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# Introduction

Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg

When *Keywords in Composition Studies (KCS)* was published in 1996, we did not intend to revisit the project. Following in the footsteps of I. A. Richards (1942, 1955) and Raymond Williams (1983), and with the assistance of our many astute contributors, we felt we had successfully made our case that one of the great strengths of our field can be found in the contested, unsettled nature of its key terms; that the more central and necessary the term, the more ambiguous and divergent its meanings; that a close look at the meanings of any critical term speaks volumes about our shifting cultural and disciplinary values; and that the complex conflicts embodied and enacted within our vocabulary itself, the many layers of voices reverberating within a given term, are less a cause for concern than they are something to be embraced and celebrated—a tremendously useful resource for the making and remaking of ourselves, our commitments, and the objects of our attention. As we noted in our introduction, we wanted *KCS* to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, to serve as a model of a different and productive way of reading our professional discourse—rather than as a glossary, an introduction to major figures and works in the field, or a reference work monumentalizing some particular vision of the discipline—and we concluded by exhorting others to join in that effort: “A study of evolving vocabularies must be a fluid project, one carried out not within this book but with it as we continue composing composition studies” (7). We were delighted with the book’s reception and the appearance of a new assignment genre in composition theory seminars across the country, “the *Keywords* essay.”

But things change. Indeed, a great deal is different since *KCS* was published nineteen years ago. As Kathleen Yancey noted even in 2004, “Literacy today is in the midst of tectonic change. . . . Never before has the proliferation of writings outside the academy so counterpointed the compositions inside. Never before have the technologies of writing contributed so quickly to the creation of new genres” (Yancey 2004, 298).

Whether one sees these changes as evolutionary or revolutionary, paradigm shift, marked discontinuity, or chaos depends very much on where one stands, of course, but what we study and who “we” are has changed dramatically over the last two decades.

First, it is impossible to overstate the speed or the effects of the evolution in communication technology since 1996. When *KCS* was published, the Internet was in its infancy. Gunther Kress suggested a decade ago that “we are moving out of an era of relative stability of a very long duration” (Kress 2003, 83)—the era of the printing press—and, thus, in “the era of the screen and multimodality some fundamental changes are inevitable as far as forms, functions and uses of writing are concerned” (61). “On the screen,” he notes, “the *textual entity* is treated as a *visual entity* in ways in which the page never was” (65), and “in these new environments, writing is likely to move in the direction of its image origins,” fundamentally altering a user’s disposition toward meaning-making (73). And this new disposition is omnipresent, as Yancey notes: “Our daily communicative, social, and intellectual practices are screen-permeated” (Yancey 2004, 305). In like manner, as Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis point out, new communications media have led to the emergence of multiliteracies: “the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on” (Cope and Kalantzis 2000, 5).

As a result of a wide variety of theoretical, educational, professional, and institutional developments, not least of which is the influence of digital media, the general *telos* of university-level writing instruction in the United States has fundamentally shifted since 1996 from academic contexts and discourses to public spheres and civic discourses. Even a cursory look at the terms included in *KCS* demonstrates a focus on the academic text, the writing student, and the classroom: *academic discourse, argument, basic writing/writers, coherence, collaboration, critical thinking, discourse community, error, essay, evaluation, form/structure, grammar, invention, logic, marginalized/marginalization, peer evaluation, portfolio, process, revision, students, teacher, voice, and writing center*. Shortly after the publication of *KCS*, though, the “social turn” of composition in the 1980s became its “public turn” in the late 1990s and 2000s as we realized what may seem obvious now, “that writing in universities is only a small slice of writing that goes on elsewhere in the world” (Bazerman 2002, 33). As early as 1997, researchers like David Russell (1997) were seeking to understand how students and teachers “use the discursive tools of classroom genres to interact (and not interact) with social practices beyond individuals

classrooms—those of schools, families, peers, disciplines, professions, political movements, unions, corporations, and so on” (505). Moreover, as Yancey notes, “writers in the 21st century self-organize into what seem to be overlapping technologically driven writing circles, what we might call a series of newly imagined communities, communities that cross borders of all kinds—nation, state, class, gender, ethnicity” (Yancey 2004, 301).

