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Locating the Boundaries of Composition and Creative Writing

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One could use several maps to chart the relation of composition to creative writing. One might adopt one of several theoretical overviews composition scholarship has produced, using this overview to define the composition-creative writing frontier. Take, for example, Richard Fulkerson's "Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity," an overview which builds on and revises a discipline-defining meta-discourse that finds expression in the work of many scholars in composition. This work organizes the discipline of composition in terms of knowledge-making practices and the internal relationship between theory and the practices of teaching and writing. Fulkerson argues that four elements constitute a theory of composition: a conception of the writing process, a pedagogy, epistemological assumptions, and an axiological commitment—a conception of what defines a goal for, and measures the success of, writing and teaching.

Fulkerson describes his work as a proposal for a "disciplinary paradigm" or "metatheory," an account of the necessary and sufficient elements of a "theory of composition" (410). I want to argue that this metatheory also provides a basis for an analysis of current scholarship and practice in creative writing, and that each of these four elements has been developed to some degree in this field. To apply this conceptual overview to the enterprise of creative writing, I draw improvisationally on three sources of "data": the self-reports of established writers, pedagogical texts about creative writing, and my own experience as a writer and a teacher of composition and creative writing. For the purpose of this essay, I leave aside what may be an important distinction between creative writing (as it is taught, learned, talked about) at the beginning and at the advanced levels. Second, I present each field in necessarily simplified and idealized terms, but trust that the conclusions I draw still serve as starting points for further inquiry. I argue that while creative writing has important lessons to learn from composition in reference to process, pedagogy, and epistemology, composition has significant lessons to learn from creative writing in terms of axiology.

Fulkerson defines *process* as "a conception of how writers go about creating texts" (411). The 1970s marked the era of the process revolution in composition, and, interestingly enough, in its rise to the stature it has achieved on this basis, composition drew on the work of "real" writers—both acknowledged experts as well as novices—in elaborating its theories. More recently, the divergent perspectives of cognitivist, expressivist, and social theories (Faigley "Competing") have made it difficult to speak of the writing process in the essentialist terms to which early process research seems to have aspired.

Some work in creative writing acknowledges scholarship on the topic of process. For example, in *Creative Writing in America*, Joseph Moxley invokes the findings of compositionists when he reminds his audience that, “whether composing monthly feasibility studies, poetry, screenplays, or the great American novel, writers are engaged in a natural, organic process of forming meaning” (26). At the same time, as Moxley’s language reflects in its references to writing as a “natural” and “organic” process, pedagogical texts in creative writing seem to lag behind scholarship in composition by portraying the writing process in either expressivist or cognitivist and linear terms. When the poet William Stafford said the secret to overcoming writer’s block is to lower one’s standards, he meant the writer ought to try to loosen his or her grip on a controlling idea or the grip the idea has on the writer. Stafford invoked Wittgenstein’s notion of language games to elaborate his meaning, describing his own writing process as following “smoke’s way,” the syntactical possibilities available in any given fragments of language. Such advice is hardly congruent with the intention-centered expressivism that still clings to conceptions of the creative writing process.

Furthermore, most of the pedagogical discourse in creative writing noticeably lacks a social perspective on composing, one in which “human language (including writing) can be understood only from the perspective of a society rather than a single individual” (Faigley “Competing” 46). In traditional creative writing classrooms, little overt investigation goes on of writing poems or stories or plays as a practice of literacy, much less of literacy acquisition as a process of acquiring “not only the words of language but the intentions carried by those words and the situations implied by them” (Faigley “Competing” 46). Creative writing as a practice of literacy—culturally overdetermined, fraught with power relations—runs tangentially to the conversation in many creative writing classrooms at a time when it has pushed to the forefront of concern in composition. In this respect, the typical creative writing class may be more conservative than the composition classroom, where the subtext of composing (as a social process mediated through power relations) runs near the surface of classroom discourse.

Fulkerson next defines *pedagogy* as “some perspective about classroom procedures and curricular designs suitable for enabling students to achieve the sort of writing one values” (411). While it sustains a wide variety of pedagogical approaches, composition has always presented itself as interested in pedagogy, with many scholars arguing that the classroom should stand at the center of our discipline. We in composition valorize teaching, thus distinguishing ourselves and our discipline from other branches of English studies. Although (or perhaps because) composition teachers recognize the gate-keeping function served by introductory courses, the underlying pedagogical ethos in our field would (ideally) assure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed.

