporting their scholarship (7).

Giroux argues that as a consequence, "the intellectual culture of the university declines" (118). I believe that this effect is direr in Composition than in other disciplines. Most contingent Composition teachers are actually literature specialists. As a result, any time they do set aside for scholarly work is less likely to be dedicated to Composition Studies. Ironically, then, the longer they teach Composition in the contingent system, the farther they might be removed from developments in Composition. Compositionists (employed as WPAs) and Composition teachers are placed into separate categories. The contrast is not only one of tenured versus contingent faculty; the division of labor perpetuates the belief that Composition study itself is adjunct.

This belief may reinforce the growing rift between Literary and Composition Studies, discouraging English graduate programs from integrating their study. Why give equal time and resources to Composition theory in the English degree if a person can be employed to teach writing without it? Moreover, the view of Composition Studies as superfluous to teaching writing may make compositionists resentful, as it characterizes their degrees as intellectual wastes of time. It may also result in Composition teachers who concentrate in literature studies feeling under prepared, overwhelmed or neglected by those who assign them Composition classes without providing a sufficient foundation.

The Quality of Contingent Teaching

The lack of scholarly knowledge of Composition, coupled with the poor working conditions of the majority of Composition teachers, can be detrimental to the quality of teaching, through no fault of the teachers themselves. Giroux notes that working conditions, including "less time to prepare, larger class loads, almost no time for research, and excessive grading demands" can lead to teachers "becoming demoralized and ineffective" (121). In addition, administrators often supply little or no training in Composition teaching even though their staff has minimal disciplinary knowledge, and they often fail to provide material resources in terms of office space and sometimes even library privileges. The best of teachers may work effectively even under these circumstances. However, Bousquet points out that, "The system of cheap teaching doesn't sort for the best teachers; it sorts for the persons who are in a financial position to accept compensation below the living wage" (3).

Management says it wants quality teaching, yet its actions suggest that economical teaching is the priority. Gwendolyn Bradley observes that, "Courses that are packaged once and delivered over and over by low-paid, part-time teachers are cheaper and more efficient

to produce than courses designed individually by highly qualified, tenure-track professors.” Prioritizing economics over quality has consequences: “Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime” (Bousquet 41). Composition teachers are made to struggle both financially and professionally, inevitably negatively affecting instruction.

Poor material circumstances and a lack of a foundation in Composition Studies can, at best, result in a lack of reflective teaching. At worst, instructors may perpetuate methods that, while useful in their own experiences as writers or learners, may not be appropriate for the students in their classrooms. Both Hillocks and Salvatori note that this is a genuine problem. Salvatori observes that when people assume teaching is generic, requiring “no special training,” then teachers are less likely “to engage questions that pose a threat to comfortable ways of teaching and habitual ways of thinking about teaching” (300). Hillocks’s study of writing teachers revealed that teachers do frequently put too much faith in the methods they have used previously, or those that were used to teach them. When students fail, teachers tend to rationalize and blame the students rather than question their pedagogical choices:

If students do not learn much . . . it is not surprising because they are weak and cannot be expected to learn. The teaching has not failed; the students have. . . . Teaching writing becomes a protected activity. There is no need to call assumptions about methods into question, no reason to try something new, no reason to doubt oneself as a teacher. (28)

Students may be branded as incompetent or unintelligent if they do not respond to the stance and method adopted by the teacher. I do not mean to say that every writing teacher without a degree in Composition fails in this way. Rather, it is a risk significantly increased when management staffs courses with those working outside of their fields and training.

I do not mean to judge teachers of writing too harshly. Stephen North cautions scholars against making practitioners the “source” of “a knowledge and method crisis” (324). This criticism too easily devolves, he says, into portraying teachers as mere “technicians” (331) who must be instructed by the more savvy scholars, or worse, “something like the simple, indigent population of the newly discovered, mostly unexplored territory of Composition” (325). Sledd expresses the same concern, balking at the “contempt” that Compositionists express “for the real teachers of Composition,” the contingent workers (“Why the Wyoming” 172-173). And their concern is a legitimate one—North cites several scholars whose condescension towards teachers makes their work painful for me to read, especially since I can recall being spoken to in such a manner by colleagues when I was an adjunct. This stance can reinforce the false theory-practice binary by belittling the importance of lore and alienating teachers.

Asking the Question

Rather than reject a more reflective and responsible role for Composition teachers because of these obstacles, I have tried to show here how the complex demands of the role can serve as a justification for reforming current labor practices. Initially, the terms “Composition teacher” and “compositionist” should be collapsed. When departments and WPAs meet to make hiring decisions in Composition, they should not accept as inevitable the economic rationales that now determine what it means to be a Composition teacher. Instead, they can initiate discussions about the role of the disciplinary expertise of candidates, both tenure track and nontenure track, full-time and part-time. In turn, armed with the discourse and research regarding the pedagogical consequences of labor practices, they can make cases for altering hiring practices in their departments—be it one position at a time, or an entire program.

