What Is College English?
Stories about Reading: Appearance, Disappearance, Morphing, and Revival

Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue

Over the past few years, there appears to have been a revival of interest in reading in English studies, especially within the field of study variously known as composition, composition studies, composition/rhetoric, or writing studies. After decades of apparent dormancy, when many scholars seemed to believe that everything that needed to be said about reading had already been said (an attitude crystallized in what, although not meant to be so originally, became in the 1980s a preemptive and self-evident equation: “to write is to read is to write” [Kaufer and Waller]), somehow the subject of reading is relevant again. The number of submissions to the journal Reader (established in the early 1980s to address the need to discuss reading in ways that leading composition and literature journals did not) has increased. The handful of sessions on reading at the yearly meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) are packed once again. Professional listservs like WPA-L (a popular organ of exchange for writing program administrators) address with regularity topics related to reading, with subscribers speculating as to how books such as Maryanne Wolfe’s Proust and the Squid might influence how reading is taught or how reading plays a role in evaluating and supporting students’ academic progress. And it is rumored that new books on reading are soon to be published by academic presses.

For those interested in reading, this is an exciting time. But it is also a baffling one. While we welcome this renewal of interest in reading, in how reading is

Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori is associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, where she teaches and does research in the areas of hermeneutics, composition, literacy, and pedagogy. Her work has appeared in a number of journals and collections. In 1999 she was selected as Carnegie Scholar by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for her work on pedagogy of difficulty, a theory of teaching and learning articulated and enacted in The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty, coauthored with Patricia Donahue. Patricia Donahue is professor of English and founding director of the College Writing Program at Lafayette College, where she teaches first-year writing, rhetoric, literature, and critical theory. In 2003 she was selected as Carnegie Scholar for her work on reading across the curriculum. She is currently the editor of Reader, and her work has appeared in a wide range of publications.
understood, we are not sure we can fully explain what accounts for it. What does this renewal of interest (repetition? return?) suggest and reveal about how reading has been taught, how it should be taught? What, if anything, does it suggest about the reciprocally reflexive relationship that might exist between reading and writing, and its potential advantage for teaching both reading and writing, especially in the college English classroom? What has made reading’s “invisibility” newly noticeable? What possibilities for the study of reading in the field at large might this revival point to and open up? What does the explosion of interest in reading in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a dearth of consideration, suggest about how reading is to be understood? What exactly is reading?

Although these questions provide context for our discussion, we cannot provide definitive answers. For one thing, as we will make clear, it is too soon to say what directions this new work with reading will move us toward, what it will ask (again) of those in English studies, both as theorists and as teachers. Our purpose, then, is to suggest how an assemblage of stories about the appearance and disappearance of reading, when understood in the context of these questions, might be used to interrogate the formation of college English as a term, a discipline, a concept (as well as a journal), and which theories and functions of reading it calls for, promotes, and values. Our approach will be fourfold. First, we will summarize the work that was done on reading in the 1980s and early 1990s, work that has had relevance for both composition and literature. Second, we will examine a particularly interesting moment in that history, the inappropriately named “Tate and Lindemann Debate” (which originally consisted of two essays published in College English), where reading served as a disciplinary hinge, a tool for distinguishing composition from literature, for loosening the ties between them. Third, we will explain how the disappearance of reading in the middle 1990s can be inferred symptomatically, through an interpretation of the CCCC convention program, a document which, we will argue, may be understood as a codification of professional interests (although as will become clear, this description is not unanimously shared). Finally, we will turn our attention to the present moment, when reading has emerged as an old beast slouching toward a not yet visible destination.

Intersecting Narratives: Personal and Disciplinary

Although we are less interested here in the work of individual scholars than in tendencies within English studies itself, a few words about our own work seem in order. We both came of age professionally at a time in which composition was only beginning to acquire intellectual momentum as a separate and discernible field of study: the 1980s. Although our graduate work was in literature, we chose to do work within composition because it offered more possibilities for scholar-teachers interested in
theory and students to understand and to challenge the obliviousness of theory to what so-called student errors and inadequacies could contribute to the understanding of reading. We saw these possibilities as not only allowing for, but in fact embracing, the challenges and dangers of working at the crossroads. We now belong to a relatively small group of composition scholars who were likewise trained in literary studies and have also retained an interest in reading. This group is not uniform in orientation, although it contains significant overlaps and parallels.

Our own research agenda has remained relatively consistent over the years. We have attempted to determine how students read, and also how “student reading” can be used to test claims about reading provided by “reader-response” (a baggy and unstable category) theories of various kinds. We have also attempted to determine how readers can use reading not merely to report on texts or to construct their signifying functions, but also to learn about themselves as readers: that is, as readers who, in thinking and activating the thoughts of another, can learn about and critically engage their own proclivities to listen to those thoughts, to dialogue with, to learn from, or to shut them out. Teaching students to perform the necessary self-reflexive moves to promote this kind of self-understanding has always been a project of paramount importance to us, the sine qua non of our professional activity.

