“This Erstwhile Unreadable Text”: Deep Time, Multidisciplinarity and First-Year Writing Faculty Mentoring and Support

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I propose to say a few more words about this erstwhile unreadable text, in order to lay out some thoughts about writing and literacy in what I like to call the contact zones. I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. 


Mountains are not somehow created whole and subsequently worn away. They wear down as they come up… rising and shedding sediment steadily through time, always the same, never the same, like row upon row of fountains." (47)

John McPhee, Basin and Range, 1981.

Having worked with a multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty for over ten years now, across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, I am somewhat accustomed to Pratt’s concept of “erstwhile unreadable text." A cultural anthropologist, for instance, suggested I read Philippe Bourgoing and Jeff Schonberg’s Righteous Dogfence (2009); my prior notions about field notes from having read Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Clifford Geertz (2005) as part of my English Ph.D. suddenly gave way to a much more nuanced understanding, one I have since used with class visits and in several first-year writing assignments. My notions of document design expanded tenfold when an environmental-science colleague showed me this kind of dialectical cross-disciplinary approach has not thoroughly enough influenced first-year writing faculty teaching and mentoring and support. Not only am I advocating for multidisciplinary faculty and curricula. Instead, I hope to encourage more deliberate faculty teaching mentoring and support and thereby create a more hospitable home or community of this erstwhile unreadable text, in order to lay out some thoughts about writing and literacy in what I like to call the contact zones. I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.

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This kind of dialectical cross-disciplinary approach has not thoroughly enough influenced first-year writing faculty teaching and mentoring and support. Not only am I advocating for multidisciplinary faculty and curricula. Instead, I hope to encourage more deliberate faculty teaching mentoring and support and thereby create a more hospitable home or community of thought about the concept of “deep time," described in the second epigraph above. It means a kind of “anti-history," where the concept of deep time emerges most prominently from eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Hutton (1785), but McPhee coined the term “deep time" in Basin and Range (1981), deploying it as a way of naming the incomprehensibility and recursivity of geospatial and geological time. Geologist Henry Gee (2009) also embraces the “deep time" as a substantive epistemological tool. Gee, for instance, laments the human impulse to fit geological history into “human terms" (24). For instance, in calling for this kind of dialectical cross-disciplinary approach has not thoroughly enough influenced first-year writing faculty teaching and mentoring and support. Not only am I advocating for multidisciplinary faculty and curricula. Instead, I hope to encourage more deliberate faculty teaching mentoring and support and thereby create a more hospitable home or community of thought about the concept of “deep time," described in the second epigraph above. It means a kind of “anti-history," where the concept of deep time emerges most prominently from eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Hutton (1785), but McPhee coined the term “deep time" in Basin and Range (1981), deploying it as a way of naming the incomprehensibility and recursivity of geospatial and geological time. Geologist Henry Gee (2009) also embraces the “deep time" as a substantive epistemological tool. Gee, for instance, laments the human impulse to fit geological history into “human terms" (24). For instance, in calling for
compositionalists do have with writing and writing pedagogy.

Where faculty in English or composition rhetoric suffer “dislocation” and lose the opportunity to be “ambassadors,” terms like post-process pedagogy, as seen in the opening anecdote, befuddle and alienate writing from faculty in disciplines outside of composition, rhetoric, and English. Not surprisingly, these scholars, many of whom may be new to the teaching of first-year writing and composition, look to writing-studies scholars as experts at the expense and exclusion of also thinking and writing in the areas of the first-year writing and writing teachers. In my experience, they express confusion and dissatisfaction with composition scholarship when it is provided because it seems inaccessible, even with extensive contextualizing, writing, and conversation.

It undermines this homogeneity reaffirms problematic dichotomies between content and writing. Faculty from disciplines outside of writing studies often approach first-year writing as though they have a firm grasp on the content and, in order to become effective writing teachers, only need a quick dose of classroom tips. As a writing program administrator, I repeatedly hear from multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty (who have already taught in their disciplines) concerned about their ability to teach writing, especially to teach writing in an academic setting, to teach something of value. “I’m not prepared to teach writing,” … “In my field we never talked about teaching.” … “There’s nothing from my background about leading class discussions.” I was never taught how to think about student-centered learning.” I am increasingly convinced that these concerns are not so much confessions of insecurities or realistic appraisals of preparedness as instead reflective of an ingrained and erant set of perceptions about who owns writing instruction in the academy and which disciplines do or do not value and practice effective pedagogy. Such concerns reinforce the difficulties such scholars as David R. Russell (1997) and Michael Carter (2007) have discussed regarding the ways in which writing is too often perceived as “generalizable to all disciplines and therefore distinct from disciplinary knowledge” (Carter 384–85).

