Richard Ohmann and the Development of a History for Composition[1]

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When I started re-reading the work of Richard Ohmann in preparation for writing this article, I had almost forgotten how much his writing and his ideas have influenced my own thinking. It was easy for me simply to internalize his way of thinking about the English department as an institution because his language is so clear that reading and comprehending what he has to say is not a struggle. As I read him again, however, I realized how much his work over the years has affected my move from literature to composition, as well as reflected my own doubts about the value and the social and political consequences of what I do as a teacher of writing and as a writing program administrator. Particularly formative for me has been the idea, which Ohmann articulated in 1976 in *English in America*, that our educational system is successful in meeting its actual goal of preparing the select few for work with the mind, while teaching the rest to follow orders (132). Of equal importance, however, has been the way he situates academic ideas and practices in the material conditions of specific and evolving historical moments. Certainly, I am not the only scholar/practitioner of Rhetoric and Composition whose work has been influenced by his view of the processes and consequences of professionalization. In this short reflection, then, I am going to suggest some of the ways Ohmann has influenced the formation of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline over the past thirty years, primarily by considering responses to his work by several of the historians of composition studies who have helped define the work of the field by tracing earlier practices of teaching writing and analyzing the antecedents of contemporary academic discourse.

Ohmann wrote *English in America* in the first half of the 1970s. I dislike pointing to any era as the *beginning* of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline, because we can always find intellectual ancestors and influences stretching back even farther into the past. However, as John Brereton (among others) has pointed out, the 1970s constituted a particularly formative period for the devel-

opment of Rhetoric and Composition as a distinct professional discipline. In addition to the entrance of a wider range of undergraduates into colleges and universities, a "glut" of literature Ph.D.s became evident in the course of the decade. These Ph.D.s found themselves in a sparse job market, and if employed, they were teaching more composition courses than they might have anticipated teaching a decade earlier. Brereton describes how the lore and then the research about teaching writing that circulated in this decade arose from the desire of these teachers—in the CUNY system and elsewhere—to do this teaching better. They developed a research community that generated and dispersed knowledge, and they documented practices that reflected what they were actually doing, as compared to what they had planned and prepared to do when they were in graduate school (496-97). Robert Connors identifies Ohmann as first among those instrumental in creating this literature and the field it represented: "The 1960s and 1970s were times of hero-editors who made a literature: Richard Ohmann, Ken Macrorie, Don Gray, Bill Irmscher, Ed Corbett, Gary Tate, Mina Shaughnessy, Muriel Harris, and Richard Braddock" ("Composition" 8). However, the 1970s also saw not only "a groundbreaking change…with the appearance of the first rhetoric doctorates in English Departments" (Connors, "Composition" 9), but also a less-celebrated change, i.e., the precipitous increase in the number of part time composition teachers (Sledd 273). It is telling that Ohmann differs from the other editors on Connors' list because of his role as a social activist and critic—not only a professionalizing compositionist—and because of his ambivalence about the emergence of the discipline. However, as editor of *College English* from 1966-1978, Ohmann was in a position to observe compositionists building their discipline and to foster their work. Moreover, his historical and social understanding, even before he came to identify himself as a marxist (*Politics of Knowledge* 7-9; 295), led him to interpret the professionalization of composition not as the end of the university (or western civilization) as we know it, but as an historical development reflecting the particular needs of American society at that time, a development that could have either positive or negative consequences—or both.

In *English in America*, Ohmann argues that both literature and composition are implicated in the American political situation, although they might frame and respond to that implication in different ways:

> I reread New Criticism and see in it a tacit politics of things-as-they-are, veiled in the claim that literature is beyond politics. Freshman English states its goals in politically neutral terms, but I find that its methods reinforce the dominance of our problem-solving liberal elites, whereas its soothing tolerance in the matter of usage covers deeper attitudes of class privilege and cultural snobbery. In English departments I see a moderately successful effort by professors to obtain some ben-

> efits of capitalism while avoiding its risks and, yet, a reluctance to acknowledge any link between how we do our work and the way the larger society is run. (304)

At the same time that composition was starting to stake its ground and define itself in contrast to literature, then, Ohmann called attention to this common underlying political purpose, which both literary studies and composition studies have dealt with in sometimes different, but sometimes disconcertingly overlapping ways. As Ohmann notes in 1976, and many compositionists still feel (as do, I suspect, many in literary studies), composition has long been considered the poor relation in English departments—an unpleasant chore relegated to graduate students, adjuncts, and the lowest level professors. It has been situated as a manual craft not worthy of the mind of the real scholar and not a fit subject for scholarly investigation or theorization (Ohmann, *Letters* 37-38; Connors, "Overwork" 188-189; Harris 404). As an attempt to overcome this lowly status, the professionalization of composition can be seen as one strand of the attempt to rethink and re-make "things-as-they-are"—although my sense of the extent to which this remaking has been successful is undermined by the sting I still feel reading Ohmann's indictment of the "moderately successful effort by professors to obtain some benefits of capitalism while avoiding its risks" (*English* 304), some three decades after Ohmann wrote it.

