

Prologue: Begging Your Indulgence

*I*n this article I ask a sometimes resistant audience to consider the value of consciously applying marketing language to educational efforts. Please bear with me. Increasingly, the university is becoming a more market-driven institution, whether anyone likes it or not. True, the most avid “marketeers” exaggerate both the value of being market-driven and the extent to which the current university, still largely a product of patronage of various kinds, actually responds to market forces. Yet it is in our interests at least to explore what it would mean to be more market-driven. Certainly, an honorably sophistic rhetorician should at least consider such a prominently suggested opposite case.

Moreover, perhaps certain approaches to market analysis are more compatible with composition’s aims than others, so that compositionists might wish to co-opt them in defense against more hostile kinds of market analysis. While this is not the place for extended analysis, there are particularly interesting connections between some branches of Quality Management theory and composition theory. In particular, the management practices loosely called “TQM,” or “Total Quality Management,” favor broad contextual analysis, empowerment of those actually doing the work, and a focus on processes, not error correction, as the key to better products (Aguayo). Indeed, those interested in further investigation might be struck by

Marketing Composition For the 21st Century

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the eerie similarity of Aguayo's whole list of TQM practices (124-25) with better composition practices. It is perhaps not accidental that TQM theories have had ready and useful application to vexing composition problems, such as assessing WAC outcomes (Morgan).

Certainly, indulging in marketing language to talk about composition imports highly dangerous alien attitudes. Even so, to avoid it entirely would be much more dangerous, given the reality of our need to deal with others who use it regularly to decide our fate. I will urge eventually that market analysis might lead composition administrators to go with some flows that at first might seem best resisted; and I will even suggest in a final, wrenching twist that this result holds regardless of our confidence in the quality of our products.

Introduction: Marketing Rhetoric

TQM marketing theories usefully ask providers of anything, even education, to think of marketing in a "Total" way—as a transaction in which providers look not just to their immediate "customers," but to the "stakeholders" in their entire economic dynamic (Deming). Robert Maust, in an article entitled simply "Marketing," writes that standard business marketing strategies, applied by analogy to education, would certainly extend to re-examining curricular choices with markets in mind. I will claim that composition's best marketing plan, the one with the best ratio of reward to risk, entails radical, seemingly dangerous, change in how composition's "managers" do business. How dangerous? Well, in short, implementing many suggestions from Joseph Petraglia's collection *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*—shifting courses to being *about* composition and rhetoric, making actual writing courses elective, telling people in other disciplines to teach their own writing, cutting literature departments adrift—and working easier, shorter hours for more money to boot. That dangerous. I contend that composition has marketed itself into a corner, much as the old Jeep corporation had done before Chrysler bought AMC and got Jeep in the package. AMC had made the mistake of holding down costs, cutting the attractiveness of its products in the process. As Chrysler realized concerning the Jeep, a significant *upgrade* of the right product can raise prices, sales, and profits all at once. It is all in the marketing, broadly defined to include how the product is packaged and placed. As the pioneer "SUV," the once lowly Jeep is now a status symbol. Composition might be able to benefit from a similar change in image.

First, does composition really need such a radical change? Maybe things are not great right now, but they could be worse. Why take risks? Quality Management theories insist, on good evidence, that companies who live by “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” tend to end up broke. Life changes. Markets move. Apple thrived by building the best stand-alone home computers, but it fell behind when home computing became networked, multi-functional and more commercial, requiring widespread compatibility among random distant computers. College composition has fed off the growth trend in general education, but now reformers, like the Boyer Commission, want to change general education utterly, often specifically targeting normal composition either for changes compositionists do not want or for the ax. Just as Apple created the market in user-friendly computing that made Microsoft rich at Apple’s own expense, composition’s WAC successes are leading other disciplines to consider making writing part of their own profit centers. That fortune is now turning back Apple’s way does not mean composition can blithely expect a similar renovation.

