Dangerous Writing

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Published by Utah State University Press

Scott, Tony.
Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9850.

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Last semester Lindsay Hutton “taught” 1,940 students. She met only 70 of them in person. Those were the ones enrolled in the two weekly sections of English composition that she taught in an actual classroom. The hundreds and hundreds of others she knew only as anonymous numbered documents she read on her computer screen and then, with a click of a button, sent back out into the ether. . . . As one of 60 graduate students hired to teach freshman composition at Texas Tech University, Ms. Hutton had a weekly quota of grading.

“Sometimes,” Ms. Hutton says, “it feels like a factory.”

—Paula Wasley

The above quote describes a graduate student teaching in a university writing program at Texas Tech University called ICON (Interactive Composition Online). The quote is from an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that describes the system (Wasley 2006). The ICON program relies on an interactive, computer-automated system that facilitates the distribution of a writing curriculum, the management of a composition staff, and the assessment of students’ writing. According to the article, the system assigns two roles to the staff: “composition instructors” (“CIs”) who meet once a week with a section of FYC students, and “document instructors” (“DIs”) who grade students’ papers from across all sections using an automated, blind system. According to the system’s flowchart, CIs meet with students to

- discuss assignments and present general principles of grammar, style, and argumentation, and to discuss their weekly assignments, which are standardized across all 70-odd sections of the two required first-year composition courses. Each assignment cycle includes three drafts of an essay, reflective “writing reviews” commenting on students’ own work, and two peer reviews of other students’ work, all of which are submitted and stored online (A6).

The system thus brings uniformity to the curriculum and reliability and efficiency to the program’s system of assessment and data compilation.
features. When students complete assignments they submit their papers electronically to the ICON system where each is graded by two DIs. The final grade is an average of the two. If the grades are more than eight points apart, the paper goes to a third DI, and ICON averages the two closest grades. The remaining role for people in this program is that of “faculty managers,” who monitor CIs and DIs. Faculty managers use the system to track how much time DIs are spending on each paper, whether the grades are higher or lower than the average, and what types of comments they are giving each paper. If a DI is “falling behind” her quota, the system automatically generates an e-mail notification.

ICON is a number of things: a means of ensuring that a pedagogy is being consistently applied in all classes according to a predetermined set of standards and assumptions; a system of large-scale assessment and accountability; a technologized method of administrative surveillance, resource management, and data collection; and even a commodity, apparently under development for sale to other programs. Not unlike textbooks, ICON is a response to the challenge of teaching writing to large numbers of students using cheap and largely inexperienced academic laborers who don’t have professional status. ICON, however, is more in line with fast-capitalist logics of authority, organization, and production for a number of reasons: it uses digital technology to organize and manage the labor of teachers and students who work at disparate times and in isolated locations; it maximizes managerial control through surveillance mechanisms and performance measurements, as well as through ensuring uniformity of important aspects of work (in this case assignments and assessments); and it seeks to address the problem of high turnover and low experience among a casualized labor pool through systematizing the work to such an extent that workers require little background or experience.

The system seems designed primarily to appeal to the interests of administrators who are not credentialed professionals in rhetoric and composition, but who are concerned with cost-efficiency and outcomes measures. ICON brings the work of students and instructors into one very standardized and predictable system that generates mounds of immediate data on student and instructor outputs. According to Fred Kemp, a designer of the system, writes Wasley, it “produces 201 discrete searchable sortable chunks of information” on students and teachers.” Those who are in a position to do so can know “whether 8 a.m. classes turn in more late papers than 3 p.m. classes . . . whether a class
is generating a higher than average number of comma splices or semicolon errors than other classes . . . whether women comment differently than men. . . . ” According to the article, Kemp dismisses critics of the system as “either Luddites with a visceral reaction to anything computerized or don’t fully understand the system’s operating principles” (A6). It is important to note here that Kemp is arguing on administrative grounds rather than on scholarly grounds. He puts the focus on what he believes are the positive attributes of the operations of the system, rather than on the assumptions about literacy and learning that are hardwired into it. Wasley goes on:

“Simply to call it an assembly line and say, ipso facto, it’s wrong, sounds like a 19th-century point of view,” [Kemp] says. “Henry Ford built an awful lot of automobiles, and he made them cheap so that an awful lot of people could buy cars that couldn’t have bought cars without the assembly line. So the idea that efficiencies within a system are inherently bad and dehumanizing, I think, is wrong.” (A6)

ICON is not just a means of organizing labor and delivering a product, though: it is simultaneously a technocratic deployment of a particular philosophy of writing and learning. This is a part of what makes the Ford analogy inadequate. The “product” here, writing education, is dramatically different from an automobile—when one thinks of the varieties of students in one class of twenty, all of the varieties of legitimate pedagogies that might be employed in the class, all of the various paths of inquiry that might be pursued, the challenges and possibilities that might arise, and the varieties of texts that might be produced, the analogy breaks down very quickly. With ICON, the philosophy must necessarily synchronize well with a mechanized system, and substantive intellectual differences would counter the system’s goals. There is no place for an unwieldy social constructivist viewpoint here. Among Kemp’s frustrations with the prior system was that instructors “could not agree on either the content or character of good writing.” Now those instructors who work in classrooms are expected to focus on “general principles of grammar, style and argumentation,” and error counts figure prominently in the data collection. There is a general philosophy of language and learning in the design of ICON, however, and this is important. The philosophy is in the architecture. The description and the deployment of the system sidesteps explicit articulation and meaningful, consequential debate of that philosophy through emphasis
on its managerial virtues. Indeed, efficiency is achieved by the system through its very thorough elimination of variance and considerations of its own philosophical contingency. In this directive system, theory is encountered always already deployed, hardwired into its structure: practices that are driven by assumptions that are certainly debatable, and may even be clearly out of step with contemporary composition research, are made settled fact by the technology and the directive operation it facilitates. The opinions and orientations of those who “instruct” and evaluate seem largely inconsequential. Moreover, in terms of this system, student writing also seems consequential to the extent that it yields data for the institution and grades for the students. Students’ writing work is appropriated by ICON as a means of assessment and as data. It therefore ceases to be rhetorical in the sense that it is intended to make meaning for an audience (it ceases to be consequentially social), and makes writing an alienating exercise in assessment and data collection. What are student-teachers and student-writers learning about literacy and education from this system? In what ways and toward whose ends is writing enacted? Should these questions be answered in terms of pedagogical philosophy, administrative structure, ideology, or economics?

While I vehemently oppose what ICON does, it does something decisive in response to deeply intractable problems that are very common in writing programs across the country (which the designers of ICON did not create). That something, however, is to facilitate cheap operational efficiency (rather than confront it) and mask the considerable shortcomings of this response in the language of access, progress, and egalitarianism (a predictable, grammatically correct essay in every driveway!). However, I am not without empathy. WPAs are regularly charged with struggling to lend integrity and substance to large, low-status, low-budget enterprises that experience a high amount of turnover among teachers. I take my place among them. The problems are troubling and no path toward a more positive future is easy or itself unproblematic. ICON certainly has had its critics in rhetoric and composition forums, but in many ways it is only an extreme, technologized version of what already happens in writing programs where teaching and writing are shaped in largely unacknowledged ways according to logics of operational efficiency that operate with indifference to what is happening in scholarship in rhetoric and composition. Philosophies and tactics of program administration can similarly mask contradictions with
substantial pedagogical consequences. Upper-level administrators look for ways to make operations at once cheaper, more responsive, and more measurable. WPAs, operating in the position of middle management, are often tasked with maintaining viable writing programs on skeletal budgets with overwhelmingly contingent faculties. Contingent teachers, many whose real status is much closer to retail workers than to vested professionals, are in many cases not entrusted with the agency to make fundamental decisions about the courses in which they assume the position of “teacher.” Publishers opportunistically flood the market with textbooks that are designed to appeal to (and reproduce) a generic, philosophically antiquated but ideologically safe middle ground. Spurned on by the marketing of higher education, students at working-class institutions come to us precisely because they want a more economically secure life in an economy that is now characterized by its insecurity. The argument that I have made in this book is that the means of production is not separate from what is being produced. When Ms. Hutton says “it feels like a factory” she seems to be addressing what it is like to work as staff in the ICON system. Certainly, though, writing as a student in that and other highly rationalized programs also assumes a distinct industrial hue.