Obviously, our personal story can be discussed in terms of larger disciplinary narratives. For example, when we consider the ways in which we have framed our research questions, the processes of inquiry we have employed, and the kinds of texts we have analyzed, it is clear that our work could be used as evidence of how reading is studied differently in composition than it is in literature. But our work could also—and just as persuasively—be examined from another angle, as evidence of the intimate and long-lasting connection that exists between composition and literature, despite their divergent disciplinary trajectories, precisely through this shared interest in reading.

The fact that our personal story can be interpreted in these opposing ways, as evidence for competing disciplinary narratives, strikes us as especially telling. For it brings into vivid relief the confusion about reading so prevalent in English studies—confusion related, in part, to conflicting and problematic claims about disciplinary ownership, about “who” can be said to own “what.” Does composition “own” writing? Does literature “own” reading? Might there be versions of both writing and reading to which composition and literature can lay separate but equal claim? Though these issues are configured differently at different disciplinary moments, the problem of ownership has been variously inscribed and reinscribed in the narratives of English studies, continuously truncating or bypassing the nexus between reading and writing, only to confront and cross it again, at crucial moments of self-definition.

An especially critical self-defining moment occurred from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, when composition began to enact a separatist project with gusto,
declaring itself a discipline in its own right, with a discrete object of study (writing) and distinctive investigative protocols. Interestingly, even paradoxically (although not consistently across the field), it was reader-response theories that provided a discourse and mechanism for this declaration of self-legitimacy.

“Reading” (in) the 1980s

The story of the emergence (and eventual disappearance) of reading within composition study has been told before, one version most recently and most cogently by Patricia Harkin (other important pieces of the story have been provided by David Jolliffe and Allison Harl, and Thomas Newkirk). Although there is general agreement in these stories about trajectory, the interpretation of causes, effects, and implications (one of the most significant implications for us is how conceptualizations of reading determine the rationale for teaching or not teaching literature in the composition classroom) vary widely. In its basic form, the story goes like this: thanks to the development of reader-response theories (such as those of Roland Barthes, David Bleich, Judith Fetterley, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, Jane Tompkins, and others), theoretical attention shifted from what texts mean to how readers make them mean. Forty years later, it is easy to forget—as Harkin has also noted—how earth-shattering was that realization. Young historians of our discipline will need to understand, to fully appreciate, the reasons for and the effects of this realization.

Rather than conceptualize readers as the passive, if respectful, recipients of textual power governed by authorial intention, reader-response theorists situated readers at the center of the interpretive enterprise. It is because of these understandings of reading that it is now possible to say that, thanks to readers, texts are sites of potential. Thanks to readers, texts snap into life. Without readers, texts are inert, expressionless, empty, mute.

Because over time, the richness and diversity of reader-response theories seem to have been forgotten, we want to clarify that reader response is not, has never been, a monolithic category. Even within the area of reader response itself, the word reader has always been a signifier for various forms of textual enactments. Some readers (those imagined by Iser) are said to construct meaning by identifying textual gaps and “filling” them through a negotiation of repertoires that are both intimated by the text and brought to it in the form of readers’ literary experience and knowledge. Other readers (those imagined by Fish) bear primary responsibility for meaning-creation, with the text understood as an effect of the readers’ activities. Other theorists and commentators suggest how readers use texts to reflect and complicate individual life themes (Holland). Moreover, there have been significant moments of reader-oriented work in theoretical approaches that aren’t explicitly reader response.
Psychoanalytic theories of meaning-making posit an analysand whose therapeutic responsibility is to read and rewrite his or her personal story. Postmodern theories of analysis require a reader who can weave together a text’s disparate threads into a coherent, or incoherent, whole. Hermeneutical theories of reading posit readers (for example, those imagined by Hans-Georg Gadamer) who learn to align the questions they ask of a text with the questions, it can be argued, that undergird and motivate the writing of that text.

Of course, there are other ways to think of the reader’s activity—along multinational, multicultural, racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Readers do read differently depending on how they are positioned: as women, African American women, queer men, queer women, African American men, Asians, Europeans, Americans, subalterns, culturally empowered readers, resistant readers, and so on. But in all these cases, though differently according to the particular theory of reading, for a reader to learn to identify and analyze the effects of a text on oneself, is not only to understand the force and the effects of that text’s writing, but potentially the effects of one’s own writing as well.

Reading, even as this brief overview indicates, is a complex term that signifies a range of ideas, practices, assumptions, and identities. The recognition of its complexity only increases when it is understood that different theories of reading lead to different approaches to the reading of texts (especially student texts) in addition to the teaching of writing. Whether writing is seen as “simply” expressive or “simply” communicative, or as a reflection of a preexisting reality, or as an act of constructing a new reality, it is always subtended by a theory of what reading is and how reading functions. Such theories are more often implicit than explicit, but they necessarily and inevitably exert their influence precisely because “to read is to write is to read.”

