

VISIONS AND VERSIONS OF
“PROGRESSIVISM”

On Doing History

I pull the journals down . . . again. They are dusty, which only further complicates their color ambiguity (they fall vaguely in the brown-tan-green nexus; perhaps there is a word for the color these once were; surely there is not a word for the color they are now). They are, I see, just where I left them: I discern traces of my last visit (this is my index card; this one is still pushed back too far; this may be my fingerprint). They are heavy, as always; delicate, as ever; frayed, of course.

And—this is the word that strikes me every time—they are dank. Stale smelling. Yet dry to the touch: brittle-dry.

Two at a time, no more: they are heavy, delicate, frayed.

It's about listening. Sarah Orne Jewett writes about "an ear made delicate by listening" (qtd. in Pryse 49). That's what historians' ears ought to be: delicate. How else to hear a conversation so faint, a conversation not meant for you, though it is in a sense about you? (We don't write for those who come after us, but our subject is what we hope we will help them to be.)

This is why it's an exercise in humility, doing history. It's relearning, sometimes unlearning, the present. Not only in the how-we-got-here sense, but also in the how-we-are-here sense. Because we *will* see ourselves in their words; this is the way we read.

Who did they hope we would be? (And who *are* we, after all?) What did they make possible for us? What did they make

impossible? And what will we do with what they left us? Doing history is an act of intimacy.

As a teacher, a writer, a graduate student in search of a project (i.e., a fledgling researcher), I want to know: what has been said about what I think I might want to say?

First time through, I'm reading for the conversation. Who's speaking? What are they saying? What are the main lines of inquiry or argument? How are these positioned in relation to one another? The reading is slow, arduous at times. I take quick notes, not entirely sure what I'm looking for, trying to remember my framing questions:

- ◆ What did *progressivism* mean to these English teachers?
- ◆ How many self-identified as progressive, and why?
- ◆ What were the alternatives to progressivism at the time?

The questions are no more specific than that. I think of this as a virtue—I will find what I find—but as my notebook fills with only the vaguest of notes, I begin to wonder.

Humility: trying not to fall into what Stephen North calls “chronocentrism” (*Making*). The idea that the past has been one grand march to the glorious present. The idea that every day, in every way, we're getting better: quicker, smarter, more humane. Nothing makes an ear callous like this chron-ic dysfunction.

So I learn how to listen. But for what? The Real Story (How It Was back then)? A Telling Story (what they tell us)? Or A Story to Tell (here's a story . . .)?

A story, at any rate. A story about a conversation.

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Others have read and written other stories of this conversation; others have thought other conversations more worthy of storytelling. This is as it should be; we *should* have different stories to tell. But I stand by this story of this conversation. It's not, after all, easily come by, and it's not a product of either fertile imagination or unmitigated bias (though it's perhaps helped along at moments by a bit of each). And so I'll argue for it, and provide textual evidence for it, not only because it's hard-won, but also because I want this story to enter our conversation.

History is not, most of us (today, in this conversation) would agree, an objective rendering of facts, a telling of the One True Story. But neither is it a pure fiction (though it might borrow literary techniques from fiction). The historian of postmodernity is liberated from the responsibility to tell The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth, but that's not to say that he or she doesn't have responsibilities. The first and definitive responsibility of the historian is to develop a delicate ear.

It's an act of imagination, an act of good faith, an act of generosity. It's not uncritical—reverse chrono-centrism—but it's patient. It is the way I try—but too often fail—to read student texts, to read all texts.

Second time through, a dissertation writer now, I'm reading for the issues: What are the lines of inquiry or argument relevant to the issues I'm focusing on? Who tends to be most interested in these issues? What kinds of alliances emerge around these issues?

I have been away from this windowless, almost airless basement for close to a year. I’ve been thinking about the conversation, how I simply can’t hear all of it at once (seventeen volumes of *English Journal*; ten issues per volume; maybe 1,020 articles). I think about my own interests, the issues that sustain me, the issues on which I’d like to get an early “progressive” take. Political teaching, political writing, assessment. What did these mean then? I read to find out, my eyes scanning faster. I move through the volumes more quickly now, with my new filter. My notes, though, are more detailed; I am more likely to stop, to linger. But now, at least I know why.

A solitary pursuit, this: I never see another soul down here. It’s lonely, pulling down these journals (two at a time, no more) and spending another long afternoon. I think of the image I once had of The Researcher (culled from countless movie portrayals): rumped, frumpy, nasty old thing oblivious to all but his (always *his*) precious old books, repositories of some Forgotten Lore. A version of the romantic writer, no doubt. Driven by a thirst for Knowledge, he sequesters himself from The World, sacrificing All for his Quest. A man to be pitied, perhaps, but also a man to be admired: he toils for us, the poor, ordinary folk who don’t Know.

And here I sit, not yet thirty years old: the right gender and race, but in every other way (or so I hope) a figure unbecoming that image. For me, finally, this is not an act of sequestration, but rather, like all acts of literacy, one of intimacy. The voices in my head emerge not from some divine madness, some inner demon, but rather from the pages of these heavy, delicate, frayed journals and from my colleagues, who are here with me: *Read this way*, they tell me, *and write that way*. *We know this already*, they say, *but we don’t know that*. *Ignore this*, they teach me, *but pay attention to that*.

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The work is, at times, dreadfully dull: reading for patterns, collecting data. At times, I think, *They're not speaking to me after all. Their formality; their air of show-and-tell; above all their storylessness—surely I am not the posterity for which they recorded their words.*

And then: a lovely image; a generous comment about a student; a novel (to me) idea; a familiar (to me) idea; a—praise be—story. I stop, I linger. I am hoping to get through this volume and the next by 5 P.M. (does The Researcher ever have a daughter to pick up, a dinner to get started?), but I stop, I linger, I listen. This voice—the voice, inevitably, of a caring teacher—draws me, and I listen. I thrill at this voice of the past, speaking so well and so kindly and in a way that I can hear. I remember why I'm listening—and why I'm teaching.