And the diminishment of composition within general education is just the most immediate threat. Other studies, like those of David Breneman and Robert Lisensky, question the very idea of general education. In response to complex factors, higher education is changing its whole mission, mostly in ways that make general education less relevant. College education is no more profitable than before, but *not* having a college degree is becoming much more dangerous. Thus, students with no interest in “liberal education” come to college simply to flee the drying lower end of our national economy. It still makes sense for them to come to college, since the work they seek demands basic information handling, something that heavily subsidized colleges can still teach more competitively than business trainers. Mostly, though, this entails “basic” literacy and numeracy—the things that supposedly ought to be learned in high school. Increasingly, students come to college to get ready for this new phenomenon—what I will call “education for followership,” as contrasted with the “education for leadership” for which general education was designed. These market trends draw large numbers of students who do not care whether they become enlightened and whose future employers are even less interested in giving their new rank and file—much less their temps and part-timers—the education originally designed to prepare an elite for leadership.

Even more broadly, the supposed economic advantages of college, still quite real in terms of wages paid to degree holders, may not actually

play out in terms of productivity, despite many superficial studies that reassure us of this common wisdom. Eichanan Cohn found serious problems in every economic study that purported to demonstrate a real connection between college education and economic productivity, and while his study is dated, the methods he critiques are mostly still in use. As Ivar Berg has determined, more highly-educated employees are paid more, but are not clearly better—and they clearly are more disruptive, more dissatisfied, and more disloyal. As Ronnie Davis and John Morrall, III found, investment in college education, in gross, is a worse deal than elementary or high school education, returning to our economy as a whole only 15% on the dollar—about as much as investment in ordinary alternatives like equipment or infrastructure. Indeed, education may be like the defense industry, roughly its equal in economic size: the over-all economic boost from higher education may come largely from the business of maintaining the industry itself, not from anything it produces. While large and prestigious meta-studies have tried to put a good spin on all this (Bowen 433; Pascarella and Terenzini 500-05), they as readily permit an inference that it is not enhanced abilities that produce the economic gains experienced by college students, but rather simply the degree, an item of cultural capital valued more for its ability to screen the labor pool than for its reflection of enhanced abilities.

Further, higher education is designed for inefficiency. Most of the direct consumers pay few of their own costs, while workers' rewards and punishments are largely disconnected from the value they provide to those consumers. In any other industry, one would expect scattered quality and a good deal of waste—as there was in Soviet communism, a roughly equivalent system. Absent a showing to the contrary, it is fair to assume that education has a great deal of inefficiency and waste. Despite this, private industry has still been loathe to do its own general training in literacy and numeracy because general training is portable and does not necessarily help the business that supplies it. Still, more businesses may become aware of the argument that lower-education workers tend to be just as productive and more loyal no matter how expert they become. They may then calculate that losing a few trainees is cheap at the price compared to sustaining part of a huge, waste-producing, tax-eating, discretionary income-depleting enterprise like higher education. Finally, the civic arguments that once supported, or even created, an inefficient model have withered in the face of conservative arguments against liberal intellectuals, arguments that are

interestingly consistent with the needs of industry.

Thus, composition faces existing, if quiet, marketing threats at three levels—its own programs, the general education model in which it fits, and the university model that contains it all. So composition may not be broken yet, but there are many futures in which it could be. TQM counsels that the only way to survive is to thrive. Let's look at how composition might thrive by looking at its "total" marketing—marketing in the broad sense of changing even the basic "product" to meet real market needs, but also just plain better marketing of whatever it does. Doing so should enhance, not replace, efforts to value composition's role in the preparation of citizens; and for right now, marketing is the much stronger lever for positive change.

