

COMPOSITION IN THE UNIVERSITY

Almost everyone has had occasion to look back upon his school days and wonder what has become of the knowledge he was supposed to have amassed during his years of schooling, and why it is that the technical skills he acquired have to be learned over again in changed form in order to stand him in good stead.

—John Dewey, *Experience and Education*

Ever since the late nineteenth century, instruction in composition has been required of all students who enter American higher education. The required, introductory-level course is called “English Composition” or “Freshman English” at most schools. The delivery of required composition instruction is a huge enterprise; at many universities the staff of the composition program outnumbers the staff of the Colleges of Engineering and Business combined. The student body of freshman composition comprises all but the very few members of each year’s entering class who manage to test out of the requirement as well as the students at the dozen or so elite private universities that do not impose one. In the academic year 1994–95, there were 12,262,608 undergraduates enrolled in American colleges and universities (“Campuses,” 9).¹ If a quarter of these students were freshmen—which is likely, since freshman classes tend to be larger than more advanced classes—nationally there were at least four million students enrolled in the freshman composition course during that year. This means that some one hundred sixty thousand sections of Freshman Composition were offered, if schools limited enrollments per section to twenty-five students—as they typically do.

By any measure, required first-year composition uses enormous resources and takes up large chunks of student and teacher time. Despite this, university faculty do not write or talk much about composition, unless it is to complain about the lack of student literacy. Within English departments, where composition is usually housed, the center of intellectual interest is not com-

position but literary studies.² The typical stance of literary scholars toward composition is figured in two recent histories of literary studies, where its importance is underlined and then dismissed. In his history of the development of the discipline of American literature, David Shumway writes that “English departments owe their relative size and importance and perhaps their very existence to the demand that college students be taught to write” (101). And in his history of English-language literary studies, Gerald Graff acknowledges that without composition “the teaching of literature could never have achieved its central status, and none of the issues I discuss would matter very much” (2). Despite their admissions of the institutional importance of composition, however, neither of these historians is interested in the intellectual and institutional relations of literary studies to the required introductory composition course. Nonetheless it remains true that the required course serves literary studies in many ways, not the least of which is that composition gives literary studies something to define itself against. Hence it is not possible to fully understand the history of literary studies without considering its relation to composition. Something like the reverse is true for people who study and teach composition: it is not easy to imagine the required course outside of the humanist underpinnings given it by its association with English departments.

COMPOSITION STUDIES

An academic field called “composition studies” has emerged during the last twenty-five years. Most of the people who work in this field are currently housed in English departments because scholarship in composition grew directly out of the pedagogical challenges faced by people assigned to teach the required first-year course. Today, scholars in composition conduct challenging and innovative research into the scenes in which contemporary writing is done. They construct theoretical models of composition and they devise pedagogies intended to facilitate composing. Composition scholars are also interested in historical and contemporary theories of language use and in the history and theory of rhetoric. Given the centrality of the required composition course to liberal arts and general education curricula, as well as the huge administrative responsibilities associated with the direction of first-year composition programs, many scholars in composition are also interested in academic and cultural politics.

The recent emergence of this field has made it possible for faculty who

are interested in composition to accrue professional rewards and satisfactions that were not readily available to composition teachers before that time. Indeed, such persons are now enjoying a kind of success, at least as success is measured by academic standards. Annual meetings of the professional organization of composition teachers—the Conference on College Composition and Communication—attract thousands of people, and these meetings feature lively debates about theoretical and pedagogical issues. There are more scholarly journals devoted to composition theory and the teaching of writing than have ever existed before, and editors of such journals receive many more submissions than they can publish. A few composition teachers and theorists now hold tenured or tenure-track positions in universities throughout the country. Undergraduate courses in advanced composition and professional writing are thriving. Ph.D. programs in composition are flourishing at dozens of universities, and every year talented students compete to secure spots on their limited admissions rosters. As of this writing, persons who hold Ph.D. degrees in rhetoric and composition are still able to obtain tenure-line positions, although the number of available jobs in the humanities is dwindling. It remains true, however, that such persons are employable primarily because they are needed to supervise massive programs in required first-year composition and not because composition studies is an exciting new field in which new academic priorities are being set.