And then, it's back to reading for patterns, back to collecting data.

Third time through, a book writer, I'm reading for positions. Why did people take the positions they did on these issues? What was taken for granted about these issues? What was left unexplored? What allowed people to say what they did about these issues?

A professor now, I sit in a new windowless, almost airless basement in a new university, halfway across the country. Much of the drafting is done, but there's work to do yet. I'm still not getting at the whys, the what's-at-stake-for-whom questions. So I move through the volumes again, for what I promise myself will be the last time, taking even more extensive notes, focusing in great depth on fewer texts. I am well into my third notebook now, but I have my frame: this is filling-in, fleshing-out work.

It's an act, after all, of motivated, selective listening. And then: representing. Howard Zinn explains the historian's dilemma by

comparing it to that of a cartographer, who must “first flatten and distort the shape of the earth, then choose out of the bewildering mass of geographic information those things needed for the purpose of this or that particular map” (8). But while the cartographer’s dilemma is largely technical, Zinn claims, the historian’s is mainly ideological: “it is released into a world of contending interests, where any chosen emphasis supports (whether the historian means to or not) some kind of interest, whether economic or political or racial or national or sexual” (8). (I could quibble here: both the historian’s and the cartographer’s tasks are technical *and* ideological—but, point mostly taken.)

So what is a historian to do? Kathleen Welsh helps me think about this:

[H]istorians are more than storytellers who invite listeners to sit at separate fires to learn separate tales of the past. They are also teachers. It is the historian’s responsibility to teach us a variety of ways to read the past, to engage in historical debate, to position narratives in relation to each other so as to gain critical perspective, to draw conclusions on and consider implications of opposing historical projects, and to create constructive tension that moves us forward in our inquiry. Critically drawing in—not just drawing on—the work of fellow historians is what North claims transforms “what would be merely stories” into “his-tory” (82), a complex and critical web of storytelling. (122)

The historian’s dilemma is the teacher’s dilemma—one I know well. And so, for me, the historian’s goals must be the teacher’s goals:

- ◆ Be aware and reflexive (but not confessional or apologetic) about my agenda. Make that still developing agenda part of what is studied.
- ◆ Be aware and reflexive (but not confessional or apologetic) about my positions. Researcher, writer, professor, white heterosexual male—these matter; they affect what I can hear and how I represent what I (think I) hear.
- ◆ Leave that agenda, and those positions, open to critique and revision. Remember that they are, always, under construction,

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in process. Listen and engage with others—what can they teach me about my subject?

Is it history or is it historiography?
Is it criticism or is it scholarship?
(See Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*.)
Answer: yes.

As I read, I think of what John Dewey says of the past in *Democracy and Education*: while we should read it—and write it—as a “present resource,” it should never be merely a model for the present. A past recapitulated is a present unrealized and a future forestalled. History should not make of culture “an ornament and solace; a refuge and an asylum” (75); it should make it a vital, ongoing process, a resource for the present imagination.

Their words ring strangely familiar: critical thinking, democratic education, active learning, community projects. And: the basics, skills-and-drills, teaching to the test. Here *we* are, I think. And yet I know they are not us, nor we them.

Don't listen for salvation, I remind myself.
Don't listen for condemnation, either.
Don't listen for some transportable tradition.
Don't listen for The Answer, The Way.
Don't listen for the Moral, the Not-This-Way.
Listen for retrospection: thinking back.
Listen for suggestion: thinking now.
Listen for imagination: thinking forward.
Listen for reconstruction: building again.
Listen for something to reframe,
something to reclaim.



Composition as a Progressive Enterprise

Many histories of our field point to the Progressive Era (and specifically 1875–1925) as formative years in the evolution of composition (Applebee; Berlin, *Rhetoric*; Brereton; Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*; Crowley, *Composition*; Kitzhaber; S. Miller, *Textual*). And yet, strangely, only Applebee and Berlin consider the influence of “progressive education” on the formation of modern composition. (Even Brereton, who claims that modern composition was “shaped by the reform impulses that pervaded late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America during the Progressive Era” [3], fails to consider progressive education itself as a formative influence on the emergence and early development of composition.) Moreover, neither Berlin nor Applebee takes a hard look at “the progressive movement” as it developed outside of English. Specifically, these historians make little of the fact that there never was a single, unified “progressive education movement,” preferring instead to speak of progressivism as a monolithic, self-contradictory entity.¹

This chapter places the emergence of modern composition in the context of progressive education by listening to how early practitioners of composition in the universities and schools represent their work (“composition” during the Progressive Era was by definition a cross-institutional enterprise). I also consider how the nascent National Council of Teachers of English and its first journal, *English Journal*, participated in “progressive” educational movements, and how those larger movements shaped the emergence and early development of modern composition. In adding this set of conversations to the historical record, I hope to prompt certain questions: What has it meant, and what might it mean, for composition to be “progressive”? What kind of work has

been, and might be, accomplished (and suppressed) under the banner of “progressivism”? Why does the idea of progressivism have such staying power, especially in *Composition and Rhetoric*? In other words, I am interested in studying not only how different visions and versions of “progress(ivism)” have informed who we were and are, but also who we might become.

A Tale of Two Progressivisms

Any attempt to account for educational progressivism as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must confront the claim by leading historians—Cremin, Reese, and Tyack, for instance—that progressive education was never a single, unified movement, but rather two distinct movements. These historians acknowledge that a mind-boggling array of contradictory reforms was proposed under the banner of progressivism; an incomplete list would include child-centered pedagogy, standardized tests and curricula, tracking, reliance on “experts,” classroom experiments, creative arts, and industrial education. But they attribute this fact not to a lack of focus in a single group, but rather to competition between two groups who took the same name.

