

## The Labor of Composition

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Review of *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, edited by Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola and *Response to Reform: Composition and the Professionalization of Teaching*, by Margaret J. Marshall.

The issue of who should teach college composition is not new; in 1971, for instance, Ray Kytle published an article in *CCC* titled, "Slaves, Serfs, or Colleagues, Who Shall Teach College Composition?" Over thirty years later, however, the issue has gained renewed attention with the rise of the "managed university." Sparked, in part, by Marc Bousquet's award-winning article in *JAC*, "Composition as Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA," discussions have erupted of late focusing on the labor of writing instruction in post-secondary educational institutions. From the email list for writing program administrators to h-rhetor to an issue of *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, the composition labor structure has received immense and careful examination, encompassing a variety of possible solutions. In a recent contribution to *College English*, for instance, Richard Miller, a frequent target of Bousquet's and others' criticisms, relies on the corporate turn in higher education as a means for change. He writes, "In this world turned upside down, the case can be made that it is now crucial to the long-term financial well-being of public institutions of higher education to improve the working conditions of writing instructors, precisely because writing programs have access to all those impressionable and invaluable future donors" (378). However unsettling it might be to envision our students as "future donors," Miller's proposal highlights the complicated and depressing state of funding in higher education as well as the labor structure in composition.

As a teacher of composition who has just transitioned from graduate student to professor, I have witnessed and experienced the unsettling hierarchies of workers in college composition. However, that labor structure, while lived by many in the field, receives little attention in graduate studies in the field. Therefore, the recent publication of Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola's edited collection *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University* and Margaret J. Marshall's *Response to Reform: Composition and the Professionalization of Teaching* proves timely as both works reflect on and respond to many of the issues pushing the lively debate. Moreover, both works provide a means for exposing present and future workers in the field to the complicated labor structure of composition, and, increasingly, of higher education in general.

While scholarly conversations, both formal and informal, show an engagement by those in the field with issues of labor, economics, and work, the discussions have been limited. This lack in the field forms the

core of both books. As both works argue, composition workers, graduate students, adjunct instructors, and tenure-track professors, can ill afford to ignore the labor structures in their departments, institutions, and communities. In turn, both publications, through different means, strive for the same ends: more equitable and fair working conditions for all literacy workers in educational institutions. As a means to these ends, Marshall and Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola interrogate and assemble varying, and at times contradictory, illustrations of the labor problems and possible solutions. And, it is in these investigations of the current labor situation, more so than the solutions, that both works offer, sadly, illuminating exposure to the dark side of composition, an exposure from which all literacy workers, and hopefully, the field, will benefit.

### **Labor and Composition**

To shed some much needed and overdue light on the complicated and expansive labor issues in writing programs, Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola offer their edited collection, *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*. Building upon a recent special issue of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, the editors assemble a large collection of essays that not only investigates the troubling labor structure of writing programs but pushes towards equitable solutions. This collection provides a thorough consideration of academic labor that will prove vital to all workers in the field of rhetoric and composition.

The collection is divided into four sections and is book-ended by two scholars' reflections on the connection of writing programs to labor issues in higher education in general. Randy Martin, editor of the invaluable collection *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, provides a foreword to the collection, in which he argues that rather than seeing the rise of services as the end of industrialization these "service" industries, such as higher education, have been industrialized. In an industrialized university, a university that functions as the portal to the "post-industrialized world", composition, as a lone general requirement, will be best positioned when it "acknowledges the politics of its own labors" (xi). Marc Bousquet, in his introduction to the collection, "Does a 'Good Job Market in Composition' Help Composition Labor?", begins to investigate the politics of composition's labors by acknowledging that there is something different about the field of rhetoric and composition in terms of employability and the role of management in employment. Positioning rhetoric and composition as the canary in the mine for the academy, Bousquet sees the field's employment structure, "where as much as 93 percent of all sections are taught by graduate students and other 'disposable' teachers," as an exemplar of future labor relations in the managed university (4-5).

Part one of the collection, "Disciplinary and Capitalist Ideology," provides engaging essays and stands as the strongest section of the book. Perhaps partly due to its placement in the collection, the first section succeeds at not only investigating the troubling labor structure of composition but also situating that labor structure in issues of democracy,

capitalism, and disciplinarity. For example, Richard Ohmann's "Citizenship and Literacy Work: Thoughts Without a Conclusion" questions the ability of literacy work to improve the standing of citizens. Further, within the discipline, Ohmann sees little proof that the gains of composition's professionalization have improved the lives of those who do the majority of the front-line work in the field (43). In turn, he advises an avoidance of management discourse and a push towards unionization. This consideration of management discourse is also interrogated in Marc Bousquet's contribution "Composition as a Management Science." Throughout the essay, Bousquet problematizes the rhetoric of "pleasing the prince" as a means to changing institutions found in much composition scholarship. Instead, he argues for solidarity, claiming "change in composition depends primarily upon the organized voice and collective action of composition labor" (12). In this claim, Bousquet introduces a recurring call throughout the collection, solidarity is key to any change in the labor structure of composition. The "we" of composition scholarship must be interrogated, forcing, in Bousquet's opinion, those who manage to turn to the workers for lessons of change.

