A TEACHING SUBJECT

Composition Since 1966

NEW EDITION

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PREFACE

to the New Edition

My aim in writing A Teaching Subject was to offer a brief and inexpensive history of our field. I succeeded in making it brief. But over the years, the price of what was, after all, only a slim volume grew higher and higher until the book finally faded out of print. Even still, several colleagues have told me they would like to be able to use A Teaching Subject in their work with beginning teachers of writing. I hope this new and more affordable version will make that possible.

In returning to this book, I was struck by how accurately its title—A Teaching Subject: Composition Since 1966—describes both its strengths and limits. I have always thought of myself, first and last, as a teacher of writing. And so I wrote A Teaching Subject out of a desire to understand how my work with student writers had come to be shaped by a particular set of problems, concepts, and keywords. This is not a book about the emergence of a new field of study, but one that tries to understand why we teach writing in the ways we do. I think that focus on teaching gives the book its coherence and drive. But I am less content with my subtitle: Composition Since 1966. For composition is a term in an in-house debate in English departments—one side of a seemingly interminable squabble between teachers of writing and professors of literature. In framing my book as being about composition, then, I ended up narrowing my focus to how first-year writing gets taught in English departments.

Or, not exactly. For it's hard not to notice how many of the key figures in this book actually studied or worked outside of English departments: James Britton, Janet Emig, James Moffett, Sondra Perl, Mary Louise Pratt, Mike Rose, Nancy Sommers. None of these people earned a PhD in English. Even the hero of many writing teachers working in English departments, Mina Shaughnessy, spent most of her career as a university administrator—and none of it as a professor of literature. Now it's clear that most first-year writing programs continue to be located in English departments and that much good work in our field is done by scholar-teachers in English. But it takes a kind of willed forgetting to imagine work in writing as simply a subfield of English studies.
But then, at the time I was writing A Teaching Subject, I was an assistant professor in an English department. So even though my PhD was in education, I think I must have assumed that since my own teaching was located in English, then so too must be the field of writing. My colleagues did not contradict me. After publishing this book, though, I switched jobs and spent ten years teaching in an independent and multidisciplinary writing program at Duke University. That experience showed me that scholars from a wide range of disciplines can teach academic writing with insight, imagination, and finesse—that teaching writing really can become a university-wide project. I thus now believe that the teaching subject is writing. It only becomes composition when embroiled in a set of arguments over what sort of intellectual work matters in English departments—lit vs. comp, rhet vs. comp, theory vs. comp, and so on.

I'm willing, when needed, to take my stand (and hits) as a compositionist in those internecine debates. But my main ambitions lie elsewhere. I am less interested in establishing composition as a disciplinary subfield of English than in increasing the role of writing throughout the undergraduate curriculum. In recent years I've worked with faculty from many disciplines who want to use writing more in their teaching. The first thing I usually tell them is that their charge is not to teach "composition," but to introduce students to the kinds of writing they themselves do as scholars. This is something they are almost always pleased to hear. Indeed, to the degree that composition refers to work that is merely preparatory or formulaic, I don't think it belongs in first-year writing either. We are not teachers of not-literature. We teach writing that is responsive, critical, intellectual, academic. Writing. We should claim the term.

And so, if I were to rewrite this book, I'd no longer want to cast it as a history of "a style of doing English" (xvii). What I see now is a series of attempts to use writing to reform undergraduate teaching. Some of this work has gone on in English departments; much of it has not. But, full disclosure: I have not rewritten this book. I am proud of what I accomplished in it, and I don't want to replace what I thought in the 1990s with what I happen to think now. For the most part, then, this volume reprints—with a few corrections of some minor errors and infelicities, and some changes in formatting—the original 1997 text of A Teaching Subject.

But there are indeed several new elements to this edition. I've added postscripts to each of the five main chapters of the book in which I
reflect on several of the directions that work on teaching writing has taken since 1997. I’ve also written a coda in which I look at how the teaching of writing is quickly changing in the digital age. And there is now an index to the complete volume.

Academic writing still usually gets taught in the first semester or two of undergraduate study. But the ability to write clearly about complex texts and ideas seems to me less a prerequisite for a liberal education than one of its distinctive achievements. And so, in this book, I look at the first-year writing course not as a site where students prepare to do academic work, but where they begin such work in earnest. It is where we invite them to join us in our ongoing work as intellectuals.

—JH
Durham, North Carolina
January 2012
FOREWORD(S)

Research and Teaching

This book traces how the teaching of college writing has been theorized and imagined since 1966. I do so by looking closely at how five key words—growth, voice, process, error, and community—have figured in recent talk about writing and teaching. I believe that in tracing their meanings and revisions I can make a case for composition as a teaching subject, as that part of English studies which defines itself through an interest in the work students and teachers do together.