I’m suggesting that where arguments about fair pay and office space have failed to move many administrators and complicit faculty to reform, arguments about the quality of our teaching may succeed. Powell reminds us that, “Presumably, arguments about access are not just about getting students in the door, but about providing students with an education” (670). Likewise, we should remind our colleagues and ourselves that hiring is not just about getting a teacher in front of the writing classroom, but providing our students, who often come to us struggling and underprepared, with instructors schooled in the appropriation of advanced literacy. Encouraging us to pay attention to retention scholarship, Powell further urges, “As retention efforts move into the classrooms, writing programs need to be informed about the politics and priorities of the retention efforts at our respective institutions, so that composition faculty are not recruited to participate in efforts that run counter to our own goals and pedagogies” (669). In the same way, we can no longer ignore the politics and priorities of labor practices, especially as they run counter to our goals and pedagogies in Composition. I believe we have a moral obligation to our students, our colleagues, and ourselves to reject the flex-labor system which prioritizes profit, and instead fight for a labor system that makes quality education the priority. In every meeting and every conversation about hiring and program development, we need to ask: Who is teaching Composition?

Works Cited

- Bernstein, Susan Naomi, Anne E. Green, and Cecilia Ready. “Off the Radar Screen: Gender, Adjuncting, and Teaching Institutions.” *College Composition and Communication* 51.1 (2001): 149-152. Print.
- Bérubé, Michael. “The Attention Blogs Bring.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52.47 (2006): B8. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 2 March 2009.

- Bousquet, Marc. *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. NY: New York UP, 2008. Print.
- Bradley, Gwendolyn. "Contingent Faculty and the New Academic Labor System." *Academe Online*. 90.1 (2004): no page. Web. 24 May 2011.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time / Adjunct Issues. "Report on the Coalition on the Academic Workforce/ CCCC Survey of Faculty in Freestanding Writing Programs for Fall 1999." *College Composition and Communication* 53.2 (2001): 336-348. Print.
- Curits, John W. and Monica Jacobe. "AAUP Contingent Faculty Index 2006." *American Association of University Professors*. 1 January 2006: n. pag. Web. 1 June 2008.
- Downing, David. *The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005. Print.
- Downing, David, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu, eds. *Beyond English Inc.: Curricular Reform in a Global Economy*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2002. Print.
- Freed, Richard D., ed. *Eloquent Dissent: The Writings of James Sledd*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1996. Print.
- Giroux, Henry A. *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm: 2007. Print.
- Harris, Joseph. "Thinking like a Program." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 4.3 (2004): 357-363. Print.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Hillocks, George. *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1995. Print
- Jaschik, Scott. "The Disappearing Tenure-Track Job." *Inside Higher Ed*. 12 May 2009: no pag. Web. 18 Sept. 2009.
- . "Rethinking Work." *Inside Higher Ed*. 31 December 2007: no pag. Web. 2 January 2008.
- Lynch-Binieck, Amy. "Filling in the Blanks: They Say, I Say and the Persistence of Formalism." *CEA Forum* 38.2 (2009): no pag. Web. 1 August 2011.
- Mclemee, Scott. "Deconstructing Composition." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 49.28 (2003): A16. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 4 May 2006.
- Murphy, Michael. "New Faculty for a New University: Toward a Full-Time Teaching-Intensive Faculty Track in Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001): 14-42. Print.
- . "On Buying Out, and Having To." *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001):154-163. Print.
- North, Stephen M. *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1987. Print.

- Nutting, Maureen Murphy. "Part-time Faculty: Why Should We Care?" *New Directions in Higher Education* 123 (2003): 33-39. Print.
- Ohmann, Richard. "Accountability and the Conditions for Curricular Change." Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu. 62-73.
- Powell, Pegeen Reichert. "Retention and Writing Instruction." *College Composition and Communication* 60.4 (2009): 664-682. Print.
- Salvatori, Mariolina Rizzi. "The Scholarship of Teaching: Beyond the Anecdotal." *Pedagogy* 2.3 (2002): 297-310. Print.
- Sledd, James. "On Buying In and Selling Out: A Note for Bosses Old and New." *College Composition and Communication* 53.1 (2001). 146-149. Print.
- . "Or Get Off the Pot: Notes Toward the Restoration of Moderate Honesty Even in English Departments." *ADE Bulletin* 52 (1977): 1-7. Rpt. in Freed 82-96.
- . "See and Say." *English Education* 19 (1987): 133-145. Rpt. in Freed 135-147.
- . "Why the Wyoming Resolution Had to Be Emasculated: A History and a Quixotism." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 11 (1991): 269-281. Rpt. in Freed 164-179.
- Thompson, Karen. "Contingent Faculty and Student Learning: Welcome to the Strativersity." *New Directions for Higher Education* 123 (2003): 41-47. Print.
- Umbach, Paul D. "How Effective Are They? Exploring the Impact of Contingent Faculty on Undergraduate Education." *Review of Higher Education* 30.2 (2007): 91-123. Print.



Amy Lynch-Binieck is an Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of Composition at Kutztown University where she teaches undergraduate composition and the teaching of writing, as well as graduate courses in composition, rhetoric, and literacy. She earned a Ph.D. in Composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her current research project is a qualitative study of the connections among employment status, disciplinary background and Composition pedagogy.