Using Student Texts in Composition Scholarship

Joseph Harris

Socrates: Oh, Phaedrus, if I don’t know my Phaedrus I must be forgetting who I am myself—and neither is the case.

—Plato

The value of work in composition is bound up with student writing. As teachers we claim to know not only about writing itself but also about how students can become better writers. And as scholars many of us regularly quote and analyze student texts. Indeed, working with student texts is one of the defining moves of our field, part of what distinguishes a career in composition from one in literature, rhetoric, education, or communication. Student texts are a form of currency in the knowledge economy of composition. We call on them as evidence, we argue over their meaning and value, in ways that scholars in few other academic fields seem to do.

But what exactly are those ways? How do scholars in composition make student texts part of the books and articles that they write? What kinds of texts do they quote and what do they say about them? To begin to formulate an answer to these questions, I reviewed the main research articles in each issue of CCC from 1987 to 2009—92 issues and 448 articles—noting whenever authors quoted directly and at some length from student texts. I focused on CCC because it is identified with research on teaching writing and thus on the work of student writers, and also because of its wide circulation and influence in our field. As for my time frame: In 1987, as the incoming editor of CCC, Richard Gebhardt established a system of blind review of manuscripts submitted to the journal. (Until then, the editor alone had been responsible for deciding what would appear in each issue.) This system of peer review has been continued, with minor changes, by each of the four editors since Gebhardt.
—Joseph Harris, Marilyn Cooper, Deborah Holdstein, and Kathleen Yancey. Since Holdstein’s tenure as editor came to a close in 2009, that seemed an apt end point for my study as well, marking out kind of an early modern period of *CCC* as a refereed academic journal.

My method was simple. I scanned each article for block quotations of texts written by students. I did not count interviews with students, transcripts of classroom discussions, brief quotations within sentences, survey responses, or paraphrases or descriptions of student work. I was interested only in those moments when authors reproduced the writing of students in something like the form we might expect to see them quote the work of fellow scholars—verbatim, and set apart from the rest of the text.

Even with those restrictions, 75% of *CCC* issues from 1987–2009 include at least one piece that quotes student texts, and 42% feature two or more such articles. Figure A shows that most issues (55 out of 92) of *CCC* featured one or two articles analyzing student texts, while 14 included three or four such articles. (None featured five or more.)

**Figure A: No. *CCC* Issues Containing Articles Quoting Student Texts**

All told, 124 articles, or 28% of the 448 published from 1987–2009, quote student writing. This percentage varies little with the editor of the journal: Gebhardt, 25%, Harris, 28%, Cooper, 32%, Holdstein, 28%. Instead the pattern has been remarkably consistent since 1987. A typical issue of *CCC*
contains four or five research articles, of which one or two quotes student
texts. (The precise average is 1.36 such articles per issue.) In Figure B,
the lighter, taller lines represent the number of articles in each issue of
CCC, while the shorter, darker lines show how many of those articles work
with student texts.

Figure B: No. Articles per CCC Issue Containing Articles Quoting Student Texts

I don’t mean to make too much of this amateur foray into charts and
numbers. But I do think these figures suggest that working with student
texts is one of the defining gestures of our field, one way in which a scholar
can claim an identity as a compositionist. In the rest of this essay, I look
at some of the common forms that this gesture takes, the kinds of work that
scholars most often call on student texts to do. But I also consider the
boundaries of such work. In particular, I am troubled by the limited
circulation of student texts in our field—very few of which are requoted
or reanalyzed outside of the articles in which they first appear. Student
texts thus turn out to be a peculiar form of intellectual currency. We
establish our bona fides as compositionists by quoting them, but we seldom
revisit student texts quoted by others.
Examples and Problems

This essay hinges on a distinction between two uses of student texts. The first is as an *example* of a point that an author has already made; the second is as a way of defining a *problem* in teaching or writing that the author then goes on to investigate. The first use is far more common. It often (although not always) occurs near the end of an article, in a section on implications for teaching, and is signaled by phrases such as:

An examination of the sampling of the writings completed by two particular students, Kelly and Twisha, may reflect some of my provisional claims…. (Kumamoto 2002, 78)

To illustrate my argument, I would like to introduce two students by way of early drafts of their autobiographies . . . (Danielewicz 2008, 428)

To say that a student text “reflects” or “illustrates” an argument is to suggest that its meaning is settled and clear. Such uses are not worrisome so much as they are predictable.