Once questions were raised about how to teach writing in light of one’s various operations of reading, a door was opened. Once opened, that door made the study of students as readers, the reading activities of students in the writing classroom, and how those activities would shape and affect their writing, a theoretical and ethical must. The “question of the reader,” which raised attention to the question of the writer qua reader, came to be inextricably tied to and gained legitimacy as “the problem” of teaching and learning and “the problem” of how to read, interpret, and respond to student texts. (We wonder how much a renewed attention to reading might forestall the cropping up of websites like http://shitmystudentswrite.tumblr.com/.)

It could certainly be argued that composition’s most significant contribution to reading was its investigation of the student reader, an emphasis that literary studies eschewed because of its ongoing interest in the reader(s) as expert—an expertise students were expected to aspire to. The fact that this contribution also helped to further composition’s separatist ambitions is not to negate its importance. By constituting the student reader as a legitimate object of disciplinary study, composition
found itself asking increasingly profound and challenging questions about the student writer, about reading in general, and about reading and writing as analogous processes. In fact, it was the attempt to crystallize how the homology of reading/writing could be handily articulated that led David Kaufer and Gary Waller, in a richly provocative allusion to Jacques Derrida, to formulate the chiasmus we have mentioned several times in this essay—“to write is to read is to write.” Although this chiasmus became a compact and economical way of (almost a password for) alluding to and acknowledging a highly complex theoretical and pedagogical project, its potential was never as expansively or exhaustively examined as it deserved, nor were its implications for both the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing fully actualized. In a matter of years, the insight it crystallized became a cliché that obviated rather than encouraged self-reflection.

We cannot say strongly enough that one of the effects of reader-response theories on composition studies was the fostering of significant and respectful attention to student readers: the assumptions student readers brought to the reading activity; the ways in which they identified and negotiated textual difficulties; the ways in which teachers could encourage acts of critical self-reflection in student writing based on their understanding of reading; the ways in which teachers acknowledged their responsibility for using student work, from the ethics of citing it in their scholarship to its respectful representation elsewhere. Of course, student readers also entered composition studies through other gateways. For example, literacy studies promoted a similar kind of attention to student readers, by investigating the reading and writing practices of ordinary or “nonacademic” readers and writers.

As powerful as was the emergence of reader-response theories in the 1980s, a sea change occurred in the late 1990s, eventually leading to the weakening of reading as a scholarly field within composition studies. One reason for this development, ironically, was the very consolidation of composition studies as an autonomous field. Once this consolidation began to occur, or perhaps as part of the price paid for it, major sectors of composition studies became increasingly separated from literary studies and everything connected with it, which for many included so-called high theory and its presumed elitist associations. In acknowledgment of its more populist origins and its formative connection with “basic writing,” “basic writers,” and the “nontraditional student,” composition studies focused its energy on social processes and textual production—the accent here is on “social” and “production.” Issues of textual consumption fell into disrepute as something negative, passive, and derogatory; consumption came to be constructed as passive, automatic, a kind of unreflexive consumeristic ingestion. Significantly, reception theory, which seldom or rarely focused on students’ receptions, became a discrete scholarly category. It has survived, independently, in the form of conferences, publications, and journals, while reader response is now a term used most often to refer to a theoretical past (although
some reader-inflected scholarship continues to be published in composition studies, particularly in *Reader*).

In addition, whether consequentially or coincidentally, the theoretical winds shifted: reader-response theories were replaced by other kinds of work (especially those focusing on cultural and historical difference). “To write is to read is to write” remained in circulation as a sheltering metonymy. As we have already mentioned, unfortunately, its commonsense appeal seemed to block rather than stimulate the production of new ideas about how to teach reading, writing, and their interanimation. For these reasons, and probably many others—predictable, surprising, necessary, or unfortunate—the category of reader response was enervated. For many, it has come to connote something not quite scholarly, or intellectual, or cogent. Eventually substituted for the “hard” energizing, engaged, critical version of reader-response (and literacy) theories described up to this point was a “soft” version—especially in the classroom—which proclaimed the right of readers and students to their “own readings.” Once reader-oriented theories were viewed in this diminished form and used to justify the approach that “anything goes,” theoretically inflected work on reading was severely compromised. Whether consequentially or coincidentally, reader-response theories were replaced by other kinds of valuable and exciting work, especially those focusing on cultural and historical differences. But although this work was obviously (if only implicitly) grounded in sophisticated theories of reading, it focused more on what these theories could do than on how.

**Re-reading the (Misnamed) “Tate and Lindemann Debate”**

Our purpose in the previous section was to summarize a history in broad terms, a history that considers the role reader-response theories played in enabling composition to separate itself from literary studies through its attention to the student reader. Our history is somewhat peculiar in its focus on reading rather than writing, because the traditional story of composition’s autonomy tends to focus instead on writers and writing. We hope that the story of reading we suggest offers a new perspective, a different way of understanding our discipline’s trajectory—what it has been, what it could have been.

