

# The Deprofessionalization of the Writing Instructor

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It may seem odd to invoke the notion of deprofessionalization in reference to an occupation whose bid for professional status has been so zealous and so comparatively recent. Indeed, many insiders would doubtless resent the implication that their occupation, which has finally achieved some hard-earned respect within the academy, is somehow becoming less professional. If my suggestion that writing teachers have been "deprofessionalized" arouses my colleagues' ire, it probably inspires little more than a yawn from occupational sociologists, who have been discussing the general phenomenon for over twenty years (Haug; Haug and Sussman). Within that group, however, the assumption is that deprofessionalization is due primarily to threats from without, while I will argue that for composition instruction it has resulted mostly from internal, self-imposed changes. Furthermore, the very assumption that deprofessionalization represents a threat to writing teachers is, as I hope to show, debatable. In any event, composition studies would do well to assess developments within the field in light of deprofessionalization, for the discipline's professional image will have much to do with its continuing struggle for recognition and influence within the academy.

To suggest that composition is undergoing deprofessionalization implies that the field had achieved professional status and is now in the process of losing that status. It should be noted that the notion of professionalization refers either to a process whereby occupations acquire the status of profession or the degree to which an occupation has achieved that status. Professionalization is, therefore, a dynamic rather than a static condition. Those occupations that have sought but not yet achieved full professional standing—for example, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, etc.—are always in the process of trying to achieve it, while the established professions, such as medicine and law, are always in the process of protecting their standing in the face of various external threats to their domain. Furthermore, although sociologists sometimes use the terms nonprofession, semiprofession, and profession as though they designated fairly discrete categories, the notion of a continuum is more accurate and helpful. As Ritzer notes, "The idea of a continuum grows out of the focus on social change" and enables researchers "to study how and why an occupation moves up or down the scale" (43). Professionalization, then, is

a continuum, and deprofessionalization represents movement on that continuum.

Evaluating the professional status of an occupation depends on the criteria used. For Maxine Hairston, in her 1985 Chair's Address to the CCCC, the existence of graduate programs in composition and rhetoric, new courses and journals, burgeoning attendance at writing conferences, and a thriving job market for composition and rhetoric faculty were all evidence of composition's professional stature. Carol Berkenkotter, who finds indications of professionalism in the increasing specialization within composition studies, points to changes in the categories on the CCCC Program Proposal Form as evidence of "the proliferation of specialized areas of interest" (155). The 1980 form had eleven categories; by 1990 that number had increased to thirty-two.

Occupational sociologists have their own measures of professionalization. According to George Ritzer, two approaches have predominated. One, the structural-functional, emphasizes the characteristics of a given profession. Among the structural-functional characteristics that Ritzer discusses, three are especially relevant for composition studies: 1) a body of general systematic knowledge that is the professional's exclusive possession; 2) a norm of authority over clients; and 3) a distinctive occupational culture (48-55).

Regarding the body of systematic knowledge, Ritzer questions whether there are any "inherent qualitative differences between professions and nonprofessions in terms of knowledge" and surmises that "where qualitative differences exist, they have been artificially created by professionals' denial of access of their knowledge to others" (49). In the case of composition, access to knowledge has not been explicitly denied, but for many years composition teachers, by ghettoizing writing instruction in the English department, perpetuated the notion that only they could and should teach writing. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement, however, with its assumption that all disciplines share the responsibility for academic literacy, potentially undermines the exclusivity of composition's claim on a body of systematic knowledge and thus can be seen as evidence of deprofessionalization.

Ritzer's second structural-functional characteristic, the so-called "norm of authority," is an interesting one for teachers of writing. The traditional image of the red-pencil-wielding English teacher is authoritarian to the extreme, and the easy association in the popular mind between writing competence and grammatical correctness, together with the often mysterious aura surrounding the act of composition, has made it easy and natural to authorize the position of writing teacher. Even among our colleagues across the disciplines, those of us in composition often arouse discomfort

and a reluctance to let us see any piece of writing that is not sufficiently "finished."

