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

Denise Comer, Duke University

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. (33)


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 Bouvier and Jeff Schonberg’s Righteous Dogfens (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 english-scientific-colleague showed me the break-out boxes, tables, and images fluidly interspersed throughout articles in such journals as The Ecological Society of America. Conversations with a biologist enabled me to teach first-year writers how to create posters as an alternative to text-based verbal presentations and presentation software programs. More surprising for me was when I learned from a musicologist that the Suzuki method of music pedagogy is not entirely about monotonous drills and rote memorization, but is also rooted in strategies I hold central to effective first-year writing pedagogy: encouragement, practice, revision, and collaboration.

Perhaps of equal significance has been what I have learned from scholars outside of writing studies about our own field’s erstwhile unreadable texts. A religious-studies scholar in our first-year writing program, for instance, once remarked, “I came to teach [first-year] writing and I read an article about process pedagogy, and then one about post-process pedagogy, and I had no idea what any of it meant.” Such a response may seem obvious: Why should a religious-studies scholar be able to make sense of Lee-Ann M. Kastman Breuch (2002), Lad Tobin (2001), or John Trimbur (2011) any more than I might be able to understand Jonathan Z. Smith (1978) or Bruce Lincoln (1999)? Surely, this scholar’s teaching and writing ultimately benefited from his foray into the contact zone, despite the difficulties he encountered. However, I have come to believe that unless these (for him) unreadable composition texts are situated alongside texts from his discipline, he will have little-to-no opportunity to position writing within religious studies. For him, writing would then unfortunately remain that which is borrowed or visited rather than nested within his own discipline.

Experiences like these—about which I propose to say a few more words—have enriched my first-year writing pedagogy, my writing, and my approach to first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support. These encounters have convinced me that first-year writing teachers bear a responsibility to approach writing and writing pedagogy through a more inclusive, multidisciplinary lens. Such an epistemological shift has, for me, been facilitated by relying on the geological concept of “deep time,” described in the second epigraph above. A deep-time approach to writing foregrounds the ways in which disciplines—like mountains—shift, erode, meld, and separate across dimensions of time and place: “always the same, never the same.” Placed alongside Pratt’s notions of contact zones, deep time illustrates the longer, deeper, more recursive and complicated histories and relationships that define contacts around writing.

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 incomprehensible and recusivity of geological and environmental science. Geologist Henry Gee (2000) and geologist Mary Louise Pratt (1991) have written substantively about this geophysical tool. Gee, for instance, laments the human impulse to fit geological history into “human terms” (2), a tidy trajectory where fish move to land and then apes gradually morph into hominids. Instead, Gee calls for “a truly substantive epistemological tool.” Gee, for instance, laments the human impulse to fit geological history into “human terms” (2), a tidy trajectory where fish move to land and then apes gradually morph into hominids. Instead, Gee calls for “a truly substantive epistemological tool.” Gee argues, “is an antithesis to the historical approach to the history of life; a kind of ‘anti-history’” (4). In calling for this “anti-history,” Gee demonstrates deep time’s epistemological disruption. Its undercurrent of phylogenetic relationships and cladograms, “branching diagrams [that] represent orders of cousinship between organisms—patterns of relationship” (Gee 6), shows that human and geological history cannot fit into a linear, compartmentalized trajectory. As such, the way we understand the nature of being human must always be always connected to a recursive, limitless past with human relationships moving along various “orders of cousinhood.”

So too, I suggest, with writing. I argue in this article that infusing deep-time, multidisciplinary dimensions into first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support—unveiling and creating contact zones within a deep-time framework, where first-year writing faculty can meet, clash, and grapple with the pedagogy, writing, theories, and practices of many disciplines—will enrich the ways faculty and students think, write, and talk about first-year writing. Such a move helps disrupt for faculty and students what Rebecca Goldstein (2009) terms “double black holes.” Perhaps inevitable situations in which individual experience contradictions within or between activity systems (e.g., between the motives and tools within a single activity system or between the motives of two different activity systems) but cannot articulate any meta-awareness of those contradictions” (507). I believe that such a move is vital across nearly all contexts of first-year writing, not only where first-year writing facilitates multidisciplinary features (as in my program), but also where first-year writing exists more firmly in English departments.

