The Boxing Effect (An Anti-Essay)

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You may remember a Monty Python sketch in which a man (Michael Palin) enters an office and announces to a man behind a desk (John Cleese), "I want to have an argument." The Cleese character responds, "No, you don't." What ensues is a maddening series of contradictions, with the Palin character asserting that contradiction does not constitute real argument, the Cleese figure responding that it can, and the sketch continuing in the usual brilliant Monty Python way, the Palin character ultimately paying five pounds for the privilege of being contradicted, insulted, and frustrated. Yet, despite his experience, he remains poignantly hopeful of engaging his tormentor in meaningful exchange, forking over another five pounds when his time is up.

If you are in the field of composition, this absurdist routine can't help but be familiar to you, simply because as compositionists, we are all caught up in the usually thankless argument about what constitutes college-level writing, a public wrangling characterized by a maddening series of contradictions that we strive to synthesize into a legitimate intellectual discourse, only to be refuted, dismissed, and mistreated. And, given working conditions in the field, it's fair to say that we, like the hapless Palin character, pay for the privilege of suffering such ill-considered abuse, having in some way been coerced into believing that it ultimately can make sense. But when decades of methodologically diverse research and historical study, of classroom experience across institutional types, of epistemological paradigm shifts of immense order cannot disrupt knee-jerk contradictions of our

field's claim that writing is not a monolithic skill open to simplistic psychometric measurement and behaviorist training techniques, then perhaps it's time to stop asking the question that sets off this absurd response. To speak of *college writing* is to invoke a formulation that encourages the commodification of writing, writing students, writing curricula, and writing instructors, a formulation that reifies a system of nonporous institutional boundaries. If college writing is an object that has to be defined in order to be produced efficiently, then we become mere delivery people uninvolved in packaging the contents of the boxes we hand out.

This *boxing* effect entails the following interlocking processes, beginning with the commodification of writing but extending throughout a system of containing devices that work against real writers' writing and rhetoric as social action.

Writing Is Commodifed, the Result of Capitalist Culture

The boxing effect is implicit in the contexts of our work. Institutions of higher education can't be disentangled from the (often pseudo) public-interest accountability trend and the larger capitalist culture. As compositionists, we teach in a corporate administrative context as part of a service industry. The business program in my own institution (ostensibly a liberal arts college) articulates this blunt relation of writing and capitalism: "Our curricula point toward preparing students for the processes of creating wealth and adding value for enterprises" ("Draft" 8). The purpose of the liberal arts core is understood as itself serving this end:

> Our graduates will be equipped with solid academic preparation for the challenges of leading firms in a turbulent market environment as well as the professional skills necessary to succeed in the marketplace, such as oral and written communications skills, teamwork skills, leadership skills, and analytical skills.

In this discourse, writing is one among several commodifiable skills, and our job becomes the cultivation of this valuable—that is, wealth-creating—commodity. Once writing is commodified,

every point of educational *interface* reinforces this construct of a disembodied skill, as David Russell argues:

> The genres of core researchers in a discipline (e.g., research articles) are translated into other genres for practitioners (e.g., research reviews, instructions, teachers' manuals, etc.) and for consumers of various kinds, such as customers (trade book popularizations, warning labels, advertising), clients (intake forms, brochures), and beginning students (teaching materials, Cliff's Notes, and—most predominately—textbooks). (85)

When I volunteered in my daughter's elementary school classroom one year, my job was to dispense prefabricated teaching materials, a curriculum that literally came in a box. At a Writing Program Administrators meeting with publishers' representatives, I listened to enthusiastic pitches about how a new text came "bundled" with pedagogical add-ons. No wonder, then, that my students now are to be "equipped with solid academic preparations." They are "product."

Efficiency of production, then, is really the one way to add instructional value, and so we're institutionally encouraged to find ever-better ways—that is, more time-efficient ways—of producing writing skill. College-level writing is thus abstracted from any individual purpose and comes to function as every other commodity, as a thing to be owned, a thing which we're contracted to provide as standard equipment.

As a Commodity, College Writing Becomes Disembodied and Asocial, with Writing Separated from a Writing Subject

These systemic cultural forces work to coerce us into answering the question "What is college writing?" with an isolable, prescriptive, testable set of bundled standards, located outside of a writing subject—a real student. The question of what college writing is disembodies writing from the social agents who not only produce it, but who might otherwise (were they ever to be allowed to write outside the box) have the potential to determine its purposes and values. Writing as a disembodied skill thus comes

to be a credential that can be impersonally produced. Students in turn can be labeled *haves* and *have nots* according to this commodified notion of writing, their worth determined by their use value: do they have good writing skills?

The central aim of the extensive longitudinal research on writing conducted by the late Marilyn Sternglass is to dismantle this writing reification process:

> Early instruction in composition is critical to fostering critical reading and writing skills, but the expectation that students have become "finished writers" by the time they complete a freshman sequence or even an advanced composition course must be abandoned. (296)

Yet writing continues to function even at her home institution as a possession, "equipment" that determines access to the university, and students become modular compendia of useful skills. College writing is one element in an assembly process.