Today's composition teacher, however, is conflicted about the notion of authority. Browsing through the 1991 CCCC Convention Program, for example, reveals such titles as: "Responding to Student Writing: Is There an Expert in the House?"; "Involving Students in Assessment"; "Empowerment/Being All That You Can Be: Negotiating the Costs of Critical Pedagogy"; "Giving Up Authority Just When They've Got It: New TAs and Student-Centered Writing"; "Learning from Students: Surrendering Expectation and Adapting to Realities." The mantle of authority traditionally bequeathed to composition teachers is increasingly one they are reluctant to don. But to the extent that composition instructors seek ways to empower their students, to help students recognize and develop their own authority as writers, they alter their own professional image, at least according to structural-functionalists.

Ritzer's other structural-functional characteristic, a distinctive occupational culture, is readily documented for composition. The emergence of CCCC as a viable subset of NCTE, the numerous national and regional writing conferences now in existence, the number of journals focusing on writing and the teaching of writing--all of these have contributed to a culture, or at least a subculture, that reinforces among its members the feeling that what they do is vocationally distinctive. It is possible, though, that the academic specialization noted by Berkenkotter might lessen the commonality of purpose felt by those within the field of composition. Professional unity is also compromised by composition's persistent dependence on part-time instructors, many of whom do not feel a sense of professional identity (Wallace).

The other main approach to professionalization within occupational sociology is the power approach. Ritzer defines power as "the ability of an occupation (really its leaders) to obtain (and retain) a set of rights and privileges (and obligations) from societal groups that otherwise might not grant them" (56). In addressing the question, "Where does professional power come from?" Ritzer points to two key sources: a margin of indetermination and a level of uncertainty. The first has to do with "the degree to which an occupation's task(s) cannot be routinized, that is, made available to masses of people" (57). Human physiology and psychology are so complicated, we have become convinced, that only a professional, the physician or the therapist, can be trusted to prescribe treatment for illness. The law, too, has become a domain into which lay people venture at their peril. The wise citizen--whether contemplating marriage or dissolution, whether buying or selling, whether conferring or claiming, consults a

lawyer.

Closely related to a margin of indetermination is a level of uncertainty. As long as professionals deal with their clients' areas of uncertainty, their professional wisdom is valued and their professional status secure. It makes sense, therefore, for the professional "to protect as well as to expand this area of uncertainty and thereby increase his power" (Ritzer 58). The ever-increasing complexity of getting a divorce or filing one's income tax is in the best interests of lawyers and accountants, assuring them a ready supply of clients.

How does composition fare when analyzed in terms of the power approach to professionalization? Does the teaching of writing enjoy a margin of indetermination? Some recent trends in composition appear to narrow that margin. A process approach to writing, for example, stresses the steps or stages or components of the act of composing, thereby rendering it less esoteric, more accessible, and more manageable. Peer feedback groups in the composition class are based on the assumption that students, not just teachers, are qualified respondents to each other's writing. The writing-across-the-curriculum movement, with its assumption that the responsibility for teaching writing should be shared among all disciplines, democratizes the teaching of writing. Finally, the proliferation of computer software designed to aid not only in checking spelling and grammar but also invention, organization and style suggests that much of the writing instructor's "esoteric" knowledge may be encoded in computer programs. As Marie Haug, writing about trends in the professions as a whole, has noted, "To the extent that scientific professional knowledge can be 'codified,' it can be broken into bits, stored in a computer memory, and recalled as needed. No longer need it be preserved in the professional's head or in books alone. A great deal of the learning transmitted to professional-in-training can be made accessible in this way" (201).

