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Matthew Parfitt
Boston University’s College of General Studies

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From the Editor

A Blueprint for the Future: Lessons from the Past

Dear Friends and Colleagues~~

Welcome to the February 2012 issue of College Composition and Communication and (although we’ll be nearly one month in by the time you read this) to the new year as well. I’m pleased to share this issue with you; as I detail below, inside you’ll find four articles; CCCC Exemplar Remarks; a set of reviews focused on the much-discussed volume Academically Adrift; a review essay addressing four books speaking to both past and present in composition and rhetoric; an exchange; and a poster page.

Viewed through a single lens, the four articles in this month’s issue move from past to present (and sometimes back again to past), but at the same time, they all do so with a similar intent: to address the past in order to help us understand our current moment. Our first article, Pat Sullivan’s “Inspecting Shadows of Past Classroom Practices: A Search for Students’ Voices,” is at once about the students in the early part of the twentieth century whose writing she studies and about the methods permitting such study. Sullivan notes that in recovering our collective past, retrieving student voices is a critical move. Referring to our “past’s underlife,” Sullivan also points out that both in working in the archives and in representing what we find there, we are wise not to oversimplify our findings; rather, we should

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seek out “the complications of [the] settings” in which students wrote. As Sullivan notes, “When you think about it, these traces of their schooling were so important to them (or their families) that they not only kept the texts but donated them to the community’s record of the area; obviously these texts touched deep tendrils of meaning we no longer can access.”

Archives also provide sites of meaning for Kelly Ritter’s “‘Ladies Who Don’t Know Us Correct Our Papers’: Postwar Lay Reader Programs and Twenty-First Century Contingent Labor in First-Year Writing.” In the archives, Ritter finds evidence of the lay reader program, which not that long ago paid housewives a base rate of pay for grading—a.k.a. “correcting”—the writing of high school students. In her assessment, Ritter finds that much of classroom practice today is forecast through the lay reader program, especially its gendered quality, its pedagogy of mothering, and its piecemeal quality. Perhaps most provocatively, she reads into that past what she perceives as today’s dilemma: “Writing teachers are increasingly pressured to be agents of literacy instruction and agents of personal care. We may need to decide which of these roles we want to prioritize if we expect to have reasonable working conditions for our already-undervalued writing faculty.”

Dylan B. Dryer’s “At a Mirror, Darkly: The Imagined Undergraduate Writers of Ten Novice Composition Instructors” looks at such faculty as he inquires into how graduate students’ sense of their own past, in terms of their understanding of academic writing, informs and shapes their responses to the work of first-year composition students. Put simply and based on Dryer’s set of evidence, the “novice teachers’ shallow history of student-teacher interactions may not furnish them with viable alternatives to the immediately available precedent of their own experience.” At the same time, Dryer creates a set of options that may assist new TAs in thinking more critically—and more confidently—about the texts both they and their students are asked to create and perform.

History plays a role in Risa Applegarth’s “Rhetorical Scarcity: Spatial and Economic Inflections on Genre Change” as well: here she reviews how the monograph genre in anthropology was changed as part of a disciplinary move. Put more specifically, several scholars—“Malinowski, Powdermaker, Mead, Bunzel, Redfield, Lesser, Miner, Landes, and many others—collectively remade what a monograph could look like and could do during the 1920s and 1930s.” According to this argument, in a case like this we see multiply. On the one hand, we can see the contribution of individual writers to the changing of a genre; on another hand, we see the genre itself changing; and on a third hand,
we begin to see how writers’ choices construct what Applegarth calls “a situa-
tion of scarcity,” choices that exist in an ecology, of course, such that one set of
choices can constrain the resources that a genre has previously made available.

In this issue of *College Composition and Communication*, we also have Ed
White’s Exemplar Remarks, which in some sense take the form of a letter to the
future members of CCCC. We have as well four reviews of the much-debated
*Academically Adrift* (*AA*), with each reviewer taking a different perspective. Rich
Haswell considers the research evidencing *AA*’s claims and finds it wanting.
Jeanne Gunner puts the claims of the volume up against the support provided
to higher education—or, more accurately put, not provided. Carolyn Calhoon-
Dillahunt wonders where the community college students are in *AA*, given the
number of students in community colleges, because they aren’t accounted for
in *AA*. And last but not least, Teresa Redd travels from excitement that WAC
and WID programs might be the beneficiaries of *AA*’s results to skepticism
about what *AA*’s definition of high standard of writing really means, especially
for African American students.

In addition, Geoffrey Sirc shares with us a review essay considering four
new books: *The Evolution of College English: Literacy Studies from the Puritans
to the Postmoderns*; *A Counter-History of Composition: Toward Methodologies
of Complexity; Toward a Composition Made Whole*; and *Teaching with Student
Texts: Essays toward an Informed Practice*. Despite our current economic and
philosophical malaise, Sirc finds himself, as he reads these books, “continually
heartened . . .by the work of scholar-practitioners who bring enormous energy
to finding new methods or reinvigorating old ones.” And we have as well Clyde
Moneyhun’s response to Doug Hesse’s articulation of the relationship between
composition and creative writing, and Doug Hesse’s reply. And last but not
least, we have a new poster page, this one highlighting writing assessment.

This issue of *CCC* interests me for several reasons, two of which I men-
tion here.

One is that I’m impressed by and curious about our relatively recent inter-
est in archives. We see that interest here, as part of research efforts in several
of the articles. We will see it on display at CCCC 2012 in St. Louis, where the
program includes twenty-three sessions involving archiving of one kind or an-
other, ranging, for instance, from “Gateways to the Past: Conducting Archival
Research” and “Performing the Archive: Practice, Stories, and Materiality” to
“Mapping Entry Points of Nineteenth-Century Rhetorical Activism,” “Lessons from History: What WPAs Can Learn from Writing Program Archival Work,” and “Rhetorical Gateways for Writing Classes.” What interests me in part is the variety of contexts in which we are using or sharing or introducing archives: for research and in theory and for programs and with our students in classrooms. What interests me as well is how we are using the metaphor of archive as well as the physical or material archive itself. I’m not sure it’s a trend, but I am wondering if the field is, perhaps, serious about taking an archival turn.

Two is that I’m very pleased that the four reviewers so graciously accepted my invitation to review Academically Adrift—and not so much because of AA itself, although that’s valuable, but because the impulses behind AA aren’t going to go away. Given that reality, we need many readers and many thinkers to see how such a volume looks in our many different contexts. Working together, we can, I believe, critique and move to action; my hope is that these reviews, which have certainly provided critique, can move us to action as well.

And not least, I am delighted to welcome a new CCC Editorial Board member, Anthony Paré, of McGill University in Montreal. Given his research interests in both genre and graduate education and his service to the profession, he’s an ideal addition to our group.

Kathleen Blake Yancey  
Florida State University