Process This
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Throughout this book, I have been arguing against assumptions and practices that preclude students and many teachers from participating in and contributing to composition studies. As I conclude, I would like to put these matters in relation to contemporary discussions of the theory/teaching split that some see as defining the next generation of composition studies. I will draw heavily from two collections of essays that are often cited as central in contemporary attempts to chart new directions for composition studies: the 1997 collection *Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change* edited by Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald Daiker, and Edward M. White and the 2002 collection *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work* edited by Gary Olson. My discussion will illustrate how repositioning all members of the writing classes as able to participate in and contribute to composition studies requires a reversal of the common assumption that transformation of the field occurs from the “top” down. In that rendition of the field theorists and experts introduce new concepts and practices that filter down through instructional materials to teachers and students who are expected to identify with the assumptions behind those materials even though, in most cases, they are not familiar with those materials. In addition, when those materials hold out different activities for the teachers and students of composition studies than theorists had to engage in to create the work, this scenario constructs further distance between and among the members of writing classes and their texts. This double negation of the possibilities for participation and contribution—the neglect that comes from restricting access to materials that define the lives of literate human beings and of posing that neglect as necessary to the life of a field of study so intimately connected with the constitution of that literacy—creates limited and limiting subject positions for many members of the writing classes even in discussions about how the field is—or should be—changing.
Conversations about changing the field tend to move in two seemingly contradictory directions. They either focus on the ways that rhetoric and composition must move away from its concern with teaching—and especially the teaching of first-year writing—to develop its “intellectual” potential or on the ways that classroom practices must remain disconnected from this or that set of theoretical matters in a quest to empower students. Oddly enough, although these conversations seem to be at odds with one another, they are, in some ways based upon similar concerns and absences. Their shared concerns include:

1) A new focus on the texts that will inform the practices of the field
2) A concern about the place of first-year writing (whether first-year writing is seen as a positive or negative part of the field).

Both conversations also fail to overtly address:

1) The valorization of practices that continue to position the majority of people who are in the field and their discourses as absent from its forums
2) The absence of conversations about the ways that first-year writing might be a place where we could actively engage many of the larger social concerns our field claims to be worried about—the inclusion of voices from previously ignored and/or repressed people and points of view, writing subjectivity and agency, and consciousness.

But arguments that ignore these similarities and pretend that the healthy intellectual life of the field hangs in the balance as we decide which side of the theory/practice split to valorize play a bit too much like “reality” TV: there’s lots of manufactured drama, and it takes the place of reality. If it is true, as Linda Flower asserts, that “composition courses reflect our public visions of literacy,” they do so largely without the input or response of the majority of people who teach and learn in composition classrooms (249). This is partly because in the society of composition studies “it is not unusual to find a department, at least in large universities, where the faculty teaches only majors and graduate students” (Bartholomae 20). In fact, at conferences I have heard statistics that indicate that as many as 80% of the people who are awarded the Ph. D. in Rhetoric and Composition never teach first-year
writing after they leave graduate school. All of these conditions defer the real problems associated with creating more inclusive theoretical and practical realities within the profession. Like the manufactured drama of “reality” TV, the manufactured drama about the importance of choosing either theory or practice, either intellectual endeavors or teaching, covers over the fact that reality exists somewhere outside of that drama—in thousands of undergraduate first-year composition classes taught by thousands of people who are considered less a part of the field than people who do not teach first-year writing (many of whom are directing programs) and even more thousands of students who are considered even less a part of the field than are their teachers. The “vision” of literacy that emerges within these realities is, of necessity, hierarchical and elitist: people must climb up and away from the lower classes to be granted the privilege of participation and contribution. Like “reality” TV this construction of the discipline favors games about who gets excluded, voted out, if you will. That the thing being dismissed created the upper classes that either no longer need or want this history is not an issue in approaches that posit theory and practice as separate. (Who really believes that we would have faculty positions in graduate programs if we did not have undergraduate writing courses, especially first-year writing courses?) More important, this restriction of the literate subjectivities of the members of those lower classes is not considered a significant loss to the profession, probably because the majority of people in those classes were never really considered to be in the field to begin with. As Anne Ruggles Gere notes in “The Long Revolution in Composition,” versions of these contradictions have been embraced by the field “over the past three decades” (120). And while I do not agree with Gere’s reading of Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals* (120), I do agree that “the contests and oppositions evident in [the] varying ways of thinking about student identities only suggests the many new concepts of humans . . . have emerged in composition studies during the past couple of decades” (121). Invoking Lester Faigley, Gere insists “theories and metaphors” of subjectivity that inform composition theories and practices “must begin from the premise that student identities cannot be defined as stable or unified”
Of course, student identities can be—and often have been—defined in these ways, but this is beside the point. The real question here is: What does it mean that a field so strongly informed by attempts to establish its own stability as a discipline and to assert its place as necessary to the unity of English studies denies these forms of identity, especially at specific developmental stages—to a majority of the members of that field? What are the implications of defining student identities as unstable, especially in relationship to the discourses students are asked to produce and the ways those discourses are and are not included in the disciplinary structures of the spaces that make up the field? As Trimbur notes, the ways we have organized the field and attempted to expand what it means to do scholarship by arguing why and how teaching composition, administering programs, and writing textbooks can and should be counted as scholarly activities, at least when done properly, [are] . . . normal moves to establish codes of practice, bodies of scholarship, and general professional standards . . . to determine what counts as a contribution. (135)

