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# 1

## CONTINGENT LABOR, WRITING STUDIES, AND WRITING ABOUT WRITING

This chapter looks at two texts, one by Elizabeth Wardle and one by Wardle and Doug Downs, to examine the ways the use and abuse of contingent faculty in higher education affect the ability to implement a writing studies approach to the teaching of composition. Although I focus on research universities, many of the practices developed at these institutions are spreading to all forms of higher education in a globalizing mode of social conformity. On many levels, writing studies is itself structured by the contradictory nature of its relation to the dominant university research paradigm: while the teaching of writing challenges many of the standard institutional hierarchies, the desire for more resources pushes these composition programs to reproduce the structures that place writing, teaching, students, form, and practice in a debased position.<sup>1</sup> Wardle's work is important here because she both acknowledges the need for structural change and offers a curricular and theoretical solution.

My strategy in referring to Wardle's texts focuses on performing a close reading of her argument in order to both highlight her main contributions to the field and unveil what is still missing from her discourse. Since she is one of the most recognized scholars in the field of writing studies, her work is highly influential; however, it is not my intention to argue that Wardle, or any other single contributor to the discipline, embodies the entirety of the discourse. Instead, I seek to look at the ways key texts are shaped by the political economy of neoliberal higher education. I also want to emphasize the importance of close reading and the need to avoid vague and distant summarizations. Since words and arguments matter, it is essential to look at how

specific arguments are constructed by paying close attention to the unfolding of a particular text.

I also want to stress that I engage with her work through a series of ideological assumptions that concern the role higher education plays in the political economy of neoliberalism. Although many people define the current historical moment by the dominance of a conservative backlash against public institutions and progressive policies, I argue that it is also important to look at the ways liberals have actively participated in the reshaping of the political economy. For example, it is clear a conservative tax revolt has fueled an antigovernment movement, and this movement has resulted in the defunding of public universities and colleges. However, at the same time, liberal and progressive professors have helped construct and maintain a system that privileges research over teaching and individual rights over collective solidarity. Even though tenure was developed in order to protect academic freedom and shared governance, one must wonder why this system of job security has resulted in a structure in which the majority of the faculty do not have their academic freedom protected and are not able to participate in shared governance. The downsizing of the faculty and the rise of a business-oriented administration class in higher education, thus, must be tied to both internal and external forces.

In *Degradation of the Academic Dogma*, Robert Nisbet (1971) argues that research universities in America began to be restructured after World War II, when huge sums of government money were funneled into public institutions in order to support military and scientific research. According to Nisbet, research faculty quickly learned that prestige and high salaries could be attained by focusing on conducting funded research, and once these professors turned away from their teaching duties to focus on research, other people had to be found to instruct the students. From this perspective, the privileging of research over teaching and grant-funded professors over instructors was not the result of a decrease in public funding for higher education; instead, government support led to a change in the priorities and incentives of these universities.

Nisbet's narrative challenges several common understandings of the relation between higher education and neoliberalism; instead of placing all the blame on the decrease of public funds and the external political push to privatize public institutions, he shows how internal practices were influenced by an increase of public funding. Thus, before the current destructive defunding of public institutions, we already see a major restructuring of higher education, and the hierarchies developed then still tend to dominate today.

As I argue throughout this book, the privileging of research over teaching and science over the humanities has a major effect on the present and future of writing studies. Not only do these hierarchies help explain the shifting of teaching from tenured professors to contingent faculty, but we also find a debasement of undergraduate teaching and the promotion of theory and graduate education over more "practical" courses like composition and foreign languages. We shall see that Wardle is aware of all these institutional transformations, yet she tends to argue that the best way for writing studies to improve its status and funding is to conform to the dominant institutional structures.

#### LABOR AND WRITING STUDIES

Wardle (2013) begins her "Intractable Writing Program Problems, *Kairos*, and Writing about Writing" by highlighting the problematic relation between the theories of writing studies and the practice of actual composition courses.

Macro-level knowledge and resolutions from the larger field of Writing Studies are frequently unable to inform the micro-level of individual composition classes, largely because of our field's infamous labor problems. In other words, composition curricula and programs often struggle to act out of the knowledge of the field—not because we don't know how to do so, but because we are often caught in a cycle of having to hire part-time instructors at the last minute for very little pay and asking those teachers (who often don't have degrees in Rhetoric and Composition) to begin teaching a course within a week or two.<sup>2</sup>

Here, Wardle correctly indicates that we cannot promote new pedagogical practices, theories, and research projects if we do not also deal with academic labor issues. As she stresses, it is hard to mentor and train faculty who are hired at the last minute and may not have expertise in writing studies. This important framing of the relation between research and teaching can help us to think about the political, economic, and institutional affordances shaping the possibilities of writing studies.

A concern for the material conditions structuring higher education weaves in and out of Wardle's article, and it is my contention that a close reading of her argument reveals a conflict concerning the ways positive change can be made at higher education institutions. On the one hand, Wardle points to large structural forces determining how writing is taught, and on the other hand, she seeks to provide a local example of how individuals at a particular location can enact new pedagogical models. The question remains whether a move to adopt a writing studies approach in the teaching of composition courses can be achieved without collective action dedicated to transforming our institutions of higher education. In other words, can new methods centered on research into genre, transfer, threshold concepts, and metacognition be applied if old institutional hierarchies are not confronted and transformed through organized collective action? If institutions value research over teaching, graduate education over undergraduate education, theory over practice, and content over form, can writing studies' focus on researching how undergraduate students learn and write take hold?<sup>3</sup>

For Wardle, material conditions and institutional expectations help define the possibilities and limitations of classroom practices: "Often these courses are far larger than the class size suggested by NCTE, likely because of the high cost of lowering class size and of widespread misconceptions about what writing is (a 'basic skill') and what writing classes do ('fix' writing problems)." From this perspective, the determination of class size is driven by an economic concern and an institutional interpretation: not only do institutions want to save money by having larger classes, but they rationalize this expansion by claiming

writing courses teach a basic skill and serve primarily a remedial goal of fixing writing problems. In response to this analysis, an important question to ask is whether economic concerns are driving pedagogical expectations, or the reductive understanding of writing is producing a rationale for money saving. To be precise, are economics producing cultural understandings, or is culture determining the material conditions?<sup>4</sup>

### THE RHETORIC OF POWER

As academic thinkers and people invested in the power of rhetoric, we often believe culture drives social institutions, so the best way to change a system is to change the culture. However, what if we have it backward and economic forces produce cultural interpretations? For instance, behind some of the recent pushes to focus on a writing studies approach to the teaching of composition is the implicit argument that the best way to increase resources for these programs is to enhance the cultural respect for the field. According to this logic, if writing studies can be seen as a legitimate discipline with established research methodologies, theories, and concepts, it will be treated with the same institutional respect as other research-oriented disciplines. Yet, one must still ask whether this approach is too focused on a rhetoric of logos and ethos. Furthermore, if the major forces structuring the distribution of resources in higher education are irrational and unethical, rational and ethical appeals may not prevail.