Donna Strickland addresses the problematic "we" of composition through an examination of the "managerial unconscious" underlying the field. Her essay, "The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies" points to the importance of administration, mainly of writing programs, throughout the field's development. Yet, the field is frequently aligned with teaching, "resulting in an obscuring of the administrative function," and, in turn, the history of the field built on a "managerial unconscious" (47). However, compositionists can employ their position at the border between traditional faculty and managerial professionals to enact changes through critique and action. Also addressing borders, albeit the borders within a discipline, David B. Downing, in "Global Capitalism, Scientific Management, and Disciplinary English," traces the growth of disciplinarity and English, claiming that English has come to reflect flexible accumulation in terms of labor practices. He envisions a less hierarchical labor structure in which English professors engage in a range of tasks "along a horizontal spectrum from disciplinary to non- or post-disciplinary practices" (68). Concluding the opening section, Paul Lauter, in "From Adelphi to Enron, and Back," echoes the other essays by connecting the structure of the managed university to the ruling free-market ideology. He examines the commonplace assertion that "what sells is the only meaningful criterion of value" (72), relying on Adelphi and Enron as instances of the commonplace and troubling ideology of a particular time, but one that can be dismantled, especially by universities.

Building upon the general call for solidarity of Part One, Part Two, "Putting Labor First," explores the consequences and possibilities of putting those who teach composition ahead of those who manage composition. In the piece that makes the call for solidarity most explicit, Bill Hendricks' "Making a Place for Labor: Composition and Unions" starts from one of the more troubling aspects of the field: the ignored state of labor and a disregard for unions. Instead, arguments abound on the abolition (or not) of composition; an issue which, he contends, should be decided locally. What needs to be of more global concern is not

composition's abolition but justice for those who do and will continue to teach composition. Echoing a familiar theme, Hendricks asserts, "It is the collective that matters" (96). In an effort to illustrate Hendricks' call for unionization, or at least a knowledge of collective organization, Eileen Schell offers "Toward a New Labor Movement in Higher Education." The bulk of Schell's contribution "report[s] on and analyze[s] campus, municipal, state-wide, national, and international organizing campaigns to address the working conditions of part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, many of them first-year writing teachers" (101). Providing readers with a plan of action, Schell points to the importance of presenting the costs of contingent labor instead of the cost-savings, the need for a rhetoric of common cause, and the enabling of coalition building (109).

Eric Marshall, in a push for a rhetoric of common cause, offers a first-person account of his experience as a part-timer and labor activist. His essay, "Teaching Writing in a Managed Environment," relies on his personal experiences to claim that more than any other academic discipline, "composition remains a primary site of managerial opportunism and labor exploitation" (116). Again, a rhetoric of common cause is essential because "what is good for part-timers is good for full-timers" (117). Also relying on a more personal approach, although done as a dialogue, William H. Thelin and Leann Bertocini's "When Critical Pedagogy Becomes Bad Teaching: Blunders in Adjunct Review" examines the problematic nature of a standard syllabi. In this case, Bertocini describes her attempt to implement her critical pedagogy with an assigned syllabus, which eventually results in a loss of employment. The incident allows the authors to demonstrate the difficulties adjunct teachers in writing programs face implementing curricular change as well as the tenuousness of their position as employees in the program.

In one of the more curricular and programmatic contributions to Part Two, Steve Parks, in "The Role of Writing Programs in Labor Relations," outlines how the various aspects of a writing program can engage in economic issues and affect labor relations. Inherent in Parks' refiguring of a writing program is a more committed engagement with "individuals or labor organizations outside the university community" (122). When the four parts of a writing program (first-year writing, upper-division writing courses, writing centers, and faculty development) engage with local labor issues, Parks argues, students and literacy workers will see writing as part of a "collective moment" (125). Part of that collective moment is expanded upon by Ruth Kiefson in the concluding piece of Part Two, "The Politics and Economics of the Super-Exploitation of Adjuncts." Kiefson explicates the state of labor under the latest stage of capitalism and connects it to academic labor. Unfortunately, much of this explication, which should be familiar to academic workers, might be new to readers in the field.

Part Three, "Critique of Managerialism" is highlighted by Tony Scott's "Managing Labor and Literacy in the Future of Composition Studies." As a field, Scott claims, "We have . . . been unwilling to develop a body of research that explores how universities' historic reliance on a contingent labor force to teach composition classes affects literacy education" (155).

