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Review Essay

Moving Knowledge Forward

Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies
Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, editors

Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange
Bruce Horner

Microhistories of Composition
Bruce McComiskey, editor

In 1984, Janice M. Lauer called composition a "dappled discipline" (20). Decades later it remains one, even more so. Contemporary composition's equipment for knowledge making is an ample assortment of theories and methods from Western social science and humanities traditions, as well as, increasingly, non-Western traditions. These are applied to an ever-growing list of locations, events, and subjects of writing, rhetorics, and literacies.

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In turn, these “expanding contexts for writing studies,” as Gesa E. Kirsch calls them, prompt scholars to improve existing research methods and “develop new ones” (xi).

Periodically, the field assesses, celebrates, or simply takes stock of its knowledge and knowledge-making equipment. This practice dates back at least to Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s 1963 review, Research in Written Composition, which Steven M. North, in his own substantial assessment—1987’s The Making of Knowledge in Composition—famously identified as composition’s “charter” (17). Similarly, in 1978, Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell noted “the sheer number of assumptions, theories, methods, and questions relevant to composing” that the essays in their collection tried to begin addressing (xvi–xvii). In 1992, Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan’s Methods and Methodology in Composition Research sought to “raise the question of our methodological pluralism” (2). In 2002, Gary A. Olson’s Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work pointed to the “rich diversity” of previous research while offering a contemporary if admittedly partial look into “a vibrant field of substantive scholarship” (xii). These and many other studies comprise what Lance Massey and Richard C. Gebhardt, in 2011, called a “healthy tradition” (5). This tradition indicates the field’s willingness to ask itself difficult questions about how and what it knows, and for whom.

Taken separately, each book under consideration here represents an established epistemological perspective in composition. In Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies, contributors draw mainly—though certainly not exclusively—from empirical research traditions to help advance the book’s overarching notion of the threshold concept, which serves as a vehicle for identifying a set of predicates to which teachers and administrators can point when representing the field’s knowledge to a variety of internal and external constituents. In Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange, Bruce Horner argues from a critical (specifically, materialist) perspective against what he sees as the ongoing alignment of composition’s work and the values of contemporary neoliberal thought and politics. Bruce McComiskey’s Microhistories of Composition offers a theory and method of historical research that resembles qualitative approaches, such as ethnography and case study, with which composition has long been familiar. In doing so, it prompts questions familiar to composition regarding the relationship between the
empirical and the critical (or, in something of a misnomer, the theoretical), questions that disciplines such as history—which straddle the boundary between such traditions of inquiry—have had to address.

Taken as a group, the books in question paint yet another picture of a rich and diverse field, a dappled discipline. But they also prompt us to ask whether an attitude of methodological and theoretical pluralism—what Carol Berkenkotter once called “epistemological ecumenicalism” (79)—can continue to provide a tent big enough to accommodate the field’s growing array of theories, methods, and subjects. This is not a new question; North voiced a similar concern three decades ago. But it takes on a new urgency, not only as the field continues exploring digital contexts but also—and, I think, more importantly—as it continues and accelerates the processes by which it “mainstream[s]” the study of writing, rhetorics, and literacies undertaken from, by, and for formerly marginal groups, locations, and perspectives. I mean the growing presence and influence of scholarship taking place under such headings as cultural rhetorics, transnational literacy, world Englishes, and community writing, as well as its focus on questions of Indigeneity, coloniality, and globalization, among many others.

My goal in this review is not necessarily to assess how well such questions get addressed by the books at hand, though of course the traditions that inform my own approaches to inquiry will lead me to make certain observations rather than others. But my broader—and, for readers, I hope, more helpful—goal is to suggest terms by which (or to identify contexts in which) these books might most productively be read in light of these questions.