The emergence of Rhetoric and Composition as a discipline was the result of a highly self-conscious self-creation by those who identified it as their field, and one crucial means of this professionalization was writing its histories and defining its traditions. The extent to which this historicizing took place, and is still taking place for that matter, can be seen by the 351 entries found using the keywords "discipline" and "history" on the online bibliography CompPile, most of which date from the 1980s and 1990s. Ohmann was certainly not the first person to engage in historicizing the field—credit is often given to the unpublished dissertation that A. R. Kitzhaber completed in 1953—but the kinds of connections Ohmann made among academic practices and events in the world helped shape the way these later historians of composition situated the field. As Ohmann notes in *Politics of Knowledge* (2003), he was one of several scholars working on issues of professionalization and the university during the 1970s and 80s. In the interview with Jeffrey Williams reprinted in that book, he explains why he thinks his examination of English departments seems important to its moment in history:

> I don't claim credit for the later explosion of interest in professionalization in the academy, but I think that what I did in *English in America*, along with work that was under way simultaneously by Burton Bledstein and by Magali Sarfatti Larson, really opened up a field of inquiry and exhibited a certain political urgency in doing so. So I'm satisfied about that, though I have not read parts of *English in America* during the intervening

> eighteen years, and I'm sure that there are parts that I would find very embarrassing now if I read them again. But some parts of it seem to have set some energies going for people in our field or in other fields—the section on composition and the sections on departments especially. (241-242)[2]

These "energies" laid the groundwork for studies of the development of composition that were not based on an isolated intellectual history, but on a history connected to social, economic, and political history; and that examine the intersections between what goes on in the academy and what is happening in the nation and the world of which it is a part. Looking back at this work, Ohmann notes:

> I was increasingly discontent and uneasy with what we were doing in our own rush toward fuller professionalization and specialization in the early sixties, and I was angry about race and militarism and class in our country, and those two strands fused for me. I turned back to look at our work in light of the critiques that were being staged of American power around the world and of domestic racism, and then a little bit later, male supremacy; so those two feelings came together because I needed to know why I was doing the things I did and what they were contributing to, or how they were critical of, the uses of power in the country. (*Politics of Knowledge* 243)

The expectation that these connections should be made in writing the history of composition was expressed even as that history was being written. For example, David R. Russell, in a 1988 review of recent works in composition history and tradition, iterates that expectation when he notes that although these connections are thin in James Berlin's 1984 history, *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Colleges*, Berlin ascribes considerable importance to them:

> Berlin sketches *what* happened to rhetorical theory and, to a lesser extent, composition pedagogy, but he has precious little space to tell us how or why it happened. This does violence to his method. The introductory chapter on method begins: "Rhetoric is a social invention. It arises out of a time and place, a peculiar social context…the codification of the unspeakable as well as the speakable " (1). However, Berlin spends few pages on the social conditions which formed the modern university and created composition instruction, though he does suggest important leads: budding materialism, the orality-literacy shift, the rise of urban-industrial mass society. (438-39)

Russell argues the need for a "full-length study of our nineteenth-century professional history instead of a brief interpretive monograph and a still-unpublished dissertation [Kitzhaber's]" (439). In his own *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History* (first published in 1991), Russell connects his study of relationships among disciplinary writing, academic institutional politics, and social conditions with "Ohmann's radical critique of freshman composition and the values of the military-industrial complex" (32), as well as with Berlin's broader intellectual conceptualization of the history of teaching writing.

In his keynote address at the 1996 Watson Conference, the theme of which was "the development of composition as a profession" (Rosner, Bohem, and Jouet xiii),[3] Robert Connors noted how quickly Composition Studies had emerged as a discipline, but he also warned of its potential ossification:

> If we are more real as a discipline, we are also more hierarchical and exclusive. If the credulous wheel-reinventing of our earlier journal articles was replaced with more rigorous means of testing and discussing writing and its teaching, the supportive good fellowship of earlier composition dialogue was also replaced with something more pointed—and more divided. ("Composition" 11)

These divisions cut across theory and practice, created schools of thinking and practice, and established orthodoxies similar to those the early compositionists had been trying to evade:

> I know I am not the only one here who has viewed the growing success and status—which I think of as the "MLA-ization"—of the field with strongly conflicted feelings. We entered composition work out of a deep dissatisfaction with the fatuity of overly specialized and theoretical literary studies—but we brought more baggage from that world than we meant to. ("Composition" 19)

In one sense, Connors echoes Ohmann's jibe about English departments' "reluctance to acknowledge any link between how we do our work and the way the larger society is run" (*English* 304), but for Connors the problem seems more like the acknowledgement of personal failures than an analysis of the systemic self-preservation of an academic discipline (even a young discipline).

