



Book Review: Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes

Michael Turner

There is the institution, and then there is composition. Or, there is the institution, in part, because there is composition. Ryan Skinnell's (2016) *Conceding Composition*, though focusing on composition, advances a perspective that has several direct applications to the field of writing center studies. In the book, Skinnell (2016) argues that composition's continued presence in higher education can be attributed to the value it offers institutions in terms of accreditation status, resources, and institutional survival. Regardless of the moves made by composition to legitimize itself, Skinnell (2016) claims that composition is used by institutions to achieve specific aims, and that this is done so, not because composition is marginal, but because it is important. Skinnell (2016) mines the archives at several institutions to study composition's "institutional implementation" as well as issues of "institutional reduplication" using what he terms a "genitive history." This self-coined methodology allows Skinnell (2016) to "maintain the narrow scope of micro-history alongside the comprehensive scope of macro-history" (p. 41) and to "illuminate disciplinary issues without being inextricably anchored to them" (p. 41). The book, however, is largely driven by piecing together a historical narrative about higher education institutions starting in the late 19th-century and extending to federal funding programs in the 1930s through the 1960s.

Skinnell's (2016) historical account on the fate of composition at Arizona State University (Arizona State University comprises the bulk of Skinnell's research), Harvard, University of Kansas, Indiana Central University, University of California-Berkeley, and University of North Texas zeroes in on the institutional decisions made *using* composition. Skinnell (2016) centralizes his argument on the notion of concession, a term he uses explicitly because it reverberates across three denotative registers: 1) "something that is yielded or surrendered" (p. 14); 2) surrendering to a point or position in order to open up new argumentative approaches (p. 16); 3) goods exchanged at events (p. 18). The main reason for the use of concession is conceptual and consequential: "redefining composition as a 'concession' effectually mitigates the pernicious expectation that composition can eventually meet institutional needs by way of intellectual, disciplinary advances. It can't" (Skinnell, 2016, p. 22). In other words, the concessions that institutions make are rarely informed by the field's pedagogical imperatives, research, best practices, blood, sweat, tears, and the list goes on. This is, of course, not surprising given the fact that administrators and educators are motivated by differing, and often conflicting, forces.

Three institutional contexts comprise the book's three main chapters. The first institutional context is the concession of composition by normal schools—schools where high school graduates were trained for the teaching profession—in order to become teachers' colleges. In the early 20th century, normal schools were compelled to position themselves as more collegiate and one way of doing so was to offer courses that paralleled those offered at colleges and universities, which included having first-year composition courses. The second context Skinnell (2016) examines is the push for institutional accreditation by regional agencies. The move by normal schools to become more collegiate hinged on the accreditation standards promulgated by accreditation associations. In the case of Tempe Normal School, accreditation was sought after when the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities (NCA) accredited secondary schools would only hire candidates from NCA accredited higher education institutions, which resulted in a mandate to differentiate composition courses (Skinnell, 2016, p. 88). And, finally, Skinnell (2016) examines higher educational institutions' attempts to secure federal funding initiatives offered throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In 1945, Arizona State University (then Arizona State College) wanted to take advantage of the new pool of students created through the GI Bill. Skinnell (2016) argues that in order to do so, Arizona State College took English 101/102—a yearlong, discrete course—and split it into two separate courses: English 101 and English 102 (p. 112). In all of these examples, Skinnell (2016) finds little or no evidence to support that the

decisions made with/to composition were informed by the discipline's knowledge about writing instruction.

The implications of Skinnell's (2016) research are relevant for how the field of writing center studies sees itself, for how that perception dictates the field's research imperatives, and for how writing centers are institutionally positioned. Indeed, writing center administrators and scholars will be astounded by the degree to which they could substitute Skinnell's (2016) use of the words *composition* or *field* with *writing centers* and have the statement still be true. Consider the following example: "composition is generally more open to wildly varying interpretation, and, as such, it has been particularly susceptible to institutional intervention" (Skinnell, 2016, p. 14). Writing centers have difficulty shaping perceptions and interpretations. Think of our constant negotiations around the terms "proofread," "edit," and "grammar" with instructors, students, and administrators. In fact, Lori Salem (2016) states plainly that the remedial label persists despite our attempts to disassociate it from writing center work and pedagogy (p. 164). Here, as well, *composition* can be easily substituted with *writing centers*:

Whatever else composition may be to institutions of higher education, we must begin to acknowledge that it is not invisible and never has been. Given the history of composition as a concession, we can no longer rely on rhetoric and composition's constitutive narrative of intellectual marginalization to drive our understanding of what we teach and study. (Skinnell, 2016, p. 140)

The tension between narratives about the marginalization of writing centers and the necessary and essential work that writing centers do is apparent when you juxtapose Neal Lerner's (2003) claim that, historically speaking, writing centers "have long been recognized as valuable" (p. 301) with Beth Boquet's *Noise from the Writing Center*—a text that, in part, embraces writing centers' marginalization. One possible explanation for this tension is that academic programs or units can be both essential *and* marginalized.