In this section, we want to hone in on a particular and especially telling event in that broader history, an event that was initiated in 1993 by the appearance in *College English* of two essays: one by Gary Tate and the other by Erika Lindemann. Although these essays were subsequently referred to in the discipline lore as the “Tate and Lindemann Debate,” they did not constitute a debate but an articulation of two divergent opinions on the place of literature in freshman composition.

In his essay “A Place for Literature in Freshman Composition,” Tate argued that the exclusion of literary texts (“an entire body of excellent writing”) from the
freshman writing course made it more difficult for students to improve their writing. Although he did not specify what he meant by “improvement,” how “excellent writing” would bring it about, and what criteria he considered relevant to the evaluation of student work, he did bemoan the apparent replacement of literature by rhetoric. The “Rhetoric Police,” he declared, had seized control, pushing aside “literary” considerations like “style” for such topics as “academic discourse,” “inventive procedures,” and “surface features” (318). He urged the discipline to adopt a “far more generous vision” of the kinds of texts (literary and nonliterary) considered appropriate for writing instruction (321).

In contrast to Tate’s call for inclusiveness, in “Freshman Composition,” Lindemann argued that for many years, students in writing courses had been harmed by a literature-centered pedagogy (a position that had also been forcefully addressed by William Coles), one that focused on textual consumption rather than production.9 She called into question a pedagogy that encouraged teachers to dominate classroom discussion (which implies that it was not literature per se she objected to, but how it was taught), and suggested that such pedagogy either failed to require a sufficient amount of student writing or divorced such writing from the intellectual demands of other disciplines. With these characterizations, we would largely concur.

Also in contrast to Tate, Lindemann took note of the significant work on reading that had been done in the humanities, drawing particular attention to “[r]eader response criticism, social constructionism, and feminist approaches,” and encouraging writing teachers to investigate these recent developments (314). Because such approaches can be fruitfully taught using a wide range of texts, she argued, why not eschew literature altogether in the freshman writing course, thereby avoiding the pitfalls associated with literature-focused writing courses? In their place, she recommended, could be substituted writing across the curriculum (WAC) courses that link writing instruction to content-based work in the disciplines, providing students with considerable experience in writing and reading numerous kinds of academic texts. We agree, of course, that reading can be taught without using literary texts, but we suggest that the force of Lindemann’s assertion may have deflected attention from the fact that literature, if examined through the theoretical screens of the approaches she called attention to, could have provided non-consumeristic responses.

What had been so innovative about theories of reading in the 1980s and early 1990s, and their potential for change, was that they shifted the conversation away from what to read to how to read. Neither Tate’s nor Lindemann’s positions, nor their reception, sufficiently confronted the importance and the implications of this shift. The issue for us is this: what does it mean to teach a particular kind of reading, and how is that reading to be connected to which kind of writing? And so we ask, what kind of “dialogue” might have emerged in composition studies at large if the protocols of reading articulated in critical theories of various kinds had been consid-
ered as analogous to protocols of writing? What difference might this have made if this question had been posed from the position of student readers and writers? How might these protocols unravel when students are encouraged to ask: how does this happen? Or, how did we come to learn to read in this way? What kind of retooling of teachers might have been necessary to make visible the kinds of complicated reading moves suggested by various theorists without reducing them to tips and steps to follow? Or what if students’ possible resistance to embrace such difficult theories might have forced teachers and students to ask irreverent questions of these very critical theories? And what if students’ reading difficulties had been approached as ways of better assessing the claims of various reading theories and of examining them as effects of readers’ preunderstandings (see Gadamer)? How could such questions have sharpened our understanding of reading theories and what this understanding can contribute to the teaching of writing?

**Reading History Symptomatically: What Can Be Learned from the CCCC Program?**

So what happened to make the professional conversation about writing and reading merely reproduce Tate and Lindemann’s? To answer this question, we turn our focus to the Call for Papers (CFP) and/or conference program (usually the nomenclature is the same) for the yearly CCCC convention. To acquire a sense of the trends and issues our convention highlights (acknowledging that what it highlights is necessarily representative of only some terms determined, for better or for worse, by those in charge of the program), we looked at the appearance and disappearance of certain Call for Papers/program categories from 1980 (when the first categories or “areas of interest” appeared) to the present time. These categories represent some variation of “reading” as suggested by “Reading/Writing Relationships,” or “Approaches to Teaching Writing/Reading,” or “Interrelationships of Composition and Literature,” to mention a few possibilities. For the years 1988–92, 1994, and 1998–99, we relied solely on the conference programs because we weren’t able to acquire CFPs. (This is not to say that the CFPs have disappeared altogether, only that we have not yet been able to locate them, despite considerable effort. If any of our readers can assist us in our efforts, we would be grateful.)