As Trimbur further notes, these normalizing activities and the “professional formations” (137–38) and “stratifications” (138–140) they create “reproduce the logic of professionalization by assuming that “entering the conversation” depends on personal acts of will, individual expertise, and career building” (140). Trimbur ends his essay by stating “We need . . . to develop new ways to read the contradictions of professional life, to grapple daily with the persistent conflicts between building individual careers and popularizing expertise for broader social purposes” (145). Clearly, students, and many teachers will have little to no agency in such a professional scene if their discourses are not included in the professional spaces upon which the field bases its assumptions about these matters. If participation and contribution do not define the relationships between and among the diverse members who constitute the field and the field, we cannot hope to challenge these conflicts and contradictions or to replace them with conflicts and contradictions that are more inclusive. What is at stake in this argument is not whether theory or practice is more important to
the intellectual life of the discipline, but whether the discourses of diverse people in the discipline are important to the discipline. Centering the theory-practice split as the scholarly business about which the discipline argues and through which it creates camps does not help us to open spaces within which the participation and contributions of many members of the field can come to define the field. No matter which side of the argument one favors, the argument itself does not address the segregation of discourses upon which the field is currently based. It is a mistake, I think, to continue down any path—theoretical or pedagogical—that assumes we can create social spaces through composition studies that we are not creating in composition studies.

In her review of *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, Elizabeth Flynn notes that conversations about the “importance of rhetoric and composition as intellectual work . . . insist on the continued development of the field as an agent for change” (981). But in many ways the agency referred to here belongs primarily to a sub-set of the members of the field. For the essays in the collection do not discuss students as active participants in this change process, even though serious redefinitions of student subjectivity are at issue in many of the essays in the collection. It is within this frame that Gary Olson proposes that we separate the “intellectuals” from the “anti-intellectuals,” with intellectuals defined as people who “do” theory that does not “constitute rhetoric and composition as a discipline whose raison d’être is the teaching of writing” (24) and anti-intellectuals as people who constitute rhetoric and composition in this way. Olson asserts that what “distressed some compositionists” about this particular rendition of the intellectual/anti-intellectual, theory/practice split was

that the field was no longer defined simply as self-reflection about the teaching of writing or about one’s own (or one’s students’) writing practices, [for] while it included these concerns, composition had become much more expansive, encompassing broad and diverse investigations of how written discourse works. (23)