But there are more ambitious ways to read student texts—ways that see their meanings as open to question, as posing some sort of problem in understanding. Such interestingly problematic student texts are often quoted and analyzed at various points throughout an article, rather than simply appearing as examples near the end. And the terms that scholars use in talking about such texts differ in striking ways from the vocabulary of example and illustration. For instance, in his 1992 “Gender and the Autobiographical Essay,” Don Kraemer introduces his reading of several student essays with the simple but telling phrase, “As I read the following . . .” (331). He then turns to a specific essay, saying that:

*I want to examine* some more student writing, an examination that
I hope will *do some justice* not only to gender’s entanglement with
other metaphors but also to the complex pressures gender, in
particular, exerts…. (331)

After quoting at length from a student essay, Kraemer begins his analysis by writing:
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*I understand* this writer to be resisting gender without denying its apparent effects. . . . (332)

Note the verbs I’ve italicized: *read, examine, do justice, understand.* These are terms that describe a reader working on and with a text, *making* sense of its phrasings, not simply calling on a text to illustrate a point previously made.

Let me stress that I don’t think that using student texts as examples is a bad thing. On the contrary, it is crucial for us as compositionists to connect our claims to the work of student writers. But I think we can use student texts in more dynamic ways than we often do. My aim in this essay is to point to such uses.

Which leads me to a final note on method: My focus here is on the *uses* that scholars make of student texts. I thus don’t quote—or requote—many actual student texts in this essay. I am aware of a certain irony. But my interest here lies more in the language *around* student texts, in the ways that we, as compositionists, frame our uses of student writing. I am interested, that is, in *our* approaches to student texts.

**Student Texts as Examples**

Student texts often appear in *CCC* as examples of a type of discourse. To offer some quick examples of such exemplifying: In 1989, Gary Sloan contrasted the kinds of errors most often made by student writers with those made by professional writers; in 1996, Mary Muchiri, Nshindi Mulamaba, Greg Myers, and Deoscorous Ndoloi pointed out some of the distinctive idioms of African student writing; and in 2000, Dawn Skorczewski offered a brief catalogue of clichés in student writing. I admire all of these pieces and think the authors make effective use of their examples. Sloan questions the idea that student errors result from ineptitude or carelessness; Muchiri et al. extend our view of academic writing beyond a US context; and Skorczewski suggests that our intertemperate rejection of cliché is itself something of a cliché. Even still, though, when student texts get used in this fashion—as examples of common forms of writing or thinking—they are, almost by definition, unmemorable.
Other scholars quote student texts as examples of their authors’ growth as writers and persons. For instance, in their 2004 study of the role of writing in the intellectual development of undergraduates, Nancy Sommers and Laura Salz quote from a student essay in order to show how it “reveals the essence of Jeremy’s freshman-year questions” (143). They are concerned, that is, less with the particular ideas or phrasings of Jeremy’s text than with what they indicate about his current stage of intellectual maturity. Indeed the point that Sommers and Salz want to make is that students often grow as thinkers in ways we can’t immediately see in their prose. The movement in their analysis is thus away from the text and toward its writer. This move places their work in a long tradition of person- rather than text-based research in composition that dates back at least to Janet Emig. Indeed one of the founding insights of our field is the distinction between teaching writers rather than writing, process rather than product, textual production rather than textual analysis. But when a text is quoted primarily for what it tells us about its author as a student or a learner, this is often accompanied with only a passing analysis of the specific moves he or she makes as a writer. And so while we find many examples in CCC of students writing at the start of a course, or of students writing at the end of a course, of student difficulties and successes and struggles and growth with writing, we see fairly few close readings of the texts they produce, analyses of their work as writers.

More recently scholars have begun to use student texts as examples of emerging forms of writing. In 2000, for instance, Robert Davis and Mark Shadle presented several examples of alternative research projects in which students mixed media and genres. This piece presaged a series of articles which call on student experiments with digital media to suggest new multimodal possibilities for academic writing—including Mary Hocks (2003); Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, and Pearson (2004); DeVoss, Cushman, and Grabill (2005); Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye (2005); Jody Shipka (2005); Nancy Welch, (2005); David Coogan (2006); and Cynthia Selfe (2009). I say call on, though, rather than quote, because I don’t think we’ve yet figured out how to effectively represent digital media in print—a result being that many of these pieces have a gee-whiz quality, in which we are encouraged to follow URLs to view cool stuff that students have posted on the web.
I am encouraged by this trend in quoting student texts, since it seems to move about as far away as one can from the hidebound practice of ridiculing bonehead mistakes in student writing. In these articles, students tend to be pictured as possessing an expertise with digital media that their teachers lack. Indeed many of these articles list students as coauthors. So these pieces show a clear interest in students as intellectuals and writers whose work calls for our response. Unfortunately, none of these articles yet offers such a critical response. Instead they tend more simply to celebrate the student work they cite.