This kind of dialectical cross-disciplinary approach has not thoroughly enough influenced first-year writing faculty preparation and pedagogy. Multidisciplinary traditions of writing studies— including the multidisciplinary dimension of the writing field, CAC, WAC, and WID programs, and the now-expanding institutional locations for FW. Instead, the strategies most often used most effectively first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support tend to remain discordantly anchored to a comparatively narrow version of writing pedagogy. Although this enables us to share, sustain, revisit, and extend the expertise compositionists have about effective writing pedagogy, it also limits our efforts by ignoring some of the same problematic challenges of translation and power dynamics that Pratt describes in relation to other contact zones.

To be clear: I am not dismissing or demoting composition scholarship from being the cornerstone for first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support. Nor am I advocating for multidisciplinary faculty or curricula. Nor am I debating whether or how much composition faculty should be housed or should be housed in English departments. Instead, I am calling for a deep-time approach to first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support as a way of enhancing first-year writing pedagogy and forging stronger writing faculty and stronger first-year writing experiences.

Having argued the work of a handful of scholars, such as Jonathan Z. Smith (1978), Bruce Lincoln (1999), and Nancy R. Comley (1986), who argues that good writing instruction should not only be a matter of learning rhetoric. Katherine Gottschalk (2002) makes similar moves through her work with Cornell University’s John S. Knight Institute: “[F]aculty and TAs in the disciplines know a great deal about writing, that indeed they may have insights into writing in their own fields that others do not” (138). More recently, Emily Gelson and Tom Glover (2009) strive to cultivate in Negotiating a Meta-Pedagogy: a multidisciplinary ethos by asking scholars from such disciplines as music and business to describe how their fields shape their first-year pedagogies too.

However, despite this work, by and large, most first-year writing faculty too often remain relatively separate from these kinds of multidisciplinary efforts. Catherine G. Lattotter (1996) notes the homogeneity of most Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) training programs: “What is immediately noticeable about the descriptions of GTA education programs . . . is their rough similarity given a wide range of programmatic options” (141). Sidney I. Dobrin (2005), in his introduction to Don’t Call it That, suggests that “neither [first-year writing] ‘practicum’ titles nor the approach to these courses has shifted very much in the past ninety years, despite remarkable changes within composition studies” (6). Those who have questioned approaches to the pragmatic—such as with the contributors to Dobrin’s collection—have done so mostly by debunking the balance between theory and methods rather than by unpacking the degree to which most of the theories and methods, however they are balanced, emerge from what narrowly-conceived disciplinary lens.

This pervasive homogeneity with first-year writing faculty preparation, mentoring, and support can further be seen through the language most often used in these contexts. Many of the terms commonly deployed in preparing and advancing first-year writing teachers—terms like process pedagogy, expressiveivist pedagogy, post-process pedagogy—may operate on the surface as intra-disciplinary terms, but are in fact phenomenologically, epistemologically, and semantically anchored in composition and rhetoric. Using such a disciplinary language delimits what could otherwise be fuller conversations about first-year writing with scholars trained in disciplines other than English or rhetoric and composition. In my experience, terms such as these isolate discourse from each other and position them in isolation, rather than positioning them as inherently connected. Writing pedagogy seems to speak effectively about writing in how to be more effective “ambassadors” contributes to many composition and rhetoric graduate students sharing “the common experience of dislocation and forced self-reinvention” (6) upon entering the profession. Learning more about the writing, pedagogy, and theories of other disciplines would help composition and rhetoric scholars speak more productively with faculty and students in other disciplines and therefore share more effectively the expertise comparative biology of humanity, such that we can understand what being human really means” (225). “What we need,” Gee argues, “is an antithesis to the historical approach to the history of life; a kind of ‘anti-history’” (4). In calling for this “anti-history,” Gee demonstrates deep time’s epistemological disruption. Its undercurrent of phylogenetic relationships and cladograms, “branching diagrams [that] represent orders of cousinship between organisms—patterns of relationship” (Gee 6), shows that human and geological history cannot fit into a linear, compartmentalized trajectory. As such, the way we understand the nature of being human must always be always connected to a recursive, limitless past with human relationships moving along various “orders of cousinhood.”