**Naming What We Know**

Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s edited collection revolves around the idea of threshold concepts. These are concepts “critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (2). The idea comes from UK education researchers Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land, who describe threshold concepts as “transformative,” “irreversible,” and “integrative” (2). Such concepts change not only what one knows in a field or discipline; they also profoundly change how one sees, thinks, and acts in that discipline. According to Meyer and Land, they differ from core concepts in that the latter, while fundamental, do “not necessarily lead to a qualitatively different view of subject matter” (4).
According to Adler-Kassner and Wardle, because writing matters to many constituencies beyond the composition community, our field’s threshold concepts should be widely known. Many people outside of composition wield power over its curricula and resources, yet they have no idea of how writing works or how it is best taught. Thus, Adler-Kassner and Wardle want to “provide a basis for writing studies professionals to describe what we know in ways that are accessible to educated readers (and listeners) who are not necessarily specialists in our discipline” (6). They argue that if we fail to do this, we will “continue to lose the battle over discussions of writing to stakeholders who have money, power, and influence but little related expertise” (7).

Naming What We Know is the most elaborately constructed of the three books in this review. The book is divided into part 1 (“Threshold Concepts in Writing”) and part 2 (“Using Threshold Concepts”). In turn, these are further subdivided.

The editors describe part 1 as “a sort of crowdsourced encyclopedia” (3). It is divided into five sections, each dedicated to a threshold concept that is explained and elaborated in brief entries written by various scholars. These entries present what the editors refer to as “final-for-now definitions of some of what our field knows” (4). Meanwhile, part 2 offers “threshold concepts in action” through eight essays that deal with “specific sites of writing instruction and writing development” (7). The entire book is cross-referenced in order to give readers a clear sense of the relationships between and among the concepts discussed.

Part 1’s five threshold concepts, each assigned its own subsection, are:

- Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity
- Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms
- Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies
- All Writers Have More to Learn
- Writing Is (Also Always) a Cognitive Activity

Twenty-seven scholars (including the editors) contribute to this part of Naming What We Know, some more than once. For example, Charles Bazerman authors or coauthors five entries across the various concepts/subsections.
The entries gathered under the first threshold concept, Writing Is Social and Rhetorical Activity, stress the various modes of relationality that writing underscores, enacts, or brings into being. For example, Bazerman locates meaning “only in the dynamic relation of writer, reader, and text” (22). Similarly, Dylan Dryer explains that “the relationships that imbue a sentence with particular meanings come not just from nearby words but also from the social contexts in which the sentence is used” (24). And John Duffy claims that “every time we write for another person, we propose a relationship with other human beings, our readers” (31).

The entries for the second concept deal with questions of form and genre. Bill Hart-Davidson explains that a specialized notion of genre—the one preferred by scholars in the field—focuses on “the visible effects of human action, routinized to the point of habit in specific cultural conditions” (39). Cheryl Ball and Colin Charleton take up form via multimodality, noting that “any combination of modes . . . makes a multimodal text” and that “all texts . . . use more than one mode” (42). Discussing intertextuality, Kevin Roozen argues that “the concept of texts getting their meaning from other texts” risks running afoot of “dominant Western notions of authorship, creativity, and originality” (46).

As with those of the first threshold concept, the entries illustrating the third concept (Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies) focus on relationality, but of a more explicitly sociopolitical sort. Tony Scott explains that while the dominant view of literacy education had once been “individualistic and focused on the acquisition of discrete, universal skills,” contemporary perspectives emphasize “social involvement and consequences” (48). Kathleen Blake Yancey complicates this picture by claiming that “writing is paradoxical because of its provision for both the social and the conventional and for the individual” (53). Finally, Victor Villanueva reminds us that when we talk about, study, or teach writing, the political is never absent; it is only ignored or overlooked. He notes that “because all writing is inflected by power dynamics shaped by identities and ideologies, writers must become aware of how those identities and ideologies are represented in their writing” (57).