And that is my point, so far. When student texts are simply used as examples—of types of discourse, of developmental stages, of new forms of writing—they remain inert within the space of an article. They do not advance an argument, they illustrate it. As a result, almost all student texts used in such ways have so far failed to play ongoing roles in our professional conversations. We have not returned to them, rethought them, debated them, because their meanings usually seem transparent and settled. They are used not to raise questions but to answer them. (Usually the question they answer is something along the lines of, “What does this kind of writing look like?”) But there are other uses of student texts that seem more often to lead to comment and response.

**Student Texts as Problems in Teaching**

Some *CCC* authors use student texts to drive their writing, to pose a question that they then seek to answer. There seem to me two kinds of problems that student texts can raise—although I will be the first to say that they overlap. One is a problem in teaching, the other a problem in writing.

Many discussions of problems in teaching center on what Lad Tobin has called the “paper from hell”—the sort of essay that disturbs and baffles us, that frustrates our attempts to respond to it. Tobin reproduces a number of such papers from hell in his 2004 book on *Reading Student Writing*, perhaps the most striking of which is “The Gooja Manifesto,” a failed attempt at a portrait of a cultural subgroup that quickly devolves into racist caricature (18–19). Tobin writes with respect and affection for his students, and his encounters with such papers from hell tend to progress
from shock to qualified understanding. After soliciting the responses of several academic colleagues to “The Gooja Manifesto,” for instance, Tobin decides that its author’s status as a recent immigrant to the US lies behind his anxieties about certain déclassé members of his home culture. Reading the paper from hell thus leads not to student-bashing but to something like the opposite, an increased willingness to work with students whose writing might at first offend us.

Writers for *CCC* occasionally use brief excerpts from similarly troubling student essays to quickly define a problem in teaching. But it is Richard Miller who has offered perhaps the best-known analysis of a paper from hell, in his 1994 *College English* essay on “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone.” In this piece, Miller reports on the responses of teachers at an annual meeting of CCCC to a student essay, submitted in a college writing course, that either reports on or fantasizes about an attack on a homeless man. Like Tobin, Miller tries to understand why and how a student might come to produce such a transgressive text and, again like Tobin again, he points to a number of cultural differences that might have influenced his work: The student had recently come to the US from Kuwait; English was his second language; he was probably unused to the mores of American classrooms (397). But Miller is more interested in how this text exposes a problem in our teaching, since we only seem able to respond effectively to student texts who “resist” our expectations when, paradoxically, they do so in a predictable and formulaic fashion. Indeed, the only section of the student essay that Miller reproduces is its concluding paragraph, a lame (or perhaps parodic) attempt at do penance for the violence that the student author has described:

> Next time I see bums and fags walking on the streets, I will never make fun of them or piss on them, or anything like that, because they did not want to be bums or fags. It was society that forced them out of their jobs and they could not beat the system. (398)

When I was beginning my research for this article, I asked colleagues, both in conversation and via listservs, which student texts they most remembered reading in our books and journals. They mentioned this “bums and fags” essay far more often than any other. What I find intriguing about this exercise in cultural memory is that Miller quotes so little of the student’s
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prose. It’s as though we are more drawn to the idea of being provoked by students than we are actually interested in reading provocative student texts. Indeed, this is pretty much Miller’s point—that most of the readers of “Queers, Bums, and Fags” seemed more eager to medicate or incarcerate its author than to respond as teachers to what he had written.

In both these cases the paper from hell is also a paper from another culture. As such, they seem to threaten our sense of authority, of control over what a writer is or is not allowed to say. Other uses of student texts pose questions more about our intellectual aims in teaching. For instance, Min-Zhan Lu’s “Professing Multiculturalism” (1994) centers on the close analysis of a text written by a multilingual student whose argument hinges, in large part, on her use of the non-idiomatic phrase “can able to.” Lu argues that, rather than correcting or ignoring such phrasings, writing teachers should ask what sort of work they accomplish. As she asks, “Why do we assume . . . that until one can prove one’s ability to produce error-free prose, one has not earned the right to innovative style?” (446). What is crucial to note, though, is that Lu cannot make this argument without quoting this particular student text. Her argument begins with and builds upon her reading of can able to. The student writer provides not simply an example of but the impetus to her line of thought.

Several other pieces in CCC draw similarly on student texts to define problems in teaching basic writers. For instance, in 1988, Richard Haswell used his reading of several student texts to suggest that teachers might encourage so-called basic writers to draw more fully on the reserves of wit and vernacular eloquence they bring to their academic writing; in 1998, Kirk Branch offered several examples of how editing the prose of struggling writers could help show them (and others) the force of their thought; and in 2001, Susan Welsh drew on the ability of seemingly unsophisticated student writers to articulate conflicts in their lives to criticize the attempts of critical pedagogy to “raise” their consciousness. In each case, the work of the scholar begins with a responsiveness to the writing of students on the margins.

