

Composition Forum 51, Spring 2023

Review of Ellen C. Carillo’s Reading and Writing Instruction in the Twenty-First Century: Recovering and Transforming the Pedagogy

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Carillo, Ellen C., editor. *Reading and Writing Instruction in the Twenty-First Century: Recovering and Transforming the Pedagogy of Robert Scholes*. Utah State UP, 2021.

Focusing on the scholarship and predictions of Robert Scholes (1929-2016), this edited collection by Ellen C. Carillo provides a space to expand our views of textuality, analyze pedagogical approaches to reading and writing in higher education, and explore the future of the discipline in the 21st century. In that sense, this collection joins ongoing disciplinary conversations about how to expand how we read, write, and teach in our current context (Inoue; Waite). Focused on Scholes’s pedagogical theories, this collection builds on his work by applying it to the current demands of a digital and information-centric world. It asks diversely interconnected questions on the multifaceted issues and concerns faced by “those with a stake in teaching, and specifically teaching students in English, English Education, and Writing Studies at the postsecondary level” (14).

The collection is divided into three parts: “Part I: Transforming Scholes’s Canon of Methods,” “Part II: Extending Scholes’s Scholarship on Dispositions and Habits of Mind,” and “Part III: Thinking About Disciplinary Issues Alongside Scholes.” Each section concludes with excerpts by Scholes, which lets readers engage directly with his words and gain a deeper understanding of the source material being discussed. Readers who are new to Robert Scholes’s work, for example, could benefit from starting with the excerpts before engaging with the contributors’ reflections. As a whole, the voices in this collection ask: Is our teaching adequately preparing students to apply reading and writing skills outside of academic spaces? How is the reading/writing divide explored by Scholes being addressed now? As the discipline continues to change, *how* should it change? In my own reading, I identified three themes from which readers can pick-and-choose based on their interests and primary concerns: 1) pedagogical strategies and reconfigurations of the major/program of study; 2) questions around disciplinary boundaries, values, and preoccupations; 3) critiques and reinventions aimed at building on Scholes’s legacy.

Pedagogy

Many of the chapters mirror Scholes’s prioritization of pedagogy. Alice S. Horning, for example, writes about Scholes’s *The Crafty Reader* (2001) and the importance of developing crafty readers in an environment that “continues to expand as more information comes at all of us from more sources at an ever-higher-speed” (38). Horning calls out the lack of engagement with reading and literacy (both in conference meetings and journals), given the rise of information access and the increased need for readers to “not only follow an argument with full comprehension, but also evaluate it on the critical criteria of authority, accuracy, currency, relevancy, appropriateness, and bias” (51).

Similarly, Christopher J. La Casse in “Periodical Textuality: A Case for Contextualized Reading Practices in First-Year Writing” and Kenny Smith in “Truth, Propaganda, and Textual Power: A Pedagogy for Combating Cynicism in the Post-Truth Era” explore what it means to teach students to productively engage with periodicals and journalism without being dismissive or reductive. For La Casse, part of the issue is how students interpret and approach texts: “High stakes testing, moreover, appears to function as a form of operant conditioning, inscribing a certain disposition in students toward reading, what Elizabeth Wardle calls an ‘answering-getting disposition,’ rather than inviting students to cultivate a problem-exploring disposition” (55). To combat this orientation toward reading, La Casse proposes to bring together textuality and rhetorical reading in what he calls “periodical textuality” (57).

In turn, Smith tries to enhance student engagement with journalism “to avoid the moment when skepticism tips over into cynicism, when students move from asking good questions to disregarding the importance of journalistic discourse” (146). Given our continuous increased access to information, and in turn to (mis)information and propaganda, the implications for teaching are clear: cultivating and fostering understanding of the medium through which we receive information is just as important as the content we choose to teach.[\[1\]](#)

“From Argument to Invitation: Promoting Empathy and Mutual Understanding in the Composition Classroom” by Kelsey McNiff and “Everyday Theory: Robert Scholes and the Ethics of Reading” by Christian Smith deal with the more ephemeral and affective parts of reading and writing instruction. McNiff grapples with the distance students maintain between themselves and the text—a type of superficial, detached reading. McNiff asks how the common composition classroom practices might “imply that we only consider the ideas of others as a means to an end?” (119). Building on Scholes’s concepts of engaging with otherness, she describes an assignment that asks “students to explore the ideas of others not in service of an argument of their own, but rather in service of an invitation to conversation” (McNiff 119).

Similarly, Smith places “Scholes’s work on reading and textuality in conversation with contemporary discussions of contemplative and antioppression pedagogies in composition studies” (135). Reflecting on their own experience attending the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CMind), Smith argues that alternative pedagogies could offer instructors “a framework for reading that attempts to foreclose the reinscription of oppressive discourses by prompting students and instructors to identify habitual responses to the shared reading” (136). Thus, by enacting different approaches, both McNiff and Smith work through how to give students pause—how to promote richer and more nuanced readings that teach students to engage with otherness in contextualized and mindful ways.