Academics who profess composition studies go about their professional work somewhat differently than do their colleagues in literary studies. Their interest in pedagogy inverts the traditional academic privileging of theory over practice and research over teaching. Composition scholarship typically focuses on the processes of learning rather than on the acquisition of knowledge, and composition pedagogy focuses on change and development in students rather than on transmission of a heritage. Composition studies encourages collaboration. It emphasizes the historical, political, and social contexts and practices associated with composing rather than concentrating on texts as isolated artifacts. Composition studies also acknowledged women's contributions to teaching and scholarship long before other disciplines began to do so. A list of canonical authors in composition scholarship would include at least the names of Ann Berthoff, Lynn Bloom, Vivian Davis, Janet Emig, Maxine Hairston, Winifred Horner, Janice Lauer, Josephine Miles, Mina Shaughnessy, and Geneva Smitherman, all of whom achieved professional prominence prior to the era of affirmative action in a field of study that readily accepted their contributions.

Given its differences from academic business as usual, it is a shame that composition studies is nearly invisible within the academy. Its unusual professional practices and attitudes admirably fit it to become a theoretical and pedagogical site wherein the sorts of institutional changes currently advocated by materialist, feminist, ethnic, and postmodern theorists could be worked out. The problem is that theorists are largely unaware that composition studies exists. They do know about Freshman English, however.

THE STATUS OF FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

The history of composition studies has been written in the fortunes of the required introductory course in composition. Unfortunately, this course enjoys very little status within the university, and so its history and status negatively affect the current status of composition studies.

The required introductory composition course was invented at Harvard in the late nineteenth century. From Harvard it quickly spread to other colleges and universities, and it has been required at most schools ever since. During the nineteenth century the course was taught at Harvard and elsewhere by regular faculty. However, in the early years of the twentieth century, the work of teaching the required course fell onto the shoulders of probationary faculty, primarily because full-time faculty realized that there was no professional future in teaching a course that produced no research (see chapter 6). Graduate students began teaching the course during the 1940s as universities came increasingly to be defined as aggregates of specialized disciplines in which research was the primary pursuit. Their numbers began to be supplemented by part-time teachers during the 1950s and 1960s, when colleges and universities were so overwhelmed by postwar enrollments that they were forced to recruit adjunct faculty to teach the required course. Today, the required first-year composition course is taught primarily by graduate students at research universities that have a sufficiently large pool of people doing graduate study; temporary instructors are employed at universities and colleges where freshman enrollments exceed the available number of graduate instructors. The course is taught by permanent faculty only at two-year colleges and the odd liberal arts college or public university that still retains a primary commitment to undergraduate teaching.

For most of its history, then, the required first-year composition course has been taught by untenured faculty. I hasten to say that this fact is utterly

irrelevant to the quality of teaching in the first-year course. Universities and English departments have been given much better teaching in first-year composition than they have any right to expect, given the unprofessional employment practices that are associated with the course. The precarious professional position of its faculty has had much to do with the status and curriculum of the first-year course, however.

Most of the people who teach composition in American colleges and universities are undervalued, overworked, and underpaid. Teachers of first-year composition are routinely employed on a contingent basis, which does not entitle them to the professional perquisites taken for granted by full-time faculty, such as decent salaries and health benefits, and access to secretarial staff, offices, telephones, and duplicating facilities. Composition teachers do not sit on the committees that make decisions affecting their teaching, including committees that choose textbooks and determine teaching schedules or those that write syllabi for the courses. Part-time teachers are sometimes hired the evening before a class begins; they are given a textbook and a syllabus and told to have a good semester (Fontaine and Hunter). Graduate student teachers, some of whom are fresh out of their own undergraduate studies, are typically given an orientation in the week before classes begin. Their subsequent teaching is supervised to the extent that funds are available for such work; such supervision usually requires that at least a few full-time faculty be committed to the composition program.