The guiding figure of such work is, of course, Mina Shaughnessy—who in Errors and Expectations (1977) developed a pedagogy to respond to the “alien papers” (vii) produced by the Open Admissions students she taught at the City College of New York. Shaughnessy’s work as a teacher
and scholar was rooted in her reading of these difficult student texts, which she quotes and patiently untangles throughout the course of *Errors and Expectations*. To counter Shaughnessy’s readings of those student texts, then, is to call her pedagogy into question. This has been done at least twice—first by John Rouse in *College English* (1979) and then by Min-Zhan Lu in the *Journal of Basic Writing* (1991). Both Rouse and Lu reread student texts from *Errors* in order to criticize what they saw as Shaughnessy’s debilitating focus on correctness at the expense of meaning. They were then both met themselves with fierce criticism from defenders of Shaughnessy, who argued that they had slighted the urgency of the need for basic writers to master the conventions of academic prose. My interest here is not to take a particular side in these controversies, though, but rather to note that they are arguments in which the meanings of student texts matter—and are very much open to debate. They are arguments, that is, that hinge on competing readings of student writing.

In a similar if more sympathetic fashion, Suresh Canagarajah returns to Lu’s reading of the *can able to* essay in his 2006 *CCC* article on “The Place of World Englishes in Composition.” Canagarajah argues that we see in the *can able to* essay how student writers, through a practice he calls “code meshing,” push at the boundaries of accepted academic dialect rather than merely conform to it. He thus reinterprets the *can able to* essay in a way that imagines its author on the margins of academic discourse not because she is struggling to catch up, like Shaughnessy’s students, but because she is in a position to innovate. To seal this point, Canagarajah compares her work to Geneva Smitherman’s deft use of African American phrasings in her recent scholarship, tracing the same stylistic move—“inserting oppositional codes into existing conventions” (599)—in the writing of both student and scholar.

**Student Texts as Problems in Writing**

So far I’ve distinguished between what I see as a pedestrian use of student texts as examples of points already made and a more dynamic use of them to define the problems that an author investigates. I’ve then looked at two quite different sorts of problems posed by student texts—the threat to our
authority as teachers by papers from hell, and the challenge to our views of good writing by nonstandard prose. What these two types of problems still share, though, is a grounding in the classroom, an interest in making pedagogical use of student writing.

Other uses of student texts make more scant reference to issues in teaching, instead approaching the work of students to get at more general problems in writing. Let me approach this use sideways, by way of contrast. While Mina Shaughnessy was clearly interested in defining the elements of good writing, the difficulties with fluency and correctness that she documents in *Errors and Expectations* are not likely to be shared by most of the scholars who read her work. She was rather defining a set of problems that teachers of basic writing need to help students to address. But when David Bartholomae writes, in “Inventing the University” (1985), of the need for student writers to define their position “against what they defined as some more naive way of talking about their subject” (153), he is describing one of the key challenges faced by any intellectual writer. I suspect this accounts in large part for the extraordinary influence of his essay. To publish, critics and scholars need to set their writing against what others in the field have said, to show how they are adding to a professional conversation. To advance to the next course, or to get a better grade, student writers need to do much the same, to say something different, something new, to argue an alternate case. In his critical yet sympathetic reading of their texts in “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae links students’ struggles with writing to our own. His essay is rooted less in the classroom than in the practice of writing.

Some of the most interesting pieces in *CCC* since 1987 make a similar use of student texts to define a problem in writing. For instance, in 1987, Phillip Arrington and Shirley Rose drew on several student pieces to reflect on the difficulty of starting an academic essay, of framing an issue in an engaging way; in 1989, Lad Tobin called on student texts to discuss metaphors, some generative and others unproductive, for the process of writing; and in 1991, Linda Peterson used student texts to suggest that confounding rather conforming to gender expectations (women sympathize, men assert) may be a successful writing strategy.

In a remarkable article on “Gendership and the Miswriting of Students” (1995), Janis Haswell and Richard Haswell draw on two student
essays, which they reproduce in full, to raise questions about how readers imagine the gender of authors. To do so, they make one of the most effective uses of images I’ve ever encountered in an academic article. They begin by showing a photograph of an artsy young woman, a scarf draped around her neck, her hair cut in a stylish bob. They then quote from an essay she wrote in her first year at college—notable for its confident, assertive voice and argument. They next show a photo of a young guy in a baseball cap and a Notre Dame T-shirt, looking straight at the camera, who turns out to be the author of a piece stressing the importance of family and friends. The rest of their article explores the dissonance between what we might conventionally expect the “girl” and the “guy” to say, and what these individuals actually wrote. I don’t have the space here to summarize the nuances of their argument, but suffice it to say that Haswell and Haswell show how readers almost always impute a gender to the author of an essay, that this imagined gender then influences how they read the text, and thus that authors, both students and scholars, need to consider how they want to conform to, resist, subvert, or circumvent the gendered expectations of their readers.