Before we begin, a few caveats. The story that we are attempting to trace here, as we’ve already suggested, is one characterized by lacunae and replete with fragments. To some extent this is not surprising, as professional histories tend to be written after considerable disciplinary consolidation has occurred, and it is virtually impossible to determine while in the middle or at the starting gate what will or will not turn out to be an event of any significance. As we have discovered in recent years (as have others; see, for example, Donna Qualley’s piece published in the spring 2011 issue
of *Reader*), the archives of conference materials are rather thin. It is a difficult, and
at times impossible, task to locate conference CFPs or to acquire answers to such
questions as “Why this theme and not another?” “Who was in the room when the
decision was made?” “What alternatives were considered?” “When did a particular
practice become institutionalized, and how, and why?” People assume that documents
were kept and that the archives are rich, well organized, and complete, when actually
they’re not. (Through no one’s fault. It’s just how things are.) Important decisions
about conference themes and areas of interest (later, “clusters”) were made, but re-
cords weren’t always kept, or are no longer available. Meetings were conducted, but
minutes weren’t taken. Memories diminished over time. Key players and program
chairs passed away.11 Personal documents slipped into oblivion. Documents were lost.
(For example, we recently learned from Sue Gallivan at NCTE that some materi-
als in the NCTE archive project were damaged when they were stored in Rantoul,
Illinois, during the renovation of the University of Illinois library.) Again, none
of this is offered as a criticism, but rather as an acknowledgment of the inevitable
consequences of busy people with limited resources and support trying their best
to mount an increasingly crowded and complicated participant event for a highly
diverse professional community.12 It is also offered as a reflection on how decisions
made under these trying circumstances nevertheless can and do have consequences
for the shape of a discipline (a point we’ll return to at the end of this essay).

So what was our launching point for this investigation? Several years ago (May
2005), in an effort to trace and track this disappearance of reading as an area of inter-
est for the CCCC convention, Mariolina Salvatori contacted by email a number of
program chairs from the period of 1973 to 2007, with the help of the CCCC’s then
secretary, who provided her with names and email addresses.13 In her introductory
letter, Salvatori mentioned that she was writing a piece on reading and was interested
in calling attention to a possible relation between the CFP categories (especially the
“relations between reading and writing”; Salvatori’s language) and the emergence or
disappearance of certain terms and categories as represented in the titles of papers
and as recorded in the convention’s program. She then posed several questions,
these among them:

1. What is your sense or recollection of when the convention’s Call for Papers began to
be organized according to specific categories?

2. What is your sense of how those changes affected or reflected certain aspects of composi-
tion studies?

Almost every chair graciously responded to Salvatori’s email and expressed interest
in the project. Their responses helped us read the data we had collected. (Though
we have received permission from some chairs to publish their comments, we have
not yet received permission from all of them. We will therefore classify various
comments largely without attribution. Our interest is not in what individual chairs decided, but in larger patterns of inclusion and exclusion.)

1980–1990

Prior to 1980, an “official” conference CFP proposal form did not exist. It was instituted by Lynn Troyka, and within it, for the first time, under “areas of interest,” appeared the category “Reading/Writing Relationships.” In an email communication, Troyka told us that the category grew out of the submitted and accepted proposals themselves as well as her personal scholarly investment in the topic. (We realize that such an organic, bottom-up definition and inscription of categories becomes less and less feasible as the field expands.) This category (“Reading/Writing Relationships”) appeared in 1980 and lasted until 1984. In 1985 the key terms were reversed, and the category became “Writing/Reading Relationships” (“Responding to Student Writing,” a new category with the potential to serve as a “reading” category, also appeared at this time). In 1986, both categories disappeared (although “Responding to Student Writing” returned in 1987) and a new, more general category emerged for one year only: “Relationships between the Language Arts.” In 1987, two new “reading” categories were offered: “Social Contexts of Reading and Writing” and “Writing/Reading/Critical Thinking.” In 1988, “Writing/Reading/Critical Thinking” was retained; the “Social Contexts [...]” category was revised to become “Social Contexts of Writing, Reading, Speaking”; and a new category emerged, “Approaches to Teaching Writing/Reading.” In 1989, “Approaches to Teaching Writing/Reading” disappeared, but the other two were retained. And in 1990, “Social Contexts of Writing, Reading, and Speaking” was retained, and four new categories were offered: “The Essay/Writing and Reading”; “Interrelationships of Literature and Composition”; “Research on Reading Processes”; and “Writers Reading Their Work and Talking about Writing.”

1991–2000

The next ten years (1991–2000) demonstrated significant changes, not only in nomenclature but in the reduction of the number of reading categories. In 1991, the category on the essay was eliminated; “Research” was retained,” as were “Social Contexts [...]” and “Writers Reading [...].” In 1992, “Literature and Composition” appeared for the first time. (It might have provided a context for the Tate and Lindemann debate. We are not sure about this, and we have not investigated the possibility. But, again, we want to pose the question of how to establish criteria for interpreting disciplinary records.) In 1993, the following new categories emerged: “Interrelationships of Composition and Literature” (note the significant inversions of terms and categories) and “Social Contexts of Reading, Writing, and Speaking.” In
1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997, only “Literature and Composition” was used. In 1998, “Literature and Composition” remained, and “Responding to Writing” was added. In 1999, both of these categories remained, but in the following year (2000), “Responding to Student Writing” was dropped, while “Literature and Composition” was retained.

