Writing outside English
A Response to David Bartholomae

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David Bartholomae’s report on the 2007 Association of Departments of English (ADE) survey (see pages 7–32 of this issue) is filled with bad news and hard choices. I think we need to thank him for outlining the situation we face with such clarity, and get to work.

Here are the five main points I take away from Bartholomae:

1) Things are getting worse. With each passing decade, fewer tenure-track faculty in English teach introductory courses in writing or literature. As a result, the MA has become the de facto credential to teach such courses. More students are thus taught by faculty with less academic training. Not surprisingly, the number of tenure-track professorships in English has declined.

Or, put another way, what we’ve been doing until now hasn’t worked—at least not at the introductory level. And what have we been doing? Increasingly, we have allowed tenure-stream faculty to do almost all their teaching in the major or at the graduate level. We’ve reduced the teaching loads of such faculty while narrowing our vision of the kinds of intellectual work that lead to tenure. We’ve redefined composition as a research subfield—which means that now even many composition specialists seldom teach first-year writing. And we’ve done all this while wringing our hands over the fate of the non-tenure-track faculty and graduate students who are left to teach the introductory courses we’ve abandoned.
(2) We rely on an increasing number of full-time non-tenure-track faculty to teach our introductory courses. This need not always be a bad thing, as Bartholomae notes. When secure full-time non-tenure-track positions are offered to qualified faculty who would otherwise be teaching part-time or on a per-course basis, everyone wins: students, teachers, administrators. But the key word here is qualified. Like Bartholomae, I am troubled that less than 40 percent of persons in full-time non-tenure-track positions hold a PhD and that most of those who hold only an MA have no plans to study for a PhD. This sets the bar very low for teaching entry-level courses in English.

(3) We need to rethink what it means to earn an MA in English. Since we seem to have acquiesced to a situation in which the qualifying degree to teach our introductory courses is an MA, we should find out what it means to hold one. It seems reasonable to insist that to earn an MA one ought to take several courses in teaching academic writing and critical reading, and design and teach a number of courses under the close supervision of a faculty mentor. But as of yet such programs are rare enough to be newsworthy — as shown by Scott Jaschik’s 2010 article on the San Francisco State MA program in teaching writing.

Even still, along with Bartholomae, I have my concerns. If MAs can teach most of our required introductory and general education courses, then what is the argument for hiring PhDs? There is a limited demand for English PhDs whose main interest is teaching aspiring English PhDs. I agree with Bartholomae that splitting the English faculty into teaching and research wings is a losing proposition. But if I were a department chair or writing director who needed to hire MAs, I would look for people with coursework in pedagogy. If the research faculty don’t care to teach our introductory courses, we need to responsibly train the people who will.

(4) We need to be wary of killer dichotomies. Bartholomae objects to labeling non-tenure-track faculty as “contingent” labor when so many of them teach in our departments year after year. I would push the point further. Too much of our talk about staffing has been dominated by what Ann Berthoff (1990) calls killer dichotomies. We divide our coworkers into tenure-track versus non-tenure-track, union versus nonunion, writing specialist versus nonspecialist, full time versus part time, continuing versus contingent, and so on. What appears to be descriptive turns out to be polemical, as one side of the binary is always preferred over the other, and so, depending on who is doing the describing, in an ideal world all faculty are imagined as tenure track, or unionized, or whatever.
My worry has to do not with such ideals per se, but with how thinking in killer dichotomies distorts our understanding of our departments and programs. Most of Bartholomae’s graphs charting staffing in English actually use four categories: tenure track, full-time non-tenure track, part time, and graduate students. That’s already a dichotomy times two. Of course, even these four broad categories will obscure important differences and innovations in staffing. But I think they are a step in the right direction. The problem with thinking in killer dichotomies is that it encourages you not only to valorize one term of the binary but also to lose interest in the other. If the only thing that really matters to you, for instance, is that all faculty are put on the tenure track, then differences in non-tenure-track jobs can start to seem trivial and beside the point. But Bartholomae’s data make it clear that beginning undergraduates are going to be studying with non-tenure-track faculty for a very long time to come.

So this is the advice I hear from Bartholomae: Most English departments and writing programs are staffed in complicated and varied ways. Rather than starting with an ideal vision of how things should be, we need to learn who is actually teaching what courses in our departments and programs, so we can then better direct the work of the faculty we do have in support of undergraduates.

(5) We need to connect teaching and research. This has been the theme of David Bartholomae’s career. It is what makes him such an attractive figure in our profession. Here he sounds a cautionary note, documenting what happens as a field loses its moorings in teaching. Bartholomae shows that English has lost tenure-track faculty positions as the senior members of our field have retreated from teaching introductory courses in writing and literature. While specialization may advance the careers of individuals, it has harmed the standing of our field as a whole. As English professors, we are not in the business of finding cures for cancer or making sure that bridges don’t fall down. Our value hinges on our ability to teach young people how to read and write critically. Our influence thus declines when we seem to shirk that task in favor of teaching more specialized and esoteric courses.

If I’ve represented Bartholomae fairly, then he and I agree on all five of these points. I continue to have misgivings about our increasing use of MAs as teachers, but I think that Bartholomae does, too. There simply seem to be few other staffing options in most current English departments. I would
like to use the rest of this response, then, to say a little more about how we might reconnect teaching and research. I have two reasons for doing so. First, Bartholomae cites me as an advocate of establishing a separate “teaching faculty” — and that is not really what I’ve meant to argue for. Second, in clarifying what I do want to argue for, I hope I can offer an alternative to the growing reliance on MAs as teachers that Bartholomae documents.