One could no doubt call on a wide range of texts, including ones by far more accomplished and celebrated authors, to make a similar case about the tangled relationships between gender and writing. What I find especially compelling about the Haswell and Haswell article, though, is their use of “ordinary” texts—essays written for a first-year college course—to explore such issues. Indeed, I am somewhat surprised and disappointed that, as a field, we have drawn so little on the vast archives of writing that students produce in our courses, semester after semester, in trying to theorize the nature of academic writing.

**Emig and Shaughnessy**

It is of course possible to reread any student text quoted in a scholarly article. But using student texts to pose problems seems to invite response in ways that offering them as simple examples does not. A quick contrast here between the legacies of Janet Emig and Mina Shaughnessy might be helpful. Emig does reproduce some student texts in her landmark study on
The Composing Processes of Twelfth-Grade Writers (1971). But her analysis clearly centers on a series of interviews that Emig conducted with Lynn, a rising high school senior, about how she writes and how she feels about writing. Emig’s overriding interest, that is, lies in the writer, the person, rather than the texts produced, of which she offers only a cursory analysis. In contrast, throughout Errors and Expectations we learn almost nothing about the personal lives of Mina Shaughnessy’s students; her book centers instead on an analysis of the texts they write.

My aim here is not to argue for one tradition of inquiry over the other. Both are unquestionably valuable—with researchers like Mike Rose and Nancy Sommers working in the more person-based mode of Emig, and scholars like David Bartholomae and Lester Faigley in the more text-based tradition of Shaughnessy. The first tradition tends to be associated with researchers in education, the second with scholars working in English. (Indeed, I suspect that the increased use of student texts in our scholarship since the 1980s is linked to the development, at about the same time, of composition as a subfield in English studies.) Still other researchers—like Marilyn Sternglass in Time to Know Them (1997), and Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis in Persons in Process (2000)—have begun to suggest how these two kinds of inquiry might be joined in studies that track the work students do as writers over the course of their college years. But for the most part, we have one tradition that focuses on students and another on student texts.

Student Texts as Historical Documents

One thing the work of students can offer us is a kind of people’s view of the history of teaching writing, and since 1987 a number of CCC authors have turned to student texts to uncover aspects of our professional and cultural past. The impulse behind this work is perhaps best shown, though, by an essay that appeared not in CCC but Young Scholars in Writing, Lauren Petrillo’s “The Visible Composition and Rhetoric of Invisible Antebellum Female Seminary Students” (2006). In this concise and tightly focused essay, Petrillo draws on contemporary newspaper accounts to describe how, from 1855–65, young women studying at a small seminary...
in Clay, Missouri, were expected to undergo examinations, participate in
debates, and give valedictory addresses in front of public town meetings.
To that point, her essay seems a solid example of a familiar kind of history
of teaching practices, but Petrillo goes a step further. She locates an actual
speech by one of the seminary students, Henrietta Clay George, whose
1862 valedictory address could not be heard by many in the crowd and was
thus printed in the local Liberty Weekly Tribune. In this speech, from
which Petrillo quotes liberally, George refers to “the dread tocsin of war”
then being sounded across the nation and urges her classmates to stand as
“sisters leagued together for the accomplishment of some grand purpose”
(21). She closes with the words, “There is only one boon we ask, and that
is not to be forgotten” (21).

Petrillo restores George to memory. She also uses the eloquence and
assurance of George’s address to suggest that female students in the 19th
century were not always as demure as many other accounts seem to
indicate. I count ten articles in CCC from 1987–2009 that make similar
attempts to recover the work of writing students from the past. Several of
these pieces take up issues of gender and identity: JoAnn Campbell (1992)
looks at the texts written by young women in their first year at Radcliffe
College from 1883–1917; Karyn Hollis (1994) studies the autobiographical
writings of students at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women
Workers from 1921–1938; Sue Carter Simmons (1995) analyzes the
themes written by Harvard freshmen for Barrett Wendell in the 1880s and
1890s; and Suzanne Spring (2009), like Petrillo, finds much to admire in the
letters and compositions written in the years before the Civil War by
students at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary.

Three recent CCC articles show how student texts from the past can
be used to explore the dynamics of power. In “Modernity and Empire”
(2009), Joseph Jeyaraj looks at essay exams written by native students in
19th century British India in order to trace how, through the process of
schooling, colonial subjects can be led to internalize the beliefs of their
occupiers and critique their own cultures. In a similar vein, Xiaoye You
(2005) shows how the model student essays in a Chinese textbook on
writing changed from one edition to the next to reflect China’s shift from
a communist to market-driven economy. And in a brilliant essay on
“Writing and Teaching Behind Barbed Wire” (2007), Hui Wu looks at
papers written by Japanese-American students who took a composition class while they were held in an internment camp in Arkansas during World War II. Several of these pieces confront the injustice of the situation the students have been placed in with a matter-of-fact candor. But Wu also offers a generous reading of the inability of their teacher, a white woman, to comment helpfully on these autobiographical essays, arguing that her “voicelessness” might be understood as a tacit acknowledgment of the contradictions in which she and the student writers were enmeshed.