In making these suggestions, I will also take a "total" view of composition as a business. In a very real sense the center of operations for "composition" as an independent entity falls very much to its national organizations; locally, most composition programs, still, are controlled by English departments that offer them inadequate support. In response, compositionists have learned to work effectively in nationwide affiliations, creating new products, testing them, and training apprentices according to shared understandings, all with a remarkable degree of cooperation among themselves. Compositionists should want to move beyond that status, becoming empowered in local situations to exercise their genuine expertise, but until then, it makes great sense to take advantage of the unusual opportunity compositionists have as essentially an inter-institutional collective—or guild, if you will.

Examining the Current "Plan" for Marketing Composition and Its Effects

Before looking at revising composition's marketing, we should look at the current marketing of composition. I will caution at the outset of this section that within it, like any good marketing consultant, I will look at composition's glass as if it were half full, not half empty; without going to irresponsible excess, I will accept claims that seem likely to be accepted by others. I see three main initiatives in place, then, to forward composition's best case. Most narrowly, there are the course descriptions and the programs that contain them. Expanding a bit, there is "product positioning"—the way composition courses implicitly define their product by where it is "sold," and to whom, and on what terms. Beyond that, we can look at public relations, both locally and nationally. In a nutshell, the course description

material is fine, maybe even good; as to PR, there is room for improvement, but the key to that may be shoring up product positioning, which seems to be where composition suffers the most harm.

Looking randomly at a large number of course descriptions on microfiche and the Internet, I have found two interesting phenomena. First, catalog descriptions as a whole indicate an apparent inconsistency among programs that is routinely managed toward greater coherence in actual course syllabi. Second, despite this seeming inconsistency among the catalogs, their parts taken as a whole have a strong over-all coherence with the Outcomes Statement currently under consideration by the Council of Writing Program Administrators ("Outcomes"). Composition's objectives are too large and diverse to be easily contained, so no one course description can contain them. But the average student looking at any particular syllabus or a prospective student looking at descriptions from several schools could usually gain a consistent and accurate view of the composition class as a general phenomenon.

The dominant terms in the course descriptions were "critical", "revision", "process", "practice", "analysis", "effective", "reading", "multicultural", and even "rhetorical"—well, okay, and "themes." The message on the whole is unmistakable: there is a lot to this, it is serious academic business, and it is much more than knowing where the commas go—though it is that, too. This informed coherence is even more common in syllabus descriptions on the Internet, where a good half the time instructors either explain the official course description further or just replace the officialese with their own more complete description. Thus, despite a difficult situation, compositionists seem capable of defining a coherent profession of rhetorical composition, and they seem inclined and authorized to do so. They do need greater consistency in the effort, and perhaps an official Outcomes Statement can help a great deal there. Still, compositionists are already at a point where they could dare to ask their "customers" and their administrators to undertake the scan I did and expect them to come away better informed about what composition, at its best, can do.

To reserve the most interesting point for last, let us skip to national public relations next and treat it briefly. There is clearly a great deal more that composition administrators could do in that arena. People largely do not understand the full meaning and import of language, literacy, or rhetoric, but when they do come to grasp more of it, it holds their interest.

I will never forget a time when, the muse being with me, in three minutes flat I got a state higher education official to shift his view of composition from a site of grammar drills and error correction to one of genre analysis and rhetorical strategies. As he said, he had simply never thought about it that way before, but it made sense once he did. Of course, he still thinks it can be tested in a universal, state-wide timed writing. There is more to be done, certainly.

But the subject is dense and unusual, and opportunities to explain it are limited by composition's professional circumstances. Composition does not have many high platforms. Still, as David Schwalm, Susan McLeod, Charles Schuster, and other former WPAs now elevated to upper administration exemplify, administering a rhetorically informed composition program is a great preparation for mid-level academic leadership. The administrative talent being developed by Writing Program Administration and Writing Across the Curriculum experience, especially as accelerated by the growth in WPA and WAC graduate school preparation, will keep percolating up the system, even in the face of individual difficulties with academic reward systems. Composition will have higher platforms, from which it can get bigger splashes. So here the need is mostly for patience, as long as other parts of the marketing plan are working.