The entries for the fourth concept, All Writers Have More to Learn, speak to some misconceptions that I suspect are among the most widely held among people outside our field. Shirley Rose explains that “there is no one lesson about writing that can make writing good in all contexts”
Collin Brooke and Allison Carr stress the importance of failure as a pedagogical strategy, specifically the act of making failure “speakable and doable” so that it may catalyze growth (63). Doug Downs notes revision’s central role in the teaching and learning of writing, but he argues that “we must also teach writers to develop workflows that anticipate and rely on revision and to discover what methods of revision best suit their own writing processes” (66). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Paul Kei Matsuda claims that since it is increasingly and emphatically not the case that we all “share more or less the same intuitive knowledge of language structures and functions,” all writers and readers need “to develop the awareness that we are all participating in the process of negotiating language differences” (68, 69).

The entries for the fifth and final threshold concept, Writing Is (Also and Always) a Cognitive Activity, describe useful extensions of the cognitive theories that initially found receptive composition audiences in the early 1980s. Dryer explains that our brains’ limited working memory explains “why unfamiliar task loads . . . can reduce performance in other, usually high-competency areas” and “why rates of surface error rise predictably when students attempt a new genre for the first time” (73). Bazerman and Howard Tinberg remind us that theorists going back to Ann Berthoff and to James Moffett understood “that writing comes from full engagement of the entire writer, which is developed across many years of a developing self” (75).

The eight essays that comprise part 2 of Naming What We Know are divided into two groups: “Program and Curriculum Design” and “Writing Across the University.” Adler-Kassner and Wardle here reassert their earlier claim that threshold concepts allow writing studies professionals “to work more effectively with our various stakeholders, from students to colleagues in other disciplines to administrators to lawmakers” (84). They intend the essay to represent “the broad scope of the field’s work,” which ranges from “writing majors and doctoral programs” to WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) programs (84).

The first group of essays visits familiar places in the composition curriculum. Focusing on WID (writing in the disciplines) courses, Heidi Estrem’s essay describes the effort to improve “outcomes-based depictions of student writing” by training teachers’ and students’ attention to the entire learning process, not just its endpoint (90). Doing so integrates writing into the learning and assessment process, where it can “begin documenting...
what student learning looks like,” which, in turn, allows constituencies across campus “to develop a shared, cross-disciplinary vocabulary that might support meaningful student writing development over time” (96). Looking at first-year composition, Downs and Liane Robertson argue that by making threshold concepts “the declarative content” of the course, we can teach “for learning transfer to later, different writing situations” (106). J. Blake Scott and Wardle turn to the undergraduate major, specifically to its emergence at the University of Central Florida, to show how threshold concepts implicitly informed its development. They also argue that an explicit and “strategic” use of the threshold concepts idea might guide the major’s present and future (123). Kara Taczak and Yancey discuss doctoral education, showing how threshold concepts can play roles in what they describe as that curriculum’s three components: “the delivered curriculum, the lived curriculum, and the experienced curriculum” (140). In addition, they see threshold concepts as useful tools with which to “review programs to see how they function” (153).

In part 2’s second group of essays “assessment” returns, with O’Neill explaining that since it “lies at the intersection of threshold concepts specific to writing studies and those specific to educational assessment” one must understand “both sets of concepts and how they interact” (158). But she notes that because campus assessment experts tend to know little about writing studies, writing studies experts must learn assessment threshold concepts if they “hope to influence assessment mandates and practices driven by those from outside” the field (158). Rebecca S. Nowacek and Bradley Hughes bring threshold concepts to bear on writing centers, arguing that the “conscious use” of such concepts helps both writing center administrators and tutors (171). In addition, they argue for the existence of “additional, writing center-specific threshold concepts” (172). Focusing on professional development and outreach, Adler-Kassner and John Majewski build upon prior research to argue that by discussing threshold concepts with faculty, we can give them “a welcome opportunity to reflexively consider the nature of their own expertise,” and we can clear paths by which they might make their discipline’s threshold concepts “more visible for students” (187). Finally, Chris Anson lays out the complexities—including benefits and pitfalls—that obtain in the relationship between writing studies threshold concepts and faculty development in WAC. The process becomes even more complex, he notes, “in implementation, where many
other related threshold concepts from allied movements such as the scholarship of teaching and learning, problem-based and inquiry models of education, and critical thinking initiatives can play a role as well” (213).