These are impressive essays, if few in number. Far more pieces in CCC work to recover the history not of students but teachers. Part of this lopsided interest might be traced to logistics. The lives and careers of teachers tend to be well documented, while student texts are seldom published, and tend to be erratically archived, if at all. But I suspect that this bias also stems from an overweening interest in, well, ourselves. As I reread CCC with an eye for how students appear in its pages, I was struck instead by the omnipresence of teachers: our ambitions, our disappointments, our theories, our textbooks, our syllabi, our assignments, our class plans, our questions, our comments, our assessments. We need to shift our gaze, to inquire into not just the materials we prepare as teachers but the uses students make of them.

How to Discuss Student Writing without Quoting any of It

Let me be clear. There is little reason for most CCC articles to quote student texts. Our competing theories of discourse and rhetoric, our studies of the politics of writing and teaching, our histories of the profession and appreciations of its major (or sometimes overlooked) figures, our debates over curricula, our proposals to reform working conditions, our inquiries into new media, our studies of writing in communities and workplaces—these are vital, central forms of scholarship in our field, but not ones which we expect to prominently feature the work of students. Still there is a surprising number of articles in CCC that one might expect to quote student texts—articles about classroom teaching, tutoring, assessment, even responding to student writing—but that fail to do so. As I
worked on this essay, then, I found myself compiling a list of strategies that compositionists seem to use to evade quoting student texts. They include:

- Reproducing or describing the assignment given to students
- Reproducing texts that students are asked to write about
- Summarizing the gist of what students write
- Describing the process of how students write
- Transcribing conversations with students about their writing
- Interviewing adults or past students about their memories of writing
- Reporting on surveys about writing given to students
- Reproducing or describing the comments teachers make on student writing
- Asking faculty or other professionals for their opinions on student writing
- Aggregating student texts into charts or tables
- Redacting texts written by students in a class to a list of titles or topics

Note that I observed all these moves in articles that did not quote a single student text at length. These are pieces in which we read an assignment, but none of the student responses to it, or the comments on a student paper, but not the paper itself, or a rubric for assessment, but none of the student essays being assessed. They are pieces in which we listen to teachers and students talking together about writing without ever reading any of the actual texts that students are working on. The basic strategy is one of displacement—a shift of attention from student writing itself to comments on or opinions about or responses to or descriptions of that writing.

Where there is displacement there is also, of course, anxiety. Over the last 25 years our field has been preoccupied with our standing in the academy—with worries over the status of our research, the role of the first-year course, and the working conditions of writing teachers. I’d add to this list of worries an unease with responding to student texts in all their particularity. We often seem more comfortable talking about theories of response than actually responding to or interpreting student texts.
Students as Coauthors

One strategy to bring students more fully into the discourse of our field is to invite them to become our coauthors. There have been four student/faculty collaborations in CCC since 1987. This is a welcome move, but not one, I’d argue, we yet know how to make with confidence, since three of the four articles strike me as reasserting the very distinction between student and faculty authors that they aim to contest. They do so by turning to the student authors for narratives about their experiences with writing—for examples, that is, which the faculty authors then critique, theorize, or situate in our professional discourse. (A clear sign of this division of labor is that virtually all of the works cited in each of these three articles are mentioned in the faculty-authored sections.) And so, for instance, in “Blocking and Unblocking Sonja” (1992), Beverly Lyon Clark and Sonja Wiedenhaupt attempt to upend the usual format of the case study, in which a researcher writes about a subject, by writing with each other instead, in alternating blocks of prose in which their voices are represented by different typefaces. It’s an interesting piece. A problem with it, though, is suggested by its title, which figures one of the authors as also its subject. Sonja writes about her difficulties completing her senior honor thesis; Professor Clark interprets and contextualizes those difficulties.