Even right now, there are opportunities, and compositionists are taking them. WAC and service learning introduce not only students but also other faculty and community members to what is really up with writing. And despite initial stories of resistance to WAC, by now it has gotten to where the prestigious Boyer Commission wants WAC as a sturdy part of their "next wave" of university education.

Unfortunately, they also may want to eliminate first-year comp. Here is where we get into product placement, but first let's listen to what the Boyer Commission had to say on its web page:

The failure of research universities seems most serious in conferring degrees upon inarticulate students. . . . Unfortunately, today's students too often think of composition as a boring English requirement rather than a life skill. . . . Faculty too often think of composition as a task the English or composition department does badly, In evaluating examinations and papers, faculty members are often willing to forgive grammatical and stylistic blunders, thinking such

matters the responsibility of composition teachers, as long as they believe they can grasp the essence of the student's text; that behavior reinforces the assumption on the part of students that clear communication is not important. . . .

Recommendations:

1. *All student grades should reflect both mastery of content and ability to convey content. Both expectations should be made clear to students.*
2. *The first-year composition course should relate to other classes taken simultaneously and be given serious intellectual content, or it should be abolished in favor of an integrated writing program in all courses. The course should emphasize explanation, analysis, and persuasion, and should develop the skills of brevity and clarity. . . .*

I have made some unfair cuts; the Commission says quite a bit that compositionists should like hearing. But I wanted to highlight the part that gets seriously screwy. Above all, they seem not to consider that there might be “serious intellectual content” in the work that it takes to *get* students to where they develop the “skills” of brevity and clarity and style—and to write substantially enough that grammatical and stylistic blunders sometimes *can* be forgiven. But on the whole, the Boyer group members downgrade composition despite their outright enthusiasm for WAC, rhetoric, research, and just about everything that well-informed compositionists want to do. Every composition administrator has local stories to tell of equal ignorance closer to home—often just down the hall or even next door.

Why do so many intelligent people miss what the best elements of the best composition programs are trying to do? We can argue many causes—the persistence of current-traditional theories, etc. But I blame mostly product placement, not bad products or even bad PR. The Boyer Commission and its local counterparts are looking for a sleek, powerful, versatile, high-tech higher education machine. Compositionists offer instead an entry-level, low-budget model—that is, admittedly, powerful, versatile, and increasingly high-tech. It is the sleeper education product of the next millennium. It is time compositionists started building and placing this product accordingly.

Focusing on Product Placement

Notice how composition is usually offered to “buyers”—a required, 100-level course, the only pre-requisites being those that supposedly should be finished before college; a course usually staffed with cheap labor, much of it with little teaching experience, even more of it with no visible research portfolio or expertise in the larger professional field; a structure that combines all the worst features of mass-production (e.g., distant centers of control and assessment) with the worst features of boutiques (e.g., unpredictable offerings). These are clichés, of course. But as composition administrators also know well, these clichés are deceptive. These cheap, inexperienced, sometimes whimsically chosen employees often have better training in pedagogy and research processes than expensive tenure-line equivalents in other departments. Composition administrators use low costs to support dynamic, interactive pedagogical systems, quickly producing in their teachers more of the abilities that the Boyer Commission and others want. The “bargain-basement” profile does not indicate well the real quality in terms of sheer teaching talent, especially not as the burgeoning increase in rhetorically informed WPAs enhances these programs. But the low profile is undeniable, and it prevents WPAs from contacting their real constituencies: the communities, employers, students, and concerned educators who want rhetorically skilled employees so badly they want to reconstruct higher education to get them.