As Scott contends, this concern leads to uncomfortable questions; but, I argue, it also comes dangerously close to offering a scapegoat, contingent labor and part-time teachers, for literacy concerns. He also outlines an important contradiction in the field: We have always, for the most part, identified ourselves as progressive, anti-elitist, and pro-student. However, if we are complicit with the current labor situation, how does that identification shift?

Each of the remaining contributions to Part Three points to specific alarming trends in the field. William Vaughn, in "I Was an Adjunct Administrator," looks at the rise in adjunct administration positions, while Katherine V. Wills' "The Lure of 'Easy' Psychic Income" focuses on factors beyond pay in the acceptance of part-time jobs. Amanda Godley and Jennifer Seibel Trainor, in "Embracing the Logic of the Marketplace: New Rhetorics for the Old Problem of Labor in Composition," contrast two campuses' handling of full-time, non-tenure track faculty. The essay succeeds in presenting the complicated nature of making arguments for contingent faculty; how does one argue and for whom? Christopher Carter, in his essay "Bureaucratic Essentialism and the Corporatization of Composition," attempts to expose the myth that "compositionists are essentially bureaucratic" (187). He argues against short-term gains which inevitably include assimilation into and naturalization of corporate culture. Carter pushes for an interrogation of the inevitability of bureaucracy that is continued by Walter Jacobson in "Composition and the Future of Contingency: Labor and Identity in Composition." Jacobson implores those in the field to constantly ask questions about the system, such as "Whose system? Which system?" (200).

Extending the calls for collective activism of Part Two, Part Four, "Pedagogy and Possibility," presents pedagogical and programmatic options for English Departments and writing programs. Leo Parascondola, in "'Write-to-Earn': College Writing and Management Discourse," illustrates some of the ways in which "historically significant management discourses symbiotically intersect with U.S. college writing instruction, with special attention to the marriage of 'write-to-learn' rhetorics with 'write-to-earn' management discourse" (209). Our field's attachment to education, literacy education in particular, as a means to defeating social inequality, he contends, actually perpetuates inequality with its embrace of free-market ideology. The epistemologies of language operating in a capitalist economy are drawn back to the split in English Departments by Ray Watkins. In "The Future of English Departments: Cultural Capital and Professional Writing," Watkins attempts to bridge the epistemologies of language dividing English Departments by advocating ethnographic methodologies.

Rather than bridging the English Department divide, Christopher Ferry pushes for composition to combat its secondary status in English Departments through internal change. In this direction, he maintains that the field must reflect on how it sees itself, aiming towards composition as teaching work. In terms of the teaching work that compositionists do, Robin Truth Goodman denounces expressivist pedagogy as complicit to capital accumulation. Instead, she advocates critical pedagogy as

necessary for students to act in the world. Building upon Goodman's advocacy of critical pedagogy, Donald Lazere, in "Composition, Culture Studies, and Critical Pedagogy in the Managed University," outlines his pedagogy centered on teaching the political conflicts. Reminiscent of Park's push for all aspects of writing programs to engage with local labor issues, the essays in the final part offer pedagogies to supplement such programmatic engagements.

The collection closes with an afterword titled "Educating for Literacy, Working for Dignity" from Gary Rhodes, the author of *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor*. Like Martin's foreword, Rhodes' afterword provides a useful bookend by connecting labor issues in writing programs to issues of labor in higher education. While, as Bousquet contends, rhetoric and composition may be the canary in the labor mine, it is not an anomaly in higher education and must contextualize its labor structure in that of the managed university. Rhodes argues for cross-disciplinary collective action, indicating that "[s]eeking status within the academy is a fool's paradise" (262). Further, he sees those working in composition engaging in work that is central to a democratic, capitalist society, as potential leaders in collective action both within and outside the university.

### **Labor and the Teaching of/in Composition**

If one might fault Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola's collection for laboring over the issues of labor, Margaret J. Marshall's *Response to Reform: Composition and the Professionalization of Teaching* provides a productive, unique response, or companion, to *Writing Bosses* and much of the current scholarship on labor. Marshall points to a tendency in the field to resurrect and repackage prejudices "from a time now dead," resulting in the repeating of "patterns of discourse that have generated the very conditions we wish to alter or refuse" (2). The strength of Marshall's book is her interrogation of the field's inheritance of past prejudices, offering a history of the field's relationship and identification to teaching. This history relies on a variety of historical sources, ranging from late-eighteenth century editorials to the Boyer report. (This report, actually titled "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities," was originally initiated under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. However, during the second meeting of the commission, the director of the Carnegie Foundation, Ernest Boyer, died, resulting in this public document, commonly referred to as "the Boyer report.") Throughout the work, Marshall exhibits a commitment to teachers and to the teaching of writing, making her claims and solutions, if not novel, all the more compelling.