2001–2011

In the next ten years (2001–11), “Reading” retained its invisibility for most of the period (remember that it last appeared, specifically, in 1991). In 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007, there was no reference to “Reading” or “Literature and Composition/Composition and Literature,” but there was a focus on evaluation and response, and, briefly, an acknowledgment of the contribution made to composition studies by other disciplines (which might be understood as implying an interest in reading).

2001: “Evaluating Student Writing” and “Theories from Other Disciplines”
2002: “Evaluating Student Writing” and “Theories [. . .]”
2003: “Evaluation of Student Texts” and “Response to Student Texts”
2004: same as 2003
2005: same as 2003
2006: “Response to Student Texts”
2007: same as 2006

In 2008, “Response to Student Texts” was retained, and a category called “Theories of Reading and Writing” appeared. Both these categories were retained in 2009, 2010, and 2011.

Although it is encouraging (and downright exciting) to see that since 2008, the words theologies, reading, and writing appear in association, it remains puzzling that for seventeen years the word reading was completely invisible. A hiatus of seventeen years? For those of us committed to examining the relationship between reading and writing, or the reading and writing connection, or the social contexts of reading and writing, or the disciplinary and curricular implications of teaching reading and writing as interconnected activities, or any possible combination of the once-available terms, this was a most discouraging, frustrating, and at times even anxiety-producing development. Why should one engage in inquiry that has been waved to the disciplinary borderlands or erased from the map altogether?

We’ll hold those questions in abeyance to turn to the second of Salvatori’s queries—the role played by program chairs in adopting or eliminating categories. Most of the chairs said that they had inherited a particular series of terms and had neither time nor opportunity to change them. A few chairs stated that they had been actively “dissuaded” from making changes. One chair felt that she had been
“prevented” from doing so. Another chair recalled that there had been significant discussion about the categories in 1999 (although the changes that were proposed were not implemented until 2002), and that no one saw any need to revisit the issue for a while. A few chairs stated that they were able to either “tinker with the categories” or provide explanatory material, or even change them altogether. (In 1995, for example, several categories devoted to multiculturalism were added: “Issues of Race, Issues of Ethnicity, Issues of Class, Issues of Gender, Sexual Orientation,” and so on.) Only a few chairs viewed the CFP categories as playing a role in influencing or fashioning the shape of the field. One saw no connection and pointed out that, no matter which categories are listed, proposers find a way to work around them, so as to say what they want to say.

Certainly that has been our personal experience: despite the disappearance of the categories of “Reading/Writing Relationships,” “Approaches to Teaching Writing/Reading,” and “Research on Reading Processes,” we have found ways to present our work. But to do so, we occasionally have had to work around, manipulate, or “psych out” the areas of interest legitimized by the CFP form.14

We want to anticipate several possible objections to our argument, principal among them that “after all, the areas of interest, categories, clusters” are just “suggestions” (which is what some of the chairs who responded to Salvatori’s query asserted), along with the idea that, actually, if one reads the CFPs and the programs wisely and rationally, one would know that there is no writing apart from reading—we are all always already reading (whether we are reading our own work, or the work of our students, colleagues, or theorists). After all, don’t we teach reading whenever we teach our students to engage and learn from the theories of writing, rhetoric, and genre we assign them to work with and from? Honestly, what is this fuss all about?

The fuss is about what this “commonsensical” response shunts. To say that our field is suffused with reading, but to reduce reading to a kind of pervasive background influence and to push it to the borderlines is, we argue, problematic. In “Reading as Construction,” Tzvetan Todorov wrote, “What is omnipresent is imperceptible. Nothing is more commonplace than the reading experience, and yet nothing is more unknown. Reading is such a matter of course that, at first glance, it seems there is nothing to say about it” (67). To read this now sounds to us as startling and igniting as it did when we first read it in the 1980s. We relearn the force of this statement every time we ask our students—undergraduate and graduate—to describe what they do when they read. Their initial puzzlement at finding a language to make visible readings’ invisible moves, the subtle insights into the processes of reading and writing and the interconnection produced once they learn to do this kind of work, and the understanding of and engagement with student texts that such work can nurture, are worth calling attention to. We believe that this attention to reading can make a significant difference in a teacher’s education.
So, we argue, the absence of such categories as “Reading/Writing Relationships” or of the term reading is significant: it suggests the invisibility of reading in composition studies, not so much because reading is considered unworthy of critical scrutiny, but because it is perceived as omnipresent, commonplace. It is taken for granted. But if, as Todorov argues, what is omnipresent and commonplace becomes imperceptible, and hence unknown, unknowable, or unworthy of inquiry, then the absence of the reading categories in programs and CFPs needs to be exposed and confronted.