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compositionalists do have with writing and writing pedagogy. Where faculty in English or composition and 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 teachers. In my experience, this thinking of confusion and distance without composition with composition scholarship when it is provided because it seems inaccessible, even with extensive contextualizing, writing, and conversation.

For a long time, American literature has been seen as a world apart, sufficient unto itself, not bound by the chronology and geography outside the nation, and not making any intellectual demands on that score. An Americanist hardly needs any knowledge of English literature, let alone Persian literature, Hindu literature, Chinese literature...I have in mind a form of indebtedness... Rather than being a discrete entity, [American literature] is better seen as a crisscrossing of set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other, other literature, other cultures...I would like to propose a new term—"deleterious"—to capture this phenomenon. (3)

Dimock’s invocation of "interdisciplinarity" promotes a more relational approach to disciplines, one that I have found to be a useful model for first-year writing faculty teaching and mentoring.

One can see a similar spirit in composition studies undergirding Malca Powell’s 2011 CCCCs 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." (7) I aim to extend this focus on relationships deliberately to how we prepare first-year writing teachers and how we support 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 any two organisms found on Earth must be cousins in some degree. (155)

The ensuing sections detail the strategies that have surfaced 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 compositionalists might inflect first-year writing faculty mentoring and support with multidisciplinary awareness. 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 compositionalists; nor am I advocating for all first-year courses to have multidisciplinary curricula. Instead, I hope to showcase a language and an approach to first-year writing faculty mentoring and support—a deep-time pedagogical approach to first-year writing faculty mentoring and support—of new disciplinary and professional possibilities that may be at stake?

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disciplines who teach writing-intensive courses to discuss how they approach writing in their courses and how first-year writing (might or might not) intersect with that work.

Moments for fostering relationships across multidisciplinary registers also include opportunities to draw on undergraduate expertise after first-year writing. 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 most about that writing. Our institution, like other first-year writing classes, gets input from across disciplines as peer tutors in the writing center, and undergraduates serve a vital role in our journal of first-year writing and in our annual conference showdown of first-year writing.

Involving faculty from a variety of disciplines into first-year writing, and motivating first-year writing faculty to move beyond traditional boundaries of the classroom, is a crucially important part of our mission of creating a more fruitful academic environment for all. Thus, it is essential for any first-year writing faculty to be aware of the many multidisciplinary readers who may be reading the course documents. In effect, a deep-time approach toward first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support embodies what David Blake Yancey’s intention to borrow the “Patient Page” concept from the _Journal of the American Medical Association_ (2009) or through Charles Bazerman’s work with education (2006). Other examples include Neal Levine’s (2005) approach first-year writing pedagogy from a position of familiarity rather than distance. 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: first-year writing faculty, instead of using a pedagogical language steeped in the disciplines, she shared understanding of humanities or composition discourse, I try to define discipline-specific terms and encourage parallel terminology across disciplines so writing is positioned more expansively and so scholars from a range of disciplines can approach first-year writing pedagogy from a position of familiarity rather than distance.

Fostering multidisciplinary awareness and sensitivity has prompted an activity in our program we call “Translating Scholarship,” where first-year writing faculty briefly share for a multidisciplinary audience the questions that motivate their scholarly writing, their habits of mind, their disciplinary epistemologies. Recently, these conversations gave rise to a wiki on our in-house website (titled “The Tower of Babel”) that highlighted discipline-based terminologies. Phrases like “the ghetto-ization of composition,” “lyric sociology,” or “synthetic review” then became more widely usable as they were defined, so all participants felt like they were together creating a language, all simultaneously outsiders and insiders to the teaching of writing. Effectively translating the language associated with first-year faculty mentoring and support means recognizing that course documents are material artifacts that may (and should) be read by people beyond students in a particular class or colleagues in a particular department. I encourage first-year writing teachers to think about teaching documents—syllabi, assignments, reading lists, student writing, course descriptions, teacher response—as having a powerful, longlasting impact, beyond particular semesters, individual practitioners, and even institutional boundaries. This reach is particularly vital in that it enables first-year writing faculty the opportunity to share assignments and course design on a more broader scale than another, with faculty in disciplines across the institution, and with members of the extended communities. We post assignments to a shared or public site whenever possible, but it is the student essays featured in our journal of first-year writing, where each faculty member contributes for a week, or in our showcase of innovative teaching materials by members of our program who win our annual award for excellence in teaching writing. In our program, we also have instituted a feedback process on our course descriptions for first-year writing: faculty draft a description and get feedback on it through a committee of peers. This process attends to the many multidisciplinary readers who may be reading the course description.