In the first chapter, Marshall lays out the key claims that she will investigate throughout the book. Subsequent chapters take up these claims, creating a linear, progressive argument structure. In her initial claim, Marshall asserts that "those of us who teach composition to undergraduates are engaged in the newest level of common school literacy" (4). She traces the shifting definitions of literacy in the country,

showing how the expansion of schooling and the country's definition of "literate" currently meet in the first-year composition course. In turn, this initial claim leads to another claim regarding teachers of literacy: As literacy expectations change, teachers routinely become targets of blame for literacy deficits. This, in turn, regularly leads to a call for the professionalization of teachers; however, "the efforts to professionalize teachers have actually denied teachers professional status because they have not included the kinds of education that would allow teachers to make independent, informed judgments, an essential function of a professional" (10). Closing the opening chapter, Marshall points towards current education reforms as reflecting the complicated and historically oxymoronic nature of the call to professionalize teachers.

In the second chapter, Marshall explores the rhetoric of blame targeted towards teachers since the eighteenth century through her claim that "although the attempts to improve education by improving teachers has employed the rhetoric of professionalization, these efforts have not provided the kind of education that enables teachers to make independent judgments that qualify them as professionals" (18). Marshall traces back two hundred years from the fairly recent Boyer report to an editorial on teaching in a 1789 popular magazine. Although her claims rely on single documents at times, such as the editorial, Marshall convincingly suggests that the Boyer report and other recent calls for reform merely echo older calls, showing a continued disdain for teachers and teaching. An analysis of the Boyer report is continued in chapter three as Marshall illustrates the report's lack of a reconsideration of the status of research, relying instead on research universities as the pinnacle of higher education. Moreover, like the Boyer report, recent attempts to revise intellectual work criteria reproduce similar prejudices by not going far enough in "insisting that faculty activities be evaluated and measured by articulated criteria representing the intellectual engagement of professional scholar-teachers" (137).

Marshall continues her critique of teaching reform movements by turning towards recent scholarship in the field attempting to alter the material conditions of teaching. In particular, Marshall focuses on Eileen Schell's and Patricia Stock's edited collection *Moving a Mountain: Contingent Faculty in Composition*. Although positioning the collection as a significant contribution to the field, Marshall is troubled that "the volume concentrates its focus and its rhetoric with the language of labor and not the language of profession or scholarly knowledge" (138). In this compelling critique, Marshall shows concern for the material conditions of all teachers, contending that "the separation of contingent teachers of composition from other teacher-scholars in higher education seems a grave misstep" (139). Seeing these concerns as issues of labor rather than issues of the profession furthers the secondary status of teachers and teaching as opposed to scholars and scholarship. She concludes that attempts to improve material conditions of teaching by turning to labor have been, and will continue to be, unsuccessful.

In an attempt to offer successful possibilities for reform, Marshall heuristically poses the question, "what reforms might those of us in

composition undertake to interrupt the historical patterns that constitute teaching as merely 'women's work,' unimportant, and anti-intellectual" (146)? Although she sees collective action in the form of labor unions as problematic, Marshall does offer five areas for further collective consideration. "Allowing for choice" is a key to Marshall; she explains that teaching, even the type of teaching one undertakes, is a choice. In addition, she argues for "accommodating difference" specifically by fostering the interdisciplinarity of the field. Further, she pushes for collaboration by "disrupting hierarchies" especially in areas such as curriculum design. And, regarding the education of new teachers, writing programs must show a commitment towards aiding new teachers throughout their teaching careers. Finally, professors must profess, particularly to public audiences.

Flexible and contingent are more than buzzwords for a post-industrial workforce, they are the growing arrangement within which most of us find ourselves. Therefore, the labor structure of composition, a structure that is both flexible and contingent, deserves continued attention, especially in the preparation of future members of the field. While neither Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola's or Marshall's works provide *the answer* to the current labor situation in writing programs, they do offer much overdue treatments of the labor structure within composition. Further, both efforts, especially Marshall's, show a recent growth in the field's engagement with issues of labor. When she is able to critique and engage with work such as Schell's and Stock's among others, Marshall pushes the field to consider and further complicate its relation to labor and teaching, a move needed for any productive advancement. Further, both works build productively upon the history of English departments and the composition and literature split. Granted, the Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola collection lacks significant reflection on the split outside of Ferry's contribution, but both works seek constructive strategies and foci (such as teaching and teacher preparation) for addressing the present labor structure and its historical and departmental roots. Both works provide very recent attempts by teacher-scholars in the field to engage in and shed light on the alarming labor structure in the field and higher education, resulting in much needed exposure of readers to economic issues. In turn, these books deserve attention from all of us laboring in the field of composition.

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