How does the low profile create this effect? Look at its consumer dynamic. Who actually “buys” composition? Students? No way! They go because it is required. The university, then? Yes, technically. But for what reasons? The historical answer, according to Connors and others, is that the university “bought” cover for its embarrassment when entering students, even Harvard’s elite of the elite, were not “literate”—meaning they made grammatical mistakes. Interestingly, there is no sign that any real success of this grammar-focused course contributed to the heavily expanded business it eventually has drawn. Rather, as with the famously inefficient “QWERTY” keyboard, economic habits just kept the engines churning. Finally, the assessment juggernaut arose when calls for accountability on behalf of the new wave of college-educated “followers” converged with compositionists’ own new claims of rhetorical expertise. The resulting studies did not reveal that the system was producing the grammatical output that the university was buying. Thus, paradoxically, while our teachers and attitudes are just what Dr. Boyer and others have ordered for the next wave of education, our

courses largely fail to produce what is currently being “bought” from them.

And yet the university continues to buy—for now. But the purchase seems mostly a product of habit and confusion, a bad decision that a routine examination of business as usual should counsel against for the future. Unless compositionists simply want to admit defeat in such a possible (and increasingly likely) future, it is time to think “totally,” asking which other “stakeholders” want the university to buy such courses, and for what alternative reasons. Here I believe we will find why seemingly high-risk product placement strategies—beyond being actually no more risky than the status quo, particularly when all of composition’s secrets are found out—make plain sense. Composition should be marketed more directly to those who really hold the purse strings, and for the reasons those stakeholders prize.

The customer is not always who it seems, nor do customers always want most what we first believe we mainly offer. I hark back to my former career as a construction lawyer for an analogy. We had a client who prided himself on making the best concrete block in the region, believing this to be the path to better sales. While better block was important, a Quality Management analysis would focus on the fact that his main “stakeholders” were the masons, not the homeowners who ultimately paid for the materials, and that masons prized above all quick delivery on short notice. He was, in effect, in the delivery business; and thus he needed to learn from UPS and the daily newspaper as much or more than from the fly ash companies. After focusing more closely on delivery, the company came to dominate its entire urban market.

Similarly, compositions’ own main “stakeholders” have been employers with very different agendas than the elitist grammatical “literacy” dreams of the university. The employers of college-educated “followers”—as well as their parents—have been after two abilities that are more basic. It is a fair inference from Richard Haswell’s study of the features of valued workplace writing that they want students just to be able to get language out and down in thoughtful form. Further, the value attached to the university credential indicates that they want students to survive the university—a place many of the employers and parents had never encountered themselves, even second-hand. As Haswell records, many composition students themselves would say at once that their composition courses were wrong-headed and very useful. They did not want, in Richard Haswell’s perfect phrase, the “ungrounded English Teacher vision,” the residue of the

old university dream of “literacy.” The students valued their own advancement in just getting words out and down, and in figuring out how the game was played. They valued it highly because the real “stakeholders”—parents and employers—did. This dynamic has actually been around for a very long time, but it is now becoming the dominant force preserving the composition course. And the apparently meager gains under this vision are no trivial accomplishment, whatever our seeming failure to reach grander goals.

So the real “customers” turn out to be employers, using universities—and students and parents—as buying agents. This arrangement necessarily puts a great deal of distance in the transaction, especially remembering that the course they are buying comes at the far, early end of college, at least as viewed by the ultimate “consumers.” There is even more distance between seller and consumer created by having to go through a “retailer,” the real seller of the goods: the English department, a “store” trading mainly in other goods. Notably, English has often sold composition as a sheer commodity—anything in demand that brought in money, cheaply. It literally has not mattered what the product was as long as somebody was buying it—and as long as English could maintain its monopoly by positioning the product as something only it could sell. That “bargain-basement monopoly” sales mode fit well with the old university’s reason for purchasing the composition course—after all, who but English people could learn all those grammar rules? But as that reason for purchasing the course has both changed and been revealed to be misleading, the rationale for the English monopoly over composition has faded.

