"Changing Habits of Thinking":
An Interview with Joseph Harris

Thomas West

As editor of College Composition and Communication for over two years, Joseph Harris has a unique perspective on the current state of composition studies as well as a sense of where we might be headed. Pedagogically, Harris advocates methodologies that "engage with the views and experiences of students and that take those views and experiences seriously." In Media Journal: Reading and Writing About Popular Culture (edited with Jay Rosen), he has put together a set of assignments and readings that ask students to critically examine their own experiences with the media. But he also advocates scholarly work that seeks better ways to do this, scholarly work that is "problem-posing," revisionary, and critical. His contributions to the field ("The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" and "The Other Reader," for example) not only suggest ways we might revise previously held notions about pedagogy, but they also explore what such changes might mean for our actual pedagogical practices.

WOE: In your first editorial at CCC, you say that you had "never looked forward very much to a career as a scholar writing to a small clique of other specialists, and so [were] pleased to find a field where so many people seem[ed] to try to speak to the concerns of experts and students alike." How has this emphasis on students' writing in composition influenced the ways in which you think of yourself as a writer?

HARRIS: It hasn't influenced the way I think of myself as a writer, but it certainly has influenced the ways I think of myself as an intellectual and a teacher: the kinds of projects that seem important to me, the kinds of questions that seem crucial.

Let me illustrate with a story: I grew up in a world that was literally parochial, bound by parish neighborhoods and schools in Philadelphia, and from there I went to Haverford College. And though the geographical distance between my home and Haverford was quite short, it seemed as though I had changed worlds, from a working-class city neighborhood to an affluent suburb, from a Catholic school to an elite private college. That shift was daunting in many ways, but what I began to realize once I got to Haverford was that the other students were not necessarily as smart as they (and others) thought they were. Then, a few
years later, when I started teaching basic writers in New York City, I quickly saw that those students were actually a lot smarter than they (and others) often thought they were. Those two counter-realizations have been very important to me. They suggested that the problem was not with intelligence per se but with what sorts of intelligence were made visible. And thus one of my ongoing projects as a teacher has been to try to gain access to the intelligence, to the insights, of students who are often dismissed as not being very smart, or as underprepared, to imagine that they have something to say to us that others don’t, and to try to help them become more articulate and confident in saying it. That desire has strongly influenced whom I’ve chosen to teach and where, as well as the kinds of writing projects I set for myself.

In terms of how I actually go about writing, I would say that my influences have been rather traditional and literary critical. That is, the important move in my work has been to treat student texts in much the same way as in a slightly different sort of career I might have been reading literary texts.

WOE: Would you talk a little about your writing habits?

HARRIS: I don’t think I’m a very good model of the writing process as it is now commonly depicted. Even though I often find myself advising students not to worry about details of phrasing, not to get stuck on particular words and sentences, to begin at various points in an essay, and so on, I’m actually the kind of writer who very much needs to start at the beginning and to work out all the details as he moves through a piece. I need to have the illusion that I’m writing a piece from start to finish and that what I’m writing is something close to a final draft. Of course it doesn’t always work that way, and I have to go back and revise.

But it’s hard for me to write a new sentence or a new paragraph unless, at least for that moment, I feel confident of what I’m saying, that I’ve got the words right. This means I do an awful lot of revising, both stylistic and conceptual, as I move along. I also do a lot of what they used to call prewriting or percolating. I need to mull over pieces for a long time before I begin to write. But once I do begin, I then usually produce something close to a final draft. Sometimes the comments of readers require me to rethink what I’ve written, but I’m not the kind of person who can first block out a rough approximation of an essay and then go back and fine tune the details. By the time I let anybody read my work, it’s usually pretty close to what I want to say.

WOE: You have said that as a graduate student you were frustrated by what seemed to you the “planned irrelevance” of much scholarship.

What are the differences between this scholarship of “planned irrelevance” and the problem-posing scholarship you advocate?

HARRIS: That’s a good question, since I worry sometimes that much of the kind of revisionary work that I do could be dismissed as a kind of professional navel-gazing, an absorption with our professional discourse rather than a moving outward. But I don’t think that’s the case. In trying to figure out better ways of talking about what it is that we want to do, we can in fact learn to do it better.