While due to the conditions negatively important content and prospective first-year writing faculty by limiting their reach as teachers, scholars, teachers, and administrators, David Smit (2004) suggests that this ongoing insularity also has a deleterious impact on student writing: “[Composition studies] continues to foster writing in generic “writing” courses with no common curriculum or content; it assumes that teaching the ‘personal essay’ or the ‘research report’ or ‘literary analysis’ is tantamount to teaching writing generally, that to teach any genre in classroom conditions is equivalent to teaching all genres in all contexts” (10). Working against such presumed universalism, I have over the years sought a more expansive and inclusive multidisciplinary approach—a deep-time pedagogy for first-year writing faculty mentoring and support. How I more effectively share the expertise in writing pedagogy from rhetoric, composition, and writing studies alongside a visible inclusion of the scholarship, practices, and pedagogies that other disciplines can bring to first-year writing? What stands to be gained from weaving a more interdisciplinary approach into first-year writing faculty mentoring and support? What might be at stake?

The ensuing sections detail the strategies that have shaped for me as I have pursued these questions by thinking within a deep-time framework. I share these strategies as a way of spurring more conversations about how compositionists might inflect first-year writing faculty mentoring and support with more multidisciplinarity. Again, I am not suggesting that anybody can teach first-year writing; nor am I replacing the invaluable scholarship on first-year writing developed in the last half century by compositionists; nor am I advocating for all first-year courses to have multidisciplinary curricula. Instead, I hope to extend this focus on relationships deliberately to how we prepare first-year writing teachers and how we do professional development opportunities, thereby generating increased inclusivity and a broadening of boundaries.

Fostering Relationships

Even though it is impossible to know for certain whether one species is the ancestor of another, we do know that no two organisms found on Earth must be cousins in some degree. (155)

One can see a similar spirit in composition studies undergirding Malea Powell’s 2011 CCCC call for papers, where she emphasizes “relations,” “webbed relationality,” and the contestation of “originary stories.” This relationality also informs the approach Anderson and Romano suggest for working against the insularity governing graduate education in composition and rhetoric: “[A] rhetorical education [that] rethink[s] graduate education as a matter of relationships: disciplinary/intra-disciplinary relationships; human relationships—hierarchical, labor, gender; and institution-to-discipline relationships.”

Deep-time pedagogy positions patterns of relation and cousinhood across time not only in terms of writing, but also in terms of human relationships. Maintaining disciplinary plurality within such a framework asks that first-year writing faculty and administrators actively create occasions for scholars from a variety of disciplines, administrators, and members of the larger community to share space and conversation in the context of first-year teaching. (7) I argue that teaching as collaboration is already an established ideal, I would counter that there is still more work to be done, particularly in first-year writing. A more rigorous and expansive collaboration would invite first-year writing faculty to consider in a sustained manner the ways in which our teaching is shaped by colleagues and mentors, students, friends, family, and acquaintances, as well as past, present, future, real and imagined experiences across disciplines and in and outside of the academy.

As a way of encouraging such insights, our teaching seminar for new first-year writing faculty meets as it offers one of the most foundational moments for establishing collaboration and relationships. We ask for active reflections about how and where and why they have written and what these experiences. Thus, the initial template for this course may have originated from within a composition framework, it gets rewritten across our time together, enriched by layers of multidisciplinarity. Establishing this culture of collaboration and relationships continues beyond that semester. Conversations, social events, symposia, speakers, symposia, classroom visits, and sustained collaborative reflection through assessment and review. While our program’s multidisciplinarity offers a natural contact zone, such efforts could also be achieved in other contexts.

Deep time, in fact, unsettles disciplinary identity in such a way that even first-year writing faculty who are primarily in English Studies would be invited to examine their own networks of kinship. Birgit Neumann and Frederik Tygstrup (2009) apply Edward Said’s concept of “traveling theory” to describe a growing interdisciplinary in English: “English Studies is certainly among those disciplines which have been strongly affected by the dynamic exchange of concepts, most of which have been imported from other disciplines, such as sociology, philosophy or psychohistory, and so forth.” The 2011-12 MLA Job Information List suggests interdisciplinarity in English Studies is growing: According to “Table 3.” the MLA identifies twenty subspecialties within English Studies. The category “Interdisciplinary” first appears in 2004-05; it remained steady at around 10% of all MLA job advertisements for several years, but has jumped most recently to 14.9%. In 2000-01, 16.6% of ads were labeled “Other fields” or “Specialization,” in 2011-12 that specialisation has dropped to 25.7%. Thus, while being situated in English department embody inter- and multidisciplinarity, with scholars connected to the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Deep time would invite conversations between faculty that draw on these multidisciplinary domains.

More specifically, one could provide a list of events happening throughout campus across disciplines and ask first-year writing faculty to attend and reflect on formal and informal conversations found around your department. In a future iteration of our first-year writing seminar in teaching writing, I might ask participants to schedule conversations with faculty members in various departments. Henry Gee, Deep Time, 2000.