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 materality of first-year writing requires a disposition toward loosing control and relinquishing some expertise. In effect, it requires a deep-time approach toward first-year writing faculty teaching mentoring and support embodies what David Blake Yancey’s intention to borrow the “Patient Page” concept from the _Journal of the American Medical Association_ and adapt it for pedagogy of “humility” “Humility in my role as a teacher of creative writing is . . . a willingness to lie with and learn from the unpredictable” (35). 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 Neal Levine’s approach first-year writing pedagogy from a position of familiarity rather than distance. 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: first-year writing faculty, instead of using a pedagogical language steeped in the disciplines, she shared understanding of humanities or composition discourse, I try to define discipline-specific terms and encourage parallel terminology across disciplines so writing is positioned more expansively and so scholars from a range of disciplines can approach first-year writing pedagogy from a position of familiarity rather than distance.

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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Endnotes

1  Stephanie Stein Crease (2006), for example, describes the Suzuki method as including both individual and group practice (29), low-stakes opportunities to share and present one’s work with others (29), “incremental … development” (30), daily practice (30), and “continual positive reinforcement and feedback” (30).

2  The term was first introduced to me by my colleague and co-presenter, Rebecca Walsh, at the 2007 CCCC.

3  McPhee in Basin and Range offers deep time as a way of mitigating the incomprehensibility of geological time: “Numbers do not seem to work well with regard to deep time. Any number above a couple of thousand years—fifty thousand, fifty million—will with nearly equal effect awe the imagination to the point of paralysis” (20).

4  Russell articulates succinctly the dangers involved with such “a conceptual split between ‘content’ and ‘expression,’ learning and writing” (5): “If writing was an elementary, mechanical skill, then it had no direct relation to the goals of instruction and could be relegated to the margins of a course, a curriculum, an institution” (5).

5  This grouping of twenty includes disciplines that are sometimes separated into a discrete unit, such as composition and rhetoric, creative writing, and technical and business writing.

6  Delli Carpin’s talk, in fact, generated a disciplinary version of the “code switching” discussed the day before by another plenary speaker on the program, Keith Gilyard.

7  I also discuss this activity, as well as the “Translating Scholarship” activity mentioned below, in another article: “Translation and Transfer: Interdisciplinary Writing and Communication” (2013).

8  This material approach, buttressed by a notion of translation, is also illustrated by an initiative currently underway by the American Sociological Association: “TRAILS—the Teaching Resources and Innovations Library for Sociology Web site”—will be an archive for peer-reviewed classroom innovations, including syllabuses, class activities, individual assignments, bibliographies and Web sites—all focused on teaching. (Jaschik 2010)

9  The JAMA Patient Page is a one-page feature in each issue that focuses on a particular medical condition or disease, including a definition of the condition, diagnosis, and treatment options. The patient page has perforated edges and a “Copy for your Patients” box in order to facilitate increased communication between patients, the general public, and medical providers. cf. Janet M. Torpy, Alison E. Burke, and Richard M. Glass’s “Depression” in the 19 May 2010 issue of JAMA.

About the Author

Denise Comer is an Assistant Professor of the Practice of Writing Studies and Director of First-Year Writing in the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University, where she works with a multidisciplinary first-year writing faculty. She teaches theme-based first-year writing seminars on topics such as illness narratives, civic engagement, and travel writing. Her scholarship, which has been published in such journals as Pedagogy, Writing Program Administrators Journal, and Composition Forum, explores writing pedagogy, writing program administration, and the intersections between technology and the teaching of writing. She has two books forthcoming from Fountainhead Press in 2014: Writing in Transit: A Multidisciplinary Reader (ed.) and It’s Just a Dissertation: The Irreverent Guide to Transforming Your Dissertation from Daunting to Doable (co-written with Barbara Gini Garrrett).

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