For example, in a piece I wrote called “After Dartmouth,” I looked at a set of educators and critics whom I was very fond of—growth theorists like John Dixon, James Britton, and James Moffett. I was attracted to their emphasis on getting students to use writing to reflect on their own experiences and concerns. However, I was also troubled by how these theorists imagined experience as almost always something felt or done—as actions in the world. I felt that such a view left out the role of ideas, of intellectual experiences, in ordinary life—that students were being viewed as people who came to class with stories to tell and deeds to recount but not with positions to argue. This seemed to me both unintentionally condescending and also simply wrong since it’s clear that in our current media culture we are all immersed in texts—ads, movies, videos, songs—and that we all spend much of our time literally reading and interpreting the world around us. And so, if we are going to begin with student experience, it seems important we recognize that many of those experiences have a strong intellectual or critical aspect.

One result of this stance is that it helps break down some of the barriers between the classroom and the world outside since intellectual work is seen as something that goes on in both spaces. And so revisiting the work of the growth theorists and mulling over its limits helped me begin to form a different sort of pedagogy, one that would ask students to think and write about other aspects of their lives, that would ask them to be critics as well as narrators of their experiences.

But this is really less a matter of choice than temperament. I have always formulated a project as a response to other people’s ideas; for me scholarship always seems to grow out of an engagement with other people’s work. But of course so does my teaching.

WOE: What about the phrase “planned irrelevance”?

HARRIS: [laughs.] That’s what it seemed to me. I first attended graduate school in film studies. I’ve always thought that the aim of a liberal education should be to help students become critics of their lived
culture as it actually exists around them and not simply some version of their cultural heritage. I enjoyed being an English major at Haverford, but in the classes I took we didn’t get to the present very often, and I very much felt that we should have. So when I went to graduate school I thought that one way of getting to the present would be to study not books but film and television. I was disappointed to find out that the profession of film studies was doing to movies exactly what the profession of English had previously done to books: mystifying the subject so they could then re-explain it to students. The lesson I took from this was that you couldn’t guarantee relevance simply through topic, that you had to always find ways of connecting your interests and concerns with the lived experiences of students.

WOE: You have mentioned an indebtedness to the work of James Britton and Raymond Williams. In what ways has their scholarship been an influence on yours?

HARRIS: Both Williams and Britton helped me rethink English studies as centering on a set of practices rather than on a set of texts, to see how the acts of reading and writing, producing and interpreting texts, are central to our work. If composition and cultural studies are to have any real impact on university study, I believe it will be through such a shift in emphasis. That is, the important move is not from Moby Dick to Madonna but from the study of texts to the study of how people make use of texts. And so, for instance, I still feel I share more in common with an English teacher who may seem to be teaching quite canonical or conventional texts but who does so in ways that engage with the views and experiences of students than I do with a cultural studies person who simply lectures at students about postmodernity or resistance or whatever.

WOE: What concepts do you see that require particular critical attention at this time?

HARRIS: In the last five years we’ve spent a lot of energy elaborating rhetorics of difference. That’s been needed, and I don’t in any way want to speak against the goal of diversity, particularly in a time when access to higher education is decreasing and racial tensions are worsening. At the same time, though, I think that, in addition to rhetorics of difference, we need to construct rhetorics of affiliation or identity, to find ways of talking about how we can negotiate as well as express our differences.

Similarly, the last decade has seen an explosion of interest in issues of power and resistance. Again, this has been useful. But I think that this interest needs to be flanked by an attention to terms like pleasure. I find it disconcerting that the only pleasure that critics sometimes seem to allow themselves (or us) is an ironic rewriting of the text.

WOE: Or a guilty pleasure.

HARRIS: Exactly, a guilty pleasure. We might instead think about ways in which we can re-identify with and take some real joy or hope from the positions and projects of some artists, writers, and critics. We should be able to feel that the texts we read do not always have to be subverted, resisted, or ironized, that intellectual work is not simply an exercise in power but also an opportunity for pleasure and craft.

WOE: In “The Other Reader” you write, “Before we can have effective criticism of advertising, or any other part of popular culture, we need to admit that all of us respond to it in ways that are often at once both pleased and skeptical, open and resisting.” How might effective criticism in other areas, say race and gender, be based on the recognitions you talk about in “The Other Reader”—for example, that we respond to these issues in mixed and complex ways?

