In many ways, it seems that the quest for identity has become the central mission of contemporary English departments. As we move into the twenty-first century, the role of English departments within universities and within larger world communities has been called into question both within the disciplines under the broad umbrella of English studies and by critics outside the academy. Perhaps more than at any other period in the history of American universities, members of English departments have become prolific in their attempts to define the agendas of English departments. Dialogue on the relative value of theory and research, public intellectualism, anti-intellectualism, professionalism, race, ethnicity, culture, class, literacy, canon, ethics, disciplinarity, and the like has emancipated English departments from being viewed as singularly defined entities and created departments in which multi-vocal knowledge making has become the norm rather than the rarity. At the same time, however, criticism arises that the multi-faceted personalities of contemporary English departments lose sight of why English departments were established in the first place: to teach “great” literature and later
to teach reading and writing. Outside the academy, too, vocal critique articulates a need for English departments to “return to their roots” and concentrate primarily on teaching “the basics” in order to become better places for students to learn. Many who work to make English departments sites where multiple epistemological projects may be pursued and where students learn to encounter language, discourse, literature, culture, and all of the tags we now associate with English studies, however, contend that if we are to be teachers of writing and reading—of language and discourse—then we ethically cannot not inquire into all spaces—oppressive and otherwise—in which language is enmeshed with our worlds. This is a debate which has become clamorous in recent years, so much so that the three books reviewed here are only a sampling of the many attempts to define who we are and what we do in English departments.

Scholars such as Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson have taught us to reconsider our own roles within departments, to recognize the political functions of the academy, to use universities as vehicles for activism. Scholars like Stanley Fish counter that it is not that literary critics have nothing to say about the political issues that shape our worlds, “but that so long as they say it as literary critics no one but a few of their friends will be listening, and, conversely, if they say it in ways unrelated to the practices of literary criticism, and thereby manage to give it a political effectiveness, they will no longer be literary critics” and will potentially dismantle the discipline of literary criticism in the process (Professional 1). (The argument applies equally to academics other than literary critics.) Still others, such as bell hooks and Michael Eric Dyson, have insisted that as teachers and scholars we must move beyond the confines of the campus to create a public intellectualism that shares in knowledge-making with the world beyond the institution of the university. That is, at all levels, for various reasons, members of English departments have begun a personal and professional quest in search of who we are and what we do, and this quest has become central to our scholarly conversations.

These three books closely reflect the larger conversations regarding English departments and their identity. James C. Raymond’s collection English as a Discipline; Or, Is There a Plot in This Play? puts the question “Is there a discipline in this department?” to a group of scholars, many of whom (such as Stanley Fish and Gerald Graff) have been vocal in addressing this very question in recent years. Likewise, Chris Davies’s What Is English Teaching? inquires into the evolution of pedagogy. In the General Editor’s Introduction to Davies’s book, Anthony Adams traces the origins of the “present day debate over the nature of English teaching” to the 1966 Anglo-American Dartmouth Seminar (viii). Davies’s book offers an interesting British perspective on the post-Dartmouth era that is balanced well by Joseph Harris’s A Teaching Subject: Composition since 1966, which begins with a detailed examination of the Dartmouth Seminar and its mission to answer the question “what is English?” Harris writes in his “Foreword(s)” that he begins his book with
a look at the Dartmouth Seminar in order to examine the “idea of growth as part of an attempt to shift work in English away from the analysis of a fixed set of great books and toward a concern with the uses that students make of language” (ix). I find it interesting that while Harris attributes the origin of theoretical examination of student/language interaction to British theorists John Dixon and James Britton, Davies, in his post-Dartmouth examination of “what is English?” in Britain, leans toward a more regimented notion of a “national curriculum” that emphasizes content. Davies includes essays by Peter Benton, Christine Lawson, and Kathy Oxtoby in his examination of ways in which the National Curriculum might be readdressed in light of the evolutionary nature of English studies. Comparing these two post-Dartmouth approaches would seem the obvious course that this review should take. The two books’ agendas are fairly straightforward: for Harris, the teaching of writing is central; for Davies, establishing a better-defined national curriculum is of the greatest importance.