Despite its “crowdsourced” nature and its admirably long list of contributors, *Naming What We Know* draws mostly—though not exclusively—from a fairly specific range of epistemological perspectives: those informed by empirical methodologies. This is potentially problematic in that readers—especially graduate students—might mistakenly believe that “what we know” about writing, rhetorics, and literacies is encompassed here, or that what we might know in the future will be achieved largely with the tools this book references. Yet, as North and others have pointed out over the decades, knowledge in and about composition comes from many sources. And especially today, as the field’s diversity of theories, methodologies, and subjects grows at an extraordinary pace, naming what we know is probably a larger and more complex task than even this ambitious and admirable book can fully perform. I don’t mean that *Naming What We Know* errs in leaving too many stones unturned in its survey and presentation of knowledge about writing. I mean that it might be trying to do something that can’t be done.

**Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange**

If *Naming What We Know* tries to make usable sense of our current state of knowledge, Bruce Horner’s *Rewriting Composition: Terms of Exchange* wants instead to alter the terms by which that current state of knowledge—or any future current state of knowledge—is developed and discussed. He wants the field to understand its conditions of (knowledge) production in cultural-materialist terms that recognize the unacknowledged forms and sources of labor that make possible composition’s production and distribution of knowledge. As Horner puts it, his aim is “to intervene in conceptualizations of the conceptual as distinct from material social practice, and thereby to further recognize the significance of all the work of composition, whether designated ordinary or esoteric, commonplace or foreign, theoretical or practical” (1–2). Moreover, Horner situates the work of composition within larger networks of work, which he enumerates as “a globalizing economy; the rise of fast-capitalist, neoliberal ideology; the globalization of English; the diminishing role of labor and of the professions, as conventionally
understood; the turn to a ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ economy; and the privatization of higher education” (2).

And while this is a book of theory insofar as it tries “to rethink some key terms in contemporary composition discourse by considering the work specific inflections of them do,” it does not, Horner claims, build an argument from one chapter to the next (3). Instead, he identifies “a recursiveness to the chapters as each (re)iterates, from a somewhat different beginning vantage point, a rethinking of composition, language, labor, value, and discipline in their relations to one another” (3). With this in mind, I would like to focus on the book’s fifth and final chapter, “Discipline,” since the issues it addresses relate most clearly to the two other books in this review, particularly Naming What We Know.

Horner argues against the processes of commodification that he sees informing composition’s approach to producing and distributing knowledge. In its place, he argues for “a return to and insistence on the always-emergent character of composition knowledge” (164). For Horner, commodification is a result of the field’s ongoing quest for disciplinary status and the institutional rewards that it supposedly confers. But by agreeing to a commodified conception of (and approach to) knowledge, the field accepts the poor “terms of exchange” established by the “dominant academic institutional culture . . . and the broader culture of professionalism” (164). This situation is made worse by the field’s “alignment with the language ideology of monolingualism,” which unnecessarily limits the field’s scope and thereby contributes to “an impoverished conception of the work of writing English” (164).

According to Horner, when composition tries to look and act more like other contemporary disciplines, it contributes to the ongoing erasure of labor in knowledge production. This is an undesirable and unjust outcome. And as a bid for enhanced disciplinary status, it is bound to fail. Horner argues, perhaps counterintuitively to some, that composition enjoys relatively “low academic status” not because it is different or lacking but, rather, because it exposes some inconvenient truths. As Horner puts it, “by virtue of its irredeemably undeniable location in the material social realm, composition manifests more powerfully and undeniably than other academic literary fields the dependence of all knowledge (re)production on concrete labor practices” (167). It therefore embarrassingly underscores
the social-material basis of all knowledge. This basis is more easily denied or obscured by other disciplines through their own commodification of knowledge, and it prompts them to keep composition “at arm’s length as the uninvited, unwelcome relative trying to crash the family gathering” (167).