**Reading as Slouching Beast: Reconsiderations and Questions**

At the beginning of this essay, we identified as our purpose the interrogation of college English as “a term, a discipline, a concept” so as to better understand the place for reading within it. Such a project is a complicated and nearly impossible task. For not only is “discipline” a category always under construction (which is one reason that the apparent revival of reading as a theoretical and pedagogical moment is so interesting to us; the sands are visibly shifting), there is also the fact that while definitions and identifications are necessary and useful, they are also inevitably selective, partial, and exclusionary. Often, once a disciplinary definition gains currency, what gets to be forgotten is what it had to exclude.

It is also important to acknowledge that disciplines are defined only through the narratives constructed to do the work of definition. Through its archival research and theoretical frame, each narrative foregrounds certain events, features, and happenings, leaving other equally telling details in the background. Often revisionary histories change the established views by recuperating or rearranging some of the details previously elided. By recuperating a history of reading that has waxed and waned over the years, our narrative does exactly that. By bringing reading from the periphery to the center, for example, it helps to raise questions about the disciplinary reading of the Tate and Lindemann debate and its effect on college English broadly understood. And it suggests that a continued, more in-depth attention to processes and theories of reading, and questions about the teaching of writing they promote and ask for, might have brought the two positions into critical dialogue, with transformative potential for the discipline. This did not happen. But we are cautiously optimistic that it might happen. Perhaps this is one issue that the “revival” of interest in reading could reanimate. And it is highly possible that this journal, *College English*, will play a significant role in igniting this dialogue, precisely because of its mixed readership, its divergence of professional interests, its capacity for cross-pollinations and intersections of various kinds. It is no accident that *College English* is where the Tate and Lindemann essays were published years ago.
Our symptomatic reading of CCCC categories also urges us to make several observations about disciplinary construction. As several program chairs have suggested, convention categories don’t mean much; one can always tweak the title and theme to make one’s proposal fit. This is, we have acknowledged, true. But, to somebody who years from now should look at a convention program, and see the key terms of the “Program Statement” repeated over and over in titles of panels and of papers, what would that prominence suggest? Of course, good historiographers would not read that recurrence of terms as ipso facto significant, unless all the papers presented (and the reasons for bending to the CFP) were carefully analyzed. So what exactly does a program chair statement signify? We have evidence from several past program chairs that the categories were instead significant: they were deliberately tweaked to account for and acknowledge what that program chair and others present at the meeting thought to be significant trends in the discipline.

Although causes and effects are simple to imagine but difficult to document and demonstrate, it does seem obvious that program categories do indeed play a role in the fashioning of our discipline. They have a rippling effect. They signal the kind of work considered of central importance. How could it not be significant that on a list of professional topics, some possibilities are included and others excluded? Why should younger scholars undertake certain projects if there is little or no evidence of the projects’ interest to others? We want to think that this convention exists both to record and to advance knowledge in the field, but is it able to fulfill this demanding aspiration if by inertia it risks reproducing only what is already there?

So, what can we say about this apparent revival of the question of reading (in one or another of the formulations we have just sketched) after approximately two decades of relative inattention? From our perspective, this revival can be read as an acknowledgment of the multifarious complexity of reading, its irreducible difficulty to be temporarily fixed in order to be recaptured, assessed, explored, and accounted for through writing; and the difficulty it sets up for teachers of writing to reflect on, to make manifest, and to remain consistent with and responsible to the ways of reading that determine their comments on and interventions in their students’ writing.

As we have discussed throughout this essay, the definitions, hence the functions, purposes, and advantages, of reading differ within and across programs in English studies (and more so across disciplines). But these differences can be productive, rather than divisive. (Ask a graduate student in creative writing to define reading for his or her colleagues in theory or composition, and you can have, if you focus on the reasons for those differences, a lively and illuminating discussion.) Insofar as the teaching of reading in the teaching of writing, or the need for it, is now frequently addressed, what this may prompt interrogating is the rationale for teaching writing without texts for students to read, to discuss, to examine and reflect on—activities
that may provide invaluable ways of understanding otherwise inaccessible processes of thinking. Could the elision of literature from writing classrooms, and current repeated arguments about the importance of reading for writing, suggest that, after all, it is not literature per se, but the way it has been taught, that has not fostered good writing (whatever that means) in the composition classroom? Could it suggest that, given the changes in student population, this attention to reading signals renewed attempts to confront and to embrace the fact that we cannot make simple (simplistic) assumptions about what and how students read, and how that affects their writing? Could it suggest that the strategic and convenient separation of reading from writing (a metonym for the separation of literature from composition), meaningful perhaps at certain times, is no longer so? Could these returns to reading suggest awareness that as a discipline, we have failed to take full advantage of reading as an analogue for thinking? Did the kind of theorization of reading we are advocating disappear because it had done its work and the discipline no longer needed it, and then moved toward something else; or because, theoretically, programmatically, and institutionally, it was too demanding to engage?