Composition specialists who have achieved success in the academic terms of promotion and tenure are often reminded—by their colleagues in literary studies—that composition is still not widely regarded as a legitimate field of study. Literary scholars tell their graduate students to take a course or two in composition, not because they are excited by the intellectual work going on in composition studies, but because composition teaching experience is attractive to prospective employers. In many institutions, faculty in literature and creative writing routinely use required introductory composition as a source of financial support for students doing graduate work in these fields. Since faculties in these specialties select students for admission to graduate study on the basis of their scholarly or creative potential, they are ordinarily not interested in graduate students' teaching experience or their suitability as teachers. Hence it becomes quite possible that the people who are selected to teach first-year composition may be uninterested in composition theory or pedagogy; further, they may be temperamentally unsuited to the interactive

nature of composition classrooms. Nonetheless, directors of the required introductory course are expected to train such people to teach composition, sometimes in a matter of three or four days.

In colleges and universities that employ part-time teachers of composition, program directors often do not hire the people who teach the courses they are supposed to supervise; in large programs, directors may never even meet all the members of the composition staff. In addition, there is no built-in institutional assurance that people hired to teach composition know anything about it or how to teach it. Many part-time teachers of composition train to teach literature or creative writing and find, when they have finished their degrees, that no work is available in these fields. Hence they become part-time teachers of the required introductory composition course, by default. All in all, directors of composition programs are expected to take moral and legal responsibility for workers they did not hire and who may or may not know enough or care enough about the work they do in order to perform it well. Given these circumstances, it is remarkable, to say the least, that the quality of instruction in required first-year composition is as good as it often is.

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The required introductory course in composition is an institution whose rationale did not emanate from some subject matter, discipline, or field of study, as most university courses do. Over the years, then, first-year composition has been remarkably vulnerable to ideologies and practices that originate elsewhere than in its classrooms. An amazing number of rationales has been advanced to justify the universal requirement in composition. I list these in rough historical order: it has been argued that students should be required to study composition in order to develop taste, to improve their grasp of formal and mechanical correctness, to become liberally educated, to prepare for jobs or professions, to develop their personalities, to become able citizens of a democracy, to become skilled communicators, to develop skill in textual analysis, to become critical thinkers, to establish their personal voices, to master the composing process, to master the composition of discourses used within academic disciplines, and to become oppositional critics of their culture. Most of these rationales developed because of composition's institutional proximity to literary studies. Others appeared during interludes in the history of composition in which persons working in other institutional sites succeeded in speaking for composition. The last four goals have recently been elaborated by composition teachers and scholars.

The habit of speaking for first-year composition is well-ingrained in the

university. Since the course was not associated with a cadre of professional academics devoted to establishing and maintaining composition as a discipline, in the past no one with the requisite status or institutional power was able to protect its curricula from programs decreed for it by those who harbored educational or cultural agendas that had little to do with the study or practice of composing. Those who spoke for composition were able to dictate to its teachers and students the goals they were expected to pursue as well as the texts they were to study and the curricula and pedagogical strategies they were to employ.

Ostensibly, academics in all disciplines want the required first-year course to teach students how to write. Here *writing* seems to mean that students are supposed to master principles of arrangement and sentence construction; they are also to learn correct grammar and usage. This desire that students master grammar, usage, and formal fluency has remained constant throughout the history of the course. At the turn of the century, for example, Sophie Chantal Hart surveyed professors at a number of eastern colleges (Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, MIT, Brown, Williams, Tufts, Amherst, Vassar, and her own Wellesley) to determine what was wanted from required composition instruction. The replies uniformly complained about student inadequacy: “they can’t tell a sentence from an adverbial clause”; “their idea of unity resembles the spokes of a cart-wheel”; “there ought to be more drill in simple English grammar”; “it is of more importance to be able to write intelligently ‘It is he’ instead of ‘It is him,’ and give a rational explanation why one is preferable to the other”; “the most difficult thing to overcome is the lack of thought”; “many of our freshmen seem to believe that anything patched up in a grammatical shape will pass for writing” (1902, 372–73). Sixty years later, William D. Templeman had the temerity to ask his colleagues at the University of Southern California what they wanted students to learn in the required Freshman English course. Faculty in Anthropology opined that the most important thing was for students to learn to express their thoughts “in clear and logical language” so that they could write better answers on essay examinations (1962, 35). Astronomy wanted students to “attain some minimum proficiency in spelling,” to develop legible handwriting, and to “develop further reasonable facility in expressing ideas clearly,” again so that they could write better answers on exams (36). Biochemistry hoped that “a student would learn to write a complete and properly constructed sentence, and a reasonably well organized paragraph” (36). And so on. Thirty years after Templeman completed his survey, the administration of the University of Texas, Austin, canceled