Setting aside Olson’s literal simplification of the movements’ earlier reflections about writing and teaching, and even ignoring
the historical inaccuracy of his assertion that such reflections had not come from and led to “broad and diverse investigations of how written discourse works”, we are still left with the fact that he dramatizes people’s reactions as “distress” rather than commitment to something that cannot be accommodated in the binarized configuration of the field he conjures up. He ignores the fact that the “expansions” he refers to are not so easily disconnected from the teaching of writing and its concerns. The real limitations of this argument are revealed, however, when Olson defends himself against Wendy Bishop’s charge that he is “intentionally not interested” in “inviting eighteen-year-olds to enter the sentence” that he writes about the pedagogical scene of which they are a part.37 That someone might challenge the fact that the students are part of the scene he is discussing but not part of his audience “mystifies” Olson. He states:

I certainly did not intend that prose for eighteen-year-olds. For a quarter of a century, I’ve been teaching that good writing is all about addressing a particular audience for a particular reason. Why in the world would I want undergraduates to “enter” a piece that is explicitly about composition “scholarship”? The audience is the undergraduate’s teacher. She [Bishop] cites Toby Fulwiler, who similarly complains that the “exclusionary use of language” by the discourse community of composition scholars “makes it difficult for eighteen-year-olds to enter and participate” (Fulwiler 220). . . . Since when is scholarship in any field written with undergraduates in mind? Do we have to certify that nuclear physicists write in such a way that sophomores can “enter and participate” in their scholarly discussions? Surely there is a serious confusion here between the goals of and audiences for scholarly writing and the goals of and audiences for other types of writing. (27)

The use of a scientific model for scholarship is invoked here without any reference to the critiques of that model that inform the serious intellectual, theoretical, and pedagogical discussions of the first-phase process movement and subsequent critiques of the scientism some see as informing the cognitive bases of that movement.38 Bishop and Fulwiler aren’t arguing that composition and science are or should be the same, or that student subjectivity
is or should be constructed through the same set of disciplinary practices across different disciplines. They are making an argument for the creation of real connections between beliefs about the power of literacy and the constitution of literate subject positions for members of a discipline. This critique has a strong history of and commitment to the relationship between literacy and the possibility for active participation in the constitution of one’s material realities.

Olson’s configuration of the history of composition studies allows him to ignore the fact that writing “with undergraduates in mind” is, and has been, a serious matter in writing studies because it challenges the very traditional ideas about audience—and about self/other relationships more generally—that he puts forth here. According to Olson, people can be talked about and/or the experiences that define their existences in material ways (in this case their educational experiences in composition classrooms) can be discussed and constructed without consideration of their understanding or participation. This practice comes dangerously close to reinscribing a kind of colonizing approach to constructing the relationship between the subjects of a discourse (i.e. composition students and teachers) and the role that discourse plays in the constitution of their material realities. That is, the argument for a view of rhetoric and composition that does not define “all research, all theory, all scholarship” as existing “for the sole purpose of furthering and refining the teaching of composition,” raises serious issues about and challenges to the ways such “scholarly work” positions members of the writing classes in relation to one another’s discourses. The assumption that discourse has to be written specifically for undergraduates to be understood by undergraduates is an extreme illustration of the way that the split between theory and practice—and the split between reading and writing—is based on and maintains limited subject positions for many of the members of the writing classes. And although Olson chooses to interpret challenges to these sorts of configurations of self/other relationships among members of our discipline as “backlash against theoretical scholarship” (14, 24), some of these challenges, including my own, are something altogether different. For many of us, the assertion
that any one mode of discourse (in this case theory) can or should define what counts as “intellectual” work is too ironically anti-intellectual to be comfortable. We have studied the many different ways that many kinds of discourses can be understood to contain deep intellectual content. In fact, this insight was one of the realizations that came from the expanding notions of discourse and how it works that Olson had claimed for his own argument earlier in the essay. The assertion that one kind of discourse should be held up as the form within which intelligence springs forth and/or can be expressed ignores both the history of composition’s struggle to move away from the limitations of that conception (especially in relation to explication) and the very real ways that such a conception of discourse limits what knowledge is. The knowledge/intelligence split that drives this conception of theory simply replicates the use of discourse as a tool for regulating access to our field’s public forums. But the more important issue here is identified by Carla Leah Hood in her response to Scott Mclemee’s article “Deconstructing Composition: The New Theory Wars Break Out in an Unlikely Discipline,” which appeared in the March 21, 2003 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education. Hood states:

One of the crucial features of the controversy that composition has inspired is absent from [this] article: the disconnection between what is considered content in first-year composition courses and what are considered composition texts in the field. In other words, students are required to take composition to learn the conventions of academic writing; they are not required to take composition to learn the field of composition. If any aspect of composition needs to be deconstructed, it is this one. (B17)

The idea that students “are required to take composition to learn the conventions of academic writing” (as if this could happen without access to the ways that participation and contribution define academic writing practices) erases the theoretical, pedagogical, and embodied history of composition studies in particular and of higher education in America more generally. It means that students do not have to read composition studies to be “in” composition studies, and that what they do learn about the field
is superfluous to their lives as writers and readers. (No one would argue that history is not a necessary type of discourse in history classes, or that philosophy is not a necessary type of discourse in philosophy classes, etc.) But the fact that this erasure is based upon a split between “what is considered content in first-year composition courses and what are considered composition texts in the field” is accurate. Bridging this gap is not only a matter of bringing the materials of composition studies into the first-year writing classroom, however. It is, instead, a more serious matter that requires us to confront the ideologies, theories, and practices through which we constitute self/other relationships in the field. In other words, understood as the historical institutional justification for the accommodation of theory, or as the material reality that opens the space of composition studies outward to the study of literacy more generally, or as the material space within which all of the members of the writing classes can gain access to the field, or as the activity upon which composition studies revisions disciplinarity and the traditional hierarchies of the academy, the teaching of writing is not—and never has been—only about teaching as teaching is configured in Olson’s argument. More important, perhaps, the space for theory claimed by the argument, the idea that writing theory does not emerge from and can not or does not exist in relation to teaching (and other institutional matters) is misguided. Even the theory that is produced by academics who do not teach or who do not wish to address pedagogical matters does have something to do with teaching, insofar as others are doing the teaching that funds the institutional structures from which that theory emerges. In addition, even when it does not define teaching as its subject, theories that emerge from work done in the academy do get taught and do affect how and what teaching gets done. One is drawn again to the similarities between this view of teaching, institutional power relationships, and theory as a type of discourse that is somehow disconnected from the business of academia and the type of reality represented on reality TV. In this scene, if theory doesn’t take affecting teaching as its purpose, then theory gets to pretend it is disconnected from any of the relationships that connect it to the material practices and spaces
upon which it depends for its existence, and anybody who doesn’t go along with the pretense doesn’t get to play the game.

In “Coming to Terms: Theory, Writing, Politics,” an essay that appears later in the same collection, Lynn Worsham notes that the theory-practice split is a result of the traditional ways that composition studies has become professionalized.

In short, composition, like literary studies, has become an institution, one that is more rather than less closed off from the larger social world in which it is situated by its own insular and professional disputes—the most consequential being the ongoing battle over the nature of “our” work. This dispute—often abbreviated as the theory-practice split— Involves those who maintain that the field’s proper work must remain strictly limited to the teaching of writing and the research required for that project, and those who insist that the scope of composition includes anything that bears on literacy, broadly conceived, and the workings of written discourse. . . . I suggest that if we persist in allowing the “theory-practice split” to govern the social relations of the field—and ultimately the way we articulate our role in the university and its relation to society—then we do so because we prefer to misperceive the nature of the task at hand: we must make the academic work of composition studies more vigorously, more resolutely intellectual.