It is important to note that both groups of progressives developed in response to the profound social unrest of the late nineteenth century. The nation was undergoing rapid and frightening changes: a series of depressions struck between the 1870s and 1890s; the railroad, industrial interests, and vast migration to the cities conspired to threaten the agrarian economy and rural life; huge corporations consolidated their near-monopolistic power (Carnegie in steel; Rockefeller in oil); and violent strikes broke out in a number of states. This period also saw a dramatic increase in the number of students at all educational levels—largely as a result of massive waves of immigration.² All levels of education were beginning to serve groups of students who had traditionally been denied access to education by virtue of their gender, race, or class. In higher education, the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and especially of 1890, which included special provisions for African American institutions; the move toward coeducation;

the replacement of the old U.S. college by the new U.S. university; and the beginnings of the democratization of postsecondary education conspired to change the nature of college life (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*; Gordon; Gilyard, “African American”; Hobbs; North, *Refiguring*; Royster and Williams). At the same time, U.S. businessmen began to criticize the public schools in the wake of the unveiling of the Russian system of “technical instruction” at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 (Cremin 21). Although it would be a decade before Joseph Meyer Rice raised fears of educational crisis to a fever pitch with his scathing critiques of public schools in *The Forum*, the ferment had begun as the United States entered the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The idea that mass public education would inevitably lead to national progress had been ruptured. The underside of universal education, which Horace Mann had advertised less than half a century earlier as “the great equalizer,” was beginning to show.³ If U.S. education were to live up to the great expectations of Mann and his fellow reformers, it would need to be made “truly progressive” (Cremin).

All early progressives shared an abiding faith that education could serve as a lever for social progress. The fundamental differences between the two main groups, however, hinged on their answer to the question, Progress toward *what*? The first group, which David Tyack dubs the “pedagogical progressives,” sought to put the schools in service of democracy and social justice. For this group, education was crucial in the realization of a more equitable, more democratic society, and a great deal of attention was paid to how teaching and learning were enacted in classrooms and communities. In contrast, “administrative progressives” (Cremin) sought to put schools in the service of industrialization and urbanization, placing most of their emphasis on “efficient” management. If pedagogical progressives sought to protect and expand democracy in the face of encroachment by the vagaries of industrial capitalism, this latter group sought to grease the wheels of what Alan Trachtenberg calls the “incorporation of America” by bringing about the incorporation of the schools.⁴

This fundamental distinction emerges clearly when we consider how prominent members of these groups believed schools

should be run. For pedagogical progressives, the primary aims of education were to cultivate in students an active, reflective approach to their own learning, and to encourage the study and practice of living well with others. At the Cook County Normal School in Chicago, for instance, Francis W. Parker set up an “embryonic democracy” in which students took up both humanistic pursuits (including the creative arts) and practical studies (with emphasis on laboratory learning). In both fields, the object was to help students reflect critically, as individuals and as group members. For instance, students at Cook County wrote, edited, and produced their own readers, which replaced textbooks and primers. Reading and writing skills, according to Cremin, were “combined as elements of communication, to be studied within the context of actual conversation and writing” (132). In the age of skills-and-drills instruction, Parker sought to help teachers and students reflect critically on what it meant to engage in these social practices.⁵

Although John Dewey dubbed Parker the “father of progressive education,” it was Dewey’s educational thinking that would become most influential for pedagogical progressives. Dewey decried the authoritarian skills-and-drills methods of traditional education, with its emphasis on rote memorization and passive learning of already-worked-out subject matter. He insisted that “[t]he child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction” (*School* 36). The point of education, Dewey urged, is to engage students in social practices, not to pour “knowledge into a mental and moral hole which awaits filling” (*Democracy* 51). For Dewey, as for other pedagogical progressives, education was practice *in* democratic living, not practice *for* it. Teachers and students worked together to foster mutually facilitated learning.

This helps explain Dewey’s often misunderstood maxim that education “is its own end” (*Democracy* 50). Although critics have used this line to support the argument that Dewey’s educational philosophy was ultimately severed from social change, it is in fact consistent with Dewey’s insistence that education can be a lever for democratic reconstruction. Consider Dewey’s definition of education: “the educational process is one of continual reorganizing,

reconstructing, transforming” (50). The notion of change—both personal and social—is *intrinsic* to education. According to Dewey, pedagogy “must progressively realize present possibilities, and thus make individuals better fitted to cope with later requirements” (56). Pedagogy, in other words, does not simply train students for the future—for the world of work, for instance—but rather engages them in a variety of “present possibilities” *within the present social context*.

Inspired by Dewey’s educational philosophy and pedagogical practice, pedagogical progressives, much of whose work is chronicled in John and Evelyn Dewey’s *Schools of To-morrow*, sought change from the inside out: true educational and social change, as they understood it, began in classrooms during the pedagogical process. From “Mrs. Johnson’s” Fairhope school in Alabama to the Gary Plan in Indiana (see Cohen and Mohl), all of the pedagogical experiments the Deweys studied emerged from a belief that revitalizing the schools meant nothing less than revitalizing the communities of which they were a crucial part (Dewey and Dewey 174–75).

The chief problem with educational reform, according to Dewey, was that it was being put in the hands of outside “experts,” including businessmen and administrators with no educational backgrounds, rather than in the hands of teachers (*Democracy*, “Relation”). This group of elite professionals—who, ironically, also worked in the name of “progressivism”—were remarkably successful in aligning the schools with corporate practices and ideology. As educational historian Joel Spring observes, the early twentieth century saw schooling increasingly organized around the imperative “to improve human capital as a means of economic growth” (153). And leading the way were school administrators: “between 1900 and 1924, school administration rapidly professionalized around . . . values of cost efficiency and school management” (250). Their success was captured in a 1920s report on progressivism: “in the struggle between quantitative administrative efficiency and qualitative educational goals . . . the big guns are all on the side of the heavily concentrated controls behind the former” (qtd. in Tyack 198).