an innovative syllabus designed for use in the required composition course there on the grounds that the point of such a course is to teach students the principles of composition *without considering issues or subject matter* (Brodkey 1996, 146-47).

Academics' desire that students master the so-called "basic" principles of composition in Freshman English is understandable, given their own lack of interest in attending to student literacy. Freshman English is supposed to "fix" students' supposed lack of literate mastery once and for all, so that teachers of more advanced courses do not have to bother with such things. The problem is that this desire simply cannot be enacted within a universal requirement that is not intellectually connected to any other feature of the curriculum. Ancient rhetoricians knew that students learned to speak and write most efficiently when their work was motivated by some compelling cultural or professional urgency. Contemporary research confirms that, outside of the freshman classroom, writing always occurs within some motivating context (Petraglia 1995). Research also suggests that the fairly abstract level of instruction that must of necessity occur within a universally required class simply cannot confer the discipline-specific writing skills that will later be demanded of students by their teachers in more advanced courses (Russell 1991; 1988). Anyone who has taught the first-year composition course, or who has even cursorily read its professional literature, knows that its central challenge is to provide students with occasions and contexts for writing that are sufficiently specific and interesting to engage them with the process. But even the most inventive assignments cannot entirely disguise the fact that in the universally required composition class, the primary motivation for composing is to supply teachers with opportunities to measure student performance. In other words, the fact of the requirement provides first-year composition with an institutional motivation rather than a rhetorical one. This makes for a highly artificial writing situation that may explain, at least in part, why such instruction never seems to stick. The writing done in required writing classes is an imitation, or better, a simulacrum, of the motivated writing that gets done elsewhere in the academy and in the culture at large.

Given the difficulty of doing motivated writing within a universally required class, the question arises: why does the requirement remain? I think it serves yet another purpose within the academic imaginary, a purpose that is not often articulated. University and college faculty imagine composition as the institutional site wherein student subjectivity is to be monitored and disciplined. The continuing function of the required composition course has

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been to insure the academic community that its entering members are taught the discursive behaviors and traits of character that qualify them to join the community. The course is meant to shape students to behave, think, write, and speak as students rather than as the people they are, people who have differing histories and traditions and languages and ideologies.

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Now, when I assert that the task of the course has been to impose a universal subjectivity on students, I do not mean to imply that the quality of this subjectivity has remained unchanged over time. When it was invented, the regime used in the required course was meant to produce an educated person, as this was defined within Arnoldian humanism (see chapters 4 and 5). The course was required of all students precisely to insure that only persons who displayed the tastes and habits of educated persons would populate the academy. Humanist goals shape first-year composition curricula even today, although this orientation is currently being challenged by pragmatist approaches. Pragmatist models of education focus teachers' attention on students' activities, trusting that students' repeated engagement in relevant activities will construct the desired subjectivity. Contemporary theorists of composition who adhere to pragmatist curricula argue that the required introductory composition course should engage students in repeated rehearsals of the discursive acts that occur in specific disciplines (Lindemann 1993). In this approach, the required composition course is meant to perform on all students the subjectivizing task that specific disciplines, like medicine or biology or theater arts or anthropology, perform only on students who select them.