I begin with the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar, where the British theorists John Dixon and James Britton invoked 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. In chapters 2 and 3, I look at how this interest in the language of students was then taken up by writing teachers in the United States who centered their work around notions of personal voice and the composing process. In chapter 4, I look at how such approaches have tried (most often with little success) to deal with the problem of error, with the nearly unyielding demand that student writings adhere to certain strict standards of usage and decorum. And then, in chapter 5, I show how attempts to rethink error as an index of broader tensions and conflicts in the culture have led to more social views of writing calling on ideas of difference and community. I then close by considering some of the limits of these new and often highly politicized approaches to teaching writing.

My aim is not to present a seamless history of composition studies in which one set of terms and interests smoothly gives way to the next—but to get at a set of issues and tensions that continue to shape the teaching of writing. I do this as someone drawn to composition as a place where not only writing but teaching gets talked about in serious and critical ways. At a time in my graduate studies when I was frustrated by what seemed the planned irrelevance of much scholarship, and indeed was thinking of leaving academics altogether, coming across work in composition gave me a way of imagining teaching as an integral part of (and not just a kind of report on) my work as an intellectual. I had never
looked forward very much to a career as a scholar writing to a small clique of other specialists, so I was pleased to find a field where so many people seemed to try to speak to the concerns of experts and students alike. I was especially struck by how the writings of students were made part of many books and articles on teaching. Not only did I like the democratic and practical feel of such work, it also struck me as making good sense. If you really wanted to argue for the advanced study of English as something more than a kind of guild activity, the business concern of critics and professional writers, then you would need to look at the uses ordinary people make of reading and writing, and to show how and why they might be encouraged to change them. This book traces some recent attempts to do just that, to rethink the sorts of work students and teachers might do together in a college writing course. In keeping with these efforts, I try to ground what I have to say in close readings of the work not only of theorists and teachers but of students as well—particularly in a series of interchapters that look at how the issues raised in this book inform (and are informed by) specific teaching aims, practices, and situations.

What I have not tried to do is write an account of composition studies as an academic discipline, as a field of inquiry with its own subject matter and methods of investigating it. Others have already done this quite well. James Berlin, for instance, offers a history of composition as a kind of modern offshoot of rhetoric in *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (1984) and *Rhetoric and Reality* (1987), while in *Textual Carnivals* (1991), Susan Miller pays closer attention to the institutional contexts that gave rise to the modern study and teaching of writing. And in books whose titles hint at their differences in emphasis from mine, Louise Wetherbee Phelps builds a careful and elaborate theory for the study of writing in *Composition as a Human Science* (1988), while Stephen North offers an overview of the competing research methods in the field in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (1987).

I have looked here instead at composition as a teaching subject—as a loose set of practices, concerns, issues, and problems having to do with how writing gets taught. To put it another way, my interests in this book have less to do with how knowledge gets made and tested than with how teaching practices are formed and argued for. And so when I turn in these pages to the work of researchers like Janet Emig or Linda Flower or Sondra Perl, I am less concerned with how their studies have shaped theories of composing than with how they have influenced the
work of writing teachers. I regard composition as a kind of style of doing English, as a set of attempts to change some of the practical ways we represent writing, reading, literacy, and literature to our students and ourselves. Indeed, composition is the only part of English studies I know of that is commonly defined not in relation to a subject outside the academy (to literature, for example, or to culture or language) but by its position within the curriculum—by its close involvement with the gatekeeping first-year course in writing. And so even while the concerns of many people now working in composition studies have gone well beyond simple questions of what to do with their freshmen next Monday, for me the most interesting work in the field continues to center around the kinds of day-to-day practices that go on in college classrooms and departments in the name of teaching reading and writing. I intend this book, then, as a sympathetic counterstatement to recent work that has stressed composition as a knowledge-making discipline, as an attempt to reassert ties to the classroom that have sometimes seemed to grow less strong as the field becomes more professionalized. (Although not absent: I think, for instance, of Phelps’s valuing of “practical wisdom” as the goal of study in composition, and of North’s affection for the “teaching lore” that long characterized most work in the field.)

I have struggled with a set of ironies or tensions in making this argument. For although I want to argue for a view of composition that centers on the first-year writing course, I also realize this is a book most likely to be read by graduate students and their teachers. And while I want to speak in the name of teaching, this is not a book on how to teach better. I have mixed feelings about moves to make composition into a new scholarly subfield, but I am also deeply implicated in such efforts. All my work as a scholar has been in composition studies. The writing of this book helped gain me tenure at a research university. I edit an academic journal on teaching composition. I know that reading work in composition studies has helped me rethink what I do as a teacher in powerful ways, and I strongly support the professionalizing of the field. But I do not want that professionalization to come at the cost of the close ties to teaching that are what give so much work in the field its political and intellectual edge.

There has long been a dissenting tradition in English that has argued for looking closely at the uses students and ordinary people make of language. Its roots go back at least to the early 1900s and the likes of George Brown, Fred Newton Scott, and Gertrude Buck. Its themes and ideas
run through the work of teachers like Louise Rosenblatt and Theodore Baird in the middle of the twentieth century, and appear once more during the 1960s in the talk at Dartmouth. I think they can be seen now in the work of many in composition. In this book I hope to add my voice to theirs.