HARRIS: There’s an imputed purity in some kinds of criticism that is off-putting and that also blocks the writer from making certain kinds of realizations. A problem with a lot of talk about race and gender in our field is that it tends to locate sexist or racist attitudes in students and the culture but not in ourselves. This creates a kind of us-versus-them relationship that can get in the way of effective teaching and criticism. To really combat racism and sexism we need to begin with self-criticism, with examining the ways that, as products of our culture, we all share in attitudes that we want to resist and transform.

In “The Other Reader,” I tried to argue that we need to deal not only with our own conflicted responses to texts but also with the often ambivalent situations in which we find ourselves in the culture and in the profession, that we need to begin by admitting to certain contradictions rather than by trying to speak from some position outside of them.

WOE: You discuss the importance of distinguishing between writing which is strongly situated and writing which is merely confessional. Would you elaborate a bit on the distinction that you’re making between these personal forms of writing?

HARRIS: I don’t think this is an area where you can draw up rules in advance—to say that this is too personal or that this should be more personal or that this is just personal enough. I am suspicious, however, about claims for personal writing as being in itself radical or liberating. The claim of those writing autobiographical criticism is almost always
for some sort of originality or authenticity—a breaking with convention and tradition. And yet the text produced is often highly conventional.

WOE: In “After Dartmouth” you say that “identity rises out of identification,” that “we define who we are through whom we choose to stand with and against.” You continually emphasize that identity involves provisional negotiations of affiliations within, and sometimes against, larger social forces in which we already find ourselves embattled and embattled. What does viewing identity in this way have to do with writing generally and composition studies specifically?

HARRIS: One advantage to a view of identity as constructed rather than simply given is that this makes the self much more open to change and revision. It’s a self that we form, at least in part, from various voices and influences around us, a self that we can thus also reform. This strikes me as a more fluid and hopeful, a more educable, view of the self.

How does this relate to writing? Writing is useful because it gives us a way of stepping back from the positions we’ve taken and allows us to examine who it is, in a given text, that we say we are: whom we’ve chosen to stand with, whom we’ve chosen to stand against. Writing, that is, offers us an opportunity for critical self-reflection that ordinary speech doesn’t usually allow. It makes language visible. Thus a more fluid sense of identity and an interest in writing together enable, it seems to me, a kind of teaching that can give students the chance to reflect critically on who they are, on how they compose and interpret experience, and on what ways they might want to change their languages and themselves.

WOE: You argue for making “aggressive use” of the insights into teaching and theory gained from students’ writing. Obviously, you see pedagogy and theory as integrated. What might be the advantages for students of bringing theory into the classroom?

HARRIS: What you want to do is not so much to bring theory into the classroom as to set up situations where students are asked to become theorists. You can do this not only by asking them to read a certain kind of text but also by engaging in the sort of activity that I was just talking about, the practice of standing back from your own work and reflecting not only on what you said but on how you went about saying it, on what your language says about you, the stances or attitudes it implicates you in. The kind of teaching I’m after is one in which students are asked to take their own writings as seriously as the work of the people they’re reading. This implies too that they should be doing some serious reading as well as writing. Such teaching seems to me to have a radical impulse and maybe even, sometimes, effect.

WOE: Some theorists see cultural studies as academic work that can influence social and political formations. Recently, however, Stanley Fish has argued that cultural studies only serves to replace the kinds of texts we study. He argues that cultural studies holds out promises about social change that it can’t keep because it’s embedded in the academy. How might we negotiate this kind of double-bind of wanting to work toward social change from within the academy?

HARRIS: I want both to agree and disagree with Fish. I agree wholly that our expertise and thus power lies with a particular sort of intellectual work and focus and that we move away from that focus at our peril. But I think that our work can be imagined, as I’ve said before, as centering not on certain texts but on certain activities or practices. I agree with Fish that if cultural studies is to make a difference, it will have to do something more than simply shift the texts we study. But I think that we can do something more, that we can aim to change how students deal with texts, to make them more articulate and confident as writers and more reflective as readers. And I suppose I disagree with Fish in feeling that such teaching can be more than simple training in the latest mode of textual criticism, that its effects can be broader and more interesting.

Having said that, though, it does seem to me that it’s useful to distinguish between teaching and political activism, to suggest that while the aims of the two can be related they are not identical. My wife runs a soup kitchen and free health clinic in what used to be the steel town of Homestead. She is an activist in ways I will never be, and I admire her work intensely. But my guess is that with my skills and temperament I have a better chance of effecting change as a teacher. What I can hope to do is to put people in a situation where they see things a little differently, where they can form new and perhaps more critical habits of thinking. That can sometimes feel like a pretty limited and frustrating form of influence, though sometimes it can be exhilarating, too. But either way it’s what teachers and intellectuals do. I don’t think we need to feel guilty that we’re not out there on the streets. That isn’t our job. Our job is to change habits of thinking.