Harris offers one of the most interesting of recent approaches to the post-Dartmouth attempt at defining English as a subject. He clearly identifies the teaching of writing as central to defining English. In the pages of this well-written monograph, Harris explores ways in which five key words—growth, voice, process, error, and community—have figured in discussions of the teaching of writing. He is not only adamant on the importance of the study of writing in defining the role of English departments, but equally adamant that the teaching of writing is why we explore writing. Harris’s response to the question “what is it we do?,” then, concentrates on the teaching of writing. For Harris—as well as many other compositionists—teaching writing means that we must also talk about writing in our scholarship, and talking about writing, about language, is necessarily an interdisciplinary enterprise. That is, contemporary composition scholarship identifies the study and teaching of writing as an endeavor committed to multifaceted inquiry that is not limited by the disciplinary boundaries of “English.” Rather, composition identifies the teaching of writing as encouraging students and teachers to engage language as an entity which subsumes, engenders, characterizes, and defines disciplines, not the other way around. Harris’s vision of what it means to teach writing is informed by the interdisciplinary notions of contemporary composition theory. He proposes that students need to learn to negotiate between competing discourses, that the writing classroom is a “contested space where many discourses and cultures meet and struggle,” though he is cautiously critical of many pedagogical approaches that address dissent and difference (117). His understanding of composition’s post-process move to examine larger systems such as race, class, culture, and gender allows Harris to encourage composition instruction to explore conflicting politics, to engage students in private and public discourses. However, I disagree with Harris’s emphasis on reading student texts, as I have become increasingly aware that teaching textual interpretation is not the same as teaching textual production.
Contrary to Harris’s position on the overriding importance of writing instruction, Chris Davies’s answer to “What is English?” leaves little room for writing instruction and downplays its importance. According to Davies, “English teaching is, like any professional activity, internally coherent, rational and comprehensible” (9). Rationality seems to be the cornerstone of Davies’s vision of English studies. Even in his critique of Britain’s National Curriculum, he seeks strong regimens in his own curriculum. Christine Lawson, in the brief seven pages she dedicates to writing instruction in Davies’s book, contends that writing should be taught according to the National Writing Project’s structure for teaching the writing process, which includes ten definitive steps of process: motivation to write, brainstorming, reflection, making preliminary notes, drafting, revising, editing, writing final copy, publishing/display, response from readers. Apparently, post-Dartmouth Britain is very different from post-Dartmouth America.

In view of the larger debates on the identity of English departments, these texts offer insight into pressing issues that must be addressed in the debate over disciplinarity. In his demarcation of what English is, Davies takes a very different political approach not only from Harris, but also from the contributors to Raymond’s collection.

James C. Raymond’s *English as a Discipline; Or, Is There a Plot in This Play?* is a provocative collection of articles that grew from one of the many post-Dartmouth conferences attempting again to provide answers to the question “is there a discipline in the department?” Raymond himself, Gerald Graff, Paul Lauter, Louie Crew, George Garrett, Thomas Dabbs, Walter L. Reed, Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin, Tilly Warnock, and Stanley Fish each offer their contribution to recent debates concerning English department disciplinarity. Among these, Lauter’s “Teach/Discipline” stands out in its examination of academic institutions which are “established, in part, to define and patrol boundaries, as between disciplines (or guilds), between groups (or classes), between us (who are within) and them (who are without)” (30). In addition, Louie Crew’s “Back to the Future” and George Garrett’s “Boiled Grass and the Broth of Shoes: Some Academic Anecdotes” are memorable reads. However, as would be expected, much of the book focuses on the comments of Stanley Fish, and the final selection of “Afterthoughts” from various contributors concentrates mainly on replying to Fish’s remarks. I don’t mean to suggest that Fish is the cornerstone of Raymond’s collection, since the other contributors’ voices are of great consequence to the book, but Fish’s voice is certainly the loudest.

In “Them We Burn: Violence and Conviction in the English Department,” Fish rehashes the argument he makes in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Studies*: that “in order to win a place at the table of tasks, a task must be distinctive” (Raymond 161). According to Fish, tasks set outside of the boundaries of literary studies must be enacted from within other disciplinary borders.
he argues that social change must come from outside academic boundaries. He contends that as soon as academics begin to reach a broader cultural audience and effect social changes, they have necessarily ceased doing the academic work of their discipline. In Fish’s world, teacher-scholars who work in the confines of the university are academics first, foremost, and at all moments in their lives. That is, we cannot sit in two places at Fish’s table of tasks. Or, as Fish puts it in order to infuriate: “The Academy—love it or leave it.”

Yet Fish’s notion of disciplinarity is fraught with problems—for which Corkin, Graff, Frus, Garrett, Lauter, and Warnock rightly take him to task in this collection. This is not to say that Fish’s contribution to this collection is without merit. It is familiar Fish; it is eloquent and provocative. I think Fish is correct to challenge us to re-examine the relationship between what gets done in English departments and what we claim to do. He forces us to examine how employing radical politics in the classroom is different from taking action in, say, a labor union strike. I agree that these actions are different, yet neither is any less a political action than the other. Fish cautions against thinking of the political work that gets done as a substitute for the “real” work of English departments. But it doesn’t have to substitute; it is itself real work. Fish’s argument conveniently demarcates what should (and what must) define English’s disciplinary borders. I find it remarkable that neither in this contribution nor in Professional Correctness does Fish turn to composition studies, to the teaching of writing, in his understanding of what we do in English departments. Fish is remiss in not identifying the importance of composition studies—and more importantly composition’s inherently interdisciplinary nature—when he discusses the singular task which earns our position at the table of tasks.

Perhaps of all those who attempt to answer the question “what is it we do?” in Raymond’s collection, Tilly Warnock is most accurate when she writes: “English departments teach reading and writing; all members of the department are engaged in literacy work of various kinds, from functional literacy to highly theoretical literacy work. Despite differences in teaching, research, and service, we are all committed to teaching language and literature as strategies for coping and as equipment for living” (148). What is most telling about Warnock’s statement of purpose is not that the teaching of reading and writing become central—I’d hope this would be the one point on which most of us following these debates could agree—but that what we do directly affects how students live their lives.

