I remember a conversation a dozen years ago with the late Susan Miller and members of my department about our endowment earmarked for the improvement of student writing. “What makes you think student writing needs improvement?” she asked. It was quintessential Susan Miller, who, since the end of the 1980s has called for a more complex view of the writing subject and for composition to reframe its identity as ameliorative. Several recent books could be said to continue Miller’s legacy; at the same time, they are a testament to how difficult it is to displace composition from its original function, even for those determined to forge a new one befitting an era challenged by
postmodern instability on the one hand and heightened accountability for the teaching of writing on the other.

In *Postcomposition*, Sidney I. Dobrin argues that it is time for composition studies to rethink radically its attachment to student writing improvement. He calls for a shift in disciplinary focus—away from student subjects toward the subject of writing itself. His aim is to disrupt, not just the linear process and development paradigm that has shaped and restricted the field, but also the pedagogical imperative that insists all theory must have practical implications.

Drawing inspiration from theories of complexity and posthumanism, as well as ecocomposition—an approach he championed in earlier work but admits failed to catch on—Dobrin calls for more consideration of how writing occurs spatially in networks and systems outside the classroom and the discipline. An invigorated field of writing studies would engage with what alternative spaces and moments make possible in writing prior to arrangement and completion of a written product, not what can be stabilized and taught as academic writing and managed and assessed in composition programs.

Dobrin lays out a basic argument that composition’s concerns are too narrow intellectually and methodologically to truly investigate writing as phenomena. He points to the ways in which both the question “How do writers write?” posed by scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, and David Smit’s question, in *The End of Composition Studies*, “What is Writing?” inevitably “direct attention away from writing and toward a more manageable subject: writer” (10). “[T]he work of theorizing writing,” says Dobrin, “is—and must be—bigger than the idea of students” (15). Dobrin credits and smartly engages others’ work with complexity in the field: Raul Sanchez’s critique of composition’s “mystification and romanticizing of the subject” (84); Byron Hawk’s consideration of the subject “as an intricate complexity inseparable from technology and language” (86); and Thomas Rickert’s use of the metaphor of ambience as an alternative to the metaphor of network, one that can “put place, language, and body into co-adaptive, robust interaction” (Rickert qtd. in Dobrin 182–83). To push beyond the subject into new theoretical spaces, Dobrin also draws on thinkers outside composition who work with complexity (philosopher Mark Taylor) and the posthuman (literary and animal studies scholar Cary Wolfe).

Awareness that the human subject is just one life form on the planet and that writing is just one medium among many complicates how we understand discourse and makes the work of writing theory more difficult. One could argue, however, that despite the turn away from humanist notions of subjectivity,
awareness of that complexity should figure into how writing is taught by whoever is going to teach it. Dobrin, though, maintains that contending with “the complex systems in which the posthuman is located, endlessly bound in the fluidity and shiftiness of writing,” requires a radical shift from “the individual as producer/originator of writing” (72–73) that now informs composition studies constrained by pedagogy.

As in his earlier book, *Constructing Knowledges*, Dobrin argues that theory can exist without practical implications (*Constructing*). He cites Gary Olson’s insistence that constituting the teaching of writing as the sole raison d’être of the field is “dangerously and unacceptably narrow and even, in some people’s eyes, anti-intellectual” (qtd. in Dobrin 28). Given the condition that the field has brought on itself, postcomposition, as a more intellectual endeavor, Dobrin says, should replace composition studies, “bequeathing it to its own powerful position as a service entity and training ground for professionals in education and midlevel management” (28).

Lately, in the face of not just management but also increased standardization, repackaging, and marketing of writing proficiency, a call for “research that breaks orbit and ventures into other spaces” (28) in pursuit of what writing makes possible has a certain appeal. We need to question all arrangements in relation to power, including our own deep-seated individual and disciplinary identifications with improvement and progress. To that end, many would argue, however, that it is not teaching but rather some form of a theory/practice dialectic or antagonism that is the field’s raison d’être.