From 1999 to 2009, I was the founding director of an independent and multidisciplinary writing program at Duke University, where I am also an associate professor of English. Before coming to Duke, I directed the composition program in the English department at the University of Pittsburgh, where David Bartholomae was chair. Since the writing program at Duke is not affiliated with the English department, I don’t think our faculty was included in the ADE survey. If they had been, almost all of them would have been counted as “full-time non-tenure-track.” However, there are two important differences between the writing faculty at Duke and the cohort described by Bartholomae: (1) all members of our faculty hold PhDs, and (2) almost all of them hold PhDs outside of English. Let me explain why I think these distinctions matter.

I was dismayed to learn from Bartholomae that so few full-time non-tenure-track faculty in English hold a PhD or plan to earn one. Undergraduates ought to be taught academic writing by people who are themselves academic writers — who are keeping up with and contributing to the intellectual work of their fields. A quick thought experiment: Who would you want to take a writing course with—a PhD in history (or biology or performance studies or religion), actively publishing in her field, trained in the best practices of teaching writing, or . . . someone who holds an MA in English literature?

What you need to teach academic writing well, it seems to me, is both a good working knowledge of a field of study and a meta-awareness of what is involved in writing as a member of that field. To gain a real and deep knowledge of a field requires a PhD. To develop a meta-awareness of its forms of writing usually requires the help of someone who knows about writing and its teaching. (This is where specialists in composition come in.) At Duke our goal is to help beginning PhDs from a wide range of fields develop that sort of meta-awareness, so they can then design courses that introduce students to academic writing through the lenses of their particular disciplines. Our first-year writing course is thus something very close to what at many other schools is called a first-year seminar — except that all our faculty are post-doctoral fellows employed by the writing program. But the driving idea is the same: the best way to learn how to write as an academic is to apprentice
yourself to a scholar and writer who can introduce you to the kinds of intellectual work he or she is actually doing.

So I very much believe that research and teaching are integrally linked and that we need PhDs to teach writing to undergraduates. They just don’t have to be PhDs in English or writing. What I’ve argued against is linking first-year writing programs to a single discipline — either English or composition. I think they are better conceived as multidisciplinary and university-wide projects. But that’s not the same thing as arguing for a separate teaching faculty. Indeed, I think that when we insist on staffing writing programs with PhDs, we make the connection between teaching and research all the more strong.

And that, I suspect, may be the one point on which Bartholomae and I differ. The two of us agree that there will never be enough English PhDs to staff all the sections of first-year writing (much less introduction to literature, etc.). His response is to call on MAs in English. Mine is to recruit PhDs in other fields.

I think that my response makes better sense not only for students in first-year writing but also for English departments. I was struck by Bartholomae’s figure 7 (see page 15 of this issue) that contrasts the staffing of English departments that are responsible for first-year writing with those that are not. In English departments that staff first-year writing, tenure-track faculty teach only about 32 percent of all courses. But in English departments where first-year writing is a separate unit, tenure-track faculty teach about 56 percent of courses. This strikes me as an encouraging statistic, since it suggests that while tenure-track English faculty may not choose to teach first-year writing, they may be willing to regularly teach other introductory courses in literature or creative writing. (While I lack figures, this seems to be the case in the English department where I now work at Duke.)

So, if our goal is to have more undergraduates working closely with tenure-track faculty, I think we want to make the teaching of academic writing a university-wide project. There are several ways to do so: writing-intensive first-year seminars, or the sort of fellowships in teaching writing we’ve instituted at Duke, or a series of courses teaching writing in the majors, or some combination of the above. It is possible, that is, to imagine an approach to teaching academic writing that would involve interested English faculty but would not be the sole responsibility of the English department.

I realize that there are many practical and political obstacles to navigate in setting up a university-wide writing program. Indeed, having spent the last ten years directing such a program, I think I may appreciate that
point more than most. The devil is always in the details. But the same can be said for any good writing program, either within English or outside it. In any case, I am not arguing here for a particular staffing structure. I simply want to pose the idea of inviting faculty outside English to join us in teaching writing. Students would benefit from such an approach by learning writing in subject areas that interest them and by working with experienced scholars. Colleges would benefit by involving more faculty in teaching beginning undergraduates. And English departments would benefit by being relieved of the sole burden of staffing a course, first-year writing, that most of our tenure-track faculty are clearly not interested in teaching.

We can't solve the staffing problems that Bartholomae documents in a single stroke. We will need to move on a number of fronts. If we want tenure-track faculty to teach more introductory courses, we need to offer them real incentives to do so — through keeping caps on enrollments low, offering funds for developing new courses, and making it clear that such teaching is valued in promotion and tenure decisions. We also need to rethink how our curricula drive staffing. It may make more sense, for instance, to require students to take one good writing course that we can staff responsibly than two mediocre ones that we need to scramble to find teachers for. And if we want faculty from other disciplines to join us in teaching academic writing, we need to imagine its moves and genres in more capacious terms than we often do now.

And, in doing all this, we need to keep students front and center. It can be tempting to view staffing as essentially a problem of academic labor — a matter of salaries, teaching loads, working conditions, and so on. But as Bartholomae shows, staffing also raises questions about curriculum — about the courses, and students, that tenure-track faculty choose to teach. Those questions go right to the heart of our professional identity.

Works Cited