

Afterword

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Each of the six essays comprising this special issue of the *Journal of College Literacy and Learning* focuses on a specific feature of the work of college literacy and learning that, however distinct, nonetheless operates with and in relation to the others: assessment culture, composing modalities, student orientations to writing; reading; faculty development. Underlying this complex whole is an understanding of the work of college literacy and learning that includes students learning literacy skills and knowledge, and the work of teaching these to students so that the students can then exchange their skills for pay. This is in accord with dominant understandings of the role of college literacy and learning in preparing students for participation in the workforce.

Compositionists, in this framing, are charged with attempting to serve students and, simultaneously, society by rendering students capable of being productive employees.

Scholarship operating within this frame is directed at identifying the best—most effective and efficient—means of providing students with those skills they will need.

Disputes then have to do with what those skills are, how best to inculcate these, and who is best situated to do so: matters that in and of themselves are complex.

But I want to use the occasion of this afterword to pose an alternative understanding of the work of college literacy and learning. For, paradoxically, the dominant view of such work as preparing students for the workplace, despite its explicit concern for student welfare, perforce overlooks the value

of the work students accomplish *as* students in writing courses, and, hence, the status and value of the students themselves as workers. Ordinarily, the activities in which courses engage students are defined not as real work but, instead, preparatory to real work to be performed elsewhere and at another time; hence, the students themselves are understood not to be engaged in real work as students but, instead, as engaged in what is known as “student work” carrying the same negative status as work denigrated as “women’s work” (Horner, 2010). Thus, rather than being seen as workers, students are seen ordinarily as the recipients and object of the work of others (most obviously, teachers). Indeed, even those efforts incorporating “service-learning” assume that work in the classroom must be subordinated to work outside the classroom to merit value as real: “academic” is, from this perspective, a pejorative.

This preparatory approach to the work of college literacy and learning also assumes the stability of that which is to be transmitted to students, its transferability to other contexts (e.g., workplaces), and its lack of susceptibility to change in the process of its transmission and transfer, a lack that makes possible their portability across contexts. Education, in this scheme, then becomes a matter of knowledge distribution, complicated by students’ lack of receptivity or by ineffective teaching.

But there is an alternative view of knowledge and, by implication, student work. Here is what Wanda Orlikowski (2006), a scholar of organizational knowledge and

management at the MIT Sloan School of Management (and, hence, someone with some degree of familiarity with practices in the realm that at least some of our students may find themselves inhabiting) has to say about knowledge—what she calls a “practice” view:

[K]nowledge is not an external, enduring, or essential substance – but a dynamic and ongoing social accomplishment. . . . [This view of knowledge] leads us to focus on knowledge not as static or given, but as a capability produced and reproduced in recurrent social practices. A practice view of knowledge . . . leads us to understand knowing as *emergent* (arising from everyday activities and thus always ‘in the making’), *embodied* (as evident in such notions as tacit knowing and experiential learning), and *embedded* (grounded in the situated socio-historic contexts of our lives and work). And . . . knowing is also always *material*. (p. 460)

If we accept this “practice” view of knowledge as the always emergent outcome of those practices, then we can say that students are engaged in and responsible for sustaining and revising knowledge of literacy, even in the very process of learning—even “practicing” in the derogatory sense—that knowledge. They are, in effect, reworking literacies in the act of learning them, just as, inevitably, they must rework them again if and when they are called upon to perform literacy activities in some workplace in the future. That is work they perform and accomplish as students in classrooms, even if (as is ordinarily the case) neither they nor their teachers acknowledge this work. As Claire Kramsch (2008) observes of learners of additional languages:

[F]ew of them are aware of the role they play as non-native speakers/actors in the life or death of a language, its development, its usage, its semiotic potential. . . . Learning a foreign language, with all the decentration, conflict, and discoveries this brings, is one of the more favorable academic means by which to

restore to learners the discursive agency that they think they lack. (p. 20)ⁱ

I am suggesting that we need to shift our orientations to the work of college literacy and learning to include not only the work that composition teachers and programs are charged with accomplishing for or on students, and all that this entails, and not only the activities we have learned to think of as, well, work for which we’re preparing students—effort for pay. Instead, we need to acknowledge, address, and reorient ourselves and our efforts to attend to the work that, like it or not, students and their teachers engage in together *as* students and teachers in classrooms: the work students and teachers do in renewing and revising language, knowledge, and social relations through their continual (re)composition in writing (Horner, 2017). That is work that also goes on, recognized or not, under the guise of literacy teaching, learning, and “preparation,” work that contributes to sustaining and revising college literacy in the very process of its learning (and teaching). And it’s work in which all of us, students included, have a stake distinct from the need for workplace preparation. Through their writing, students remake written language, the knowledge writing is often thought merely to communicate, and the social relations writing is often thought merely to reflect. Recognizing students’ inevitable participation in and accomplishment of such work would allow us to engage more deliberately with our students in that work, and it would enable us to direct their and our efforts toward better ends than what we and our students have been led to think we are, or should be, working.

References

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Notes

ⁱ “Peu d’apprenants ont conscience du rôle qu’ils jouent en tant que locuteurs/acteurs non-natifs sur la vie ou la mort d’une langue, son développement, son usage, son potentiel sémiotique. . . . L’apprentissage d’une langue étrangère, avec tout ce qu’elle apporte de décentration, de conflit et de découvertes, est une des matières scolaires les plus propices à . . . redonner aux apprenants la puissance d’agir discursive dont ils pensent manquer.” Thanks to Christiane Donahue for assistance in translating this passage.