On the other hand, scholars in creative writing have lamented “creative writing teachers’ relative lack of interest in pedagogy” (Moxley 27). First, teachers of creative writing are more likely to posit inherent talent as the most important variable for writing students’ success or failure. Creative writing teachers often position themselves to invert the pedagogical ethos of composition, to foreground their role as the keepers of the castle rather than the openers of the castle gates. Similarly, creative writers who talk about teaching often seem to posit inherent pedagogical know-how as the key to classroom success. For example, Robert Pinsky, Poet Laureate of the United States, critiques the “education bureaucracy” (17) that prevents MFA graduates from securing employment in public schools. The implication is clear: these young writers make “naturally” effective teachers. Indeed, as Wendy Bishop has pointed out, teaching was to be “a relatively unnecessary area of concern” (9) in the post-war emergence of creative writing programs. Second, few teachers in creative writing have the occasion to speak their philosophy of teaching creative writing, with the result that we might recognize most of what passes for reflective, pedagogical talk in creative writing as recipe swapping (“I tried this once and it worked”) or “lore” (North).

The major professional journal for creative writing teachers, the Associated Writing Programs’ *Writer’s Chronicle* (formerly the *AWP Newsletter*), regularly includes interviews with writers, articles and criticism about contemporary writing, as well as the occasional piece on creative writing in the academy. Frequently, articles appear that take pedagogy in creative writing as their primary focus. Beneath the thoughtful questions and considered recommendations they may present about moving beyond the workshop (Guevara) or the problem of student self-disclosure (Larson), these discourses seem to stand impervious to the work of other scholar-teachers—not just from fields like composition, but from the field of creative writing as well. For example, an article about the problems of the writing workshop that appeared in the *AWP Chronicle* in 1998 doesn’t include any reference to Joseph Moxley’s critique of the writing workshop that appeared in 1989. Neither does it refer to another article, published in the same journal in 1995, that examines the same need to “reinvent” the undergraduate creative writing classroom by moving away from the workshop format (Gaffigan). In pedagogical texts, creative writing teachers too rarely cite each other’s work. There is no “discipline” there.

The most abstract of Fulkerson’s theoretical elements, *epistemology*, is defined as “some assumptions about what counts for knowledge” (411). Best described as a conception of the relationship between language, discourse, and knowledge, *epistemology* is implied in the ways we imagine the activity of writing, the relationship between words and ideas, and the subject. The idea of subjectivity—or the position(s) a writer occupies—underlies the broad question of epistemology. As Lester Faigley persuasively argues in

Fragments of Rationality, questions about the “subject” of composition are central to many debates in writing studies today as part of the postmodern transformation of English studies.

More often than not, however, the teaching of creative writing continues to place an unproblematic notion of an “author” as a unified consciousness at the core of creative production. Indeed, one can argue that it is the business of creative writing programs to construct “authors.” Yet, though the poststructuralist critique calls into question the presence of the unified writing subject, the linked issues of the historicity of language and the situatedness of the writing/speaking subject are rarely accessible in many creative writing classrooms.

In an interview for the *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, former United States Poet Laureate Robert Hass discussed the resurgence of and new developments in poetry in the United States. Hass responded by referring to

a whole bunch of poets working in what you could call a postmodern vein. A simple way to say it is that they are abstract expressionists, they're interested in process, they're suspicious of subjectivity, they're suspicious of representation, of the kind of poem in which some “I” describes itself going out and having a morally or emotionally significant experience which is captured in an image at the end of the poem. They're sick of that kind of poem. They think the “I” in the poem doesn't do a good enough job of calling into question our identities, that the ease with which the world is represented in poems like that is in collusion with the ease with which the world is represented in the language of advertising and that the satisfying formal closure isn't really much at all like what we experience in the world. (Smith 12–13)

Composition teachers familiar with poststructuralist theory will recognize this description of the critique of the unitary, rational subject, a critique, as Hass points out, reflected in the work of some contemporary poets. Still, in highlighting this development, I can safely assert that Hass raises an epistemological (and aesthetic) issue that has yet to gain a wide hearing in creative writing. Few creative writing classes evince conscious engagement with the philosophical underpinnings upon which foundational notions such as “voice” and “point of view” so thoroughly depend. On this point, creative writing can learn a great deal from composition theory, in the discourse of which may be found ways of talking about and questioning received notions of the author, of creativity or the writing process, or of “good” writing or the goal of writing, all in view of the relationship between discourse and ideology.