It is my contention that the social hierarchies placing research over teaching, the sciences over the humanities, theory over practice, and graduates over undergraduates are not rational or ethical structures; rather, they are irrational power structures rationalized after the fact in order to maintain a system of prestige and privilege. Moreover, these power structures can only be countered by organized collective action, and they will not be transformed by merely rational and ethical appeals. This does not mean we should stop making rational and ethical arguments, but we must understand that these rhetorical

devices will not be enough. We should add to pathos, logic, and ethos a fourth category of social power.

### INSTITUTIONS MATTER

In returning to Wardle's (2013) text, we see both the strength and weakness of her institutional analysis.

In addition, composition courses continue to be housed largely in English departments, where they tend to get the least attention and funding of all the low-funded English programs and where sometimes faculty with little interest in or training to teach writing are nonetheless required to do so. Sometimes entire composition programs are staffed with brand new graduate students, many if not most of whom are graduate students in fields other than Rhetoric and Composition, and who have taken, at most, one graduate course in how to teach writing before walking into a classroom.

Wardle begins this important analysis by pointing out the problems many composition programs face because they are located in English departments, and they are often at the low end of the funding and prestige hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Since theory and literature are privileged over practice and writing, the importance of writing studies is devalued, and the teaching of composition is seen as an activity that requires little expertise, experience, or concern. One of the main ways this dynamic has been countered is by the establishment of separate writing programs. In what is often considered a type of academic divorce, collective action changes the power relation by producing a new institutional structure. Here power and privilege are countered by a collective will to create a new system and set of material relations. Yet, rarely has this type of transformation been produced by compositionists convincing English literature professors to revalue writing and writing studies; instead, the divorce is made through institutional power structures and battles over scarce resources.<sup>6</sup>

In stressing culture over economics, Wardle argues that promoters of the field of writing studies must realize composition has been treated by management in a different way than other disciplines.

No administrator would ever send untrained faculty members or graduate students from another discipline to staff an entire segment of courses in, say, biology or history or mathematics or economics. Yet this happens every day in composition programs. Because of these and other entrenched practices, locations, and labor conditions, and despite our field's advances in how best to teach writing, we can still find composition classrooms where the students are learning modes or grammar or literature in formalistic ways, or are learning popular culture with little to no attention to writing itself, in courses sometimes if not frequently taught by faculty or graduate students with little to no training (or even interest) in teaching writing.

Once again Wardle hones in on the main problem, which is that teachers' working conditions shape students' learning conditions, but her analysis does not go far enough. Not only are first-year writing courses often devalued in the higher education institutional hierarchy, but many first-year courses are devalued and underfunded no matter the discipline.<sup>7</sup> The central problem then is not primarily an issue of the ways people see the teaching of writing; rather, the problem stems from the social hierarchies placing research over teaching, faculty over students, theory over practice, and disciplines over general education.<sup>8</sup>

### CONFRONTING INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHIES

Writing studies often flies in the face of the dominant social hierarchies shaping higher education because it uses research to focus on student learning and effective pedagogical practices. Moreover, the attention to which skills and knowledge transfer from one class to the next—and from inside and outside the academy—positions writing studies to be a major player in assessment and the evaluation of instructional quality.<sup>9</sup> Still, the problematic nature of labor conditions for writing instructors threatens to undermine the desire to produce specific outcomes: “The fact that research has suggested for many decades now that students in composition courses often do not reach desired course outcomes or improve as writers in measurable ways in one or two composition courses is not an unrelated

problem. It seems reasonable to assume that if we staffed any set of courses in any discipline with teachers who had little training or interest in teaching them, we would likely see a problem in student achievement” (Wardle 2013). As several longitudinal studies have looked at what students learn and transfer into and from their writing courses, it has become apparent that students are often not learning and retaining the desired goals of courses.<sup>10</sup> Wardle argues that one reason for this failure to transfer is that the faculty teaching the courses have little training in writing studies. However, one unintended risk with this focus on transfer is that it can feed the current political ideology that blames teachers for all our educational and social problems. Without a focus on the larger economic and political forces shaping higher education practices, teachers become the solution and problem in every social issue.<sup>11</sup> In the case of higher education, the lack of expertise and experience of graduate-student instructors places them in a difficult situation: they are often pushed to teach courses outside their interests and knowledge, and then they are blamed for not being experts.

A materialist analysis of higher education tells us graduate students play a contradictory role since they are supposed to be students and teachers. For example, many graduate students are recruited for graduate programs in order to keep certain subdisciplines alive, but once they start to study, they are immediately asked to be teachers of courses outside their area of specialization.<sup>12</sup> One could even argue that the use and abuse of graduate-student workers has been a major driver in the casualization of the academic labor force. The fact that departments allow grad students to teach undergrad courses sends the message that one does not need a degree, or expertise, or even experience to teach at a research university. This system puts the bar of entry into the profession so low that the door is open for virtually anyone to teach required undergraduate courses. A reason, then, that there are so few jobs for graduate students after they earn their PhDs is that there are so many grad students and contingent faculty without degrees teaching the courses.<sup>13</sup>

As writing studies emerges as the dominant paradigm for the teaching of composition, this troubling use of grad student instructors becomes even more apparent. If writing is not just a practice but is also a subject of study, it requires expert practitioners with degrees and experience; however, the larger structures of higher education can undermine this quest for expertise. Wardle adds that this labor problem is enhanced by the fact that there appears to be little consensus in the field concerning what people are actually supposed to be doing:

The fact that composition courses often do not seem to achieve desired outcomes is made more complex because our field does not necessarily agree on what appropriate outcomes are or should be for first-year composition. Despite the valiant and important efforts of those who worked (and continue to work) on the WPA Outcomes Statement, beliefs about what outcomes should be for composition still seem to vary widely. Should composition courses help prepare students for what they will write later? If so, what counts as “later”? School settings? Which school settings? Work settings? Personal settings? If transferable knowledge and skills are not the desired outcome, then what do we focus on instead? Self awareness? Cultural awareness? Artistic and creative enjoyment of writing?

One of the laudable aspects of writing studies is the fact that it continues to ask the question, what are the goals of writing courses and how can the attainment of these objectives be studied and monitored? Yet, even if a stronger consensus were reached in the field, the use of grad-student instructors and part-time faculty would make it hard to implement the accepted practices.