And so today there is a paradox at work in the universal requirement that was not so apparent when the required course was expected to create "educated persons," when the curricula of colleges and universities were not determined by specialists in academic disciplines, as they now are. The question whether composition can become a discipline—that is, whether a field of study can be erected around research on composing—is now being raised by teachers and scholars who profess composition studies. The important questions that have not been raised, however, are whether the required introductory course should be part of this emerging discipline, and, if it is, whether the curriculum of that course can retain its traditional function of imparting a universal subjectivity. If the required introductory course is to become a part of the disciplinary practices of composition studies, it must necessarily become part of a sequenced curriculum of courses that introduce students to discipline-specific principles and practices. In other words, the introductory course in composition would serve the same functions for composition stud-

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ies that Biology 101 and Philosophy 101 serve for those fields. If this happens, the subjectivity inculcated in the course will no longer be universal—that is, the course will no longer produce “the good student” but will aim instead at producing writers or editors or some other more specialized subjectivity. As this analysis implies, the first-year course is a historical holdover from an era in which college curricula were informed by an older sense of discipline, the point of which was to shape students’ character and conduct by means of repeated practice and correction. The traditional function of the required first-year course is increasingly hard to reconcile with the professionalization and specialization that now characterize the American academy.

Given the highly disciplined, highly specialized nature of curricula in contemporary colleges and universities, and given too that students from truly diverse backgrounds now enroll in higher education, I have serious doubts about whether a universal student subjectivity is any longer possible or desirable to sustain. And since the required introductory course, considered as an institutional practice, has no content aside from its disciplining function, it is difficult to imagine what sort of content might be appropriate for it apart from that function. Add to this the twin problems that plague the required introductory course—unprofessional employment practices and the intellectual coercion of students and teachers—and it seems that the time has come to reflect seriously on the worth of the universal requirement.

WHO OWNS COMPOSITION?

Since composition is traditionally housed in English departments, the persons who have spoken most frequently for composition have been literary scholars. Unlike composition studies, literary studies is a powerful discipline. It got its start during the last decades of the nineteenth century, when a handful of American scholars and intellectuals realized that English could be subjected to the same sort of philological study that had long been applied to dead languages and created methods to study it in just this fashion (Graff 66). This move permitted them to construct English as a language whose history, grammar, and literature required disciplined study by its native speakers. At the same time, colleges and universities began to institute written entrance examinations in order to test students’ mastery of their native tongue.³ The entrance exams were based on English-language literary texts, and students’ performances on them were widely perceived to be miserable. This supposed demonstration of students’ inadequate mastery of written English

established the grounds for requiring composition instruction of all who entered the university.

Composition and literature have been entwined in an uneasy embrace ever since. I mention above that the study of English is defined within English departments, first and foremost, as the study of literature, and I suggest that this is why historians of literary studies tend to overlook the important role played by composition in the growth of English departments. Graff, for example, attributes the relatively large size of English departments to their adoption of a coverage model for historical periods of literature (7). But an argument can also be made that English departments are large because the required composition course introduces nearly every undergraduate to English studies and thus serves English departments as a powerful recruiting tool. The fact of the requirement also reinforces the impression that everyone needs to study English. Too, the required introductory-level composition course makes it possible for professors of literature to offer small seminars in esoteric literary periods or figures, first, because it supports a large number of graduate students who are thus available to do specialized study, and second, because the practice of hiring teaching assistants or part-timers to teach composition frees full-time professors to engage in highly specialized literary research. Anyone who doubts that composition has contributed to the growth of English departments need only look at the relative size of departments of history or philosophy—where the faculty also employ coverage models—to determine the difference that required first-year composition makes, at least in terms of sheer size.

While historians of literary study have ignored the intimate relationship between literary study and composition, historians of composition have struggled to understand it. Usually, they read the relation in terms of the unequal status accorded to literary study and composition within the academy. For James A. Berlin, composition represents the fallen other against which literary studies measures its own superiority. Following an insight put forward by Tzvetan Todorov, Berlin argues that in the West, rhetoric and poetic have always been entangled in a complicated hierarchical and yet symbiotic relationship wherein “a given rhetoric thus always implies a corresponding poetic and a poetic a corresponding rhetoric” (1987, 25). However, when students of modern poetics began to define the literary text as a “unique and privileged” artifact (as they began to do in the inaugural disciplinary moment of literary studies during the late nineteenth century), it became necessary to devalorize rhetoric, according to Berlin: “in tacitly supporting the

impoverished notion of rhetoric found in the freshman writing course, academic literary critics have provided a constant reminder of their own claim to superiority and privilege, setting the range and versatility of their discipline against the barrenness of current-traditional rhetoric, the staple of the freshman course" (28).