Fulkerson calls the fourth constituent of a theoretical paradigm *axiology*, which he defines as “a commitment about what constitutes good writing ...some analysis of what we want student writers to achieve as a result of

effective teaching" (410–11). Good writing has been talked about in formalist, expressivist, mimeticist, and rhetorical terms, according to Fulkerson. Formalist perspectives value correct and well-organized writing. Mimeticism values factual correctness in content. Expressivism values sincerity, heartfeltness, honesty, authenticity or originality of voice. The rhetorical perspective characterizes good writing as that which persuades, engages, or interests its audience. The variety of composition terms Fulkerson uses to talk about "good writing" can help us clarify the assumptions with which creative writing teachers assess growth and development in their students—a clarification sorely needed, as the torturous discussions at professional conferences about grading creative writing amply show.

However useful Fulkerson's analysis of axiology may be when applied to creative writing, I want to discuss two possible problems in its relation to composition: its focus on the curricular, and the axiological insistence on "good writing" as solely textual. Fulkerson studies composition, then represents the field exclusively in terms of "teachers, textbooks, and curricula" (409). The empirical propriety of Fulkerson's method is admirable; nonetheless, it produces a picture of the field from an "insider's" perspective. Little in Fulkerson's metatheory enables one to address the dialogizing perspectives of students, for instance, or others outside the academy. Indeed, the institutional practice of writing instruction inscribes composition in narrowly curricular terms. We commonly speak of the first-year writing course as an initiation into academic discourse communities, and we often characterize the writing sponsored in our programs as fulfilling the quasi-ceremonial function of earning the credentials that would allow students to go on to the "real" work of the university. Of course, the generative possibilities of viewing composition as a contact zone have begun to draw the attention of compositionists interested in uncoupling writing and schooling. Anne Ruggles Gere's study of self-sponsored writing groups identifies four goals common to many of them, goals which taken together could enormously enrich our conception of teaching composition in the academy: self-esteem, honing the craft, the opportunity for performance, and the perception of writing as an activity which changes the writer's and others' lives. Gere goes on to suggest that our conception of composition as a field, our sense of our profession, historically derived, has focused too narrowly on textbooks and curricula within the academy, and that we have ignored writing and the teaching of writing that has gone on in other contexts. Still, the most significant feature of creative writing in school remains its extra-curricular orientation.

Second, by delimiting "what we want student writers to achieve as a result of effective instruction" (411) in narrowly constrained textual terms, Fulkerson weakens the term "axiology." Fulkerson comments, for exam-

ple, responding to James Berlin's espoused goal for liberatory pedagogy as "externalizing false consciousness" (qtd. in Fulkerson 421) that "one would expect the goal of a writing class to at least refer to writing" (421). Conceiving of effective writing principally in terms of audience, as Fulkerson argues we generally do, diminishes our practice and teaching of rhetoric. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles has suggested that "In some ways, the history of rhetoric is the conflict between those who would spell out rules for rhetorical form vs. those who would invent new forms to construct new meanings" (358–59). Bridwell-Bowles further argues that language and texts "represent our visions of culture, and we need new processes and forms if we are to express ways of thinking that have been outside the dominant culture" (349). One of the justifications for the production and study of so-called "imaginative literature" in composition may be found here, insofar as in such works, we are apt to encounter mold-breaking strategies and experimentation with expressive form. Appropriateness and effectiveness *vis-a-vis* an audience, on this view, must exist in productive tension with rhetorical or expressive purpose.

One could argue that all writing teachers share an institutional identity as members of departments of English, that our proper affiliation stems from our common position in relation to a shared object—the study, practice, and teaching of writing. This shared enterprise would seem to unite composition and creative writing, throwing the two together by default on the margins of the institutional core, literary studies. Yet for all that the two fields might have in common, we also recognize significant rifts separating composition and creative writing. Often, each has separate faculty as well as distinct student clientele. Each has separate conferences and journals. Most suggestive, perhaps, each seems to operate with a distinct sense of a constituency for its teaching, an audience for its writing, and a function it performs in the academy. Until now, composition and creative writing have moved in parallel at the margins of departments of English. Recognizing their contingency, we are in a position to imagine alternative configurations that may prove to be more suited to our needs as writers and teachers and to the needs of our students.

Interrogating the Boundaries of Discourse in a Creative Writing Class: Politicizing the Parameters of the Permissible

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Despite subtle differences between composition and creative writing, as well as shared institutional history which has kept them more or less separate as fields of study, these areas of research and practice can inform one