#### **CONTINGENCY AND INSTRUCTION**

Due to the temporary and transitory nature of academic labor in writing programs, administrators often fall back on prescribing simplistic and rigid syllabi: “Because labor is unstable, some programs attempt to ensure programmatic consistency by giving part-time teachers and graduate students (some of whom teach even their first semester as MA students) program syllabi

and specific and fairly rigid assignments to teach.” Although it may seem like a unified theory of writing studies would enable this type of programmatic control, the reality is that it takes a great deal of study and practice to become an effective teacher of writing. In fact, once we see writing studies as a separate discipline with its own key concepts, theories, practices, and body of research, a high level of professional development is required, yet the material conditions of these programs often prevent the needed focus on expertise and experience: “Many programs make efforts to provide ongoing professional development for adjunct instructors and graduate students, but these supports are in constant tension with material conditions related to pay and time constraints, including the fact that such underpaid adjunct instructors are often teaching numerous sections at multiple institutions, leaving them little time to participate in the life of any one department.” It should be clear from Wardle’s analysis that it will be hard for a writing studies agenda to be employed if current labor conditions continue. In short, we must promote a national agenda to promote full-time faculty with job security, fair wages, a career path, and professional-development funding in order to secure a place for writing studies.

While Wardle does not make a direct call for a national movement, she does realize why the current labor structure should be transformed: “Until all composition teachers have relevant theoretical and research-based knowledge about writing and teaching writing, and are treated as expert professionals by their institutions, any attempts at programmatic consistency seem bound to be reductionist. In other words, until composition faculty themselves have enough knowledge about writing research and theory to make their own informed choices about curricula, and to make informed arguments for changed material conditions, how can we move beyond a managerial mode in composition programs?” Thus, we need a national solution to the academic labor problem because as Wardle indicates, the only way to advance the field is to change the labor situation and the way people are trained and hired. Moreover, if only some

institutions are able to hire expert full-time faculty, the myth that anyone can teach writing can continue to circulate.

By relying on a disposable labor force, any effort to enhance the status and consistency of writing studies is bound to fail.

If teachers are passive recipients of curricula they didn't help shape and philosophies they don't share, it seems likely that they can only enact them in a formulaic fashion, if they enact them at all. Such formulaic teaching (which our legislative bodies seem intent on pushing us even further toward) simply reinscribes all of the problems I have been outlining above: composition teachers are not seen as professionals with specialized disciplinary knowledge, and stakeholders assume that anyone can teach composition; and, thus, anyone can be hired to do so at the last minute, since there must not be much to learn or prepare for in teaching a composition class. The teachers most willing to teach composition for \$2,000/course and no benefits are often (but not always) least involved in the field's discussions about writing and writing pedagogy; in turn, the composition courses they teach may not be informed by the knowledge of the field, and students are then less likely to achieve desired course outcomes, all of which set composition courses and programs up to be viewed as anything but academic or scholarly. And the cycle continues.

Wardle here outlines the central dialectic between labor conditions and the field of writing studies: the more writing is seen as a simple skill that can be taught by anyone in a single lower-division course, the more the low pay for the teachers is justified, and the more an institution relies on insecure faculty, the more it must impose a reductive, rigid curriculum, which further devalues the labor of the instructors and the expertise of the discipline.

#### LOCAL VERSUS NATIONAL

Following this insightful analysis of the material conditions shaping writing studies, Wardle turns her attention to the ways an individual program can counter many of the problems discussed above, and here is where things get complicated. Although it is possible for individual programs to make

improvements and enact the core principles of writing studies, it is unclear how such local actions deal with the national problems discussed above. After all, we have a national academic labor system, and as Wardle posits above, there are often shared understandings of writing pedagogy and writing faculty that transcend individual institutions.

The central focus of the rest of her article is on the development and the implementation of a writing-about-writing program, but I want to concentrate on her institutional arguments. For example, she argues that teaching about writing studies in a writing course cannot help but confront the academic labor problem: “If teachers must know the research of the field in order to teach composition classes, large groups of adjuncts can’t be hired at the last minute and treated as expendable; rather, potential teachers must have some training (whether formal or informal) in rhetoric and composition.” Wardle makes a clear rational claim for the need to hire expert teachers with the right degrees and experience, but it is unclear how this reasoned argument will counter the administrative desire to keep the cost of instruction low by hiring grad students and contingent faculty members to teach required undergraduate courses. At the heart of her claim is the idea that if the field can prove it increases student outcomes by professionalizing the discipline, administrators will naturally support hiring more expert faculty:

When composition teachers have this sort of disciplinary knowledge, they can teach to informed outcomes without being forced to a prescriptive and reductionist consistency, and they can be engaged and rewarded as expert colleagues, rather than “labor” to be “managed.” . . . This *should* result in better achievement of student outcomes related to writing. And better student outcomes with professionalized teachers *should* raise the status of composition courses and programs themselves.

This logical argument for enhancing the status of writing faculty by professionalizing the field and demonstrating student learning does not account for the fact that many established disciplines like math, biology, psychology, and sociology still rely on graduate students and contingent faculty to teach many of

their undergraduate courses. Furthermore, one of the only ways professions like law and medicine have been able to control the wages and labor conditions of their members is by controlling credentialing. Laws, unions, and collective action—not logic and ethics—have served as the keys to maintaining labor standards.

If we look at other professions that have been able to protect better wages and working conditions, we should insist that only people with PhDs in writing studies or closely related specializations should be allowed to teach composition at the college level, but this requirement has never been realized. In fact, instead of calling for the PhD in writing studies as the basic standard for hiring new faculty, Wardle opens the door to a compromised solution: “In sum, teaching declarative concepts about writing requires *knowing* declarative concepts about writing, which requires some familiarity with the research of Writing Studies. There are two ways to assemble a faculty with such familiarity: hire all Rhet/Comp specialists (an expensive and difficult proposition) or implement sustained, scaffolded support for composition teachers from all backgrounds so that they can gain familiarity with some composition research.” Due to economic concerns, Wardle calls for a model of training people to teach in a writing studies mode, but this argument may not improve many of the labor and material problems she discusses throughout her article.

#### FROM THE NATIONAL TO THE LOCAL

In her analysis of her own program’s implementation of a writing studies approach, we learn she relied on the good fortune of having certain institutional players who supported her mission:

At UCF we encountered and were able to take advantage of a kairotic moment to use a writing-about-writing approach to address the set of problems I outlined earlier. Our experience demonstrates how a programmatic writing-about-writing approach with timed implementation and training improved professionalization, informed micro-level classrooms with macro-level disciplinary knowledge, and, through both of these, improved student

outcomes. For these changes to occur, particular institutional supports had to be in place, and an advocate in upper administration needed to serve as the catalyst to ensure the attempted changes came to fruition. Our experience at UCF demonstrates how deep cultural shifts and changed material conditions can be effected through a combination of *kairos*, piloting and assessment, advocacy, and laying bare our practices so that they are visible to stakeholders.