That is where the very idea of composition *administration* came in at first. It was patently a way for English to raise the stakes, scaring away the general education competition by making its offering look a bit more substantial and expertly mysterious to outsiders. But this move to professionalize composition administration, at least, had an effect that has been treated by most English departments as an unintended consequence. By restoring the forgotten educational power of rhetoric, this move raised the actual value of the course, making it harder and harder to keep composition in that “cheap commodity” bin. The course itself had so much potential that composition programs ended up producing the equivalent of a monster engine in a light chassis, and cheaply—cheaply enough that it seemed like a good idea just to buy all that raw power without thinking through all the consequences. As with the old AMC Javelin AMX and other

muscle cars of the early seventies, no wonder so many courses—and composition directors—crashed and burned. Kids were much safer with Ramblers.

Now, composition administrators are learning to channel all that power into better uses. Admittedly, the product still sits in the English department bargain bins, and it is often still analogously an ill-fitting casual gift, given by a distant relative. There is, however, now an enormous, actual market that wants fully rhetorical composition badly. It simply does not realize that composition and rhetoric is what it wants! I first began to see this on my former campus, a gung-ho Quality Management shop if there ever was one, when “teams” started developing campus-wide “Key Quality Indicators” (KQI)—a small list of competencies that, if they were produced, would tell us that the system as a whole was doing well. Generated very much with future employers in mind—and even in the loop—the listed competencies read like a regular outline for rhetorical composition: Communication, Problem-Solving, Critical/Creative Thinking, Self-Directed Learning, Personal/Social Development, Teamwork/Team Leading, Multicultural Understanding, Cultural Enrichment; even a Safe, Attractive Campus didn’t seem too far-fetched as a goal for composition classes. Only one KQI was clearly out of composition’s bounds: Competency in a Discipline. We need to come back to that last thought when we devise a new plan, but for now the key point is that rhetorical composition at least promises to offer the very central ideal of what “stakeholders” want from college.

In sum, if there were to be only one college course in the new, market-savvy university, it would probably have to be composition; and yet as a result of composition’s marketing “plan,” many informed reformers think composition is the one course that can be eliminated, pushed back into high schools or up through the entire curriculum.

Composing the Marketing Plan

The deeper reason why universities are doing things like come up with KQIs relates to the real market—what Robert Reich identified as far back as 1988 as the “next wave” economy—and the increasing plainness with which our current educational system serves it poorly. It turns out that these college-educated “followers” have to be semi-leaders. As Reich explains, the next wave of economic development, in which we are now fully caught up, requires an improvement in the value of labor much more

than decreases in its cost. The entirety of the liberal arts used to aim at producing more valuable labor, using the lavish inefficiency of a broad, subject-oriented buffet. Now, as the Boyer group nails down, higher education needs to get that result much more reliably and efficiently, leaving space for technical proficiency and creating the genuine ability to engage skillfully within and across advanced, research-based discourse communities. Specifically, the Boyer group asks research universities to:

- I. *Make Research-Based Learning the Standard*
- II. *Construct an Inquiry-based Freshman Year*
- III. *Build on the Freshman Foundation*
- IV. *Remove Barriers to Interdisciplinary Education*
- V. *Link Communication Skills and Course Work*
- VI. *Use Information Technology Creatively*
- VII. *Culminate with a Capstone Experience*
- VIII. *Educate Graduate Students as Apprentice Teachers*
- IX. *Change Faculty Reward Systems*
- X. *Cultivate a Sense of Community*

Now, who can do that better than a discipline of rhetoric?

So there is a tremendous opportunity for such a discipline—for a full division and product line, to use my commercial metaphor; and only as a full division can rhetoric and composition both meet the market demand and, perhaps most critically, appear to be the obvious candidate to do so. To borrow loosely from Quintilian, composition programs need not only to have the best rhetoric, but also to appear to have the best.

The sweet and easy deal would be to find composition's own Lee Iacocca—a buyer (that is, another existing department or program) that believes in its potential and prizes what it could offer in return for an enhanced investment. It is tempting to think of going right to the lead stakeholder, private industry—to set up for-profit institutes, perhaps, or work inside corporate walls. That should be a growth market for composition and one that composition programs should prepare their graduates to enter, but the analogy breaks down. "Private industry" isn't a unified market, and while there is more competitive advantage in training one's own employees than many business leaders think, there is much less advantage than in the intelligent use of a unified supplier market like the university system. That is why industry still wants to support a unified buyer and supplier of general

education and general training, even at some cost of inefficiency and loss of control.