These, we suggest, are questions that now need to be addressed.

Notes

1. The question of whether composition is an area, a field of study, or a discipline remains a vexing one—as is the question of nomenclature. In this essay we use the terms composition and composition studies interchangeably. Though we consider composition studies and literature/literary studies to be different fields within the larger discipline called English studies, we understand why there is a desire on the part of many writing specialists to describe composition as an autonomous discipline, completely separate from literature.

2. Contributors to Reader in the late 1970s and 1980s included Charles Altieri, Ann E. Berthoff, David Bleich, Deborah Brandt, Steven Mailloux, Kathleen McCormick, Bruce Peterson, Louise Rosenblatt, John Schilb, David Shumway, and many others. (It should be noted that Reader began as a newsletter that grew directly out of a forum on “The Reader of Literature,” organized by Robert Crossman and James Slevin, at the MLA convention in 1976. For many years, it was edited by Elizabeth Flynn, then coedited by Paul Kameen and Mariolina Salvatori; it is now edited by Patricia Donahue.)

3. Although new books are still in the “rumor” stage, in the most recent issue of Pedagogy (winter 2012), three new essays on reading (focusing on reading in various ways) have appeared: by Ira James Allen, Erick Kelemen, and Paul T. Corrigan.

4. For us, being in composition never meant not being in literature and theory.

5. What’s the point of teaching sophisticated readings of texts, but then reducing the teaching of writing to preestablished formulas? What’s the point of teaching reading in the writing classroom when most assignments, unfortunately, seem to function in a particular way: instead of asking students to mine those readings or to reflect on their reading activity, the assignments treat texts merely as a starting point that students are seldom asked to revisit. Such assignments ask students first to read (to read “about”), then to write.

6. The phrase provides most of the title of an essay (“To Write Is to Read Is to Write, Right?”) that appeared in an influential collection of essays edited by Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson and published in 1985: Writing and Reading Differently. Because Kaufer was an associate professor of rhetoric and English at Carnegie-Mellon, and Waller a professor of literary studies also at Carnegie-Mellon, their
collaboration serves as an especially vivid example of how the gap between literature and composition can be bridged in scholarly practice. The essay offers numerous formulations of how the interaction between reading and writing can be understood: for example, “Deconstruction gives substance to that widely felt experience that to ‘read’ a text is always to be thrown into language, into its flows and surprises, and to recognize that we are part of that flow, that ‘writing.’ Reading and writing, within deconstruction’s premises, moves as a linguistic and cultural yin and yang: we read each other, the signs of the world, the nuances or blatant assaults of political, commercial, cultural signs; and to ‘read’ is to find ourselves within ‘writing’” (83). It is interesting to note that Writing and Reading Differently also emerged from a composition/literature collaboration, a graduate course team-taught at the University of Kansas by Atkins (a specialist in eighteenth-century literature) and Johnson (the director of freshman-sophomore English).

Finally, we want to mention that Writing and Reading Differently was one of several books published during the 1980s that offered powerful theoretical and pedagogical examinations of reading and its relationship to writing. Other titles include Louise Smith, Audits of Meaning; Winifred Horner, Composition & Literature; David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrofsky, Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts; Thomas Newkirk, Only Connect; and Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl, Reclaiming Pedagogy.

7. Additional work we have done on these issues can be found in The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty, “The Figure of the Student in Composition Textbooks,” “Citation Difficulties,” and “Disappearing Acts.”

8. The phrase echoes “students’ right to their own language” (another phrase whose possibilities were never thoroughly mined), but it never had a comparable political investment. It was more of a laissez-faire position.

9. We hinted earlier at the negative connotation “consumption” acquired.

10. See the essays and framing materials in Donahue and Gretchen Moon, Local Histories, for several examinations of this idea.

11. John Lovas, who has passed away, provided an articulate assessment at the CCCC planning meeting of what categories are and can be used for. According to a chair present at that 1999 meeting, not much of his proposed change was implemented.

12. At least three of the chairs who responded to Salvatori’s questions mentioned the lack of support for organizing the convention. More recent chairs mentioned that the task of organizing an increasingly larger convention is taken into more serious consideration, which nevertheless calls attention to the incredible demands made on earlier chairs. These are stories that our discipline should hear to better understand itself.

13. Our thanks, again, to the following chairs who responded to Salvatori’s email: David Bartholomae, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Lester Faigley, Keith Gilyard, Anne Gere, Cheryl Glenn, Doug Hesse, Shirley Logan, John Lovas, Jacqueline Royster, Cynthia Selfe, Lynn Troyka, Victor Villanueva, and Kathleen Yancey.

14. Again, it should be noted that the reduction of categories did not necessarily mean that fewer papers about reading were presented at the conference. “Reading” might have appeared under a variety of guises, on different panels, in different sessions.

Works Cited