This stress on the chance event of having a group of supportive administrators conflicts with the large structural issues she addresses throughout her work. After all, if we have a national labor and teaching problem, it is hard to see how this problem can be fixed by relying on the temporary support of local actors. In fact, Wardle describes some of her local good fortune:

The Dean of Undergraduate Studies' role as an advocate for changes in the institutional structures around the writing program (as well as the math program, which is a story in itself) cannot be overestimated. Knowing that some new funding was going to be available through a tuition increase, she made a proposal to the President for reducing composition class size from twenty-seven to twenty-five and conducting a three-year study of smaller class size, providing comparison groups of nineteen. She also argued for six new full-time instructor positions, four in 2009–10 and two more in 2010–11. The President agreed to what she proposed, launching the President's Class Size Initiative (PCSI), with the understanding that everything we did would be audited, assessed, and presented to stakeholders at any time. Our Dean of Undergraduate Studies understood how funding worked, knew what funding might be available, and had access to one of the few stakeholders who could effect structural change immediately.

This was indeed a fortuitous set of circumstances and thus does not establish any type of model that can be followed other than hoping to get supportive administrators with extra funds and a desire to do something differently. If one of the main positive factors in developing this program was funding to reduce the size of writing classes and hire more full-time faculty, it is hard to imagine how a similar program can be implemented without similar extraordinary resources. My argument does not undermine the value of Wardle's program,

but it does question whether we can spread this type of teaching and learning if we are not getting the needed resources. In other words, writing studies cannot be implemented on a large scale if we do not change the labor and funding structures of higher education.

In her final rhetorical gesture, Wardle argues that change is possible, but that it must wait for the right moment:

Our experience illustrates that sometimes there are moments when change is more possible than usual, and as rhetoricians and writing program administrators, we can and must be prepared to take advantage of them. We might fail, and the passing opening might close. But it is possible to leverage our field's knowledge and narrative to work with our good teaching faculty and make changes. Often our field's narratives about composition programs are about the forces at work that keep change from happening. But change is possible, and structures are created, destroyed, and recreated by human beings.

Wardle is right to stress the role we can all play in making social and institutional change happen, but her own story is reliant on a particular, local example of a fortuitous set of circumstances that would be hard to replicate across the country.

#### LABOR AND WRITING ABOUT WRITING

As Wardle's focus on labor issues attests, it is difficult to imagine how to utilize a writing studies' approach in a system that relies on untrained contingent faculty; however, as she argues in her article with Doug Downs, "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies,'" the way around this problem may be found in a new curricular model for composition. In examining Downs and Wardle's work, I argue that the current emphasis on transfer, genre, and metacognition in writing studies represents an important effort to make undergraduate-student learning the focus of research and teaching at American universities, but this projects tends to reinforce many of the academic hierarchies structuring higher education today.

### TRANSFER VERSUS FYC

A common move in many writing studies texts is to use the concept of transfer in order to question traditional assumptions regarding first-year writing:<sup>14</sup>

First-year composition (FYC) is usually asked to prepare students to write across the university; this request assumes the existence of a “universal educated discourse” (Russell, “Activity Theory”) that can be transferred from one writing situation to another. Yet more than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist and have seriously questioned what students can and do transfer from one context to another. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 552)

As we saw above, part of this critique of the universal, first-year writing course is based on the notion that these courses tend to be taught by contingent faculty and graduate students with very limited training in the field, while the other part of this argument is that the current way of teaching students composition is ineffective because it is based on the false assumption that writing is a universal skill that can be taught in a single course. Moreover, the labor and the antiuniversalist arguments come together through the notion that what allows administrators to place unqualified people in the composition classroom is management’s flawed understanding of what can and should be taught in an effective writing course. In fact, Downs and Wardle posit that some of the false conceptions regarding composition come from writing studies’ own failure to examine the research and findings related to what students actually transfer from one context to the next:

However, for all practical purposes, 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 can do what nonspecialists have always assumed it can: teach, in one or two early courses, “college writing” as a set of basic, fundamental skills that will apply in other college courses and in business and public spheres after college. In making these unsupportable assurances to stakeholders, our field reinforces cultural misconceptions of writing instead of attempting to educate students and publics out of those misconceptions.

When we continue to pursue the goal of teaching students “how to write in college” in one or two semesters—despite the fact that our own scholarship extensively calls this possibility into question—we silently support the misconceptions that writing is not a real subject, that writing courses do not require expert instructors, and that rhetoric and composition are not genuine research areas or legitimate intellectual pursuits. We are, thus, complicit in reinforcing outsiders’ views of writing studies as a trivial, skill-teaching nondiscipline. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 552–53)

Here, the reductive understanding of composition is once again tied to the labor issue: since administrators and other people inside and outside academic institutions don’t realize what teaching writing really entails, they do not think it is necessary to hire expert faculty. Furthermore, the common practice of teaching composition in just one or two first-year courses provides the illusion that writing teaches “skills” and not any content. In fact, it is the purported lack of content that feeds the notion of writing’s being universal but empty.

The solution Downs and Wardle propose to many of these issues is to move from seeing composition courses as classes in how to write in college to classes about writing, which would entail a transition “from acting as if writing is a basic, universal skill to acting as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge to which students should be introduced, thereby changing their understandings about writing and thus changing the ways they write” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 553). The driving idea behind the writing-about-writing strategy is to make writing itself the disciplinary research content of writing courses. Thus, the divide between the empty universal form and the particular content is overcome by making the form the content. In what can be called a Hegelian reversal, the opposites of the dialectic are synthesized by overcoming their supposed differences on an abstract intellectual level.

#### **THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Downs and Wardle follow this equation of form and content with another dialectical synthesis:

Despite the progress our field has made over the years at erasing theory/practice oppositions, it is still too easy to imagine pedagogy as “practice,” removed from the realm of serious theory or research about the work or direction of writing studies as a discipline. Resisting the notion that talk about pedagogy is merely talk about “practice” is especially important to writing studies because our field is conceived—by those who fund it, those who experience it, and most of those who work in it—as primarily pedagogical. Part of our purpose here is to insist on the deep disciplinary implications of FYC pedagogy; a pedagogical move whose intention is to help resituate an entire field within the academy demonstrates that pedagogy has impact beyond the daily teaching to-do list. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 554)

By overcoming the standard conflict between research and teaching, writing about writing promises to increase the prestige of writing studies, but the question remains: how does one turn the practice of teaching composition into an established discipline?<sup>15</sup>

The fundamental strategy revealed by Downs and Wardle is to find an intellectual way to overcome the academic hierarchies that place composition in a debased status. Therefore, instead of calling for an elimination of the structures placing research over teaching, content over form, and theory over practice, the idea is to dissolve these hierarchies on a theoretical and formal level. One of the assumptions here is that if other disciplines and administrators recognize the research-oriented disciplinary status of writing studies, universities will be more likely to respect and support this field and treat it like other established disciplines. Here, the strategy is not to intervene and try to change the material conditions through organized action; rather, the desire is to play by the rules and values of the already established hierarchy.