Richard Ohmann's historical work was profoundly and actively political, as has been the thinking of later compositionists who have recognized, argued about, and acted upon the political implications of the work composition does. James Berlin's attempts to infuse first-year composition with cultural studies and cultural critique come immediately to mind. Ohmann saw the work of some compositionists as evidence of "a widening of political awareness

within and around composition teaching and studies" (*Politics of Knowledge* 234), as contrasted with non-activist faculty, "a bunch of people who have been identified as tenured radicals or the academic Left [who] don't do anything but write books and build careers" (233). As evidence for some optimism about the potential activism of compositionists, he cites the large attendance at the "entirely left panel" (234) he chaired at the 1991 Conference on College Composition and Communication, at which James Berlin, Linda Brodkey, and Lester Faigley gave presentations. Berlin, in turn, cites Ohmann when he observes that "freshman English, with its positivist epistemology, was probably doing an adequate job of training students for the new technical professions, encouraging a view of reality that held them in good stead in their professional lives" (76). Berlin's critique of the idea that the purpose of teaching composition is to impart a merely instrumental, mechanical skill (235) reflects Ohmann's claim that limiting education to training rather than inviting students to think for themselves and write for an audience serves as a means of creating a well-trained but obedient work force (*English* 158-159; 302-303). This critique has profoundly affected the shape of composition studies since the mid-eighties, and given rise to ongoing arguments about the purpose(s) of teaching writing.

However, there has by no means been anything like agreement among compositionists (or other academics, for that matter) that teaching writing is inevitably a political act with ideological underpinnings and social implications. Perhaps the bitterest refutation of this idea was given by Maxine Hairston in 1992:

> Then one can say that because standard English is the dialect of the dominant class, writing instruction that tries to help students master that dialect merely reinforces the status quo and serves the interest of the dominant class. An instructor who wants to teach students to write clearly becomes part of a capitalistic plot to control the workforce. What nonsense! It seems to me that one could argue with more force that the instructor who fails to help students master the standard dialect conspires against the working class.
>
> How easy for theorists who, by the nature of the discipline they have chosen, already have a facile command of the prestige dialect to denigrate teaching that dialect to students. ("Diversity" 184)

Hairston was a strong proponent of situating composition outside of English departments, a prospect on which she gave her chair's address at the 1985 Conference on College Composition and Communication. By 1992, she perceived the "politicization" of the discipline she had helped form to be the result of the conventional elitism of English departments, trickling down from literary studies to composition ("Diversity" 184-185). Her attack on the idea that teaching composition is a political action should also be seen

in the context of her opposition to Linda Brodkey's attempt to create a new first year composition curriculum at the University of Texas, a course grounded in the rhetorical examination and production of social and political texts (Trimbur 248), an approach which Hairston believed would turn attention away from the fundamental task of working with emerging student texts ("Diversity" 191-92). The national furor that surrounded this new curriculum and the very public arguments about it brought into the open the social and political ramifications of education[4] that Ohmann and Berlin had anticipated. But in this case—as in others not so highly publicized—the attempt to bring student writing into the realm of public action lost out to those who wanted to maintain composition instruction as a more sheltered means of nurturing students' discursive capabilities, as well as to those who expected composition to uphold conventional social norms.

Similar, but generally more restrained, arguments underlie many of the divisions in Composition Studies apparent throughout its self-creation as a discipline and into the present. There are ongoing major differences among compositionists concerning the extent to which first year composition is expected to teach instrumental skills of language and rhetoric, in comparison to cultural critique and a broader conception of discourse. This question has been confounded by whether such a "broader interpretation" should include literature (Lindemann; Tate) or civic discourse (Delli Carpini; Harkin). Similar disputes have arisen about the extent to which business and technical writing should examine ethical issues and critique workplace writing (Katz) and about the accusation that as Writing Across the Curriculum has been modified to take into account the large body of work done on disciplinary discourses, it has become merely another form of training, teaching students to conform to conventions outside of (rather than inside) English Studies (Mahala; McLeod and Maimon; Russell, "Rethinking").