This system of usefulness, of worth defined as "adding value to [business] enterprises," redefines not only students but teachers of writing as well ("Draft" 8). Teaching becomes a matter of boxing, bundling, and otherwise delivering learning packages through a writing process that standardizes all products. Unable to resist the cultural imperative to reify writing, we find ourselves participating in the boxing effect. Kurt Spellmeyer argues that

> [m]any textbooks still uphold the dictum that a sentence "should contain," as William Strunk long ago insisted, "no unnecessary words," and "a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts." Just as widely endorsed is the advice of Henry Seidel Canby, offered in 1909 but repeated, with a few up-to-date modifications, by authors of the latest handbooks and rhetorics. "When a man prepares to write a theme [. . .] he should have a definite idea in his own mind as to just what points he is going to make [. . .] he should write a theme as an engineer builds a bridge, planning it first and then building from his plan." Legacies of a specific time and place, these injunctions now possess a timeless self-evidence, a cultural purchase inversely proportional to their diminishing visibility [. . . .]

> [T]oday these claims are neither true nor false; they are common sense, ideas a teacher might endorse even after his experience has failed to support them. . . . (3)

Instead of leading to a Kuhnian crisis and revolution in the commodity paradigm, the teacher's experience with real human subjects writing in real social locations reinforces the disembodiment of college writing. Divorced from actual writers and their social contexts, writing operates in/as Platonic form, and the pale, inferior imitation that an individual student produces becomes evidence of college writing as a good that he or she does not possess.

Epistemological *Container* Theories Support the Commodification Process

Despite the resurgence in rhetorical instruction, then, much of our work as writing teachers remains under the coercive influence of reductive cognitive models of linguistic competence, a situation exacerbated by an often equally reductive assessment culture. As a writing teacher, I come under intense pressure to be instrumentalist in approach, behaviorist in pedagogy, consumerist in curriculum, all forces leading to the reification of reading and writing. Almost twenty years ago, educational theorist Patrick Shannon analyzed this commodification process:

> [W]hen they reify reading instruction, teachers and administrators lose sight of the fact that reading instruction is a human process. . . . [T]heir reification of the scientific study of the reading process as the commercial materials means that their knowledge of reading and instruction is frozen in a single technological form. . . . [S]chool personnel's reification of science requires that they define their work in terms of efficiency of delivery and students' gains in test scores. (190)

Consider the larger cultural nostalgia for mechanistic models of reading, given new strength by continued strides in mandatory, state-sponsored testing. In a pre-social-construction model, college (or any educational level) reading *skill* can be easily assessed, since the model separates readers from interpretation; in such a

model, the text *contains* its own meaning. The student reader's task is to read the text and extract that meaning. Success can be measured through various forms of comprehension testing, for correct answers have a close to absolute relationship with the text—an idea or point either is or is not in the text, and a student either has or has not understood it. It's a container model of knowledge; open the text's lid and scoop out the meaning from the text box. It powered much of the pedagogy of English classes through at least the 1980s. Its appeal is clear: if knowledge exists in bits or chunks, then it is easily measured, in a text or a student's performance, according to a scale of simple to advanced. In turn we get a theory of teaching and learning that is incremental, that posits basic skills as necessarily prior to other, higher-order cognitive skills. The boxes, in other words, can be neatly labeled.

Curricula built on this model assume that texts hold knowledge, that we mine knowledge from texts, and so that if we read the right texts, we will get the best knowledge and become the best people. This is a commodity model of reading infused with a ruling class ideology—he (sic) who reads the most of the best naturally rises to the top, but only he who is naturally superior will understand these hard books. The notion of inherent textual meaning is compelling because it idealizes out of existence some otherwise troubling phenomena, like the unequal performance of white students and students of color on standardized tests. If the boxes are identical, then any difference in their unpacking can be directly attributable to the individual student. Min-Zhan Lu locates this neutrality as a scientistic element of composition textbooks, which

> empty writing of the social and historical, operating to authorize a notion of "good" writing structured on the binary of 'human' universality vs. social, historical differences. . . . [T]hese texts . . . offer 'new,' 'scientific' justifications for maintaining the neutrality of "good" writing. (70)

The writing curriculum is the production end of this meaning collection. Students learn to mine a text box's ideas and then recast them in a box he or she has decorated, as this current online guide to writing puts it:

> An essay can have many purposes, but the basic structure is the same no matter what. You may be writing an essay to argue for a particular point of view or to explain the steps necessary to complete a task.
>
> Either way, your essay will have the same basic format.
>
> If you follow a few simple steps, you will find that the essay almost writes itself. You will be responsible only for supplying ideas, which are the important part of the essay anyway. ("Guide")

Such a model of writing supplants the concept of the rhetorical, the recognition of language as a social practice, of communication as an exchange with a purpose, as a context-dependent process of negotiated meanings. The container model posits reading and writing as a linear process of incremental skill that moves hierarchically from the simple to the complex. What is prior is simpler, and what is later is more challenging. Applied to students, this model rewards students from certain cultural backgrounds and justifies itself in the face of poor performance by others. Applied to the institutional level, this container model produces the differing degrees of cultural capital that can be named community college, four-year school, research university.