Both *Rewriting Composition* and *Naming What We Know* offer “terms” with which readers might get a metaperspective on composition’s processes of knowledge production and dissemination, but they do so from different traditions of inquiry that sponsor different epistemological frameworks. Where *Naming* seeks to harness the field to let it better articulate with other entities in the ongoing struggle for recognition and resources, *Rewriting* urges the field to break its neoliberal chains in order to engage these other entities under more favorable conditions not only for its own disciplinary sake but, as Horner sees it, for education itself. And while it might be tempting, at least for some of us who have been in the field a while, to see in these contrasting books an echo of the old “theory wars” of the 1990s, we might turn instead to Bruce McComiskey’s book for a way to move through that old and familiar impasse.

**Microhistories of Composition**

Microhistorians are historians who believe in the explanatory power of the ordinary, the minute, and the seemingly insignificant. They look for these in the various contexts of their research, examining figures and texts that traditional historians might disregard and asking different questions of them. For microhistorians, attention to such conventionally ill-suited subjects makes possible the detailed knowledge that contributes to a thorough understanding of larger social forces and events. In his introduction to *Microhistories of Composition*, Bruce McComiskey describes the microhistorian’s desire to “negotiate a methodological middle ground” between the large-scale approach of social history and the fine-grained emphasis of cultural history (15). As he puts it, “microhistory assumes every act is conditioned by multiple forces at varying levels, some imposed socially (by institutions) and others emerging personally (from desires), all in a complex dialectic” (14–15).

For McComiskey, microhistory is thus “ideally suited for the complexities of a discipline like composition” (24). Its “proclivity for the margins, the exceptions, the uncommon (but always viewed within larger contexts) makes it an ideal methodology for exploring composition’s other histories,
the histories not included in the grand narratives” (24–25). Unlike social history and cultural history, which choose sources “because they illustrate a priori assumptions about events under analysis,” microhistory believes that “all sources are rhetorical” in that they “interpret events” (21). In this context, the task is to “collect a variety of interpretations from which a full and complex understanding might emerge” (21). And, in a gesture that should be familiar to compositionists, microhistorians make their own assumptions and difficulties part of their narrative. As McComiskey notes, “methodological self-consciousness places microhistorians in dialogue with the historical sources they interpret, not in a position of power over them, and it places the audience of the historical text in dialogue with the past” (24).

Microhistory was developed in the mid-1970s by historians who believed, according to McComiskey, that “both positivist social history and relativist cultural history had reached points of theoretical and practical exhaustion” (16). They saw social history driving endlessly toward abstraction while cultural history stayed mired in thick description. They sought a different way forward that would be “multiscopic, equally valuing and dialectically employing both abstract narrative and concrete description in the service of historical arguments,” trying to achieve “dialectical and analytical integration” of various layers of the abstract and the concrete (17). Such an approach aims “to generate more complex historical knowledge” (18).

Unlike social history, which tends to portray “powerful individuals” who drive history, and unlike cultural history, which compensates for that emphasis by focusing on “marginalized people,” microhistory looks for “the exceptional normal” (19). McComiskey quotes John Brewer’s definition of microhistory as “an event or practice that . . . seems exotic, remarkable, or marginal, but that, when properly investigated . . . reveals its own logic and order” (19). For microhistorians, “the acts of the exceptional normal reflect a dialectical interaction of individual free will (the sole focus of cultural history) and social conditioning (the sole focus of social history)” (20).

This idea of the exceptional normal runs through Microhistories of Composition, informing even those essays that do not refer to it by name (though most do). Louise Wetherbee Phelps identifies the 1979 Council of Canadian Teachers of English Conference as an exceptional normal insofar as its enduring impact “suggests that conferences and other interaction rituals” play a role akin to those of “journals, textbooks, and monographs”
in developing a field’s disciplinary identity (81). Kelly Ritter calls journal editors “‘normal exceptions’ to the typical figures in grand narratives—well-known scholars, teachers, program administrators, or even academic institutions themselves” (92). Douglas Eyman and Cheryl E. Ball focus on “uncelebrated texts—academic work that has not been directly influential and has not been widely cited” in order to highlight the larger problem of our field’s weak technical infrastructures (117). Suzanne Bordelon notes the “distorted depictions of elocution and expression” found in “conventional” histories of rhetoric (138); in response, she looks for (and finds) a normal exception in nineteenth-century teaching practices at Boston’s School of Expression. Approaching Roger Garrison as “a normal exception who has been largely forgotten,” Neal Lerner reflects on the various politics of remembering, and he argues for the need to think broadly when searching for (and learning from) figures in composition’s past (219).