Much writing program administration discourse might best be called “pragmatist,” a term Marc Bousquet uses (I believe rightly) in a controversial article in the *Journal of Advanced Composition* and also in a chapter in *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University* (a collection I coedited with Bousquet and Leo Parascondola). Pragmatists generally frame the corporatization of higher education as inevitable and advocate either acquiescence to its inevitability or coping strategies that reflect a wariness of its effects but nevertheless seek to work within “the system” in order to achieve modest goals. Bousquet identifies this figure of the coping, deal-making WPA as the primary subject position of much of the WPA discourse. As the usual disciplinary narrative goes, the WPA describes the particular conditions that she or he is working under and then outlines adjustments and tactics that lead to some modest gains, employing a situated pragmatism that relies heavily on sophistry and canny resourcefulness. As the WPA appeals to the “bottom line” values of those who talk in terms of scalability and cost-cutting, she salvages what she can for quality pedagogy and working conditions.

Bousquet critiques both the model of professionalization around which this pragmatist discourse is centered and the more general
strategy of having middle managers act in isolation for the benefit of those who are managed. Among the problems he identifies with the discourse that positions the WPA as pragmatic hero is how it situates rhetoric and the project of writing pedagogy in relation to market logics. This is a very important point that was too often missed in the sometimes vitriolic and reductivist backlash that characterized responses to Bousquet’s argument. Parsing through the various positions outlined by (among others) Richard Miller, Bousquet identifies the free market, liberal individualist ideology that is at the core of these pragmatist calls to “face the realities” of writing work in the contemporary university:

In the pragmatist account, contemporary realities dictate that all nonmarket idealisms will be “dismissed as the plaintive bleating of sheep” but corporate-friendly speech “can be heard as reasoned arguments” (1998, 27). I find this language intrinsically offensive, associating movement idealism and social-project identities and activist collectivity generally with the subhuman, rather than (as I see it) the fundamentally human capacity to think and act cooperatively. (2004, 26)

Critiquing an administrative philosophy that centers on “corporate friendly speech,” Bousquet further associates this administrative philosophy with a philosophy of rhetoric:

More important than the adjectives and analogies [that bolster a corporate point of view], however, is the substructure of assumptions about what rhetoric is for. The implicit scene of speech suggested here is of “pleasing the prince,” featuring an all-powerful auditor with values beyond challenge and a speaker only able to share power by association with the dominating logic of the scene—a speaker whose very humanity depends upon speaking a complicity with domination. (2004, 26)

Bousquet suggests an important, if still undeveloped, connection between rhetoric-in-action in the hands of WPAs and rhetoric as the subject and practice of writing pedagogy. Both can derive from an ideologically conservative “substructure” in their perceptions of the role of education and rhetoric. To return to Villanueva, “economies are carried rhetorically.” Discussions of the economics of work in writing education—discussions that usually only take place in writing program administration forums—are too often discussions of crisis and response,

1. A number of contributors to Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University make similar arguments.
of coping and maneuvering. Antiutopian and conformist at their core, these responses usually assume the form of “moves” rather than “strategies.” A disciplinary ethos that promotes pragmatic, acquiescent strategies and rhetorics of administration that are adaptive to the point of self-negation are likely to tend toward pedagogical philosophies and programs that are similarly chastened in their views of the possibilities of education and writing. We are what we do, and at some point the conditions become such that we begin to do more harm than good in writing education.