As the margin of indetermination surrounding composition shrinks, the level of uncertainty also decreases. While the study of literature often tends to mystify the act of writing, many composition teachers and current textbooks seek to demystify it. From literature we get the idea that writers are gifted, that they work alone, that they write when they are inspired. But one need not be a serious student of literature to have distorted notions about how texts are produced. As Murray has observed, most students have an impoverished view of how writing is created. They "have never seen writing being made. They believe that teachers and writers know a magic rite that places words on the page in an order that is full of grace and meaning the first time, that each work arrives correctly spelled, each piece of punctuation appears at the moment it is needed, and that all rules of rhetoric, grammar, and mechanics fall into place on their own" (105).

Murray, of course, is interested in demythologizing and demystifying the writing process for students. Lisa Ede shows a similar interest in her recent freshman writing text, where she attacks head-on "the romanticized image of the writer struggling alone until inspiration strikes" (15). Ede, like many other composition teachers, wants her students to feel part of a community of writers and to see writing as a process of making meaning, not a gift imparted to the fortunate few. To the extent that writing teachers attempt to level the playing field, they reduce the level of uncertainty surrounding the act of writing, indeed, most teachers probably feel that reducing uncertainty is part of their job. According to the power approach to professionalization, however, they may be making their job security more uncertain. Perhaps the ultimate uncertainty is the disappearance of the teacher altogether, a state of affairs described in some detail in Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*.

The word "power," like "authority," makes many modern composition theorists and teachers nervous. When a Peter Elbow talks about power, for instance, it is not something to be guarded by members of the elite, that is, teachers, but rather a power available to everyone. His book, *Writing with Power*, says Elbow, is based on "an assumption that virtually everyone has available great skill with words. That is, everyone can, under certain conditions, speak with clarity and power" (7).

If a major component of professionalization is power, then deprofessionalization is primarily the loss of power. One explanation for professionals' perceived loss of power that has achieved some notoriety is the "revolt of the client," a tendency for clients to question the professional's authority. Client revolt is fueled, among other things, by increased knowledge; the more clients know, the less willing they are to trust the judgment and authority of the professional. Haug and Sussman, writing at the end of the 1960s, saw in the student demonstrations of the period evidence for a challenge to the professional expertise of college and university teachers. Two decades later, though, it is more difficult to see college students as clients in revolt. Most teachers are as likely to lament student passivity as they are to complain of excessive challenges to their authority. The gripe against today's students is usually that they are too extrinsically oriented and motivated to risk biting the hand that will one day pass them on to the hand that will feed them. Also, modern college students, according to most faculty, are less knowledgeable and skilled than their predecessors, especially in the area of writing, and hence less able and likely to mount an effective challenge to the teacher's authority.

Composition has, however, adopted some practices that create a climate in which "client revolt" could flourish. By stressing that as teachers they are not the only audience for student writing and by encouraging their

students to get feedback from other readers, whether classmates, friends, tutors, or others, composition teachers both systematize and sanction what Bloor and Horobin, writing about physicians and their patients, call "lay consultants." Bloor and Horobin hypothesize that "the proto-patient who has negotiated a diagnosis with his lay consultants is likely to present to his doctor a relatively well developed set of requests . . . [and] to be less compliant in his interaction with the doctor than is the patient whose proto-patient career has been foreshortened" (278-79).

While physicians do not encourage prospective patients to consult lay people before making office visits, they may, in an effort to minimize trivial consultations, subtly encourage patients to assess their own condition in order to decide whether an office visit is really necessary. Such behavior may make patients more capable of and more likely to engage in self-diagnosis, which in turn may make them more likely to question the physician's judgments. Because doctors dislike both trivial office visits and challenges to their authority, Bloor and Horobin accuse them of placing patients in a "double bind":

The sick person is expected to analyze his condition in terms--is it serious or non-serious, does it require medical treatment or some other alleviative action, etc.--which imply diagnostic and prognostic evaluation, but on presentation to the doctor the sick person is expected to "forget" his own prior assessment of the condition and defer to the doctor's; the sick person is first encouraged to participate in and then excluded from the therapeutic process. (277)

Do writing teachers do the same thing? Certainly an emphasis on student self-diagnosis is a hallmark of much current writing instruction, for it is consistent with the conviction that, as Hawkins puts it, "the teacher is not solely responsible for what goes on in the classroom" (11). But when self-diagnosis leads students either to question authority (and as long as teachers give grades, they will be perceived to have authority) or to resist treatment (Elbow, *Contraries* 81-82), how do teachers respond? It may be impossible to generalize about teachers' behavior in such situations, but clearly both the challenges and the responses do much to shape our evolving professional image.