The picture for writing centers, however, may be more complex than simply being used to meet institutional goals. While composition is conceded by the institution, writing centers may be conceded by the institution *and* by composition programs. The history of writing centers is marked by their contrast with classrooms, and thus, classroom pedagogies. Peer tutoring, according to Kenneth Bruffee (1984), acted as an “alternative to classroom teaching” (p. 637) through which social learning theories can be more fully realized because the collaboration that occurs peer-to-peer exists in productive contrast to “traditional classroom teaching” (p. 637). Lerner (2003) further specifies this friction as “the writing program versus the writing center, classroom composition versus one-to-one instruction” (p. 55). This emphasis on difference between classroom teaching and one-to-one instruction may be too far afield, or too tangled up in pedagogical concerns, to be relevant to historical research from an institutional perspective, but even if considered adjunctive, the writing center exists in relation to classrooms and curricular programs. This relationship was largely one of remediation and writing centers’ association with remediation resulted in them being conceded by those in composition who were “invested in legitimizing composition as an academic discipline” (Lerner, 2003, p. 64). Based on these dynamics, writing centers may be well-positioned to think through *gradations* of concessions by institutional forces that are both distant (i.e. upper administration) and proximal (i.e. composition programs).

One implication that Skinnell (2016) feels his work brings forth is that composition pedagogies have the potential to become untethered from institutional concerns with few attendant consequences. For writing centers, the relationship between pedagogy and institution comes into view in Salem’s (2014) “Opportunity and Transformation” where she argues that liberal arts colleges and public colleges are more apt to have a writing center (p. 37) and that these writing centers tend, inevitably, towards “liberal-arts-inflected pedagogies and practices” (p. 38). This self-reinforcing relationship between institutional values and pedagogical values seems a productive avenue for exploration, one made more robust by considering Skinnell’s (2016) vantage points and argument. Skinnell (2016) does end the book by gesturing towards this complexity when he states that the “pedagogies and theories that influence instruction” (p. 143) are not “on a separate (intellectual) plane from the institutions that require composition education,” (p. 143) but he circles back by writing that pedagogy and theory are not “necessarily persuasive in arguments over composition in the university” (p. 143). So, getting at this dynamic seems to be the task before us especially because just as there are times when the institution makes some decisions in a vacuum, there are times

when writing center stakeholders hold genuine persuasive power and the degree to which our pedagogies align with the institution (or can be spoken convincingly about to others) becomes paramount.

Skinnell's (2016) book is timely given the disciplinary self-awareness currently afoot in our scholarship. More importantly, we should take Skinnell (2016) up on his offer to test his argument by looking at our localized contexts and seeing where our narratives converge. If we "attempt to temporarily bracket" (p. 40) disciplinarity, as Skinnell (2016) does, what would our research and theories look like if they abandoned concerns with marginality, centeredness, and remediation on the basis that writing centers serve institutional purposes impermeable to whatever narrative threads the field is sewing together about research and visibility? And with this research, what writing center narratives might we bring into being?

References

Boquet, E. (2002). *Noise from the Writing Center*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Bruffee, K. A. (1984). Collaborative learning and the "conversation of mankind." *College English*, 46(7), 635-652. doi: 10.2307/376924

Lerner, N. (2003). Punishment and possibility: Representing writing centers, 1939-1970. *Composition Studies*, 31(2), 53-72. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43501554>

McKinney, J. G. (2013). *Peripheral visions for writing centers*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Salem, L. (2016). Decisions...decisions: Who chooses to use the writing center. *The Writing Center Journal*, 35(2), 147-171. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43824060>

Salem, L. (2014). Opportunity and transformation: How writing centers are positioned in the political landscape of higher education in the United States. *The Writing Center*

Journal, 34(1), 15-43. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43444146>

Skinnell, R. (2016). *Conceding composition: A crooked history of composition's institutional fortunes*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

<https://thepeerreview-iwca.org>

The Peer Review / Proudly powered by WordPress