A similar pattern plays out in articles by Hawisher et al. (2004) and Fishman et al. (2005). In both articles, the student authors describe their experiments with new forms of writing, and the scholar-authors frame those experiences for a professional readership. The exception to this pattern is “Cross-Curricular Underlife,” by Anderson, Best, Black, Hurst, Miller, and Miller (1990), in which five student authors describe the writing cultures of several intermediate undergraduate courses, arguing that there seems little connection between those cultures and the one fostered in their first-year course on college writing, and thus voicing some doubt about the ability of composition teachers to prepare students for the work they will do in later courses. The analytic thrust of this piece is clearly contained in the work of the student authors, with their faculty advisor and coauthor, Susan Miller, offering her response only at the end of the article (although, once again, almost of the works cited in the article are mentioned by her).
While four pieces over 23 years is hardly a trend, these articles do connect with an emerging interest in promoting undergraduate research in writing studies. The case for sponsoring student scholars in writing has been well made by Laurie Grobman (2009) and Amy Robillard (2006), who both point to the interesting new journal *Young Scholars in Writing* (*YSW*) as a showcase for such work. *YSW* has published many striking pieces since its inception in 2003, and I see no downside in encouraging undergraduates to undertake serious research on writing and its teaching. But I also think this is a different issue than the one I am trying to address. To publish in professional journals like *YSW* or *CCC*, student scholars need to be both exceptionally skilled and motivated. (Remember that it can take years to take a scholarly article through the drafts required for publication.) I’m interested in how, as compositionists, we can deal respectfully with students who are still in an earlier stage of development as writers—who may still be learning to control the complex conventions of academic writing, and who are liable both to make mistakes they might not commit a few months or years later and to argue positions they might soon want to revise. I’m interested, that is, in how to deal with writing that is still clearly the work of students. Not every undergraduate hopes to become an apprentice scholar, but that doesn’t mean we can’t learn from their work.

At the same time, I think it’s now clear that we need to approach the writing of all students with the same respect and care we offer published writers. Or to put this in the negative, we can’t quote the work of student writers without their permission, as if they were simply the nameless producers of handy sample texts for our scholarship. Both Paul Anderson (1998) and Amy Robillard (2006) have argued convincingly for a new ethics of quotation that honors students’ control over their writing—that insists that we ask students for their permission to quote their work, and that allows them to choose if they wish to be named or not as its author. *CCCC* has also offered its official support for a more transparent method of dealing with student writers and texts in its 2003 Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition. These are important steps toward recognizing both the value of the intellectual work of students and their authority over that work.
Rereading Student Texts

I began my research on this project with a question about how student texts circulate in our scholarship. Since so much of our work centers on reading and responding to student writing, I wanted to find out which student texts seem to matter the most to our field, which we return to most often in our work as scholars. But I soon had to set that question aside, since I was able to locate only five examples—out of 448 articles over 23 years—of CCC authors reconsidering student texts that had been previously quoted by other scholars. I’ve already mentioned one of these pieces, Suresh Canagarajah’s rereading of the can able to essay first quoted by Min-Zhan Lu. Others include James Seitz’s (1991) appreciative rethinking of student writers’ uses of metaphor (first quoted in Tobin 1989), Geoffrey Sirc’s (1997) reclaiming of a seemingly failed student essay (first quoted in Bartholomae 1993) as the voice of a punk rock ethos, and Susan Kates’ (1997) reuse of a letter by a 19th century Radcliffe student (first quoted in Campbell 1992) as expressing a desire for less restrictive forms of writing and teaching.

These are all terrific essays. But the fifth in the group is surely one of the best pieces ever to be published in CCC, Lester Faigley’s “Judging Writing, Judging Selves” (1989). Faigley is interested in how our ideas about what is good writing imply a set of values about who are good writers. To connect our views of writing and selfhood, Faigley first looks at several student texts presented as model essays for the College Board exams of 1929. He then turns to what is itself one of the most quirky and remarkable books published in our field, What Makes Writing Good?, edited by William Coles and James Vopat (1985). For this collection, Coles and Vopat asked 48 composition scholars to send them what they felt was the single best essay they had ever received from a student, along with a brief comment on why they had chosen that particular piece. Based on his rereading of these texts from 1929 and 1985, Faigley argues that, as a profession, we have consistently valued student writing that evokes a nuanced and complex interiority, that muses and reflects on the experiences of the author, more than we have valued writing that actually gets things done, that analyzes texts, or argues positions, or solves problems.
Faigley moves fluidly from theories of selfhood to debates over teaching to discussions of student work. But the power of his piece stems from his decision to *reread* essays brought forward by other teachers, since this allows him to comment on the core values of our field as they are shown by our actual work as readers of student texts. Rereading thus opens up a space for metacriticism, for reflecting on the ways we value and work with student writing. We need to do more of it.

**Trends**

So where does all this leave us? My reading of *CCC* from 1987–2009 suggests that while working with student writing is indeed one of the defining moves of our field, we too often use student texts in a quotidian fashion as mere examples for arguments already made. When I tabulated the main use of student texts made in each of the 124 *CCC* articles since 1987 that reproduce student writing, here is what I came up with:

**Figure C: Uses of Student Texts, *CCC*, 1987–2009**

I make no claims for the exactness of these numbers. I haven’t asked anyone else to double-check my coding, several articles make various uses
of student texts, and some use texts in ways that don’t precisely fit any of my categories. But even still, the broad trends seem obvious. Most uses of student texts in *CCC* serve as examples of points that the author has already made. More ambitious uses are countable.