Commodification Is Replicated in Institutional Structures

Where curricular control is removed from the teachers who teach the curricula, instruction is always already corrupted. External curricular control means not only debased curricula and limited access for students, but it also debases the field and faculty. Commodified college writing is therefore also a formula for maintaining the distinctions between institutional levels.

In "Our Apartheid," Ira Shor describes the stratification of educational institutions and employs the metaphors of "tracking" and "apartheid," both of them forms of social and institutional containers. He argues that the community college system is a means for the social tracking of students, but his argument also clearly suggests that the control placed on the community college system correlates with a cultural impulse to discipline the

bodies of certain faculty—of those who lack cultural capital, who are reified via the tightly structured bureaucracy of state control of curriculum.

Within a university context, *community college* is a monolithic term, a kind of icon for a set of assumptions, a primary one being that there is no need for differentiation, that community colleges are relatively identical boxes. The differentiations that are commonly made among four-year institutions—Research I and II, comprehensive universities, state schools, regional schools, private liberal arts schools—are usually not used by faculty and administrators at these schools when it comes to thinking about relations with two-year schools. This attitude is reinforced by the perception of the two-year school as a place of reduced autonomy. In "Pleasure and Pain: Faculty and Administrators in a Shared Governance Environment," Sally Fitzgerald (then a community college dean) discusses the problems administrators face in working collaboratively with faculty. She explains some of the constraints on hiring and course assignments, constraints imposed not by her administrative superiors at the college but mandated by state legislators. The degree of external control, the restrictions on autonomy, that pervades the state's institutions at the community college level is striking in its ability to box in faculty status as well. Just as students in the writing classroom traditionally have been constructed more by assumptions about their institutional affiliation than by their critical awareness, so, too, have faculty.

The institutional relations have been formed by a linear notion of relationship: two-year school education precedes university education, a temporal frame that discourages serious attention to what happens in the two-year school, just as has been the pattern of relations between secondary schools and college. The relations of two-year school, four-year school, and research university faculty are thus limited by a class-based ideology, one that overrides the material connections that exist between them. Materially, colleagues at two-year, four-year, and research institutions have common means of contact. We often work together, especially those of us in the rhetoric-composition field, since the number of part-time instructors is so high in both types of insti-

tutions, and this part-time population is likely to teach at both. We share students, since a primary mission of many two-year schools is to send a significant number of graduates to four-year institutions. We have course articulation agreements that acknowledge the parallel work of our curricula. We belong to many of the same professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English, attend many of the same conferences, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and read many of the same journals, such as *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and *Journal of Basic Writing*, sharing a common theoretical knowledge. We were graduate students together. Clearly, a powerful ideological system operates to justify the divide that is apparent despite these material connections.

Each institutional faculty is boxed into its own institutional container, and these are dialogically nonporous. A deeply ingrained notion of hierarchy in education, a social construct of linear relations, produces a static relationship in which one group must always speak *up* to the next group even as it works *down* against a response from this group. The seemingly democratic nature of shared work in the national professional organizations constructs its equality via a base of dues-paying members even as it enables status distinctions through the cultural capital of its status-graduated conferences and journals. The egalitarian unity of a CCCC, for instance, is one of the "utopias—nowheres, metacommunities" that Joseph Harris cites in his critique of the idea of community (100); it is unrelated to the material conditions of our daily lives in our stacked institutional boxes.

Writing out of the Box

When we reify writing, we tacitly endorse a set of beliefs that assume generic shape as common sense: writing, after all, is concrete, a thing you can produce, use, sell. Richard Ohmann critiqued the ideological agenda behind the Strunk and White dictum to students to "use definite, specific, concrete language" as having the effect of "encourag[ing] them to accept the empirical frag-

mentation of consciousness that passes for common sense in our society, and hence to accept the society itself as just what it most superficially seems to be" (250). Writing in college has a material reality that cannot be contained in a set of disembodied descriptors or idealized prescriptives.

Writing in college, as elsewhere, happens among people, in real places, over time, for a vast range of purposes. When people writing in college environments write, we see embodied instances of college writing. To attempt to define college writing outside this human social context is to invite its commodification, to erase the subject himself or herself, to justify mechanistic curricula, and to support institutional atomism. All the contemporary professional calls for a rhetorical curriculum speak against such commodification, and all the emerging works of alternative discourses embody the subversion of it. We've paid enough for our arguments over what college writing is.

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