The administrative progressives were not necessarily school administrators per se. In fact, as David Tyack makes clear,

administrative progressivism was led by efficiency experts, corporate leaders, and other professionals from the world of business. These professionals, spurred on by muckraking journalists who routinely excoriated the schools for their inefficiency, set about corporatizing the schools by setting up school boards on the model of boards of directors; by calling on efficiency experts to run time-motion analyses on teachers; by subjecting students to standardized curriculum and tests—in short, by running schools as if they were competitive businesses. Callahan summarizes:

The procedure for bringing about a more businesslike organization and operation of the schools was fairly well standardized from 1900 to 1925. It consisted of making unfavorable comparisons between the schools and business enterprise, of applying business-industrial criteria (e.g., economy and efficiency) to education, and of suggesting that business and industrial practices be adopted by educators. (6)

Administrative progressives' willingness to subordinate teaching and learning to the tyranny of the bottom line derived from their cherished belief that schools should assist in the ineluctable progress toward urbanization and industrialization. In the midst of radical social changes, and in light of the pride with which U.S. society viewed its recent industrialization, it is perhaps not surprising that school reformers looked to industry and business for models after which to fashion the schools: "The division of labor in the factory, the punctuality of the railroad, the chain of command and coordination in modern businesses—these aroused a sense of wonder and excitement in men and women seeking to systematize the schools" (Tyack 28). Some reformers imagined students as factory workers churning out products, and teachers as their overseers. More often, the teacher was viewed as the factory worker and the student was considered the product. In 1917, for instance, F. E. Shapleigh offered this analogy:

The school is a factory. The child is the raw material. The finished product is the child who graduates. We have not yet learned how to manufacture this product economically. No industrial corporation could succeed if managed according to the wasteful methods which prevail in the ordinary school system. (qtd. in Callahan 176)⁶

The transformation of the schools into factories and corporations paved the way for a number of reforms: the use of Frederick Taylor’s scientific management techniques in the schools and the concomitant shifting of power from teachers to outside “experts”; heavy reliance on “objective,” standardized tests; the development and implementation of prepackaged, standardized curricula; the tracking of students based on results of those tests; more stringent work conditions for teachers (larger classes, higher accountability); and many more. In short, teachers’ work was to a large extent conditioned by the constraints imposed by administrative progressives; indeed, the work of a teacher became largely to execute and measure the effects of the mandates of these “experts.”

The Emergence of Modern Composition and NCTE

It was in this complex context that modern composition was born. As many historians have noted, modern composition was a product of the hysteria caused by the failure of over half of the young men who took Harvard’s 1874 written entrance exam (Applebee; Berlin, *Writing*; Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*; Crowley, *Composition*; Kitzhaber). When results of the examination became known, a national literacy scandal was declared, and the schools were pronounced ineffective and inefficient. (It was assumed that the public schools could only be in worse shape than the elite preparatory schools from which many of the Harvard examinees hailed.) Presuming that schools would not remedy the dire situation in short order, many reformers—including A. S. Hill of Harvard—agreed that the colleges and universities were forced to make (presumably temporary) provisions for the woefully underprepared students who would continue to darken their doors. This was the beginning of required first-year composition, that curious phenomenon that has stubbornly retained its place in the American academy despite its century-long status as one of the few (and often the only) required courses in increasingly elective college curricula.

Of course, the schools, too—and especially the high schools—were pressured to improve. By the 1890s, many rural and urban

schools were in disrepair. The former provided teachers with drastically inadequate training; the latter were becoming terribly overcrowded. The Harvard exams made evident how inefficient even the “best” schools really were, according to many businessmen. Muckraking journalists working for popular magazines such as *McClure’s* and *Saturday Evening Post* also fanned the flames of educational crisis (Callahan). Not to be outdone, higher education joined the fray. One “progressive” reform during the late nineteenth century was a movement—led by elite eastern universities and formalized in the work of the 1892 Committee of Ten—for uniform college entrance requirements and standardized high school reading lists. It was thought that the postsecondary institutions could thus put pressure on high schools to raise their standards and produce a more suitable student “product.”

Not surprisingly, secondary schools resented being placed under the thumb of the colleges (Applebee; Hook). Out of this tension between secondary and postsecondary schools emerged the National Council of Teachers of English (1911), along with its official journal, *English Journal* (1912). Although its mandate would grow thereafter, the immediate catalyst for the formation of this initially Chicago- and New York-based group was the domination of the high schools by the colleges.⁷ Fred Newton Scott, who launched a Ph.D. program in rhetoric at Michigan and who insisted that a “system by which colleges could exert control over secondary school requirements was ‘feudal’” (qtd. in Hook 12), was elected its first president.

Under Scott’s leadership, the young NCTE was successful in expanding its membership. As early as 1913, editor James Hosis could write the following in response to the impression that *English Journal* (*EJ*) was read almost exclusively by high school teachers:

A large number of our subscribers are college professors, some of them heads of departments in the largest universities. The normal schools are also well represented, and many elementary-school teachers and principals are on the list, as well as city superintendents and state school officers. It may be worthwhile to add that practically all of the large libraries . . . receive the magazine and that there are subscribers in such far off lands as Turkey, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and New South Wales, to say nothing

of Germany, England, and Canada. Of course every state in the Union is represented. (qtd. in Hook 56)

A brief look at who wrote for *EJ* during its early years provides another index of NCTE’s quick growth. During *EJ*’s first ten years, between 20 percent and 42 percent of the submissions came from either Chicago or New York.⁸ This is unsurprising when we consider that NCTE held its annual convention in one of those two cities every year but one (1919, Boston) during its first decade. As early as 1915, however, twenty-five states were represented by writers in *EJ*. At no point during the first ten years were fewer than sixteen states represented by the writers. Perhaps even more interesting is the healthy balance of representation among colleges and schools in *EJ* during its first decade.⁹ Although submissions from schools generally outweighed submissions from colleges, college representation never fell below 30 percent of total contributions and school representation never rose above 60 percent.