Any attempt to analyze the professionalization or deprofessionalization of an occupation assumes a certain amount of internal occupational consistency. Whether composition evidences that consistency is certainly arguable, as is the question of whether it should be internally consistent.

Bartholomae, in his 1988 Chair's Address to CCCC, concludes with an appeal to resist calls for "a disciplined, ordered field," stating flatly: "I am suspicious of calls for coherence. I suspect that most of the problems in academic life--problems of teaching, problems of thinking--come from disciplinary boundaries and disciplinary habits" (49). To the extent that Bartholomae's characterization of and hopes for composition studies are representative, to the extent that we are "fractious, prone to argument . . . multivocal, dialogical," attempts to analyze the profession as a profession will be complicated.

While it may be difficult to say exactly what the new paradigm of composition instruction looks like or just where we are in the paradigm shift (Hairston, "Winds"), it seems clear that a different role has emerged for the writing teacher. The new writing teacher is more a facilitator than a dispenser of truth, a referee rather than a judge (Hawkins), a collaborator rather than an evaluator (Jacobs and Karliner), a coach and diagnostician (Murray), a commentator and counselor (Harris). These roles all narrow the gap between teacher and students. They also redefine, as I have suggested, the nature of professional authority and may be seen as having contributed to deprofessionalization. Whether deprofessionalization, as defined by occupational sociologists, is a negative phenomenon for composition, however, is debatable.

As Ritzer notes, professionals have never enjoyed unrestricted authority over clients. Especially for such professionals as doctors and lawyers, whose livelihoods depend on a constant flow of patients, there is considerable pressure to accommodate oneself to patients' desires (164-165). Most writing teachers do not have to compete for clients in the same way that other professionals do. Still, since in most departments student evaluations figure in promotion, advancement, and merit decisions, teachers are obliged to pay attention to students' wishes and to their own standing in students' eyes. Writing teachers are not strangers, then, to the demands of what Ritzer calls "client-centered conflict" and to the pressure to compromise as a way of coping with that conflict.

Compromise with clients does not, however, necessarily compromise the quality of the professional's performance or the outcome of the professional-client consultation. Rosenthal, in his study of professional-client relations among lawyers, observed two approaches: the traditional and the participatory. The traditional model "holds that client welfare and the public interest are best served by the professional's exercise of predominant control over and responsibility for the problem-solving delegated to him rather passively by the client" (2). The participatory model, on the other hand, holds that "both client and consultant gain from a sharing of control over many of the decisions arising out of the relationship" (7). After

studying the lawyer-client relationship in 59 personal injury claims, Rosenthal found that participating clients tended to receive better settlements than did traditional clients. Rosenthal concludes that "neither lawyer nor client should be in charge, but that professional service should be a matter of shared responsibility" (2).

Increasingly in the composition classroom, the participatory model is the norm, as it has always been in the writing center. In this respect, writing teachers are allied with psychotherapists, most of whom adopt a participatory model of therapist-patient relations. Indeed, Rogerian psychology has significantly influenced conceptualizations of writing conference dynamics (Duke, Murphy, Reigstad and McAndrew, Taylor). To the extent that writing teachers see their task in Rogerian terms, providing clients with "the opportunity of making responsible choices" (Rogers 51), they will adopt what Reigstad and McAndrew call a "student-centered" conferencing style, in which students "are treated as conversational equals and fellow writers" (30) who determine "the direction of the session, initiating movement to each new phase of the conference" (29). Some research suggests that this approach is more effective than a directive, teacher-centered style. Studies by Beaumont and Jacobs and Karliner note a clear relationship between instructional style and students' revision of their writing, finding that directive, prescriptive instructional roles promoted student passivity and minimal revision, while a collaborative, student-centered approach produced more substantial revisions in students' drafts.