Susan Miller also argues that composition is the necessary other half of literary studies, the inferior underside of the discipline to which literary studies can be constructed as superior. Miller reads the literature-composition nexus as a response to America's changing demographics during the troubled last years of the nineteenth century. Immigrants, women, and students whose family status was unclear to the genteel men who ran American colleges—all clamored for entry. And so "the university, ambivalent about its formerly unentitled, newly admitted students, needed to establish an internal boundary, a way to stratify diverse participants in what had been perceived as one dominant American group" (1994, 26). Miller also argues that while literary studies was established as a means of distinguishing a set of preferred texts from those circulating in popular discourse, composition was established in order to distinguish literary writing from all other sorts undertaken inside the university: "in composition, literary authorship could be openly compared to the inadequacies of popular writing and especially to inadequate student authorship. Like early American popular writing, institutionalized writing-as-composition could be implicitly demeaned as unequal to writing from the advanced elect" (1990, 54-55). For Miller, as for Berlin, composition serves literary studies as the despised (because fallen) other against which it can continually measure its own superiority.

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About half of the chapters in this book explore the historical relations of literary studies and composition. In chapters 2 through 6 I try to articulate the ideology and practices by means of which literary scholars have managed to keep composition in the place they designed for it—at the bottom of the academic pecking order.

In *Professing Literature* Gerald Graff asserts that the scholars who invented English studies identified with "the Matthew Arnold view of literature and culture" (3).⁴ I argue that the scholars who invented the required first-year composition course also identified with Arnoldian humanism. Furthermore, they justified the requirement of Freshman English on humanist grounds, and they designed a curriculum for the course that furthered humanist agendas. Even today some teachers of English wish that the humanist

study of literary texts were still an unquestioned mainstay of first-year composition instruction (see chapter 2).

The humanist claim upon composition is typically enacted through the practice of requiring students to read literary texts in the first-year composition course. Literally hundreds of English teachers have asserted that reading literature improves students' writing ability. A few have tried to articulate precisely how the connection between reading and improvement in writing works; generally they argue that students' grasp of style is improved by their unconscious absorption of its finer points as these are demonstrated in the work of great authors. Fewer still have addressed the question of composition pedagogy itself, beyond imagining assignments that ask students to represent their reading or class discussion in writing. Now even if one grants the point that writers can learn something about the way language works through reading, by a sort of osmosis, one need not accept the further claim that literary texts are the best readings to use for this purpose. Historically, though, English teachers have resisted suggestions that nonliterary texts be read in the first-year course. Generally, they justify the necessity of literary reading with humanist arguments: students need to learn values, they need to be acquainted with the best that has been thought and said, and so on (see chapter 5).

A fundamental assumption of this book is that the humanist approach to the first-year course is not the best approach to teaching composition. The problems that confront a humanist agenda for composition instruction are formidable. First of all, modern humanists privilege reading over writing. The point of a humanist education, after all, is to become acquainted with the body of canonical texts that humanists envision as a repository of superior intellectual products of Western culture. My review of the historical arguments put forth to justify the reading of literary texts in the first-year composition course (see chapters 2 and 5) suggests that reading and discussion of literature receive far more attention in humanist curricula than does actual instruction in composition. A second problem posed by humanist composition curricula is that humanism takes a respectful attitude toward already-completed texts, while composition is interested in texts currently in development as well as those that are yet to be written. That is to say, composition is primarily a productive or generative art rather than an analytic or interpretive one.⁵ To assert, as I do, that the act of composing differs appreciably from the act of reading is to challenge two fundamental premises of modern

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humanist pedagogy, namely, that the point of composition is to express oneself and that the point of writing is to represent or reflect upon the quality of one's reading and experience. While teachers of composition do analyze completed texts, they do so in order to gain a better understanding of how texts are composed. People who study and teach composition are also interested in understanding how human events are affected by oral and written texts, and they investigate the ways in which texts put cultural values into circulation among various publics. But they are not necessarily interested, as humanists are, in demonstrating how a given text either questions or upholds a supposedly permanent or quasipermanent set of human values. And with the notable exception of the group of composition teachers and theorists generally called "expressionists," whose ties to humanism are clarified in later chapters of this book, compositionists are not interested in limiting writing pedagogy to instruction in reflexive self-examination (Berlin 1982).