Just as Marx (1975) accused Hegel of taking an intellectual and not a material approach to social transformation, we see here how the dialectical process of combining opposites can create the illusion of overcoming structural hierarchies. Furthermore, instead of defending the importance of writing, form, and teaching, this strategy may function to reinforce the devaluing of these activities. For example, in an effort to copy

the way other disciplines have received institutional support, Downs and Wardle call for the need to establish a major for writing studies: “The Intro to Writing Studies course would be akin to the introductory courses offered in all other disciplines (i.e., Intro to Chemistry or Intro to Philosophy) and would potentially serve as a cornerstone course for writing studies majors beginning to take root across the country. (Having a major, of course, dramatically changes a field’s standing in the academy.)” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 554). By taking on the same values and practices of the dominant university research paradigm, it is hard to see how the labor condition of writing will change since the main reason administrators want to devalue composition courses is that so many students are required to take these courses, so in order to drive down the cost of undergraduate education, low wages must be justified. In other words, the cultural value of the field does not determine the labor value; instead, the desire to reduce the labor value is justified after the fact by a cultural argument. This structure is similar to the way discrimination often functions in capitalism: cultural hierarchies are employed to justify and rationalize the desire to drive down wages and extract surplus labor value. In turn, these hierarchies are used to maintain and police the already-established value system. Thus, it may be very hard to revalue writing courses and the field of composition since its devaluation already serves to rationalize a whole set of economic and cultural practices.

It is important to point out that this understanding of the relation between culture and economics is not only crucial to the desire to transform labor practices in composition programs, but it also shows we often exclude irrational economic exploitation from our rational understandings of how rhetoric and education function. Inherent in Downs and Wardle’s argument is the idea that if other disciplines and administrators saw we are really just like them, they would stop forcing us to rely on exploited labor. From a rational (logos) and moral (ethos) and even emotional (pathos) perspective, this strategy makes sense, but it may not work in terms of the political economy of social

hierarchies. Consequently, we must add to the trinity of rhetorical figures a fourth element, which we can call *dunamis* (Ancient Greek for power and the ability to cause change). Of course giving something a new name will not necessarily change practices, but we do need to think about how irrational power defies our ability to make standard rhetorical appeals.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of focusing on the power structures and vested interests that maintain composition in a devalued position, Downs and Wardle in this text seek to challenge the dominant idea that contentless writing courses teach universal skills:

A number of assumptions inform the premise that academic writing is somehow universal: writing can be considered independent of content; writing consists primarily of syntactic and mechanical concerns; and academic writing skills can be taught in a one or two introductory general writing skills courses and transferred easily to other courses. The content-versus-form misconception—as old as FYC itself—appears in standardized testing, with the SAT “writing” test giving better scores to longer essays and completely discounting factual errors. It also finds its way into New York Times editorials, where no less a public intellectual than Stanley Fish argues that it is possible to, and therefore that FYC should, focus strictly on writing’s grammatical forms and disavow interest in its content. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 554–55)

Downs and Wardle have set up the issue of how people conceive of composition courses as an opposition between an empty universal form and the full content of disciplinary research, but what if instead of combining the opposing elements, we worked collectively to reverse the hierarchies structuring higher education? In other words, what would happen if we organized to force institutions to value teaching, writing, practice, and form?<sup>17</sup>

Not only do Downs and Wardle want to question the traditional view of writing courses as universal structures dedicated to teaching form, but they also critique some of the broader visions of composition programs:

The WPA Outcomes Statement adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in April 2000 . . . highlights four major outcomes for writing instruction: rhetorical knowledge;

critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; and knowledge of conventions. These outcomes, which reflect an ideology of access to the academy and a desire to prepare students for academic writing, are increasingly being adopted nationwide (Ericsson). But can FYC fulfill these expectations?" (Downs and Wardle 2007, 555)

Downs and Wardle argue that we cannot teach in a required first-year writing course the broad writing, reading, and thinking skills often advertised by universities and colleges:

While some general features of writing are shared across disciplines (e.g., a view of research writing as disciplinary conversation; writing strategies such as the "moves" made in most research introductions; specialized terminology and explicit citation—see Hyland or Swales, for example), these shared features are realized differently within different academic disciplines, courses, and even assignments (Howard; Hull; Russell, "Looking"; Shamon). As a result, "academic writing" is constituted by and in the diversity of activities and genres that mediate a wide variety of activities within higher education; its use as an umbrella term is dangerously misleading. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 556)

Using the writing studies concepts of genre and transfer, the argument is that it is misleading to tell the public we can teach general skills when we know writing always occurs in particular genres for specific contexts and each discourse community requires its own specialized terminology. The problems with this view are twofold: (1) it could promote the defunding of composition classes and programs because they no longer claim to do what people want them to do; and (2) it dismisses the fact that we can teach some important generalizable thinking, reading, and writing strategies.

Like so many other theories of composition, the focus on what does not transfer in particular contexts and genres can function to further devalue the teaching of writing. In fact, there has been a long tradition of composition scholars calling for the end of first-year composition, but these theorists rarely take seriously the possibility that their efforts to delegitimize these required classes could result in administrators deciding

there is no reason to fund writing courses and programs at all.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, these calls often are attached to the idea that composition courses are currently failing to do what they say they are doing. Is it any wonder people do not want to support a field that regularly argues that the field is failing? Furthermore, this critique of first-year writing courses can serve to hide the problem of relying on just-in-time, insecure faculty. After all, if no one is teaching writing in an effective manner, why should anyone care if nonexperts are teaching the courses?

Instead of dismissing the value of these courses, we should reexamine the key role these required courses can play in helping students adjust to the types of writing, thinking, and reading that occur in higher education and beyond. For example, teaching students to always think about the purpose, audience, context, and form of each writing genre is a general approach that can be taught. Yes, students may not learn how to write like an expert for specific genres in a few weeks of study, but they can learn to detect formal requirements and apply general tools for critical analysis. Furthermore, if students do not have their particular grammatical and syntactical issues addressed in first-year writing courses, it is unlikely other faculty will ever take the time to work on these problems.