One such newly imagined community may well be writing studies—an increasingly global construct of academics comprising a methodological diversity and linguistic orientations scarcely considered in the mid-1990s. As the English language itself has evolved into “a *lingua mundi*, a world language” (Cope and Kalantzis 2000), the disciplinary formation that grew up around the uniquely US educational practice of first-year college writing—what we called composition studies in 1996—is now self-consciously struggling with its provincial origins (Horner and Trimbur 2002). “Dealing with linguistic differences and cultural differences has now become central to the pragmatics of our working, civic, and private lives,” Cope and Kalantzis (2000) write, a statement increasingly true for everyone, but especially for those who teach and study writing. The changing demographics of US classrooms have helped expand attention to instructional practices, writing teacher preparation, and research methodology in L2 contexts, and the historical boundary between L1 and L2 is being permeated from both directions (see, for example, Matsuda et al. 2011).

Methodological plurality in the study of writing practices is becoming influential in the United States as domestic and ethnocentric studies make room for polycentric or intercultural research (e.g., You 2010) and deeply interdisciplinary work produced outside US borders (e.g., Torrance et al. 2012). The remarkable explanatory power of discourse analysis and contemporary genre theory have introduced US writing specialists to the work of writing researchers from multiple continents (e.g., Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2002; Johns 2002). Professional organizations with historically domestic orientations, including the College Conference on Composition and Communication and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, have begun to remodel with an international perspective; meanwhile, work in rhetoric and composition, a field once thought to have relatively little influence outside its own sphere, is increasingly cited in the work of non-US writing researchers and integrated in internationalization projects—enabled via the affordances of digital technology outlined above—such as GXB: Genre Across Borders and *Asociación Latinoamericana de Retórica*.

These developments situate postsecondary US writing instruction amid a galaxy of considerations for writing specialists, wherever they are. In “The Case For Writing Studies as a Major Discipline,” Charles Bazerman argues that the study of writing is the study of “how people come to take on the thought, practice, perspective, and orientation of various ways of life; how they integrate or keep distinct those perspectives in which they are practiced; and how we organize our modern way of life economically, intellectually, socially, interpersonally, managerially, and politically through the medium of texts” (Bazerman 2002, 35). Such expansive work involves researchers and scholars from a great many domains and disciplines beyond composition studies, including, as Bazerman notes, anthropology, psychology, sociology, cultural history, linguistics, education, classics, political science, cultural studies, and science studies (32–35). He writes, “In short, the study of writing is a major subset of the history of human consciousness, institutions, practice, and development over the last five millennia” (Bazerman 2002, 36).

Here we see at least three powerful trajectories of *writing studies* at work. First, writing studies is invoked as a massively interdisciplinary examination of nothing less than the human condition since the dawn of civilization, something much bigger than and far beyond the scope of composition studies as any of us could imagine it in 1996. Second, by means of a spatial metaphor, writing studies is portrayed as an extensive and extending field, with composition at its conceptual center. And third, writing studies—and composition studies by association—is represented as a serious intellectual discipline worthy of professional respect, power, and resources. Other constructions of *writing studies* are in circulation as well, of course. For instance, Downs and Wardle (2007) collapse *writing studies* and *composition studies*, using the former as an exact synonym for the latter without commenting on that change in any way. Writing in *College Composition and Communication*, they repeatedly refer to writing studies as “our field” or “our discipline” (553, 554, 574, 575, 577, 578), and they deploy the term in ways that make it serve as an unproblematic substitution for *composition studies*. They write, for instance, that “[t]he field of writing studies has made part of its business for the last forty years testing [common and misleading] assumptions and articulating more complex, realistic, and useful ways for thinking about writing” (555), a time frame and agenda most readers would likely ascribe to composition studies. In like manner, they suggest that “writing studies as a field has largely ignored the implications of this research and theory and continued to assure its publics (faculty, administrators, parents,

industry) that FYC [first-year composition] can do what nonspecialists have always assumed it can” (554–55).

Using *writing studies* as a marker for the research, theory, and stakeholders of FYC suggests a much narrower purview for the term than the one Bazerman invokes. Oddly enough, though, Downs and Wardle (2007) seem to have similar motives to Bazerman for doing so—that is, they seek to improve the disciplinary status and professional respect for the work of writing teachers. They contend that in redirecting efforts from teaching students how to write to “teaching *about writing*,” it can be demonstrated that “writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced” (553, emphasis in original). Acting upon such a premise, they suggest, should raise “writing studies’ standing in the academy and what it teaches in the courses it accepts as its *raison d’être*, first-year composition” (553–54). Displacing *composition studies* and deploying *writing studies* in this way has a variety of rhetorical effects, the term now serving metonymically as a reassertion of the importance of theory in teaching (554); a claim to “authority over [our] own courses” (557); an argument in support of undergraduate research initiatives (558); a locus of increased professional, pedagogical, and personal ethics (560); a call for increased specialized training for writing instructors (575); a defense of disciplinary colonization of undergraduates (577); a justification for academic program-building; and a recapitulation/new expression of our yearning for and intent to achieve “full disciplinarity” (578).