WOE: When you became editor of CCC you instituted an “Interchanges” section in which readers were invited to respond to articles which had appeared in the journal. What other discursive forms do you think we might use to challenge traditional scholarly forms in effective and productive ways?

HARRIS: The intent of the Interchanges section is to feature short pieces that are in some clear tension with or relation to one another. That
sort of responsiveness is, in fact, a characteristic of much academic work. But most of the written dialogues we engage in occur over an extended period of time and literally appear in different spaces—in different journals or in different issues of the same journal. I’m trying to make that critical dialogue more dramatic and immediate, to showcase it within the space of a single issue.

Are there other kinds of writing that we could be doing in composition? I’m not sure that the way to encourage new forms or genres is to ask for them explicitly, to specify a certain kind of writing that a journal is looking for. Instead, I think the important thing for people to do is to think of their writing as writing, to view what they do as writers as not simply putting together research reports or commentaries on other people’s texts but as crafting artifacts for certain kinds of effects. These effects can involve something more than the construction of a sense of authority or scholarly thoroughness; they can also include a sense of style, surprise, eloquence, play.

For instance, in his recent essay, “The Nervous System,” Richard Miller not only offers incisive readings of theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu but also supplements those readings with an intensely personal series of reflections on his family and his work, at one point even reproducing a poem of his own composition and then, most importantly, subjecting all these moves—critical, narrative, poetic—to an ongoing critique. The lesson to be learned from such a piece, then, is not to try to jam anything and everything into the space of a single essay, but to look at how Miller is working against various conventions of the academic essay at the same time he is exploiting them.

Another example. In the May 1996 issue of CCC, there is a very interesting piece by Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey called “Postings on a Genre of E-mail” that is set up as a kind of dialogue between two voices about whether electronic discourse is really a new use of language or simply a more familiar set of uses in a new medium. But what’s really interesting is that neither of the voices in the piece is tagged specifically to Spooner and Yancey, so there’s no way of reducing the text to two competing positions. And then their text is still further complicated by the introduction of even more voices, postings from the Internet, that interrupt and comment on their exchange. On top of that, the essay is formatted so that all these voices overlap and intersect with each other so that the boundaries between them are blurred visually too. All this seems to me more than just a stylistic or typographical fancy but rather an attempt to create collaborative text that is neither simply univocal (two or three people composing together, writing in the same voice) nor an old-fashioned point-counterpoint sort of dialogue.

My point is not that these pieces should represent a new genre of academic writing, that we should all write like Miller or like Spooner and Yancey, but rather that we should look for writing that, in one way or the other, pushes against the edges of the form it is working in.

WOE: So it’s not so much about instituting new forms as much as it is about being open to stylistic alternatives necessitated perhaps by new technologies and different ways of thinking?

HARRIS: Right. David Bartholomae and Tony Petrosky talk about trying to get students to take on a hesitant and tenuous stance toward academic discourse. I think that goes for us too, that there are dangers in becoming settled in particular genres, even supposedly innovative ones. I like pieces that aren’t quite one thing or the other.

WOE: Do you think that on-line publishing affords possible ways to work against elitist limits of conventional scholarship in English studies?

HARRIS: I think it can. I’m not sure it necessarily will, but I think it has the potential. For me the most interesting aspect of on-line communication has to do with its ability to bring a number of people into the room at the same time, to get people talking not only over great expanses of space but also to get them talking across lines of age and profession and the like. Its most worrisome aspect is that so far most of these people still seem to form a fairly predictable group, that the users of the Internet are sharply defined by class and even gender. So if one of our desires really is to hear more from minority or dissident voices, the Internet doesn’t seem to be the place to go right now.

The Net does seem to offer different stylistic opportunities to its users, though; it encourages a prose that is not exactly conversational but is clearly not formal. I also imagine that eventually—though I don’t know much about this—we will see texts that really are structured differently, texts that are not merely distributed on the Net but are composed for it, articles and books that are hyper-textual rather than linear-textual. I’ll be interested to see what those new forms are; I don’t think I’ve seen any compelling instances yet.

WOE: What about prejudices against on-line scholarship when it comes to decisions about hiring and promotion?