Rhetoric and composition helps to answer the problems of disciplinarity that Fish poses. Rhetoric and composition studies—specifically, the teaching of writing—generally argue that discourse precedes thought and that the inquiry into the function and operation of language is an inquiry into more than basic “how to” operations of rules. If we include the teaching of writing—or just about any other notion of literacy—as a major facet of what we do in English departments, and if we value what we currently understand about writing and discourse, then Fish’s dis-
ciplinary boundaries collapse. That is, if we understand the teaching of writing as having larger epistemological implications in the lives of our students—as Harris does—then what we do in English departments does indeed insist upon the kinds of political action which Fish claims we as members of English departments cannot perform and still remain in our disciplinary position. The notion of discipline is itself a self-limiting idea; since the teaching of writing is an interdisciplinary discipline, it resists those limits. If we understand writing and discourse as enmeshed with the ways we think, then writing instruction is necessarily not only ideological and political, but active as well. Fish has elsewhere argued for the importance of rhetoric. In an interview with Gary Olson, he contends that once you “begin with a sense of the constructed nature of human reality” then rhetoric is “reconceived as the medium in which certainties become established” (253). That is, Fish views language as central to the constructed nature of human existence. How then can the teaching of writing be anything but an interdisciplinary endeavor, an endeavor which demands recognition of its political implications, of its potential to enact change?

This is precisely why Harris’s *A Teaching Subject* is such an important text. While Fish, Graff, Raymond, Warnock, Davies, and many others have staked their claim in the debate on disciplinarity, Harris has sidestepped the metadiscourse of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity in order to move directly into a more crucial venture: examining how we have come to understand the teaching of writing and why that understanding is so critical to our interactions with our students. He is acutely aware of his students, of how what he does in the classroom affects their lives. Unlike Fish, who argues for rigidly demarcated boundaries between activities, Harris questions the separation of the university and the world: “the world outside the university is usually seen as a place where people do and feel things. . . . And college is imagined as a place where people talk and read about things. The world of action and the world of the mind” (18). He argues that even those approaches that promote student writing about experiences outside the classroom may in fact foster gaps between sites. He contends that in universities people—secretaries, teachers, students, janitors, and so on—lead real lives doing real things and suggests that students be taught to envision ways in which they already examine texts and engage discourse in the world. Harris contends that what students are exposed to in classrooms is as important in their lives as what they confront and learn elsewhere. In essence, he argues for an interdisciplinary view of the teaching of writing that extends beyond the simple notions of academic disciplinary borders to encompass more meaningfully active roles. Harris calls—as many who look beyond interdisciplinarity to public intellectualism do—for a self-conscious decision for academics, teachers of writing in particular, to participate in conversations that occur in public spheres; he insists that the university, too, is a public sphere which has consequences in the everyday lives of students, teachers, and other members of the community.
Patricia Bizzell, in “Professing Literacy: A Review Essay,” writes that one of the reasons we in English departments talk so much about literacy is because “we are having a collective identity crisis about being English teachers, and, in particular, we are very unclear as to what good we are doing for the larger society with our efforts” (316). The movement toward interdisciplinarity is part of this same quest for identity, an identity which necessarily must include asking not only “what is it we do?” but also “how does what we do affect others?” It raises questions about how we conceive of intellectual enterprise in and out of university confines. Those who are most threatened by this move are those who accept a narrowly defined cult of professionalism within the American academy and the ways in which that cult of professionalism has been deployed to protect particular interests of particular communities of scholars and a certain vision of the nature of intellectual enterprise. Interdisciplinarity performs an intellectual function that is critically important to the concrete interests of people, no matter what their relationship to the academy. Books like Davies’s, Raymond’s, and Harris’s do well to ask the question “what do we do?”; but when we answer “we teach language and writing,” we begin to ask the more difficult questions such as “what is writing?” The agenda of each of these books is admirable and needed, but the more difficult questions—such as those Harris addresses—are often sidestepped. Perhaps the question “what do we do?” is not the question we should be asking; rather, we should ask “what is writing?” or “what is language?” because these questions lead to answers that address the larger epistemological issues of the quest for English department identity.

Each of these texts offers important insights into how we conceive of the role of English departments. And though my disagreement with Fish’s limiting view is evident, I don’t want this to discount the importance of his agenda or the agendas of the other contributors to Raymond’s collection. I continue to contend that what is strongly lacking in Davies’s book and in most of the discussions in Raymond’s collection is an examination of how composition studies has become dominant in defining what it is we do—particularly as we move from asking questions of identity to asking practical, rhetorical questions like “how do we teach writing?” Contemporary English departments find writing instruction to be a major facet of their daily functions; we must look toward composition studies in our understandings of English as not just an interdisciplinary undertaking but one that moves to make the intellectual endeavors of the university more accessible to public spheres. That is, books like Harris’s help us to understand the ways in which our roles as teachers of writing do have political ramifications in the lives of other human beings. These three books are important contributions to conversations which now dominate our contemporary professional discourse. These conversations, contextualized within current political climates and their impact on higher education, must shape our thinking about the future identity of English departments.
WORKS CITED