As a WPA, I understand the lure, and sometimes the necessity, of pragmatism. In order to function as a program administrator in most medium to large institutions it is necessarily to sometimes be complicitous with administrative realities that we abhor: the reliance on part-time teachers is no small part of this. However, I also feel that it is essential to continually name the contradictions and inadequacies in our programs, scholarship, and pedagogy—to keep pushing the issues to the forefront and to be willing to make strategic, if controversial, moves to address them. This may very well mean, for instance, cutting back or eliminating first-year writing programs at many sites and concentrating on upper-division courses and majors. Pragmatism leaves the harsh, intellectually debilitating contradictions created by business as usual in postsecondary writing largely unacknowledged. There is therefore no thorough understanding of the ramifications of current practices, and likewise little basis for oppositional consciousness or action among colleagues. Indeed, lack of continual acknowledgement across the spectrum of our professional work—from departmental and university-level discussions of writing to the field’s most influential scholarly forums—has the broad effect of naturalizing it. So situations rife with contradictions—for instance, that of a part-time teacher who has no health insurance and works as needed lending her alleged “authority” to students through the “process” pedagogy she gleans from an expensive textbook that is required for all of her students, who, themselves, are mostly part-time workers taking required classes—remain unacknowledged in scholarship and pedagogy.

MAKING WRITING DANGEROUS

The challenge is to find ways to situate ourselves, our work, and writing education within particular locations and under particular conditions that generate new insight and transformative action. This action should
be undertaken with a careful understanding of how administrative decisions shape teaching as a profession and teaching and writing as practices. I ended the previous chapter with a question: Is there still a place in rhetoric and composition at which we are willing to risk a utopian impulse? This question can’t just be addressed in pedagogies enacted by tenure-track faculty in the relative bubbles of their own classes, or in conversations among scholars in specialized realms. It will need to be addressed with respect to the broad ecologies of writing education—to labor practices and systems of valuation, policy framing, and material resources, all of which are aligned according to ideological assumptions. Rhetoric and composition professionals need to develop a stance and corresponding vocabulary that both recognizes how administration, research, and the embodied acts of teaching and writing are integrated, and that strategically positions that integrated dynamic in relation to the political economics of higher education.

James Paul Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear argue that literacy education should evolve to account more fully for relationships between discourses and social practices within the varied spheres of people’s lives: “Learners should be viewed as lifelong trajectories through these sites and institutions [work and educational], as stories with multiple twists and turns. . . . As their stories are rapidly and radically changing, we need to change our stories about skills, learning and knowledge” (1996, 6). This is a still largely unheeded call for an inevitably problematic and even messy professional engagement that critiques and confronts both academic and fast-capitalist discourses and practices. I am looking for ways to make administration, teaching, and writing speak back to the conditions of production, engaging in a critical dialectic with the locations of their enactment. I am looking for ways to make writing education consequential, immediate, responsive, and sometimes even dangerous. What if we turned more of the intellectual energy of our profession toward understanding and addressing how the economics of higher education are shaping writing pedagogy? What if the immediate, material conditions of the classroom became the fully acknowledged context of the writing and learning that took place there?

I recently taught Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza* in a graduate rhetoric class. Rereading this remarkable book, I was again struck by the following quote, which describes Anzaldúa’s encounter with a dentist as a young girl:
“We’re going to have to do something about your tongue,” I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. “I’ve never seen anything as strong or as stubborn,” he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down? (1999, 75)

Anzaldua worked in the hybrid intersections of language, politics, economics, history, and personhood: she learned to write dangerously. She connected literacy education to the immediate location of its practice, writing from her specific places and times. Her goal wasn’t just communication, however, it was transformation—she wanted not only to communicate with her audiences, she wanted to challenge them, and she started by making language and the position from which she speaks primary points of contention. Rhetoric isn’t just about adapting to contexts or appealing to the values of audiences. It is also about strategically transforming contexts and about challenging the values of audiences. Finding adequate means of expression in no single discourse or genre, Anzaldua invented her own hybrid discourse: a blending of dialects, languages, and forms. She framed her radically polysemic project in terms of tyranny and rebellion, positioning it against a masculinist culture that is heterosexual and white by default and always threatens to render large parts of her experiences and who she believes herself to be unarticulated. Her “serpent” literate practice is dangerous because it cedes neither history or knowledge as unchallenged givens—it refuses to be convenient or palatable. Rhetorical models are at once examples for partial emulation and opportunities for subversion and novel articulations. She argues that to assume the conventions of a discourse is to risk reproducing its ideological underpinnings, lending tacit support to the historical processes that have led to its ascendancy. Language is inescapably sedimented with the lived political struggles of places and times.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself... I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. (1999, 81)