Celebrated essays are less likely to work with student texts. Of the 24 Braddock Award winning articles published between 1987–2009, only five reproduce student writing. Not one of the 23 CCCC Chair’s Addresses during that period analyzes a student text. Of the 18 essays collected in the two-volume 50th anniversary issue of *CCC* (which I edited), only two reproduce student writing—and those analyze the dissertations of well-known compositionists (Bizzaro 1999) and the comments of graduate students on their training (Taylor and Holberg 1999). It thus seems that when we move to represent who we are as a field, student writers tend to get left behind.

So, why do student texts have such a limited role in our literature, and why, in particular, do we seem loath to reanalyze student texts quoted by other scholars? I can’t claim to have anything like a definitive answer to either question, but I do have two ideas I’d like to put forward.

First, I suspect that the lingering aspects of an *in loco parentis* role for teachers may inhibit our discussions of student writing. We still tend to refer, in both speech and writing, to “my students,” much like “my children,” and although it is clear that students are not our children, we often seem to approach the work of students taught by our colleagues with the kind of circumspection we might use in talking about their children. That is, we are hesitant to criticize, at least in public. The effect is both to infantilize students and to moderate vigorous discussion of our work as teachers.

Second, I also suspect that a desire to establish composition as an academic subfield has encouraged an unreflective endorsement of what Richard Haswell (2005) has touted as “RAD research”—Replicable, Aggregable, and Data-Driven. I have no argument with studies that aim to produce such knowledge. But I don’t want to lose sight of another more critical and essayistic tradition of work in composition—one that is more idea- than data-driven. In “The Essay as Form” (1984), T.W. Adorno distinguishes between the work of the scientific article, which aims to report on facts already discovered, and that of the essay, which in the act
of commenting on other texts creates new insights, and so “catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done” (152). Much of the work I most admire in our field strives to catch fire in such ways with student texts, to use them not as evidence for prior claims but as material for thinking through problems in writing and its teaching.

Adorno also notes that, unlike the research article, the essay does not aim at comprehensiveness, but rather “says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete—not where nothing is left to say” (152). As I near the end of this essay, then, I’d like to stress that I’ve not aimed here for comprehensiveness, but have instead tried to point to some specific (and limited) approaches to student texts in the pages of CCC. My hope is that keeping these approaches in mind will prove useful as we read other instances of student writing and, especially, as we continue to write about student texts ourselves. I look forward to seeing how my fellow compositionists test and extend my insights through an analysis of student texts in other journals and presses, or indeed through a rereading of the pieces in CCC I’ve looked at here.

**If I Don’t Know My Phaedrus**

In *Writing Students* (1994), her fine study of how teachers have represented students in composition scholarship, Marguerite Helmers describes a process by which, over the course of an article, an author might begin by discussing an individual student, then shift to speaking about “my students,” before moving on to talking about “our students,” or even just “students” in general. What makes this slide into abstraction possible, Helmers argues, is our shared and unexamined sense that we know who “our students” really are. They are, it seems obvious, people defined by some sort of *lack*—of skill, interest, passion, culture, political awareness, whatever. Our job as their teachers is to make up for that lack. And so in our journals we come across one narrative after the next in which a teacher finds some new way to enlighten or energize or transform or empower “our students.” Like Socrates in the epigraph to this essay, we assume we know our students, our Phaedrus, like we know ourselves.
Or not. Along with Helmers, I am wary of seamless accounts of teaching in which an author first diagnoses the needs of students and then proposes a method for dealing with them. This is why I am so drawn to scholarship on teaching that works closely with actual student texts. For when we quote what students write, we open up the possibility that others will read their texts differently than we do. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates mocks written texts for only being able to restate the “very same thing forever” (81), but, in a way, I think that is precisely their value. In person students often seem touchingly eager to learn, to agree, to think like we do. But student texts remind us that we can never fully know their authors. They are obstinate in their otherness. Even when we try to use them simply as examples, they never serve as perfect examples. We can try to understand, to respond to what students say in their writing, but we can never simply turn their language into our own. Instead, once quoted, student texts can be reinterpreted by other scholars in ways we cannot control. Their value lies in how, at least sometimes, they can disrupt the smooth flow of our discourse about writing and its teaching.¹

¹. Bruce Horner and Min Lu were there from the start of this essay. I owe many of my insights in it to them. My colleagues at the 2011 Watson Symposium helped me frame what I had to say for a broader set of readers than I first had in mind, and Denise Comer, Tamera Marko, and Jessica Restaino offered useful responses to my work in progress. My thanks go to them all.

**Notes**

**Works Cited**


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