Despite the effectiveness and appeal of collaborative approaches to teaching writing, there are factors militating against their widespread adoption, and these factors have to do with the roles with which teachers and students feel comfortable. Diane Stelzer Morrow, a former doctor turned tutor who explores possible connections between physicians and writing tutors, describes three models of doctor-patient relationships: activity-passivity, guidance-cooperation, and mutual participation. In the first two models, the doctor is assumed to be knowledgeable, the patient ignorant. In the third model, the physician does not claim to know what is best for the patient; instead, determining the best course of treatment becomes a shared goal of the interaction between doctor and patient. While the practice of medicine has changed and with it the conception of the physician's role, mutual participation, says Morrow, "is not, by any means, the most prevalent model" (227). She speculates that mutual participation has failed to become more popular because of both doctors' and patients' attitudes. Patients do expect their doctor to be an expert, to know more than they do, to diagnose, to give specific advice--in short, to fulfill a traditionally professional role. Physicians, for their part, recognize that a patient's trust in the doctor can be instrumental in the patient taking action that will

promote healing and health. Thus, the doctor may well be reluctant to say, "I don't know."

Within composition circles, it is fashionable to espouse "dialogic" approaches to writing and teaching. The politically correct writing teacher is expected to agree with the Freirean dictum that "knowledge of the object to be known is not the sole possession of the teacher" and that "the object to be known is put on the table between the two subjects of knowing" (14). Especially for the composition instructor, as opposed to the subject-area faculty member, the teacher is expected to concede the authority of the writer, recognizing, as Donald Murray asserts, that "as much as the teacher--the experienced writer--knows about writing, the composition teacher does not--and should not--know the subject of the student's draft as well as the student writer" (129).

These concessions are, from the standpoint of professional authority, just that: concessions. Writing teachers who believe that their role as authority and expert inhibits their students' empowerment as writers, and who deliberately shun that role, are in the process significantly affecting the way they are perceived professionally, both by clients and by peers. Many composition teachers, still chary about their tenuous status in the academy, would appreciate the irony felt by a colleague of mine, who, on the way home from a CCCC convention, observed, "Everybody keeps telling me to give up my power. What power?"

This, then, is the postmodern writing teacher's dilemma: The experts in the field tell her to actively resist being cast in the role of expert. Her goal should be to empower student writers. Her classroom should be collaborative, dialogic, her pedagogy liberatory and nonauthoritarian. The result of these attitudes and behaviors, she is assured, will be better writing, and, more importantly, better writers, but another result, one that does not get talked about nearly as much, is deprofessionalization. What is the future of a deprofessionalized segment of the academy in times of retrenchment?

From the perspective of occupational sociology, participatory, collaborative, liberatory, or student-centered pedagogies are evidence of deprofessionalization because they weaken teachers' claim to an exclusive body of knowledge, lessen their authority over clients, diffuse professional power, and narrow the margin of indetermination teachers enjoy. As I have suggested, deprofessionalization, by this definition, does not necessarily compromise the quality of what goes on in the composition classroom. Indeed, it may result in more effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, as I have noted, composition is not the only profession to have discovered the effectiveness of "deprofessionalized" approaches to client relations. At the same time, deprofessionalization does affect composition's image and standing in the academy. For a discipline that has worked long and hard

to achieve professional status in the university, what I have called deprofessionalization is a dynamic that composition teachers would do well to pay attention to and be self-conscious about.

Emerson wrote, "Nature arms each man with some faculty which enables him to do easily some feat impossible to any other, and thus makes him necessary to society." Peter Elbow has said, "I think teachers learn to be more useful when it is clearer that they are not necessary" (*Teachers x*). Between these two poles, teachers of writing live and move and have their professional being.

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