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Translating Between Disciplines

If by some fiat I had to restrict all this writing to one sentence, this is the one I would choose: The summit of Mt. Everest is marine limestone. (124)


Moving toward a more multidisciplinary, deep-time platform for first-year writing faculty mentoring and support also invites a reconsideration of the language used in these contexts. McPhee worked time and again to translate the concept of deep time for various readers. Working toward a multidisciplinary, deep-time platform for first-year writing faculty mentoring and support also invites a reconsideration of the language used in these contexts. We have invited seniors from a variety of majors to first-year writing faculty focus groups to discuss the writing they’ve done throughout their undergraduate experience (on and off campus), and what they remember as the most memorable moments in their first-year writing classroom. Our institution, like other first-year writing classes across disciplines, peer tutors in the writing center, and undergraduates serve a vital role in our journal of first-year writing and in our annual conference showcasing first-year writing.

Talk in Comp Theory

Teaching Composition

seminars on teaching writing not necessarily be limited to discussing the writing in other disciplines and instead “get it into the gut.” This would mean that preparation workshops, conversations, or journalistic interviewing. Any of these gestures would help foster a more multidisciplinary perspective for first-year writing.

Reading “Erstwhile Unreadable Texts”

An abstract, intellectual understanding of deep time comes easily enough … Getting it into the gut is quite another matter. Deep time is so alien that we can really only comprehend it as a metaphor. (3)


Working toward a more expansive, deep-time multidisciplinary in first-year writing faculty mentoring and support prompts a reconsideration of the kinds of readings offered to teachers of first-year writing for training and/or professional development. Closely reading texts from other disciplines is crucial for first-year writing faculty to move past general abstractions about writing in other disciplines and instead “get it into the gut.” This would mean that preparation workshops, conversations, or seminars on teaching writing on not necessarily be limited to discussing the Norton Book of Composition Studies (2009) or Cross-Talk in Comp Theory (2003) or Teaching Composition (2007) (though each deserves presence), but also include selections from the aforementioned texts. This reflects the approach that Maxine Greene discusses for "more reading about the reading taking place off campus" and "a systematic and conscious comprehension of the practices, and, just as important, of the nature and perceptions of our field" (130). Similarly, I ask that first-year writing faculty think together in a forum about how their teaching of writing is shaped and inspired by experiences with writing and people off campus. I have asked people at area nonprofits to visit my first-year writing class and talk about their writing. One might also encourage first-year writing faculty to ask members of the larger community about their writing, perhaps through oral history, ethnography, or semi-collegiate interviewing. Any of these gestures would help foster a more multidisciplinary perspective for first-year writing.

Conclusion: What’s at Stake?

The result, therefore, of our present enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end. (80)


My hope in making visible the advantages of and strategies for inviting more earnestly a greater number of disciplines into first-year writing faculty teaching and support through deep-time pedagogy is that others involved with first-year writing will deliberately pursue the many multidisciplinary possibilities rather than leaving such discoveries to occasional or situated chance. While there have already been some efforts at infusing first-year writing faculty preparation, mentoring, and support with multidisciplinarity, they have been for the most part somewhat isolated and/or directed primarily toward curricular design rather than in what are arguably the most crucial places: epistemology and pedagogy.

Surely there are costs. Fostering deep-time pedagogy, cultivating relationships, seeking out collaboration, translating, and embracing the materiality of first-year writing requires a disposition toward loosening control and relinquishing some expertise. In effect, it requires a total shift away from teaching mentoring and support embodies what Deetz (2004) terms the “pedagogy of humility.” “Humility in my role as a teacher of critical writing is … a willingness to lie and learn from the unpredictable.” (5) This unpredictability amidst shifting ground can leave us vulnerable to competing approaches to and values regarding the teaching of writing. However, one can see much value through instances of multidisciplinarity in the larger field of composition studies, as in J. Blake Scott’s “Civic Engagement as Risk Management and Public Relations: What the Pharmaceutical Industry can Teach Us about Service Learning” (2009) or through Charles Bazerman’s work with education (2006). Other examples include Neil Lerner’s work on the boundary cultures between scientific writing and the humanities and James Hennesy’s work on the role of the English department in the classroom and Blake Yancey’s intention to borrow the “Patient Page” concept from the Journal of the American Medical Association and adapt it for the larger field of composition studies in order to facilitate better conversation between scholars of writing studies and others.

Such efforts as these underscore the gains that can be attained through multidisciplinary cooperation and conversation, and highlight what seems a general receptivity to multidisciplinary approaches that remains discordant to the mentoring and
support in which many first-year writing faculty participate. What I hope to have achieved in this article is to push against the monolingualism, the lingua franca of composition, that still dominates so much first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support, and instead create more space for translanguaging, for a pidgin dialect—a deep-time pedagogy—that could facilitate a culture of first-year writing that permeates disciplinary boundaries across, within, and beyond the academy.

Works Cited


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