While the early NCTE was becoming increasingly diverse in geographical and institutional terms, we must recognize its limitations as well. Despite the rapid growth of postsecondary education for African Americans as a result of the second Morrill Act, for instance, few articles were published by writers from what Royster and Williams call “historically African American institutions” (566). Similarly, though this period saw a dramatic rise in the number of women attending both secondary and postsecondary education (Gordon; Hobbs), and though *EJ* did publish a number of articles by women teaching in all-female schools, I count only two articles from 1912 to 1929 that pay explicit attention to the role of gender in education (Marsh; Yeomans). The others take up generic topics such as “How We Use Our School Library” (Keyes), “Entrance Literature and the Ancient Classics” (Shackford), or “Inspiration in Freshman Composition” (Magee).¹⁰

In short, the early NCTE was both admirably “progressive,” promoting educational change through national, cross-institutional dialogue, *and* decidedly mainstream, representing the interests of a primarily white, male-identified constituency. We might consider it a typical liberal organization—it worked for change

but without radically disrupting the status quo. The very first editorial comment to appear in *EJ* makes this orientation clear enough:

The *Journal* is progressive. . . . [W]e are eager to move forward Nevertheless, we believe in sound methods of investigation and testing. The American educational world is at present quite too much of a mob, ready to crowd after any leader sufficiently stentorian. After all, the burden of proof rests upon the new. (Hosic, "Policy" 375)

Thus, the journal offers a developing portrait of "progressive" English during the Progressive Era (see also Hatfield, "Nominal"). It also provides a record of what we might consider a two-decade-long experiment in trying to establish cross-institutional dialogue (in 1928, *EJ* began to publish a separate college edition). Finally, unlike its disciplinary counterparts—*PMLA*, *Modern Language Notes*, or *Modern Philology*, for instance—*EJ* was pedagogical in focus: it provided a forum not only for theoretical and historical research, but also for teacher narratives and classroom experiments in literature and—significantly, for our purposes—in composition. All of these factors make *EJ* a useful resource for historical inquiry into how progressivism was figured in English, including composition, classrooms during the Progressive Era. While a single periodical can never offer a complete and definitive picture, this one offers us valuable insight into how many English teachers, and especially composition teachers, envisioned and tried to enact "progressive education."

Modern Composition as Pedagogical Progressivism

As the editorial comment above suggests, the young NCTE and its journal were not necessarily supportive of *pedagogical* progressivism. After all, it is likely that one of the "sufficiently stentorian" educational leaders that the editors of *EJ* had in mind was John Dewey, who had yet to publish his magnum opus (*Democracy and Education*, 1916), but who had spoken loudly with the publication of a series of lectures under the title *School and*

Society (1899), the influential study *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), pamphlets such as “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), and a slew of essays in education journals such as the *Elementary School Record* and *University Record*. By the time NCTE was formed in 1911, Dewey’s ideas were widely circulated and had already influenced education at all levels.

At the same time, we do see in the pages of *EJ* a good deal of attention (albeit sporadic and unorganized) to Dewey’s educational philosophy and to what James Berlin calls a “rhetoric of public discourse” (*Rhetoric*) or “democratic literacy” (*Rhetorics*). These teachers, who often designated their approach “the social view” or “the social conception,” sought to teach writing in the service of democratic citizenship. They believed that students should be encouraged to inquire into the most pressing political issues of the day.¹¹ In this view, the goal of education was to prepare students for democratic citizenship by encouraging literacy as a means to social awareness and involvement (Carter; Gaston; Gibbs; Hansen). And more than that, helping students to participate in public discourse meant opening up the possibility of participating in the reconstruction of the social order (Fries; Ruud). These educators focused on the creation of a classroom environment that facilitated the development of the individual intellect and the realization of social responsibility. Thus, composition teachers took up and designed a number of pedagogical innovations—including collaborative projects, student contracts, and self-directed learning—in the name of democratic progressivism (see, for instance, Clark; Douglas; Glaser; Hargrave; Hatfield, “Not,” “Project”; Keyes).

Like the teachers showcased in the Deweys’ *Schools of Tomorrow*, some English teachers sought to place pedagogy at the center of school and community reform. One high school teacher, for example, wrote in 1914 about the need to make educational projects “real” and responsive to the needs of the particular school and community in which students worked. E. H. Kemper McComb, a high school teacher, used Deweyan language to exhort his fellow teachers: “Lay firm hold of the fundamental idea that education is life itself; give your pupils problems that grow out of the social conditions of your schools; show them how to solve these problems in a natural way that prevails outside the

school walls” (415). By way of example, McComb reflected on how his seniors collaborated to develop a program for Fire Prevention Week, a project that required them to write for multiple audiences and purposes, and that asked them to use their developing literacies to engage the local community.

In fact, in the 1910s and early 1920s, we see in the pages of *EJ* a movement for what John D. Cooke called “Community English.” In the high schools and in first-year composition, students were often asked to organize themselves as a small community, often on the model of “societies” that proceeded by parliamentary law. Community English asked students to engage directly the community of which the school was a part; it was an early version of what we today call community service learning. Cooke, for instance, asked his high school students to write letters, give speeches, conduct public debates, hold pageants, and the like. Student inquiry into the community was viewed not only as a rich learning experience, but also as an opportunity for community development. Through such projects, students would become more informed and more involved in their local place.

Community English shows that, at least in some locales, composition during the early years of the twentieth century was not simply the intellectual backwater that some of our historians have claimed. Indeed, Robert Connors has marked the period from roughly 1900 to 1930 as “the Dark Ages of composition” (*Composition-Rhetoric* 99). According to Connors, this period saw composition become almost completely severed from its roots in rhetorical theory, giving over instead to the canon of concepts—the modes of discourse, the methods of exposition, the levels of style, the select-narrow-expand invention system—that we now associate with “current-traditional rhetoric” (13). Connors’s reliance on textbooks, however, leads him to speculate about classroom practice in ways that contradict many of the representations of teaching in *EJ*. Though writing teachers struggled with how to enact Dewey’s pedagogical principles, many of them devoted themselves to student-centered, project-oriented, community-based classroom practices. The first two decades of *EJ* demonstrate that the teaching of English, and specifically composition, was a complicated affair.