Disciplinarity

For those interested in disciplinarity, Paul T. Corrigan catalogs four key tenets of Scholes’s pedagogy in “Reading’s Many Branches: Rober Scholes’s ‘Canon of Methods.’” These include: 1) the importance of making reading practices visible and explicitly teaching them, 2) growth for readers at every level, 3) replacing a canon of texts with “a canon of methods” (25), and 4) simplifying reading without mechanizing it and oversimplifying it (26). These core tenets are recurrent throughout the rest of the chapters and serve as guiding principles. Practically, this cataloging takes stock of what we know so we can identify what needs to still be explored within reading practices.

Forwarding questions around our disciplinary responsibilities, this time in regards to student-teaching, Jessica Rivera-Mueller builds a heuristic from Scholes’s “Learning to Teach” (2004) to explore the tensions Scholes sees between research and scholarship. Rather than putting them in opposition, Rivera-Mueller explores the affordances of “pairing these two activities together as a heuristic [which] provides two ways of understanding and working with the ‘problems’ teachers confront when they work with students” (74). This gives instructors in teacher-learning differing approaches to engage with their concerns both “as ongoing learners” (76) and as “decision-makers who identify and study teaching problems” (82).

Critiques and Reinventions

The final section critiques, expands, and reinvents Scholes’s work to our current context. Thomas P. Miller’s “How Scholes Helped English Departments Confront the Death of the Author, The Loss of Readers and the Emergence of Intertextual Literacies” describes the changing landscape of English Departments, which have experienced “drops in majors and jobs that have reached historic levels in the last decade,” (168). Miller expands on the fact that while “Scholes may not have found a lot of takers for his proposal to restructure English departments” his predictions “have proved to be undeniable” (177). Disciplinary questions about revisions to the major in a changing economy that increasingly relies on student tuitions (178) are at the basis of the last section of the collection: What now?

For Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Angela Christie, the solution is practical. “‘Not a Neat Conspiracy, but a Muddle:’ A College-to-Career Quality Enhancement Plan in the Spirit of Scholes” provides a case study of their work “integrating workplace literacy into the fabric of the institutional strategic mission through the newly adopted College to Career QEP” (198).[\[2\]](#) In a very practical way, they answer Scholes’s call to align the learning to students’ reality by making the connections explicit and standardized (200). For Gaillet and Christie, these small but impactful curricular changes are about “training faculty in how to translate the humanities skills into employment skills” (205), including reading and writing.

In direct contrast to Gaillet and Christie’s search for common ground, Emily J. Isaacs explores what happens when there is fracture in the discipline. Speaking from her own experience in a newly formed writing program that broke away from the English department, Isaacs “draw[s] on Scholes to implore faculty at new writing studies departments to be very careful” (183) and avoid replicating English department problems in a new context. A key concern is that “those with the most status and power make writing studies departments mirror and focus on their own interests and scholarship, which is what led English departments to neglect the crucial work of providing literacy instruction to all students at our universities” (Isaacs 184). Thus, alternatives and reinventions must be self-critical and iterative to avoid reification.

Also being mindful of the reification of oppressive systems, Robert Lestón’s “Attending to the Tactical: Robert Scholes and the Legacy of White Language Supremacy” explores the limits of Scholes’s theorizations. The lack of engagement with oppressive discourse of academic language, students’ rights to their own language, and discussions on African-American Vernacular English means that “the form of literacy for which Scholes openly advocated was inextricable from white, middle-class language use” (Lestón 213). By exploring the difference between strategic and tactical discourse, Lestón advocates not for acculturation into the profession, “but to find ways to allow those students who will never be bourgeois to form it into something more accommodating” (219).

This collection hits its mark “to serve as both a tribute to Scholes and a resource to contemporary secondary and postsecondary instructors and administrators” (Carillo 9). By honoring Scholes’s work both through content and form, this collection takes the time to show (as much as tell) what it means to bring theory and praxis together. This collection will be useful for students and faculty familiar with Scholes’s work as well as to newcomers who want to engage with Scholes for the first time. Future work, for example, could examine the associations of democracy and citizenship in the work of Scholes with more complicated and critical views of those concepts, such as Amy J. Wan’s “In the Name of Citizenship: The Writing Classroom and the Promise of Citizenship.”

Rhetorically, by placing Scholes’ excerpts alongside the work of contributors, the collection embodies the collaborative conversation that Douglas D. Hesse envisions in his closing remarks: “Scholes himself has hosted, absent and after the fact, a marvelous intellectual dinner,” a dialogue with “exciting topics for conversation—about reading, writing, teaching, the profession, [and] the high stakes of textual power” (259). As we continue to expand and build in the dynamic context of the English discipline, the critiques and reinventions in this collection serve as guiding posts to ask the hard questions and build even as we honor.

Notes

- Those interested in these chapters, might benefit from the additional pedagogical case studies present in *Literacy and Pedagogy in an Age of Misinformation and Disinformation*, edited by Tara Lockhart, Brenda Glascott, Chris Warnick, and Juli Parrish, and Justin Lewis, which also presents assignment examples to raise a more critical consumption of news and media. [\(Return to text.\)](#)
- QEP, or quality enhancement plan, creates more direct alignment between school literacies and career readiness to mainstream that process for students. [\(Return to text.\)](#)

Works Cited

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