

Linda K. Shamon, Rebecca Moore Howard, Sandra Jamieson, and Robert A. Schwegler, eds. *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2001. 179 pages + CD-ROM. \$23.

In his Afterword to *Coming of Age*, Robert Connors invokes the famous Mark Twain trope about lightning bugs and lightning to dramatize the difference implied in the one-word change recommended by the editors of this volume:

“Advanced writing,” as opposed to “advanced composition,” is not predicated on the idea of a fugitive two- or three-course selection that appears, sputters, and gives up the ghost to a literary undergraduate major. [. . .] The advanced writing curriculum, for which this book is a prospectus and menu, is a much more thoroughgoing and radical idea. It proposes and provides a program for an entirely new conception of undergraduate literacy education, one based on the centrality of writing rather than literature. This conception will be, in fact, the alternative English major for the twenty-first century. (147)

This “last” prophetic word is a fitting conclusion to one of the most exciting and timely professional books I have read in a long time. Like many in composition

*From Advanced
Composition
Courses to
Advanced
Writing
Curriculum: The
Difference
between
Lightning Bugs
and Lightning*

Alice M. Gillam

studies, my department colleagues and I are in the early stages of designing a new undergraduate writing studies concentration. *Coming of Age* set me to jotting down notes, consulting my university's course catalog, and mapping curricular ideas from the first page of the introduction to the last electronic text on the CD-ROM.

Both the content and form of this text are future-directed. As the Preface explains, *Coming of Age* is a "print-linked publication," which combines the print mode of publishing with at least one other [mode]," in this case a CD-ROM (xi). Together the print section and CD-ROM create a whole text in which neither part is ancillary nor subordinate to the other. The print essays in Parts I and II argue for the shift from discrete advanced composition courses to a fully articulated undergraduate writing studies curriculum, while the electronic essays in Parts III and IV offer a sampling of advanced writing course descriptions and syllabi as well as pragmatic advice about creating an undergraduate writing studies program. Short abstracts of the electronic essays in Parts III and IV appear in the print volume, offering readers a preview of the CD-ROM's contents and an opportunity to surf the virtual texts according to interest.

One of most useful essays for those who are just beginning to think about an undergraduate writing curriculum is Rebecca Moore Howard's brief introduction, "History, Politics, Pedagogy, and Advanced Writing." As long as our field is identified and defined primarily by our work in first-year composition, argues Howard, advanced writing courses will remain an "afterthought" with no clear curricular purpose. Within the framework of a carefully conceptualized writing studies curriculum, however, such courses not only take on clear and multiple purposes but also work together to fulfill an unmet curricular need: preparing students to be writers in the broadest sense. Speaking for the editorial team, Howard proposes a writing studies curriculum organized around three objectives: (1) historical and theoretical courses that provide disciplinary knowledge; (2) a wide range of practice-oriented writing courses that prepare students for careers as writers; and (3) courses in civic or public literacy that prepare students for "using writing as a means of participating in the public sphere" (xv).

The five essays that make up Part I, "Redirecting the Field from Advanced Composition to Advanced Writing," expand upon the ideas introduced in Howard's essay. In "Advancing Composition," for example, Lynn Z. Bloom demonstrates the need for a coherent advanced *writing* curriculum by offering a historical overview of the hodgepodge of courses that have fallen under the rubric of "advanced composition." Robert A. Schwegler, in "Curriculum Development in Composition," explores what it

might mean to conceptualize the writing curriculum in terms of “activity fields” (29), while Linda K. Shamon, in “The Academic Effacement of a Career: ‘Writer,’” argues for curricular reform in terms of student need. Specifically, Shamon interviews five full-time writers who testify to the academy’s failure to prepare them for their current careers and to “the need for courses that address the history, the variegated expertise, the public roles, and the ethics of writing as a profession” (43). Offering a counterpoint perspective, Richard M. Bullock, in “Feathering Our Nest,” cautions us to reflect on our self-interestedness in promoting this new curriculum and asks us to consider possible negative consequences, such as graduates with “dismal employment prospects” or the erosion of our field’s experimental and subversive potential through greater professionalization (21-24).

The essays in Parts II and III describe possible courses that might meet the curricular objectives articulated in the introduction. Part II essays focus on sample core courses, and Part III on possible electives. Each of these sections further organizes courses according to curricular aim. So, for example, the core courses described in Part II as “preparing students for participation in the discipline of writing studies” include Andrea Lunsford’s “Histories of Writing and Contemporary Authorship,” Sandra Jamieson’s “Theories of Composing,” and Gail Stygall’s “Discourse Studies,” while the elective courses that accomplish this same aim include Mary Lamb’s “The Rhetoric of Gender as Advanced Writing,” Deepika Bahri’s “What We Teach When We Teach the Postcolonial,” and Dennis Baron’s “Literacy and Technology.”

My response to the rich array of course descriptions in Sections II and III—27 in all—was twofold. On the one hand, I found myself dazzled by the broad range of curricular possibilities and inspired to plan new courses on such topics as “The Rhetoric of Gender” or “The Rhetoric of the Everyday” as well as to figure out how I might incorporate Dennis Baron’s “writing on clay” assignment into my current course on classical rhetoric. On the other hand, I found myself questioning various classifications—both the distinction between “core” and “elective” and the categorization by curricular aim (disciplinary, public, professional). Why, I wondered, was a course like Arthur Walzer and David Beard’s on “Rhetorical Theory” classified as “elective” rather than as “core”? Even more puzzling were some of the categorizations by aim: Howard’s course on “Style, Race, Culture, Context” as “professional” rather than as “public”; Chris Anson’s course on “Below the Surface: A True-to-Life Course in Editorial Practice” as “disciplinary” rather than as “professional”; Diana George’s course on “Cultural Studies: The Rhetoric of Everyday Texts” as “professional” rather

than as “public.” I mention these examples not so much to quibble about categories as to illustrate the challenges entailed in defining and creating this new curriculum. As the authors in the text acknowledge, such work will require a great deal of local negotiation and undoubtedly a great deal of disagreement.

That is, once we shift from our enthusiastic embrace of the idea of an advanced writing curriculum to the real work of designing such a curriculum and getting it approved, things get decidedly more complicated. The five essays that make up Part IV, “Designing and Protecting the Advanced Writing Program,” take up these very issues. Each essay discusses the practical and political realities a particular institution faced in establishing an advanced writing program. As John Ramage cautions in “From Profession to Discipline: The Politics of Establishing a Writing Concentration,” those planning such a new curriculum should anticipate some of the following challenges: “resistance from your increasingly embattled literature colleagues [. . .]; the necessity of collectively defining and enacting a disciplinary identity that is necessarily ‘impure’ from the perspective of any one of the major theoretical versions of that identity [. . .]; the likelihood of having to debate ‘secession’ (from the English Department) and ‘abolition’ (of first-year composition)” (CD-ROM para. 3).

Despite these sobering words, I predict most readers will come away from *Coming of Age* with their enthusiasm only slightly dampened. This book’s palpably exuberant tone is contagious and leaves one energized for the messy but exhilarating work ahead. Contributing to this excitement is the high level of interactivity offered by the CD-ROM, where readers are invited to download and transform syllabi, to communicate with course designers, and to connect with various hot-links. The formation of an undergraduate writing curriculum seems a natural next step in our discipline’s “coming of age” in that it reflects the range of theoretical and practical work that has long made up our own notion of composition studies. And it seems appropriate that one of Robert Connors’s many legacies is to be among the first to issue forth this call to new identity.