That suggests another tactic: a direct link with the upper reaches of the university—as with WAC, of course, but more pointedly as in full, independent disciplinarity, the thing our local Key Quality Indicator analysis revealed to be so glaringly absent from the profile of composition. Of course, many institutions have already moved this way, and as prominent a figure as John Trimbur has made a thorough enough case for this on grounds that are more direct. This is dangerous ground, however; and composition programs may need resort to the greater resources of English, especially in the transition, but a Department of Rhetoric is much better positioned to meet the Boyer call and at the same time place the composition product prominently among university offerings. The word is out on English as a discipline. As Lisensky puts it in a critique of general education, written for general audiences:

The commitment to quality faculty usually is related not to the appropriateness of faculty skills to the functions performed but rather to a set of traditional criteria. The hiring of English department faculty who meet the qualifications for research and graduate education, or who have specialized in literature when a vast amount of work is in lower-division writing courses, provides the basis for problems not only of morale but also of curriculum structure. (23)

Those morale and curriculum problems would continue for a Rhetoric department that dealt only in low-end products, but not for a discipline that claimed general education as a continuing, not strictly basic, aspect of university education as a whole.

In other words, composition should want to position itself to be the superstructure for new wave general education, not the submerged structure of WAC and the loss leader for English. That means developing upper level courses, elective courses, sequences, the whole works—and charging the real price of admission, if compositionists have the collective courage. Composition administrators can start insisting on selling their products at apparent full value—even if costs are low! I have yet to hear an explanation of how running massive cheap labor shops for composition furthers the prospects of rhetoric and composition. The prospects of the largest number

of rhetoricians are best served by full disciplinary prospects, whatever the occasional, anomalous local effects to the contrary.

True, if composition administrators refuse to play along with the “anybody can teach composition” game, many English departments will find someone who will. But the English bargain-bin game is playing out. The logic of English composition devolves eventually into no composition, especially since we know that the implied promise of “literate” writers are met most poorly with the approaches uninformed teachers are most likely to use. English departments have problems nobody may be able to solve, especially in a time of aggressive and largely reductive assessment. Instead of maintaining a decaying English game, composition administrators ought to push—and even take some falls—on behalf of fully supported expertise in all composition classrooms. If that means drastically fewer sections can be covered, then so be it. Make them elective and let the market sort out who gets scarce goods. As much as the larger market wants the abilities we purport to offer, it should not be satisfied with scarcity for long. But again, this only works out if composition and rhetoric programs keep pushing the upper reaches of the possible discipline—not only to build a better “store” for itself, but, frankly, to have a better chance of actually delivering the full menu of Boyerish goods. Advanced placement testing and dual credit classes—students getting their composition in high school, as everybody used to say they should—is going to eat the bottom out of the composition market. Fortunately that is a bottom that belonged to the English model much more than to a rhetoric model, and one that, as Trimbur writes, is “oversaturated,” bearing curricular expectations that have been pushed “long past the breaking point” (14-15). In sum, compositionists ought to welcome the phasing out of cheap, basic composition as the very thing that frees composition from being the English department’s loss leader and lets it become the Composition and Rhetoric department’s foundational course.