As Ohmann observed as early as 1976, disputes about how to teach composition and what to teach in it are not by any means theoretical only. The professionalization of composition, for many if not most of its teachers, has meant the rise of a few specialists ("boss compositionists," according to James Sledd) who provide intellectual support and some say "professional" management to the far larger body of workers in the field—graduate students and adjuncts, both part time and permanent—who are shamefully underpaid and who are expected, like their students, to be obedient to the goals and practices of their particular program, goals and practices over which they are unlikely to have much control (Harris 57). Junior faculty and graduate students in Rhetoric and Composition may have the best of it, since they can conceivably look toward "getting out" into some specialized aspect of rhetoric or composition theory, leaving the rest of the composition teachers to endure a demeaning labor situation and to maintain the order established for the required composition courses. This situation is periodically noticed and deplored, of course, but the few changes

made, according to Marc Bousquet, are meant merely to make the roles of the tenure-less teachers a little more lucrative and a little less insecure, not to fully integrate them into the intellectual (and decision-making) life of the university (207-9). The university itself—and the English Departments to which writing teachers usually belong[5] —see no need to change the situation (Sledd 273-74), or they claim to be helpless to do so. Some writing program administrators are depressed by the limited effectiveness of their roles (Micciche), as are some literature professors who lament the declining importance of Literary Studies in any but top-tier colleges and universities (Green). Many well-intentioned WPAs just plug away doing their best—keeping things going in the hope of keeping them from getting worse.

Such plugging away, however, betrays the tradition that Ohmann helped compositionists find and found, a tradition steeped in questioning and acting, in recognizing the effects of our social order on our work, and in at least *trying* to make change happen, rather than in resigning ourselves to the inevitable. Ohmann's achievement was in publishing essays rooted in what I like to call "bar talk," i.e., the things compositionists and WPAs (and faculty in other disciplines, I'm sure) admit to each other privately, but do not or "cannot" state in public venues. *English in America* projected a way of talking about teaching writing and learning to write that was based in archival research, but that cut through those conventional, public but unpublished silences of the professoriate. It may be that because Ohmann was a man, educated at Harvard and tenured at a prestigious Eastern university, he was in a particularly good position to break those silences and to serve as a catalyst for framing the archival past of composition in the material culture and class relations of his time. And it may be that the professional respectability of some current compositionists has reinstituted the usual disciplined reticence to discuss some of the negative consequences of our work—although compositonists seem less likely than other faculty to ignore the working conditions of those who actually teach writing. Moreover, that silence has been regularly interrupted by the rattling of cages by critics like Sledd, Harris, and Bousquet, who (albeit from different theoretical positions) demand that we consider how our professionalization has institutionalized an academic underclass as well as comfortable positions for researchers and program directors.[6] Richard Ohmann clearly influenced composition historians like James Berlin, David Russell, and Robert Connors, who created a past for composition that helped to professionalize it as a discipline. At the same time, however, Ohmann undermines any complacency (or at least my own complacency) about the value and success of what we have accomplished by transforming composition from a practice to a discipline. And rereading his work should remind compositionists that when we lapse into disciplinary complacency, we undermine the foundations of our field as well as the possibilities for its future.

Notes

[1]Acknowledgements: this piece has been substantially improved by critical readings by Patricia Harkin and Shirley Rose (Purdue).

[2]In an endnote, Ohmann admits to rereading the entire text of *English in America* soon after this interview, to prepare for a reissue of the book.

[3]*History, Reflection, and Narrative: The Professionalization of Composition, 1963-1983*, edited by Mary Rosner, Beth Boehm, and Debra Jouet, offers a collection of these first Watson Conference papers on the growth of composition as a discipline. Their introduction to the collection explains that the idea of disciplinarity was central to the aims of the conference series, as well as to its first session. Ohmann has a short article in this collection, "Professionalizing Politics," in which he makes the case that unlike some other academic fields (like economics), composition embraced political activism at the same time as it professionalized itself:

> [T]hese political energies invaded discussion of teaching practices, putting up for debate the decorums of classroom hierarchy, standards, grades, and even the question of whether composition can be systematically taught at all. In short, the conventions of authority and dignity a nascent profession would ordinarily call upon to set practitioner apart from client were all interrogated, and in the core venues of the discipline. Likewise, questions of political derivation were allowed to subvert academic conventions of writing in the journal: the passionate appeal, the free-form essay, the collage, gained admittance to CCC, as if to forgo the exclusions and reassurances implicit in a shared, specialized, and emotionally restrained style of address. Composition was airing unseemly questions about neutrality, detachment, and partisanship, and even about whether to act like a profession. (232)

[4]See public accounts of this battle in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* written by Katherine S. Mangan in 1990 and 1991.

[5]For a current argument for the separation of writing from literature, see Barry Maid's account of the longstanding battle between the fields in "In This Corner…".

[6]The accusation that Composition has reverted to the staple English department practice of individual career-building and the exploitation of teachers recurs periodically; see, for example, Connors (1990 and 1996/99), Sledd (1991), Harris (2000), and Bousquet (2003).

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