Another reason we should not dismiss the universal aspects of a writing course is that it is important to help students understand the modern universalistic approach to reason and mass education. At the heart of modernity, we find the quest for universality, objectivity, neutrality, empiricism, and skepticism.<sup>19</sup> These learning attitudes represent ideal forms of thinking that constitute the foundation of the modern university, and while universality can repress cultural specificity and individual uniqueness, it is still vital to get students to understand the foundations of modernity and the modern university. However, Downs and Wardle's stress on the specificity of particular disciplines does at times appear to reject the very notion of modern universality and the possibility of teaching generalizable habits of mind: "Asking teachers to teach 'academic writing' begs the question: which academic writing—what content, what genre,

for what activity, context, and audience? FYC teachers are thus forced to define academic discourse for themselves (usually unconsciously) before they can teach it" (Downs and Wardle 2007, 556). This conflict between the empty universality of academic discourse and the particularity of disciplinary genres may represent a false opposition, which is later overcome through intellectual mediation. While the emphasis on students' learning how to adjust to specific contexts can result in a discourse of social conformity, the devaluing of formal universality may undermine the collective nature of university discourse.

As Slavoj Žižek (1989, 80) has argued, the key to modernity is the establishment of an artificial mode of subjectivity, which in turn allows people to escape from their immediate immersion in tradition, nature, solitude, and unconsciousness. In modernity's break with the premodern, an artificial separation from the world is developed, and this new attitude allows for abstraction, generalization, logic, reason, and the scientific method. Of course, there are good and bad things about this social attitude, but the very meaning of the word *university* is derived from the *universal* application of reason. For example, when René Descartes declares all people have an equal ability to reason, we can argue that his claim is not true in reality, but the call for universality opens up a space for democracy and an ethics of universal equality. The democratic subject is therefore an artificial construct that works like the universal discourse of scientific reason, which might only be an ideal abstraction, but it still remains important for us to teach.<sup>20</sup>

#### SCIENCE AND CAPITALISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

One reason it is so easy to devalue teaching in higher education is the notion that anyone can teach but only a few special people can do research. This neoliberal logic is in part derived from the way science has been combined with capitalism in the contemporary university. Due to the role of grants, intellectual property, and patents, scientific knowledge is now tied to an access

to capital.<sup>21</sup> Many university leaders have argued that we know how to fund the sciences because they bring in extra funds, but teaching only costs money. Of course, this view discounts the money students bring in through tuition and state funding and the fact that many research grants fail to cover the full cost of projects, but this logic is still endemic to higher education.

Returning to Downs and Wardle, we find that the rejection of the universal writing course is coupled with a stress on particular expertise and a devaluation of the humanities: “These instructors are unlikely to be involved in, familiar with, or able to teach the specialized discourses used to mediate other activities within disciplinary systems across the university. In effect, the flavor of the purportedly universal academic discourse taught in FYC is typically humanities-based and more specifically English studies-based” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 556). The discourse of writing studies here not only devalues first-year writing courses but also feeds into the current devaluing of the humanities. After all, if the goal of a writing course is to teach students how to conform to specific expert disciplines, the humanities becomes just one discourse among the others. Furthermore, the humanities themselves suffer from the same universal tendencies dismissed by the focus on transfer and genre and the collusion between capitalism and the sciences.

In fact, one of the reasons the humanities have lost much of their funding is that writing programs have been breaking away from English departments. Once again, there are positive and negative aspects of this divorce, but what has not been fully considered is the way the turn to the social sciences in writing studies contributes to the loss of funding for the humanities and a move toward the dominant university research paradigm. Part of this stress on scientific empiricism can be found in the employment of the concept of transfer, which is often used to discredit the work of current and past teachers of writing:

Our field does not know what genres and tasks will help students in the myriad writing situations they will later find themselves. We do not know how writing in the major develops. We do not know if writing essays on biology in an English course helps

students write lab reports in biology courses. We do not know which genres or rhetorical strategies truly are universal in the academy, nor how to help FYC students recognize such universality. According to David Smit's summary of what we know about transfer, assumptions of direct and automatic transfer from one writing situation to another are unfounded. With scant research-based information about how to best help students write successfully in other courses, FYC teachers do not know whether choosing genre A over genre B will be of service to students who must write genre B or genre C later on. In "academic discourse" FYC, then, instructors must hope that any writing instruction will help students in some way and/or limit their teaching to basic scribal and syntactic skills. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 556–57)

Although it is important to be self-critical, this summary of what transfer tells us about the teaching of composition could be used to completely defund and dismantle writing programs. After all, why support a field that admits that it does not know what it is doing and that it may be failing at some of its most important tasks?

It is possible that in order to clear a space for a new model of composition, the old and current models must be negated, but this theory of transfer is often employed in a highly overgeneralized way. In fact, David Smit's work mentioned in the passage above constantly repeats the same generalized message about the impossibility of generalizing. What Smit (2004) does not stop to consider is that his own writing strategy follows a classic humanities-based critical discourse. By arguing that specific discourse communities and writing genres are too particular to teach in a universalizing writing course, he falls back into a set of universalizing claims, which undermine from within his entire argument. Here we find what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1998) called the split between the subject of the statement and the subject of the enunciation (26, 44, 138). Smit's central statement is that the teaching of writing most often fails because the teachers and the students are not experts in a particular discipline or discourse community, but his enunciation is a general claim not derived from any particular discourse or genre other than the universal academic discourse itself.

### UNIFYING THEORY

As Downs and Wardle reveal, the focus on the contingent and the particular in writing and learning is at times combined in writing studies with a strong desire to offer a single, unifying theory to make sure everyone is teaching the same thing in the same way: “If writing studies as a discipline is to have any authority over its own courses, our cornerstone course must resist conventional but inaccurate models of writing. A reenvisioned FYC shifts the central goal from teaching ‘academic writing’ to teaching realistic and useful conceptions of writing—perhaps the most significant of which would be that writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent and irreducibly complex” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 557–58). It does seem contradictory to argue in a universalizing and absolutist way that writing should be taught as being contingent and complex, but this contradiction helps reveal one of the main structures of neoliberal ideology, which is the ability to get people to believe they can embody contradictions without tension or conflict. For example, MOOCs are often sold as being both highly personal and massive, and like so many other aspects of new media globalization, the isolated individual is able to freely choose when to plug into an already constituted universal system. In the case of writing studies, we have seen how opposites are combined in a friction-free fashion: form becomes content, theory becomes practice, research becomes teaching, and the particular is universalized.<sup>22</sup>

Like Hegel’s dialectic, the theory of transfer offers a universalizing discourse about the impossibility of universality, and one way this ideology is reproduced is by turning to a metadiscourse in which a splitting occurs between what one says (everything is contextual) and how one says it (everyone should know this universal truth). In the case of writing about writing, self-reflexivity opens up the space for a doubling discourse in which contradictory notions can be maintained without conflict, tension, or dispute.