Those who criticize the managed university seldom walk away from it. We keep our names on the writing we produce under its aegis. We re-enter the classroom every term. We perform and encourage performance to the best of everyone’s abilities—at the same time that we encourage critique as a form of resistance to assimilation. It is our work, however, to improve student writing so that students will fare better in the system we struggle to change that makes compositionists complicit and hypocritical. Dobrin is not the first to suggest that specialists profit from managing the teaching labor of others whose conditions do not improve, despite the scholarship testifying to that exploitation and, I would add, the rhetoric of support provided by those in positions of privilege outside of composition studies. Sharon Crowley maintained in 1998 that composition constructed the need for its own services and called for discipline-informed rhetorical study to replace required first-year composition (*Composition*). Similarly, Dobrin posits that to lose the power
of the WPA might be to gain “something much more powerful: the ability to do different, more likely better, kinds of work free from the writing program administrative shadow” (108).

In a provocative chapter devoted to critique of both the WPA and the empire of the WPA (Council of Writing Program Administrators), Dobrin invokes Marc Bousquet’s claim that composition will probably never “enjoy the status it seeks” and “be one of the gang of disciplines until its labor patterns are more like those in other fields” (qtd. in Dobrin 120). He agrees with Bousquet that “complacence” (102) in the face of institutional realities hampers what can be theorized about writing, going one step further in a call for postcomposition to move beyond not just the administration of subjects but to disassociate altogether from the issue of contingent labor—a position with which many invested in that struggle no doubt take umbrage (121).

Certainly critique is imperative to disrupt what inevitably becomes stable and management-driven. To disassociate writing studies from pedagogy and administration, however, because of how it functions to limit what we care to know about writing is another matter. If one is to understand the system in which writing circulates, is not how writing instruction is delivered and administered—all communication about communication—a part of that system? Why the need to reject pedagogical implications of what an ever-becoming postcomposition engages? As a field we have historically told ourselves that we investigate “where theories of writing intersect, where they contradict . . . where they prevent us from doing something we deem necessary” (Harkin 136). James Zebroski posited a model in which theory is one of several situated practices that develop and produce knowledge in complex connection with language, teaching, curriculum, and other practices—a networked “theory of theory in composition . . . that emerges from a philosophy of internal relations” (qtd. in Dobrin 140). Dobrin acknowledges but reconfigures Zebroski’s hope for a “space for us to learn about and teach writing” (140), preferring instead the spaces between practices and more consideration of “moments as pauses in the system” (141), presumably because of what they reveal about the irreducibility of language and about writing systems themselves.

If we “occupy a posthuman world,” as Dobrin claims (144), in which it is impossible to separate the subject from systems of writing, what then should the practices of composition studies become? How shall we teach each other what we are coming to know?

In her book *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, Donna Strickland aligns with Dobrin in targeting “the pedagogical
imperative,” claiming that it is made possible by the “managerial imperative” that has always been with us. The production of knowledge about the teaching of writing is necessary, in other words, because of the administrative responsibility for what gets taught and the desire to see that it’s done right. Strickland continues the work reflected in her earlier chapter in Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers, investigating the extent to which the disciplinary professionalization of the field has served the management class.

Like Dobrin, Strickland wants to bracket teaching, but from management, for the purpose of better understanding the privilege and power to which compositionists are often blinded in conflating the two. In identifying with the disenfranchisement of writing and writing instructors, not just the WPA but the field of composition as a whole has avoided full critique of its practices. Complicity in the credentialing of students, especially through the exploitation of adjunct instructors, has been so long a part of the field that it is pushed into the unconscious. Management is primarily what has professionalized composition at the same time that it has disenfranchised most of those who actually teach it. An important part of the critical process for Strickland involves a useful reframing of the story composition tells itself. Rather than the familiar narratives in which the rise of English studies depends on the disenfranchisement of writing culminating in the ruined university, Strickland emphasizes the managerial work on skills for the workplace as, historically, the task of the university from the outset. She also revisits the history of composition that has heretofore emphasized displacement at the hands of literature and the circumstantial position of writing instruction. She traces how the disciplinary formation of composition studies in the university, despite its progressive impulse and alliances, has been part of systematic management, constructing not just “a subject about teaching” or “a body of knowledge that seeks to produce proper student subjects,” but a “power/knowledge complex” of “teaching subjects” (53). She revisits the particularly formative era of the 1970s in composition’s history, characterized not only by progressive interventions but simultaneously by an emphasis on back-to-basics, the rise of the “composition professional-management class” (78), and the founding of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. In the same vein, she reconsiders the social turn in composition in the last thirty years and the ways in which social-epistemic rhetoric and democratic participation ironically came to signify the field’s intellectual and disciplinary stability (109). She points in particular to James Berlin, who, in rejecting writing instruction for the workplace, declares
social-epistemic rhetoric as the dominant approach and cultural critique as
the teaching mission, establishing what Strickland sees as a normalized place
for critical pedagogy within the “ideological state apparatus of higher educa-
tion” (110–11). Invoking Chantal Mouffe and the inevitability of hegemonic
formation and commodification, Strickland sees potential for intervention
in democratic classroom practices as long as we recognize the unlikelihood
that they “serve to usher in a more equitable social order” (114). Strickland’s
intention is not to reject critical pedagogy, but rather to caution that anyone
identifying as democratic not “overlook inequities built into those practices”
(115). She wants to better understand, not necessarily reject, the field as “fun-
damentally managerial, to see the managerial as an imperative energizing the
field throughout its history” (119). What distinguishes Strickland from Dobrin
is the potential she envisions for a more democratic professionalization—if and
when composition comes out of denial into consciousness of the conditions
of everyone’s work. Finally, her aim seems to be that compositionists become
more ethically and politically aware of our own field and the limitations in all
our practices, theoretical, pedagogical, and administrative, so as to change
them and still get the work done.