Modern Composition as Administrative Progressivism

At the same time, it is fair to say that this kind of pedagogical progressivism was not the dominant approach to composition in the schools or in the first-year college course during the Progressive Era.¹² Taken as a whole, composition was neither student-centered nor committed to social reconstruction. But if composition did “devolve” during the Progressive Era, as Connors suggests, I believe it is too simple to attribute this devolution to “the badly prepared and reactionary nature of the audience for textbooks after 1900: the writing teachers” (*Composition-Rhetoric* 99). Given the working conditions of these teachers, Connors’s argument seems reasonable enough; then, as today, good teaching in the universally required course was almost certainly accomplished despite working conditions that seem cruelly designed to thwart such work. But these working conditions were embedded in larger cultural practices and in the logic of a larger economic system, and in my view these deserve more attention than they receive in Connors’s history. Indeed, the innovative intentions of some composition teachers were thwarted by the fact that modern composition developed at a time when U.S. education and society were in the grips of an obsession with *efficiency*—in the midst, in other words, of the incorporation of America and its schools.

Consider, for instance, that the cost-efficiency movement was in full swing by the time *EJ* appeared in 1912. In the very first article to appear in *EJ*, Edward Hopkins (who would later become president of NCTE) wonders, “Can Good Composition Teaching Be Done under Present Conditions?” Answering his titular question in the negative, Hopkins complains that composition teaching in secondary and postsecondary institutions is “abnormally inefficient” (1). What to do? His answer is telling:

If in business affairs an investment fails to bring desired results, the common practice is to ascertain whether those results will justify an increase of an investment sufficient to insure obtaining them, or whether the business shall be discontinued. This is precisely the nature of the English situation. (6)

The real question facing English, urged Hopkins, was this: “is or is not training in English expression necessary to a successful industrial and business future?” (6). Thus arose a movement in English to apply cost analysis to determine whether this upstart—composition—was “worth it.” Just as administrative progressives were applying business practices to the operation of schools, so were they applying them specifically to composition instruction. And just as the value of the schools was measured by their service to business, so was the value of composition tabulated.

For the next decade, Hopkins would sit on the Committee on the Labor and Cost of the Teaching of English in Colleges and Secondary Schools with Especial Reference to English Composition (hereafter, for obvious reasons, referred to as the Hopkins committee). This committee began in 1909 under the aegis of the Modern Language Association, and NCTE began sponsoring it in 1911. NCTE occasionally published reports from the committee in *EJ*, as well as its final report (in its sixteenth edition) in 1923 (Hopkins, *Labor*). The work of the Hopkins committee is significant because it shows us what administrative progressivism looked like when applied to composition. In my reading of the report, however, the committee in fact appropriated the language and ideology of administrative progressivism in an effort to subvert the mania for bottom-line “efficiency” and to support the pedagogical work of composition.

As Hopkins’s 1912 *EJ* essay suggests, the committee began with the assumption that composition was woefully inefficient. For administrative progressives, “inefficient” was code for “not cost-effective.” That is, economy was *equated* with efficiency. Therefore, the task would be to reduce the costs of composition in the high schools and universities. The Hopkins committee, however, found that the “inefficiency” of composition was owing to inadequate resources and support for teachers. In its report, for instance, the committee declared that theme-reading work for composition teachers at both educational levels was “two and a half times the limit of physical endurance without undue strain” (Hopkins, *Labor* 6). The average high school teacher had more than 125 students, though “maximum efficiency” would demand that they be responsible for no more than

50. Similarly, teachers of first-year composition were typically assigned 105 or more students, while maximum efficiency would require no more than 35. While composition teachers typically received less pay and lower status than teachers of other subjects, their workload relative to their colleagues in other disciplines was 1.75 to 1 (28).

The committee used the language of economy and efficiency to couch its findings and recommendations, but it refused to equate economy with efficiency. For instance, it determined that when tabulated per pupil, English cost less than any other subject. The average *total* cost was higher, but only because it served a greater percentage of students. Of course, reducing the number of students to efficiency levels would raise cost, but the average “unit cost” would remain 10 percent below the average for scientific and vocational subjects (Hopkins, *Labor* 7). Therefore, the committee recommended fewer students per instructor, fewer sections of composition per instructor, smaller classes, and increased pay for composition teachers. In so doing, it appropriated the language of efficiency and economy to protect responsible teaching and labor practices.

While the Hopkins report may point to a constructive response to the fervor for efficiency, it is also true, as Hopkins himself noted in 1917 (“Wanted”), that composition’s association with the cult of efficiency was pulling English apart, with particularly negative results for composition. Because the fortunes of literature-oriented English had never been tied to its practical consequences (at least according to its defenders) but rather to its humanizing function, a great debate emerged between those who advocated “culture” and those who advocated “efficiency.” Although *EJ* printed numerous articles throughout the 1910s refusing the easy distinction between efficiency and culture (Hill; Lewis; Palmer; F. N. Scott, “Poetry”; Webster; Williams), English began to split between humanist elitists on the one hand and “reformers” who “share the ideals of the efficiency expert [and whose] thoughts run to standardization and quantity production” (Bode 387) on the other. The defenders of “liberal culture” insisted that the primary responsibility of English was to preserve and pass on the great classical and Christian traditions

(Babbitt 69). Meanwhile, composition was becoming a “vast industry for the manufacture of good English in school and college, [with] stupendous machinery and ingenious tools, . . . processes and paraphernalia of all sorts” (Osgood, “No Set” 160).