One way to gauge the extent to which the study of writing can be considered a serious intellectual endeavor with full disciplinarity might be to look at how *writing studies* is being used to name or rename university departments, programs, and research centers, to consider what kinds of work and workers the term is used to subsume. Such an examination seems to suggest that in practice, generally, we are somewhere between Downs and Wardle’s narrow construction of *writing studies* and Bazerman’s more expansive one, with the term being used to imagine, (re)configure, and perhaps integrate various aspects of faculty activity—research, teaching, and service—in diverse ways across the very local contexts of specific institutions.

The Department of Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota, for instance, describes writing studies as follows: “Drawing together scholarly methods from the humanities and social sciences, the field of writing studies seeks to understand and enrich the ways people use written texts to shape the world.” And the faculty there describes themselves thusly: “[We seek] to understand the social, disciplinary, and rhetorical

functions of written, visual, digital, scientific and technical communication practices. . . . We investigate the intersections of communication with culture, politics, science, technology, and ethics.” Pedagogically, at UMN, *writing studies* connotes a constellation of faculty and courses providing instruction in FYC, technical communication, professional writing, rhetorical theory, digital communication, literacy studies, and second language studies. Finally, *writing studies* at UMN synthesizes student and faculty support services often atomized in other institutions into writing centers, WAC/WID programs, and faculty development initiatives through the department’s Center for Writing.

A close look at any of our institutions or discourses would likely reveal additional, novel, and perhaps idiosyncratic ways that *writing studies* operates as a keyword to influence powerfully what we can imagine, perceive, and conceive about who we are, what we do, and why. But it is nonetheless evident that we are now in a very different place than we were when *KCS* was published in 1996, a landscape so fundamentally altered that an examination of other influential keywords now in high circulation seems once again critically important to undertake. The material in this volume is thus wholly new: the terms addressed in the previous book are a product of their time and point quite specifically at “composition studies” as the domain of inquiry rather than at the broader, more complex intersections we might mark as “writing studies.” However, while the landscape and hence the keywords we include here have changed, our approach to the project remains the same. As with *KCS* in 1996, the terms we have chosen to include here are those located at broad intersections of meaning, each one of critical importance precisely because its shifting meanings are “bound up with the problems it [is] used to discuss” (Williams 1983, 15). Our goal in this volume is not to provide fixed, unitary meanings of a term or even to privilege some meanings above others, but rather to illuminate how many divergent and contesting significations reside within our field’s central terms. Our argument, which is embodied and enacted in each entry, is that it is less productive, less appropriate, and less promising to define or confine a term’s meanings than it is to listen openly, generously, and carefully to its many, layered voices, echoes, and overtones, especially the dissonant ones.

We remain painfully aware that our effort to render the fluid, actively conflicting meanings of the terms runs the risk, thereby, of containing and domesticating them, and that every meaning we include may become valorized—and every meaning we fail to include become concomitantly devalued—in ways that seem to contradict the very intent of

the project. The selective nature of our roster of keywords, we believe, is more inevitability than failing; what else could have emerged from our particular histories and locations but a *partial* view? However, as before, we did assert two essential criteria for inclusion: each term is a part of our general disciplinary parlance (often masking its power by its ubiquity and seeming innocuousness), and each is highly contested, the focal point of significant debates about matters of power, identity, and values. Indeed, these keywords are frequently used to define each other, which both masks and foregrounds their shifting dispositions: to help emphasize this interlexical activity, we use boldface to mark the first appearance of other keywords in each entry. Since we will surely omit terms that you think should have been included, we conclude here with the same request and challenge we offered what now seems like a professional lifetime ago: to treat this volume not as a glossary, introduction to the field, or reference work, but as an invitation to join us in our evolving study of our evolving vocabulary as we continue writing writing studies.

Finally, while we recognize that every text results from the work of many, many minds and hands, we want to offer special thanks to the following people: to our mentor, Gary Tate, for guiding us to the *Keywords* path; to our editor, Michael Spooner, for his encouragement and support throughout this project; to our many contributors, for their willingness to write (and revise and revise) these little monsters known as “keyword entries”; and to our editorial assistant, Christine Scherer, for helping us bring it all together. This book would not exist without them.

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