And finally, a fully professional composition can tone down the absurd culture of workaholicism that has grown up around composition. Few markets yet are paying the full price of that advanced course compositionists are striving to deliver; and fewer still are genuinely paying the full cost of the Sisyphean “literacy” model, with its requisite stack of “themes” for “correcting.” Most markets are actually paying for the “followers” model of just getting some words on paper and seeing how the game is played. To borrow from Haswell, taking him a bit out of context, in that “followers” model teachers mainly need to emphasize fluency, good,

open-ended introductions, sentence combining, and the more advanced forms of logical structure—and none of it to perfection. The trick lies more in preparing savvy teachers who can focus efficiently on what matters than in finding naïve teachers willing to hurl themselves into useless all-night theme-grading sessions. There is absolutely no reason to ask a savvy teacher to spend more than three hours per credit hour per week on the actual mission of first-year composition. Instead, composition workers should be spending their remaining time on two more hopeful things: helping composition expand its upper-division markets and getting their own degrees and research agendas in order. After all, it is that upper-level agenda that is going to prepare students not only for the Boyerish mission, but for finally overcoming the advanced lexical difficulties now too often called “basic” or “developmental.” Yes, the university, in its crisis-driven schizophrenia, is temporarily trying to become more exclusive even as it can least afford to be, putting all programs under intense economic pressure. Composition teachers should not “enable” that kind of disfunctionality with their own martyrdom; they should prepare for an eventual, rational, professionalization of the work that could do real, long-term good for the very students in the most need—and pay them more money for less work in the bargain.

Conclusion: A Cruel Twist

That is, composition programs should aim higher if their administrators and professional members believe their own rhetoric. Let us take a moment to examine the glass as if it is half empty. From the viewpoint of every buyer, compositionists look as if they do not believe their own rhetoric. Composition programs more often look as they would if composition administrators believed that English departments could meet massive customer needs without expert help; as if higher education could let the bottom fall out of “remedial” work and thrive; as if rhetoric were capable of being only the handmaiden to WAC efforts, not once again the center of the university; as if composition and rhetoric’s every aspiration to being more than English’s bargain bin is just hollow boasting. Indeed, little in our own assessment literature offers hard evidence that our claims to be the center of the Boyerish, market-focused university will prove out. Indeed, compositionists publish entire volumes on assessment that do not once venture to demonstrate that students are learning to write better.

Certainly, if composition cannot meet the Boyerish call, if full rhetoric

and composition departments cannot demonstrably improve student abilities, then by all means compositionists should continue to hide. If the real goals of composition programs are non-economic, and if compositionists believe so strongly in such alternative goals that they are willing to practice deceit upon both their institutions and their students, then they should eschew all economic analysis, deriding and castigating it at every turn. In such a scenario it matters little whether we call the glass half-full or half-empty; indeed, there is no glass, just the illusion of one. In that event, the current state of composition would be something of a blessing, offering great latitude for invisible—if by that same token often ineffectual—subversion. But most likely conditions are not going to stay that way as the university becomes increasingly market-driven.

If instead compositionists just give in to their apparent fears about the state of their art, then the proper action has interesting parallels with what a more aggressive and optimistic profession would do, even if with a different spirit. Composition could still become elective, in this case because it is not vitally important. The adjuncts can still all be let go; those adjunct jobs are no plums, and their holders tend to be talented and resourceful, able to make it through to other careers. Composition teachers could still cut back their expectations of writing ability in their first-year classes; what little anyone would actually want from composition either could not be done or could be done easily. Compositionists could prepare their graduate students for work in areas other than first-year writing teaching or even English department work at all. Compositionists could then look to advance not in the English department, but in the general university structure—perhaps in the newly evolving Boyerish general education mission, as manifested in the burgeoning “first-year experience” courses. Such compositionists as remain could push WAC, WID (Writing in the Disciplines) and even WOD (Writing outside the Disciplines, anyone?) to give students the lateral experiences they really need. It is mostly a matter of doing the same things, just as passive flotsam rather than as engaged agents.

I prefer to think the glass is half full, and that composition and rhetoric have uncovered the beginnings of interesting and valuable knowledge. What is more clear is that market forces are moving us toward either filling or emptying that glass. It is highly unlikely that we will make the right choices without facing more squarely than we have just what it is that people really want to buy from us and whether we really have it in stock.

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