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A third problem is posed for humanist composition by the fact that humanism has tended to be an exclusive educational tradition, insofar as the humanist impulse is to impart instruction to a select few who are considered able to inhabit a humanist subjectivity.⁶ During the late nineteenth century, for example, English teachers reserved literary instruction for those first-year students deemed to be suitably prepared for college by virtue of their education or family connections, while they associated composition with less able students. Composition instruction, on the other hand, has or can be configured to have a democratic agenda. There is nothing inherent in the notion of teaching people to compose that is by definition exclusive. As the example of Plato's response to the Older Sophists suggests, teachers of composing can be scorned by elitists precisely because they are willing to impart their art to all comers (*Gorgias*). A final problem posed by a melding of humanism and composition is this: humanism—at least in its Arnoldian version—has more in common with metaphysics than it has with rhetoric (Lanham, Spanos, and see chapter 3). Indeed, Arnoldian humanism is hostile to rhetoric, and it is suspicious of composition as well (Berlin 1996; Schilb 1996; and see chapter 5).

What is
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humanism?

These differences between humanism and composition are not often articulated in the discourse of English studies. I take it that this silence has to do with the institutional politics of English departments. If composition's differences from literary studies were forcefully and repeatedly articulated, it might become much more difficult for English departments to justify continued ownership of the required first-year course.

Certainly, English professors are not the only people who have had de-

signs on first-year composition. Because the course is universally required, it is possible for faculty and administrators to make an argument that composition instruction “belongs” everywhere, or at least somewhere other than English. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, advocates of a movement known as “Writing-Across-the-Curriculum” (WAC) managed to secure upper-level writing requirements in many universities (Russell 1991, 282ff.). However, proponents of WAC did not succeed in dislodging the universal requirement even though many of them, like David Russell, have repeatedly questioned its usefulness (1995; 1988). Its supposed universality also renders composition susceptible to larger changes in educational philosophy. During the 1940s, for example, advocates of general education argued that the required course ought to be “modern” and “practical”; they insisted that literary study was neither. Their effort to turn the first-year course toward instruction in what they called “communication skills” enjoyed a heady if brief success—the communication skills curriculum did not survive the 1950s in most universities (see chapters 7 and 8). However, its short history demonstrates the tenacity with which humanist assumptions about education cling to first-year pedagogy. It also provides a particularly clear historical example of what happens when an ideology and pedagogy are imposed on first-year composition by people who do not teach the course.

English teachers whose primary intellectual alliance is to humanism have not reacted positively to the occasional association of required composition with nonhumanist rationales. I examine two instances of humanist reaction to interventions in the required curriculum. The earliest of these occurred at the University of Iowa, when Norman Foerster, a prominent humanist literary critic, resisted the implementation of a communication skills curriculum by faculty in the College of Liberal Arts. The second was recently enacted in the pages of *College English* when humanist English teachers responded with alarm to the suggestion, made by a composition specialist, that students enrolled in the first-year composition course could profitably complete their study without reading any literary texts (see chapter 2).

Chapters 7 through 9 trace the influence of another intellectual tradition on the first-year course. That tradition is pragmatic, and it has, on occasion, ostensibly been indebted to the philosophical tradition called “pragmatism.” Since first-year composition was initially shaped by Arnoldian humanism, in the history of discussions about the course the terms *pragmatic* or *practical* ordinarily mean “immediately useful.” From the point of view of humanist literary study, the first-year composition course certainly looks practical and

workaday, and humanists have sometimes distinguished composition from literary study on the very ground of the immediate utility of writing instruction.