Responses to this latter development varied. No sooner was first-year composition established than it came under attack by critics (Duncan; Osgood, “No Set”; Manchester; Thurber; see also Connors, “Abolition,” on the “first wave” of abolitionists in the 1890s and the second after 1911; and Russell). Conversely, because composition was deemed more amenable than literary study to objective measurement, it was more often thought to be an important part of the effort to make English more efficient by nailing down, once and for all, its “minimum essentials.” “Minimum essentials” referred to “standards of knowledge” (Reynolds 349), and the ultimate goal was to have English teachers reach consensus on what and how they wanted their students to learn. In 1926, Sophia Camenisch reported that the most drastic change in English during the 1920s was an increased demand for widely shared “standards and objectives” (181). But long before then, in 1912, *EJ* found “occasion for rejoicing in the prospect of a national syllabus of the high-school course in English” (Hosic, “Signs” 439; see also Hosic, “Nationalization”). Both *EJ* and NCTE were active in the movement to ground English more firmly in “scientific” facts and conclusions, rather than “personal opinion.” In her 1924 NCTE president’s address, for instance, Essie Chamberlain claimed that “English suffers from a lack of organization and the precise marking of its limits” (6). She encouraged her colleagues to shore up the discipline: “Scientific facts painstakingly gathered must justify the superiority of the chosen material, and methods as well, over those which have been rejected” (7). An astounding number of articles reporting on such experiments appeared in *EJ* in the following several years.

And composition, it was thought, could lead the way. At the University of Illinois, for instance, efficiency was sought through the systematization of the evaluation of writing. The grading procedures were draconian in their unstinting emphasis on mechanical correctness. Students received an E for any of the following: three or more misspelled words; two sentences with violent changes of

construction; two unclear sentences; two straggling sentences; one comma fault; one incomplete sentence; two grammatical errors; a noticeable number of improprieties or barbarisms; a marked lack of unity; a marked lack of coherence (Tieje et al. 593). This was in the first semester of first-year composition; in the second, the standards were raised.

At the high school level, too, there was hope that “inefficient” composition could be turned around through standardizing curriculum and measurement. This was understood as part of a larger effort of administrative progressivism, as we see clearly in this passage from a high school English teacher:

Now just as the study of methods of business has produced the new application of science to industry known as scientific management, so the demand of the age for the measurement of results is bringing forth a new science of education based upon exact measurement and judgment ascertained by the facts. (Noyes 532)

Moreover, composition measurements, especially the Hillegas scale, devised by Milo Burdette Hillegas of Columbia, portended the day when “all teachers may feel that their gradings are just and uniform because based on a definite, fixed standard” (Noyes 536; see also Hudelson; Fulwider; the 1915 report of the NCTE Committee on the Scientific Study of the Teaching of English). In fact, the influence of administrative progressives here was direct: in 1913 arch-administrative progressive Edward Thorndike published an article in *EJ* urging the use of the Hillegas scale in composition. If *EJ* is any indication, this call was answered by English teachers and administrators at all levels of education (see Courtis; Gunther; Henderson). Although enthusiasm for fixed, objective measurements for composition was never entirely untempered (see Parker; F. N. Scott, “Our”), one *EJ* writer was able to report by 1928 that nearly two hundred standardized tests were in use in English programs across the country, most of them for composition (LaBrant; see also Certain). Thus was composition conscripted into the service of what Callahan calls the “cult of efficiency.”

Not coincidentally, this orientation served the labor market particularly well. At the high school and college level, many teachers

were experimenting with what was called “Business English,” “Industrial English,” or, later, “Commercial English” (Clapp; Cody, “Organizing”; Cook; Cooke; Duddy; Lyons; Opdycke; Struble). These courses typically taught students how to write business letters and other workplace genres; they always emphasized “clean, clear” prose (see especially Cody, “Ideal”). Their primary purpose was to prepare students for what the functionalist 1926 “Report of the Committee on the Place and Function of English in American Life” called “practical affairs”¹³ (NCTE Committee on the Place).

EJ itself seemed to be lukewarm on the vocationalization of composition (see “Business English”; “Efficiency Wave”; Hatfield, “Clapp”), but it did see fit to publish a 1913 article titled “The Demands of the Business World for Good English.” Written by W. R. Heath, vice president of a mail-order house, this essay alerts English teachers to what they “must teach” in order to please the corporate world. This article is very much in line with the prevailing conception that businesses ought to provide the blueprints for composition work. In Chicago, for instance, Sherwin Cody reported on a joint venture of the Chicago Association of Commerce and the Chicago Board of Education. The first step was to “get a concrete expression of just what business men did want” (“Organizing” 412). Then, tests would be designed to test those skills, and the tests would be implemented “under the auspices” of local businessmen’s organizations. Finally—and this was evidently the program’s crowning achievement—an “efficiency employment list” would be created so that businesses could see which students were most “efficient.” In the process, the Board of Education would also learn which teachers were most efficient; indeed, it would offer “efficiency certificates” to teachers with high-performing students.

On the college level, the vocationalization of composition was even more pronounced, perhaps because college teachers were not accustomed to teaching for such practical ends. As one University of Illinois teacher wrote in 1912:

In the good old days when composition courses were unnecessary, going to college meant one thing; today it means another—a dozen others. The type of student now chiefly represented in

our thousand theme-writers was then sticking to his farm or shop or office. Now he demands special training from the state, in agriculture, engineering, or commerce. He is a Philistine. (Guild 412)

If not to destroy the temple altogether, the philistines had come to make it their training facility (see also Frank Scott).

Defenders of liberal culture and public rhetoric never completely died out at either the high school or college level. Still, the spirit of the times supported projects like that described by Cody—and for the reason he states: “It appeals to the imagination of every American to get a business measurement, to be able to meet a business standard” (“Organizing” 418). The secondary and postsecondary composition classroom could be a place where such a standard became visible—where, in fact, that standard could become the driving force of instruction.