HARRIS: There are already similar prejudices against entire fields—as is still often the case with composition—or against supposedly lesser journals or presses within a field. Academics is a status-obsessed and hierarchy-ridden profession. I don’t see that changing much very soon, although I do think it’s our responsibility to try to change the game as we play it. For the time being, I would simply point out that publication
on-line can be refereed and can be as formal and rigorous as scholarship in other media.

WOE: As editor of CCC you are not only exposed to the most recent scholarship in the field but you help shape the field as well. What trends do you see or would you like to see in composition?

HARRIS: To begin with, there are several ongoing issues that have long been part of work in composition and that are likely to remain so: assessment and evaluation, identity within writing, classroom authority and politics. And since composition has long been closely identified with a reformist movement in higher education, pieces dealing with writing across the curriculum are still very important. I get a lot of submissions dealing with these issues, and I think appropriately so. They’re not new, but they’re a central part of much work in the field.

There is also clearly a very strong current interest in histories of rhetoric and composition, much stronger than I recall just ten or twelve years ago when I was entering the field. I feel a little ambivalent about this. Some historical work is quite interesting, but I guess I worry about it as something of a retreat back into the purely academic. This shift toward history springs, at least in part, from a very powerful theoretical argument about the historical situatedness of all discourse and thus the need to pay close mind to the material and institutional contexts of writing and teaching. I’m convinced by that argument. At the same point, though, when I read histories I find myself impatient to learn what use they might be put to, to find out how they connect up with current issues in theory and teaching, to make sure that they hold more than simply a professional or antiquarian interest.

As for writing I would like to encourage: we need to find convincing responses to questions about access to higher education that are being raised in both professional and public forums. Sometimes the code word for these issues is “basic writing,” sometimes it’s “placement,” sometimes it’s “standards,” but talking about who is going to be allowed in our classrooms in the coming years and what sort of support they will need to succeed in school strikes me as absolutely crucial.

We will also need to study the workings of electronic discourse. Things are now happening very fast which could profoundly shape the ways people go about writing and the work we do as writing teachers. We need to be proactive here, to hazard some speculations and hypotheses and guesses, to try to shape our intellectual environment as much as we can.

Thomas West teaches at the University of South Florida.

Book Buyers, Book Cellars

Joseph Mills

I was living in France when I read my first Richard Brautigan book. And my second, third, fourth, and fifth. After writing to a friend about this spree, she replied with a postcard, so one day I walked home with my baguette and there was Brautigan, waiting in my postbox, sitting in dark clothes on the edge of a bathtub. A long drooping mustache punctuated his serious expression, and he wore a small medallion, a round hat that was a cross between a sombrero and a fedora, and wire-rimmed glasses. On the back of the card, my friend had written, “He looks like Father Guido Sarducci,” and my first thought was, “Is that the bathtub he committed suicide in? How did he do it?”

Because his death was one of the first things I knew about him. A year earlier, on the way to a Pt. Reyes trailhead, some of us stopped in Bolinas for coffee and muffins, and as we were leaving, Sean said, “This is where Richard Brautigan used to live. He killed himself here.”

“Oh,” I said and climbed into the car.

At the time, I didn’t connect the name with visits I used to make to the Living Batch bookstore in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There I had discovered by chance a book called Three from Brautigan. The cover attracted me. It showed a man standing in jeans, vest, necklaces, black coat, and a hat (this one a cross between a sombrero and a homburg), and a woman in a skirt, boots, and headband sitting next to him. Both looked very nineteen-sixtiesish. A statue of Ben Franklin was in the background. Again and again, I pulled this book from the shelf, and each time after looking at the photo, I would read a few lines, think “I should read this sometime,” and put it back.

Sometimes, the cover price seemed too steep. Sometimes, I told myself I was too busy. But really, I was simply waiting. It was as if somewhere a voice whispered, “Not yet. Not now,” and sensing that almost intangible voice, I made up a tangible excuse.

We do that with books. We wait. We buy them and shelve them unread. We faithfully pack and unpack them with each move, and then one day, maybe at some point when we tell ourselves we have “the time,” although that’s never really the reason, we read a book that we’ve already handled over and over.

For Brautigan, the “now” occurred in France. Randomly browsing in a small Bordeaux library, I found a shelf which held five of his books, and, immediately, I knew that I was going to read them all. Maybe it was homesickness that inspired me to read in Europe the work of someone