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, an exiled Kenyan novelist, playwright, poet, and activist, similarly writes about the complicated psychologies of postcolonialism. Among the central themes of Ngugi work is the struggle of
people to find a mode and language of expression within institutions, including educational systems, which have been forged in conditions of oppression. In his novel *The Wizard of the Crow*, a corrupt government official in a fictional African nation has become obsessed with mirrors and is only capable of repeating the phrases “if” and “if only” as he scratches at his own skin. He seeks help from a shaman, the “Wizard of the Crow,” who tells him, “Words are the food, body, mirror, and sound of thought. Do you now see the danger of words that want to come out but are unable to do so? You want to vomit and the mess gets stuck in your throat—you might even choke to death” (2006, 175). When the shaman, who identifies himself as “postcolonial,” enables this governmental official to complete his sentences, the patient realizes that the source of the “if only” malady is a deeply historical racial self-hatred, a strong resonance of colonial rule: “If . . . my . . . skin . . . were . . . not . . . black! Oh, if only my skin were white!” (179). Ngugi characters are often seekers of languages of personhood and politics, and the institutions within which they find themselves don’t offer adequate answers or satisfactory means of expression. So characters’ utterances are multivocal, and often contradictory and incomplete. A single utterance can include a ventriloquiation of state power, a strategic movement from English to an indigenous dialect, or (as in this case) tortured omissions and truncated conversations that avoid dangerous realizations about history, power, and identification.

In his fiction and his cultural critique, Ngugi describes literacy education as a powerful means of interpolation. In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngugi argues that education, far from giving people the confidence in their ability and capacities to overcome obstacles . . . tends to make them feel their inadequacies, their weaknesses and their incapacities in the face of reality; and their inability to do anything about the [material] conditions governing their lives. They become more and more alienated from themselves and from their natural and social environment. Education as a process of alienation produces a gallery of active stars and an undifferentiated mass of grateful admirers. (1986, 56–57)²

I wonder how accurate this description might be of writing education in the “working-class” or “second-tier” institutions that are the majority in higher education in the United States, where service economy rhetorics

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2. Also quoted in Moreno (2002, 222).
and logics shape the lives of students on the job and in the classroom. In our roles as teachers, scholars, and administrators, we need to find ways to recognize, account for, and address the political economic factors that shape our work in order not to reproduce “education as a process of alienation.” Try as they might, Ngugi characters can never really be “post” colonial in the sense that they can escape their own histories. Likewise teachers and students in postsecondary classrooms cannot escape their own immediate and historical situations; we should turn fully toward them rather than deny them. Language use is always already active, alive with the ideological assertions and omissions carried in any discourse, and straining toward the author’s purposes—no matter how expertly or awkwardly. Practices with language likewise don’t proceed from privately held “attitudes” or consciousnesses: practices form consciousnesses which, in turn, shape practices. A more fully social view of writing subsumes subjectivity and textuality within a highly fluid, recursive process which embraces possibilities for agency and transformation—both of authors and audiences.

I write this book at a particularly troubled, and I think hopeful, time in American history. The rightist narrative of endless economic growth and democratization through globalization and liberalization of markets seems to have lost much of its public credibility with a brutal and costly war in Iraq, revelations of secret prisons and torture, continued growth in wage disparities, record levels of home foreclosures, annual increases in the numbers of people who have no health care coverage, a record national debt, and rising unemployment. This is a time when a socially and environmentally devastating political economic hegemony looks not so hegemonic. It is also a time in which there is a growing global awareness (and accompanying political movement, particularly in Latin America) of the weaknesses, contradictions, and injustices of neoliberalization. This is not a time for pessimism or defeatism concerning the possibilities for education or democracy. We can question old political economic paradigms, understand how they are shaping our educational work, and present hopeful alternatives in the classroom and in our programs. The fullest realization of the power of literacy and learning is far more likely to come about when we conceive of our identities and the identities of our institutions as dynamic, constantly evolving, and subject to being rewritten. The lashing tips of the “serpent’s tongues” that might grow in the mouths of teachers and students might be directed toward the circumstances of their own labor and education.