Composition’s utilitarian, vocational emphasis was ideologically consonant with administrative progressivism and the corporatized U.S. university, with their focus on efficient (that is, cost-effective) bureaucracy. As Gerald Graff suggests, in the changing academy of the early twentieth century, “bureaucratic administration took the place of traditional ideology as the bond holding the institution together” (*Professing* 60). While the old U.S. college was designed to provide wealthy young men with high culture, the new U.S. university was organized toward the same end that Joel Spring identifies for the schools: the development of human capital for the purpose of economic growth. It both participated in the broader corporate economy and developed a corporate, pyramidal economy of its own. And as Stephen North has shown, first-year composition fit the corporate bill nicely (*Refiguring*). Almost everyone in the (mostly elective) U.S. university was required to take at least one first-year writing course, but those who taught it were not well compensated (to put it mildly). As the Hopkins committee report shows, for cost-effective delivery of credits for cash, no course could touch first-year composition (*Labor*).

But the new U.S. university was a product of more than home-grown U.S. corporatism. As has been widely noted, it was also influenced by the model of the German research university (Graff,

Professing; North, *Refiguring*; Scholes, *Rise*; Shumway). The German tradition emphasized dispassionate research, the production of (scientifically derived) knowledge rather than the teaching of it, and the specialization of knowledge into discrete institutional and disciplinary units. It was concerned primarily with “producing” researchers: those who would contribute to disciplinary knowledge.

Although composition was thought to be useful in standardizing teaching practice and developing a body of knowledge about “what works” in the classroom—contributing to making the corporate university more efficient—it fit decidedly less well into the *disciplinary* orientation of the new U.S. university. First of all, as John Brereton suggests, casting its lot with NCTE—“an organization with distinctly pedagogical aims that fostered a Midwestern, egalitarian attitude toward education rather than the Eastern elitist approach”—had “serious consequences” for college composition (24). In effect—with exceptions such as Fred Newton Scott aside—allying oneself with teachers in the schools meant giving up the privileges of disciplinary and institutional authority. Schoolteachers, it was thought, did not *produce* knowledge; they disseminated or applied it. The German tradition demanded that researchers commit themselves to the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge, not to these lower activities. Also, composition’s vocational emphasis did not serve it well on this front: German professors and researchers-in-training hardly concerned themselves with the “philistines.” Published research on literature may have fit the disciplinary bill, ensuring national “progress” through the maintenance of “our” cultural capital (see Hutcheon; Shumway), but training undergraduates (first-year students, no less) for the workforce would not advance knowledge.

And then there was the matter of *who* taught composition. Soon after its inception, first-year composition came to be staffed primarily by teaching assistants and instructors, a disproportionate number of them women. Professors, most often male, avoided the course, for reasons the Hopkins committee’s research makes clear: overwork, poor pay, low status. Young, often female, instructors were recruited to do the dirty work of remediation, thus

freeing up the more established (male) members of English departments to pursue the “real” work of the discipline: the analysis of literary texts. Whatever hopes early compositionists may have harbored for composition as a “masculine,” scientific pursuit, composition soon became “the distaff partner in a socially important ‘masculine’ enterprise, the cultural maintenance of linguistic dispositions of power and enfranchisement” (S. Miller, “Feminization” 40).¹⁴ The yoking of modern composition to first-year writing, then, gave rise to two related developments: (1) authorization of exploitative, specifically sexist, labor practices, and (2) ratification of the idea that the proper purview of English was the study of literary texts, understood as the reception and interpretation of a narrowly defined “type” of discourse (literature), and not the production of multiple discourses. This drove a wedge between literary study and composition, authorizing the former as the official “content” of the discipline and relegating the latter to the seemingly paradoxical status of permanent remedial work, evacuated of content and therefore of true (that is, extra-practical) value. These assumptions in turn authorized the continuation of the corrupt labor practices that kept underpaid and overworked pre- and nonprofessionals hard at work but discouraged them from making the teaching of writing or their students’ writing objects of theoretical or scholarly study. Of all positions in the academy, perhaps the instructor of first-year composition most closely approximated the factory worker (or the composition teacher in the public school): he or (more commonly) she was considered little more than a theme-correcting machine, an executor of training in basic decoding and encoding skills.

“Progressive Composition”

Placing the formation and development of modern composition within the complex context of educational progressivism yields no simple, neat lessons. Perhaps the most important service this historical material can offer, in fact, is to complicate our sense of the field’s history. Neither of the common versions of “progressive” that I outlined in the introduction—the grand march toward the enlightened present or the traditional retreat to naive,

liberal politics—can capture the complexity of where we have been, and so neither is likely to serve us well in understanding where we are or where we're going. It is tempting to tell history as a story of winners and losers. We might read this material to suggest that administrative progressives “won” and pedagogical progressives “lost.” (See Cohen and Mohl for one such reading.) Then we could cast ourselves as contemporary heroes, *true* progressives: finally enlightened, fighting the good fight not only against our ideological enemies but also against “tradition.” But while administrative progressives clearly were able to consolidate their power during the Progressive Era, and while pedagogical progressives never did create a formidable alliance, administrative progressives' power was never total. As William Reese makes clear in his case studies of grassroots reform efforts during the Progressive Era, important local efforts were underway throughout this period to resist the incorporation of the schools. Reese's work on socialists, trade unionists, women's groups, parents' groups, and other agitators for school reform provides an important supplement to the more traditional focus on business elites. And it reminds us that there are always voices other than those that speak loudest. In this chapter, I have spent more time on the influence of administrative progressives on composition than on that of pedagogical progressives because it is important to understand the perspective and practices that were dominant during this period. At the same time, it is equally important not to lose sight of pedagogical progressivism—precisely because its alternative visions and versions of “progressive” work in English may point us toward a more useful and humane model for such work today.