### THE SELF-REFLEXIVITY OF WRITING ABOUT WRITING

In their generalized description about what a writing-about-writing course would actually look like, Downs and Wardle point toward the value of having students study writing studies theory and research in a composition class:

The course content explores reading and writing: How does writing work? How do people use writing? What are problems related to writing and reading and how can they be solved? Students read writing research, conduct reading and writing auto-ethnographies, identify writing-related problems that interest them, write reviews of the existing literature on their chosen problems, and conduct their own primary research, which they report both orally and in writing. This course would serve as a gateway to WAC and WID programs better able to address issues of specialized discourse within specific academic disciplines. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 558)

The move here is to avoid the faculty's lack of expertise in external discourses by turning inwards and asking students to study writing itself. This turn to metacognitive self-reflexivity brings up several questions: (1) Do students want to learn about writing studies research and theory? (2) Does self-reflective knowledge about writing help college writers write? (3) Does writing about writing represent an academic form of metafiction? (4) Does this focus on writing itself prevent people from learning at least something about other writing genres? and (5) Isn't this move the ultimate example of turning to a generalized academic theory about how academics think about theory and writing?

### WAW AND METAFICTION

One interesting aspect of this move to a self-reflective discourse is that it mirrors the use of metafiction in many forms of contemporary media. There have been several different explanations of why we are witnessing so many movies about movies and songs sampling other songs, but some of the more intriguing theories are that,

1. self-reflexivity creates distance from characters and plot, which increases the role for the audience (Hutcheon 1988);

2. since we do not believe there are any alternatives to our current social and economic system, all we can do is become aware of our problems from a perspective of ironic distance (Fisher 2009);
3. since we have run out of new forms and content, a self-reflexive culture is centered on remixing, sampling, collage, and pastiche (Strinati 1993);
4. the author's knowingness of genre rewards and reflects the audience's knowingness (Hutcheon 1988);
5. in a media-saturated culture, media only reflects other media (Baudrillard 1993);
6. we conform with irony and distance to a system in which we no longer believe (Žižek 1989);
7. the hyper-self-consciousness of culture reflects the self-consciousness of people living in a state of new media surveillance (Fisher 2009).

These general cultural claims concerning metafiction and contemporary media may seem far removed from the idea of teaching writing about writing, but all these trends do share the same tendency to equate form with content and society with the self.

It should be clear here that in no way am I arguing Downs and Wardle intend to mimic the worst aspects of the culture industry and the surveillance state, but it is possible that the recent moves in writing studies are shaped by larger social and cultural forces. For example, when they lay out their general principles for a writing-about-writing class, the focus on reading stresses the key role metacognition plays in contemporary education:

Though there are a number of ways to institute an Intro to Writing Studies course, our iterations of the course were designed according to shared core beliefs and a desire to resist and alter students' misconceptions about writing. The first of our shared beliefs corresponds with James Reither's assertion that writing cannot be taught independent of content. It follows that the more an instructor can say about a writing's content, the more she can say about the writing itself; this is another way of saying that writing instructors should be expert readers. When the course content is writing studies, writing instructors are

concretely enabled to fill that expert reader role. This change directly contravenes the typical assumption that first-year writing can be about anything, that somehow the content is irrelevant to an instructor's ability to respond to the writing. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 558)

In another Hegelian twist, reading is combined with writing as form is fused with content; meanwhile, a general method is proposed as just one of a number of possible ways to teach writing. The question then is, how is this combining of opposites made possible through the turn to a self-reflexive activity? My theory is that self-reflexivity allows the field of writing studies to imagine it can escape from the destructive hierarchies that shape higher education today, which place the teaching of writing in a debased state. Since we do not believe we can transform or escape the current system, all we can do is find a way to conform to it from a critical distance, and this distance is generated through self-reflexivity.<sup>23</sup>

For Downs and Wardle, a key aspect of this self-reflexive turn is the idea that by requiring students to study research in writing studies, the students will become convinced that the field is actually a discipline:

In this course, students are taught that writing is conventional and context-specific rather than governed by universal rules—thus they learn that within each new disciplinary course they will need to pay close attention to what counts as appropriate for that discourse community. Taking the research community of writing studies as our example not only allows writing instructors to bring their own expertise to the course, but also heightens students' awareness that writing itself is a subject of scholarly inquiry. Students leave the course with increased awareness of writing studies as a discipline, as well as a new outlook on writing as a researchable activity rather than a mysterious talent. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 559–60)

In their desire for universities to recognize the value of the field, these teachers try to get students to see writing studies as a separate discipline. The logic appears to be that if students buy into our discipline, surely others will do the same, but we must remember that one of the key hierarchies in the university

is the one that places disciplines over students and teaching. After all, disciplines are built and maintained by policing the borders within a bureaucratic structure that rewards specialized research: students, teaching, and formal concerns may play a small role in the production of disciplinary prestige.

Instead of countering the dominant structures that privilege disciplinary expertise over novice students, Downs and Wardle try to imagine students as experts already:

The course respects students by refusing to create double standards or different rules for student writers than for expert writers. For example, students learn to recognize the need for expert opinion and cite it where necessary, but they also learn to claim their own situational expertise and write from it as expert writers do. This respect for students is in accord with the field's ethos, thus blending a pedagogical advantage with a disciplinary one. In addition, creating high expectations for students aligns well with current learning theory: students can accomplish far more than we typically give them credit for being able to, if only we will ask them to do it. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 560)

Although the theory of transfer tells us writing courses often fail because the students cannot write or think like experts in the genres they are using, the idea here is that if we simply pretend students have expertise, they will see themselves as experts and act accordingly.

This treating of amateurs as experts returns us to the labor problem in writing studies. In the current educational system, the only way we can claim more tenure-track lines is if we pretend to be just like all the other respected research disciplines, but we can never win at this game because it is structured with us at the bottom. The move then toward self-reflexivity offers an imaginary solution to a real material problem. If we just imagine that all of the oppositions structuring our world can be combined in a seamless manner, we can enter a social space devoid of conflict, hierarchy, tension, or debasement. However, material hierarchies are not transformed through simple rhetoric, and thus instead of interpreting the world, we must organize to change it.

### THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

My critique of Downs and Wardle is ambivalent because once we get to their concrete proposals for the teaching of writing, we see that their suggestions are actually quite sound and effective. The problem then is that their theory of institutional change is in conflict with their actual pedagogical practices. To be more precise, they propose an institutional strategy that is highly problematic, but the actual courses they propose make a lot of sense. Theory here is in conflict with practice, and thus it is necessary to approach their contradictions with a contradictory interpretation.