The sine qua non of intellectual work is theory; thus the primary way to make the work of composition more seriously intellectual is to make it more seriously theoretical. . . . What we must do . . . is to understand, and to make explicit, the profoundly rhetorical (and political) nature of theory. (102–3)

It matters, of course, who “we” are here. And in a sense, this is the issue I have been addressing throughout the book. For what is the position of different people’s discourses in the field if, as Worsham indicates in her conclusion, “we truly value work directed toward effecting social and political change” and if, as she continues, “it is incumbent on us as intellectuals to continue the ‘deadly serious’ work of making ‘really free’ places, lives, and identities”\(^{39}\) (112). Who, exactly is doing the making here? Who is being placed in the position of being made? Furthermore, can this sort of metaphor for manufacturing freedom—where some
make free “places,” “lives” and “identities” for the rest of us—work? What is freedom in this structural configuration of who creates and who is created for/on? Where are the spaces within which freedom could be a result of the assumptions at work here? And if this freedom is made for spaces outside of those within which it is manufactured rather than inside those spaces, if it is assumed that the world can change even as the profession stays the same, then are professional spaces justifiable? Obviously, I am worried that the field is being too strongly constituted as the kind of space that ignores these questions. One of the main reasons I have this worry is because of our tendency to favor metaphors of transformation over transition. In her conclusion to Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change, Lynn Z. Bloom states her concern about these metaphors of transformation:

If there is a conspicuous gap in Composition in the 21st Century, other than its rather slight concern with the liberatory and textual power of creative writing, it is the indifference to the economics of these various visions of disciplinary and consequent social reform. . . .

If the profession cannot ensure the funding for its broad-based, unsettled, unsettling, and undoubtedly expensive agenda, what chance is there not only for reformation of the status quo but also for the utter transformation that Flower, Gere, Trimbur, Heath, and Lunsford, among others, envision? (276)

These expenses are not merely economic, although Bloom is right to worry over that aspect, as any of us who have been doing the kinds of work discussed here can attest to. Mostly, I have come to understand that self/other relationships are constrained by systems that define participation and contribution in ways that close these activities off to certain members of the writing classes. I suspect that this has happened partly because a rhetoric of participation and contribution would require us to revise the very notion of situatedness that underlies most of the rhetoric of the field. In such a rhetorical scene, where rhetoric not only gives us audiences, but also makes us audiences, we would have to attend equally to what kinds of audiences our rhetorics make us as we do to what kinds of writers they make us and the majority of members
of writing classes. If my rhetoric requires my audiences to stay in suppressed positions as writers, then I can easily deny those writers access to the forums in which I discuss them and/or their texts with other audiences. Once part of a population is excluded in these ways, it’s not as hard to substitute opportunities other than participation and contribution as adequate practices for rhetors and audiences alike. We have, I think, become a certain kind of audience for student discourses, one that needs only a certain type of student texts: those that can be considered irrelevant to our professional lives except as objects through which we construct assessment rubrics, textbooks, justifications for our existence, and arguments about what kinds of discourse should and should not be considered worthy of inclusion in our professional spaces once student discourse has been bracketed from those spaces.

Over the past year, I have been fortunate to consult with Bob Broad as the faculty in my department work toward new forms of assessment. As we read student texts together in small groups, faculty members concentrated on naming what we valued in a series of student texts. In those sessions, facilitators Carmella Braniger, Michael George and myself worked hard to keep ourselves and our colleagues focused on what we valued in and about those texts. We all had to make an effort to move out of our conceptions of ourselves as certain kinds of readers of and audiences for student discourses to be able to discuss what we valued about those discourses. Moving away from reading student discourse only to identify problems and weaknesses and to make academic evaluative judgments is important, however, if we want to see the value of including those discourses in composition studies as we revise curricula and set new grounds for participation and contribution. Our work has indicated some serious gaps between what we value in first semester students’ texts and the stated goals for the first-semester course, gaps that are inevitable when goals are set to standards that assume very limited roles for those texts outside of the classroom and very traditional evaluative practices. In “Literate Action,” Linda Flower describes an undergraduate class in which students work with “inner-city teenagers” to produce a newsletter and a “public Community Conversation” about some
public issue relevant to the teenagers’ lives. At the start of the article Flower states:

Traditionally, the academy has wrapped itself in the cloak of what Deborah Brandt calls textual literacy, idealizing the autonomous text and valorizing the essayistic mind. . . . Expressivist literacy, on the other hand, according to John Willinsky, embraces self-discovery and an aesthetic of craft and creativity. More recently, a third vision, which we might call rhetorical literacy, is emerging as the social, the cognitive and the rhetorical strands of English studies weave themselves together and begin another reconstruction of composition. Rhetorical literacy revolves around literate action. In place of a decontextualized, logically, and linguistically autonomous text, rhetorical literacy places a writer—a rhetor, if you will—as an agent within a social and rhetorical context. (249)

Flower is not discussing a first-year writing class here. But as I have discussed previously, and as others have shown, the introduction of community literacy activities operates to expose the differences between and among rhetorical contexts—those of academia and those of a community literacy agency, for example—in many of the ways the article outlines. What is disturbing here is that the academic context is positioned as arhetorical rather than as a rhetorical context with its own sets of expectations, discursive conventions, purposes, and configurations of writing subjectivity and audience. As we know, even many of our first-year writing students and teachers do not understand the traditional academic context as arhetorical, but as restricted by rhetorical conventions and expectations that create a form of discourse that has no place in the discipline from which it draws its subject matter and emerges. And while I agree that we must continue to seek alternative forums for student discourses, I do not agree that doing so can or should take the place of creating spaces for those discourses within the field of composition studies itself. In fact, the relationship between those we include and those we do not, and the ways our theories and practices open and close spaces for participation and contribution, may be the defining relationship upon which possibilities for transition and transformation rest in our disciplinary conversations.
and structures. How we respond to the problem of the inequities fostered by systems of literacy in which some people are only or primarily talked about and/or to (with little attention given to their ideas about how they are being talked about and/or to or to their own ideas about the issues surrounding those discourses) may have a special importance to us if the transformations we desire are at all possible. Transitional spaces, practices, pedagogies, theories, and professional behaviors may be necessary to overcoming these inequities. How these transitions are enacted, if they work, is more than a matter of if people whose voices haven’t previously had a forum now write things “worth” inclusion in our professional publications. We can’t simply say that if they were good enough they would be there, for certainly if first-year writing students were or felt invited to submit to those publications their numbers alone would ensure some sort of representation. In this new rhetoric, it matters what we do as audiences for the massive amounts of student texts that we ask people to produce and which we read. (I am not in favor of doing away with student writing as a strategy for dealing with these problems.) The myth of “the Rhetor,” like the myth of “The Author,” as an individual who is solely responsible for whether a text is persuasive must be seriously challenged for new ways of creating self/other relationships to become possible. We must continue to explore and address the ways in which we, as audiences, hold certain assumptions about a certain genre—student discourses—and certain writers—students—to challenge the limitations placed on that genre and those people by our assumptions. What students are taught or not taught about composition studies, what kinds of papers they do and do not write, how strongly those papers are constructed as isolated events disconnected from other discourses about the same things, and where they are and are not allowed or invited to go has, I think, too much to do with what they are and are not like for us to ignore these issues any longer.

What I have been suggesting here is that participation and contribution are vital concepts as we explore these issues and attempt to create transitional practices within which enriched and enriching subject positions become available to the lower classes in
composition studies. If those practices open spaces outside of the field—in community agencies, for example—and not inside the field, we should not accept that as enough. At the very least, we should begin from the belief that composition studies is capable of opening spaces for all members of the writing classes to participate in and contribute to the discourses that define their material realities as members of those classes.