The idea of the exceptional normal, and of the issues it addresses and underscores, has been a topic of discussion among microhistorians within the field of history. Carlo Ginzburg writes that microhistory in general arose in the late 1970s through an “awareness that all phases through which research unfolds are constructed and not given” (32). Through these phases would arise questions about the relation between the “microscopic dimension” (that is, the people, things, or events being studied) and the “larger contextual dimension,” the relation itself thus becoming “the organizing principle in the narration” (33). Specifically, the issue is one of determining whether and to what extent one element—the element under the microscope, as it were—is anomalous or analogous and, if the former, whether the anomaly, precisely because of its anomalous status, reveals something about the larger context (33). In other words, is it merely exceptional, or is it an instance of the exceptional normal? It seems fairly clear that this is a question of perspective and interpretation rather than observation or investigation alone. In this sense, the microhistorian (and, by implication, every historian) works precisely at the intersection of the empirical and the critical, as well as at the intersection of the methodological and the theoretical. On the one hand, it is commonsensical and maybe even banal to note that the ideas informing how we study something will play a very strong, even determinative role in what we eventually claim to know about it. But how often will we be willing to confront the consequences of that apparent banality and risk our ability to move our inquiries forward? Microhistories
of Composition does not answer this question, nor does it really set out to ask it in the first place. But its most significant contribution might be its ability to show, through the many interesting examples offered by its contributors, how intractable and inevitable such questions are for research, especially research in a dappled discipline like composition.

Moving Knowledge Forward
Our field’s tradition of self-reflection suggests that composition will continue to try to account for its epistemological breadth and depth. On one hand, at stake is the field’s ability to describe itself accurately and comprehensively to people in other fields and other professions, especially those that brush up against it. But on the other hand, and perhaps more important, also at stake is the field’s ability to understand itself, particularly as it and its participants become more inclusive, more diverse, and global. I don’t think it’s necessary, any more, to argue that these moves beyond composition’s traditional objects and locations of inquiry are good things.

But with this expansion and deepening come new challenges. Until recently, a field-wide attitude of tolerance has been enough, mostly, to allow for a wide range of epistemologies. And it has been acceptable to ignore research that draws from traditions different than one’s own. But in light of the field’s growth and diversity, this strategy is becoming untenable. For example, Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies continue to make their salutary presence known in composition’s conferences, publications, and classrooms. But they bring with them not just another set of options, not just more equipment with which to do the field’s already-established work. Rather, they urge the field to look beyond its comfortable ethic of pluralism, to do more than simply make a little bit more room, adding to the old manse that North originally associated with lore but that might now also describe the field as a whole. New work with new tools in new areas urges us—or, at least, should urge us—to do more than nod politely and then go back to “our own work.”

It challenges us to do what I think the best theoretical or conceptual work should do: go back to our basic assumptions unafraid to watch them deconstruct before us. In a way, the books in question here do a version of that, though unintentionally. They prompt us to take a step back and think about the relationships between what we think we know about writing, rhetorics, and literacies; how we go about knowing it; and how we share all
of this with others and with each other. Individually, each book here asks us to take that step back so that we may move forward differently. But collectively, they encourage a deeper, longer, and perhaps more consequential attitude of reflection, not only on the substance of our various theories and methodologies, but also on theory and method as such. Reading these books together and in relation to each other, I do not find myself willing to “move forward” exactly as each one might like, but I do find myself challenged to continue thinking, and thinking anew, about the practices and politics of knowledge-making that make up our discipline’s dapples. In a way, that seems more important.

Works Cited


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