Although I do not think we can change the institutional status of writing studies by conforming to the dominant university research paradigm, we can help students become better writers by following many of the ideas presented in Downs and Wardle's work. For instance, the description of the readings they use in their courses does show careful attention to the ways students actually think and write:

The articles we assign vary, as do the ideas on which we focus; thus, we do not prescribe an "ideal" set of readings here. However, the common denominators among our readings are these: Material in readings is centered on issues with which students have first-hand experience—for example, problems students are prone to experience throughout the writing process, from conceptual questions of purpose, to procedural questions of drafting and revision, to issues surrounding critical reading; Data-driven, research-focused readings seem more useful than highly theoretical pieces. The former tend to be both more readable and more concrete, making them more accessible and relevant to students. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 560)

Here, the focus is on helping students understand their own writing and the composing strategies of other writers. This practice is highly generalizable and does appear to align with many of the ways people teach composition today. Of course, the major move is to replace theme-based readings with texts centered on writing itself.

Downs and Wardle also present a mode of pedagogy that places the teaching of writing at odds with the dominant

structures of higher education: “To center the course on student writing and avoid merely banking information, students discuss, write about, and test every reading in light of their own experiences; they discuss why they are reading a piece and how it might influence their understanding of writing” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 561). By focusing on student participation in their own learning and a move away from the banking theory of education, they return to an emphasis on student learning and engaged participation, but we must realize these pedagogical practices are often at odds with the way many courses continue to be taught at research universities in the United States. Although Downs and Wardle remain silent on this institutional issue, they do provide a model of student-centered learning:

Class time spent on readings focuses more on students’ reactions to them than on the readings themselves; thus, our students write about issues raised by readings by responding to prompts such as, “How are your experiences with research writing like and unlike Shirlie’s as Kantz describes them? What would you do differently if you could?” We find that students’ responses initiate excellent class discussions, and that throughout the course students come back to ideas in the readings they write about to frame discussions about their writing experiences. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 561)

This emphasis on student thinking and writing is often in conflict with the dominant use of lecturing, large classes, multiple-choice exams, and grading in most university courses.<sup>24</sup> Students are therefore exposed to another model of learning, but the question remains, what happens when they enter their other courses?

The problem then is not so much that nonwriting classes utilize expert discourses students have not mastered; rather, research universities tend to undervalue engaged undergraduate education, and this neglect can leave students disengaged and alienated. In fact, a student once told me my class had made him realize his entire education had been ineffective, but he wondered what he could do if the rest of the university does not realize this ineffectiveness? One response to this student and all the other alienated students is that they must work with

faculty and other stakeholders to transform the way all courses are being taught.

As Downs and Wardle indicate, another problem with education at research universities is that students often do little if any research: “The most noteworthy feature of the course is that students conduct primary research, however limited, on issues of interest to both themselves and the field of writing studies. Conducting primary research helps students shift their orientation to research from one of compiling facts to one of generating knowledge” (Downs and Wardle 2007, 562). This move to ask students to do their own research is an important way to break down some of the hierarchies pitting faculty against students and research against teaching, and yet, once again, we must wonder what happens when students are only exposed to this involvement in producing new knowledge when they are in isolated, devalued writing courses?

In many ways, the model of teaching Downs and Wardle present should be followed by all classes in all subjects at a research university because it challenges some of the artificial aspects of academic discourse:

One conception of writing we strive to help students shift is imagining “writing” essentially as merely drafting a paper. The course design helps us show students that most scholarly researched writing in fact begins with becoming curious and establishing a question and moves through research. What students traditionally imagine as writing is actually only the final move in a much larger series of events. However, in our courses, students do arrive at this final move, presenting their research in both a significant written report and an oral presentation. (Downs and Wardle 2007, 563)

This method places students in a real situation of creating new knowledge and communicating that knowledge in an effective way. Instead of simply listening to an expert professor lecture about already-established knowledge, students are motivated to practice the essential aspects of academic research themselves.

The question remains whether writing studies can improve the status of its faculty and discipline while creating effective learning experiences for undergraduate students. Downs

and Wardle help us solve the latter issue, but the former issue remains vexed. This conflict between effective teaching and ineffective institutional structures will remain until students and faculty organize to fight for a better system with better values and better practices.

## NOTES

1. My conception of the dominant university research paradigm is derived from Marc Bousquet (2008), Kirp (2009), Nisbet (1971), Readings (1996), and Washburn (2008).
2. For more on the labor issues facing composition, see Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola (2004) Robertson and Slevin (1987), Schell and Stock (2000), Tony Scott (2009), James Sledd (2001), and Donna Strickland (2011).
3. For more on the hierarchies shaping contemporary higher education, see Kirp (2009), Samuels (2013), and Washburn (2008).
4. Throughout the history of Marxism, there has been a debate concerning whether economics (the base) determines culture (the superstructure) or culture dictates economics. For a careful analysis of this debate see Kojin Karatani (2014).
5. See Bousquet (2008), Crowley (1998), Schell and Stock (2000), and Strickland (2011).
6. For a discussion of the separation of writing programs from English departments, see Strickland (2011).
7. This use of contingent faculty in courses from a wide range of disciplines is discussed in Eagan and Jaeger (2008).
8. My use of binary oppositions in my argument seeks to clarify the general trends in higher education; of course, there are always exceptions, but these exceptions help prove the rule.
9. See Adler-Kassner and O'Neill (2010).
10. Anne Beaufort's (2007) *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction* offers one of the first longitudinal studies of transfer from a writing studies perspective.
11. See Diane Ravitch (2013).
12. The contradictory nature of graduate-student instructors is discussed in Marc Bousquet's (2008) *How the University Works*.
13. See Bousquet (2008).
14. I discuss this use and abuse of the concept of transfer in chapter 2 of this book.
15. On the formations of disciplines, see Becher and Trowler (2001).
16. My concept of power is in part derived from Jacques Derrida's (1978) reference to force in *Writing and Difference*.
17. Downs and Wardle's (2007) work also may appear to support a tendency in writing studies to dismiss the importance of teaching students how

- to improve their grammar and syntax in a college writing class. One of the reasons for this downgrading of the need to teach mechanics is the fact that people often do not think of grammar as an essential rhetorical device. Although in the current structure, teaching, writing, practice, and form are devalued, these values must be countered, not reinforced.
18. See Crowley (1998).
  19. See Descartes (1996).
  20. For a detailed examination of the role of universality in universities and modern reason, see Colm Kelly (2012).
  21. See Washburn (2008).
  22. One of the key Hegelian aspects of these combinations is the use of rhetorical tricks to overcome material oppositions. For example, Hegel used the fact that in the German language, the word *Geist* means both mind and spirit in order to maintain a premodern religious discourse and modern scientific discourse at the same time.
  23. For an insightful analysis of the relation between irony, metafiction, and contemporary society, see R. Jay Magill (2009).
  24. See Samuels (2013, 27–37).

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