The term *pragmatism*, on the other hand, denotes a rich tradition of uniquely American philosophizing, a tradition that is sometimes constructed to include Ralph Waldo Emerson and is nearly always associated with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, as well as contemporary thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish. Pragmatism is an action-oriented, forward-looking philosophical orientation that eschews the search for first principles; that is to say, it is more interested in the questions "what shall we do?" and "what are the consequences of our actions?" than it is in metaphysical questions such as "what is true?" or "what is real?". As such it is perhaps better described as cultural criticism than as philosophy (West 5). James Campbell defines the pragmatism developed by Peirce, James, and Dewey as a "philosophical view" that includes an emphasis on "processes and relations; a naturalistic and evolutionary understanding of human existence; an analysis of intellectual activity as problem-oriented and as benefitting from historically developed methods; and an emphasis upon the democratic reconstruction of society through educational and other institutions" (14). Most of the features named have surfaced in composition theory, if not in the pedagogy of the first-year course: a naturalistic understanding of human existence underwrote the communication skills movement, while the turn toward process pedagogy during the 1970s witnessed a marked emphasis on process, experimental method, and problem solving (see chapter 9). However, composition teachers' commitment to social reform through education has been somewhat less marked. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, English teachers who thought of themselves as progressive educators established student-centered classrooms that had the explicit aim of teaching students "to work together in support of democracy" (Holt 1994, 73). But these efforts to implement pragmatist educational goals in the schools eventually succumbed to pressures exerted by powerful ideological and institutional forces, including a romantic notion of individualist expressionism and the humanist respect for traditional learning (Holt 1993; Russell 1991, 191ff.).

During the 1940s, general education was animated by a specifically Deweyan pragmatism, which held that learning occurs by means of engaging students in activities that induce them to reflect usefully and creatively on their experience (Dewey 1938; Gary Miller). The curriculum of the first-year composition course was altered significantly by the advent of general educa-

Pragmatist
Project

tion. Dewey's work also influenced the development of process pedagogy during the 1960s. Janet Emig, the theorist who is ordinarily credited with the invention of the process approach to teaching writing, asserted in 1980 that Dewey is "everywhere in our work" (1980, 12). Since the pragmatist underpinnings of process pedagogy gave composition teachers a way of thinking about teaching writing that did not wholly depend on their institutional relation to literary studies, its incorporation into composition lore must be credited, at least in part, with their conceptualization of composition as an art rather than a course. Moreover, the invention of composition studies was intimately connected to the development of process pedagogy because its theorists discovered a way to talk about student writing that authorized teachers to think of themselves as researchers.

Pragmatist composition curricula have a distinct advantage over the humanist approach to writing instruction insofar as their focus on active learning suggests that people who want to learn to do something should actually practice doing it. However, the appropriations of pragmatism that have made their way into composition studies and first-year pedagogy have limitations. Not the least of these, in my opinion, is that most such appropriations have neglected Dewey's insistence that pragmatist educational efforts ought always to be politically and socially motivated. I argue that with the widespread adoption of process pedagogy, the politics of first-year composition altered from conservative to liberal (see chapter 10). Unfortunately, the instrumentalist or functionalist character of some strains of pragmatism (and of American liberalism itself) have made it possible for teachers of composition to forget Dewey's commitment to education as a primary means of bringing about social change.

COMPOSITION ON ITS OWN

Composition studies may be on the way to establishing itself as a discipline. A history of composition studies, considered as a disciplinary entity apart from the required introductory course, has been published (Nystrand et al.). And as of this writing, at least three university composition programs that were formerly associated with English departments have become independent academic units. Apparently, more separatist moves are in the planning stages.

It looks as though composition specialists, when and if they become independent of English departments, may attempt to maintain the introduc-

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tory composition course as a universal requirement. I fear that they may have learned only too well the lessons taught them by their colleagues in literary studies—that required composition provides full-time faculty with a firm institutional base from which to operate an academic empire. Given the unethical and intellectually inappropriate practices that motivate the universal requirement, I hope that composition specialists will take a hard look at it before they repeat past practice. In the final chapters, then, I make a series of arguments against retention of the universal requirement.