The collection of essays in What We Are Becoming: Developments in Un-
dergraduate Writing Majors, edited by Greg A. Giberson and Thomas Moriarty,
might be considered a deposition on the fluid condition of the field of composi-
tion studies. Certainly the work on the development of undergraduate writing
majors documented by its fifteen contributors responds to a call for greater
disciplinary rigor and the expansion of composition’s boundaries beyond the
first-year writing course into spaces where new knowledge can be discovered
and circulated. As Janice Lauer points out in her introduction, for over thirty
years the emphasis has been on claiming disciplinary scholarship at the gradu-
ate level; now attention can be paid to the undergraduate. In addition, more
English majors will be able to enter graduate programs with a background in
writing, not just literary, studies (viii).

What We Are Becoming addresses disciplinary issues and historical
conflicts, as well as the differences in the institutional structures in which
undergraduate writing majors are housed. Several chapters describe new ma-
jors as opportunities to disengage from rhetoric and composition’s historical
connection to English, both outside of and within reconfigured English de-
partments seeking, as contributor Rodney F. Dick describes, a new “middle
ground” and shared commitment to literature and writing. Lisa Langstraat,
Mike Palmquist, and Kate Kiefer, for instance, write of restorying the history and professional (victim) identity for composition as part of the process of developing an undergraduate degree at Colorado State University. Others honestly recount the difficulties in the redistribution of turf and credit hours that accompany designing a writing major in a strong literature department. Kelly Lowe and William McCauley, for instance, offer a cautionary tale and stress the importance of laying the groundwork for an institutional need for a writing major in negotiations with colleagues over resources. Contributors, who work in both small colleges and large universities, carefully consider what the focus and content of a major in writing should be, addressing in various chapters the roles of classical rhetoric (Beard; Delli Carpini and Zerbe); textual production (Baker and Henning); creative nonfiction (Martin); civic rhetoric (Moriarty and Giberson); and multimodal writing (Murray), providing evidence for what the curriculum might look like if it includes “specialized courses that draw on our vast disciplinary knowledge” rather than “a collection of old service courses, stitched together and called a major” (10). Contributors regard the balance of emphases, having thought through the role of the major more broadly in their institutions and in undergraduate education that prepares students for academic, public, and professional lives. Rebecca de Wind Mattingly and Patricia Harkin consider implications of a writing major for remedying what are often the shortcomings of WAC and WID programs in which “research faculty have little experience and less interest in the teaching of writing” (21), offering instead what they consider a postdisciplinary writing major, graduates of which know “that as situations change, discourse must change to meet that challenge” (21).

This is a comprehensive and thoughtful collection that enriches both scholarly and practical understanding of what is involved in undertaking the development of an undergraduate writing major. If one were to move in this direction, it makes clear the need for thinking through the consequences for all stakeholders. Its authors, most of whom have lived with all aspects of the writing major, offer many ideas for consideration, whether or not one’s preferred approach or institutional conditions are similar.

No doubt the establishment of undergraduate majors factors into respect for composition as a specialty—becoming “one of the gang” of disciplines,” as Bousquet and Dobrin would have it (Dobrin 120)—even if, as the volume’s editors maintain, “consensus on the shape, content or focus” of these majors is still growing (Giberson and Moriarty 3).
Works Cited


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