The Literary and the Literate: The Study and Teaching of Writing in US English Departments

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Abstract

The study and teaching of academic and other practical kinds of writing has become, over the last 40 years, a major focus within university English departments in the US. Although the study and teaching of imaginative literature has traditionally had greater prestige, writing studies (as it is coming to be called) has altered the landscape of academic English dramatically, both within and beyond English departments. A typical US university provides support for student writing in various programmatic ways, which are usually housed in English departments. There are introductory courses in general academic writing ('composition') in the first year or two, required of almost all students (and have been so for 140 years). There is a 'Writing Center' that provides one-on-one or small group tuition for students in any course. There is a 'Writing Across the Curriculum' or 'Writing in the Disciplines' program that offers support to teaching staff in all departments on ways to use writing more effectively to support students' learning in their fields. There are English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) courses mainly for international students. Often there are specialized communication courses to support writing in such fields as engineering, commerce, law, or the natural sciences. And increasingly there are four-year curricula where students earn a bachelor's degree in writing, just as they might in literature or chemistry. All of these supports for writing are in addition to (and separate from) courses in creative writing (poetry, fiction, drama) and professional schools of journalism. This was not always so. And the expansion of English department curricula has been—and in some ways still is—a site of contestation, more and less bitter, for almost 150 years.

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Chapter 8

The literary and the literate: The study and teaching of writing in US English departments

David R. Russell

The study and teaching of academic and other practical kinds of writing has become, over the last 40 years, a major focus within university English departments in the US. Although the study and teaching of imaginative literature has traditionally had greater prestige, writing studies (as it is coming to be called) has altered the landscape of academic English dramatically, both within and beyond English departments. A typical US university provides support for student writing in various programmatic ways, which are usually housed in English departments. There are introductory courses in general academic writing ('composition') in the first year or two, required of almost all students (and have been so for 140 years). There is a 'Writing Center' that provides one-on-one or small group tuition for students in any course. There is a 'Writing Across the Curriculum' or 'Writing in the Disciplines' program that offers support to teaching staff in all departments on ways to use writing more effectively to support students' learning in their fields. There are English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) courses mainly for international students. Often there are specialized communication courses to support writing in such fields as engineering, commerce, law, or the natural sciences. And increasingly there are four-year curricula where students earn a bachelor's degree in writing, just as they might in literature or chemistry. All of these supports for writing are in addition to (and separate from) courses in creative writing (poetry, fiction, drama) and professional schools of journalism. This was not always so. And the expansion of English department curricula has been—and in some ways still is—a site of contestation, more and less bitter, for almost 150 years.

Since the 1870s, general skills writing courses, now called First-Year Composition, have been required for almost all undergraduate students at US universities, usually amounting to one fifth of students' first-year studies. And since the requirement was first instituted at Harvard in 1875, the courses have almost always been administered through the English department. Composition courses provide the vast majority of students for English departments and have allowed English departments to have much larger teaching staffs and larger post-graduate programs than other humanities departments (post-graduate students often teach composition courses). Yet for the first hundred years of its existence, composition was not an area of research and had almost no status in English departments in comparison to literary criticism, though the importance of good writing was recognized in the wider university and national culture, and there were always some faculty in English departments who took an interest in composition. They founded in 1949 the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), to help English departments deal with the influx of GIs into higher education after WWII. CCCC published a newsletter (later a journal) and laid the foundation for writing to become a recognized field in the late 1960s and1970s.[1]

In the 1970s, with an influx of 'baby boomer' students and 'open admissions' policies designed to provide greater access to higher education for minorities, 'poor writing' became a national issue, as it had a century before. The teaching of academic writing began to professionalize in the US. Though based in English departments where literary (not literacy) study dominated, professors interested in academic writing carried out their own programs of research and publication, centred on rhetoric, not literary criticism. 'Writing specialists' or 'compostionists' did research on texts of all kinds (not only canonical literary texts) and they studied and taught the production as well as the reception of texts—writing as well as reading, literacy as well as literature.

The new writing specialists developed the various institutional means of supporting student writing outlined in the opening paragraph, and a national professional organization for each of them, in addition to the overarching organization, the CCCC, and an associated organization for writing program administrators (the WPA) (Council of WPA, 2015). They created MA and PhD programs in composition and rhetoric, and a consortium of PhD granting institutions (now with more than 70 member universities) (Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition, n.d.). In the last decade or so, many institutions have begun a full four-year bachelor’s degree in communication, emphasizing writing, either as a component of English departments or, more rarely, as a separate department of writing or writing studies (Committee on the Major in Writing and Rhetoric, n.d.).

Today, the academic job market for composition is still strong, even as the demand for literary scholars has declined. The increase in permanent positions has been in writing-related areas, not in traditional literary study (Modern Languages Association, 2013). Yet academic writing's place within English departments is still very much contested. This chapter will first look at how composition developed, then at how attention to academic writing has changed and is changing many departments of English in the US.

Disciplining English: 19th century origins

Before the American Civil War, higher education was for a tiny few, mainly future ministers, in private seminaries and small private 'liberal arts colleges'. Students took a single classical curriculum. All students were required to take a program of history, mathematics, religion, moral philosophy, Latin, and Greek. The only course they took all four years was Rhetoric (mainly oral), which meant there were a lot of rhetoric teachers. Exams were oral, science almost entirely absent, as was English literature, which was discussed mainly in student-run clubs, rarely in teacher-led courses. In the 1870s US higher education expanded to serve a rapidly growing nation, in both population and territory, with growing practical needs led by the rise of corporations and professions. Higher education was reorganized on the German model of von Humboldt, with specialized departments conducting scientific research, a new research degree offered beyond the Master’s, the PhD, and an elective curriculum for undergraduates. Yet the old classical, liberal arts curriculum was in part preserved in the form of 'general education' requirements in the first year or two (out of four in total). These introductory courses in history, math, philosophy, and so on, were felt to be necessary before the rapidly expanding population of students entered their major course of specialized study, due to the uneven preparation available in burgeoning secondary schools. European Higher Education (HE) systems, in contrast, were generally able to offload such preparation to upper secondary schools, as long as enrolments in HE remained highly selective.

This new American HE system emphasized the written communication of modern, specialized scientific knowledge, rather than the old oral, oratorical tradition of the ante-bellum college. It instituted competitive—written—entrance examinations, in keeping with its democratic, meritocratic ideology. As soon as the exams began, the faculty complained loudly that students could not write their mother tongue. Latin and Greek were dropped as requirements, and the four-years of Rhetoric was no longer required. However, a one-year introductory course in written composition was instituted, first at Harvard, and then almost everywhere else, to remedy the presumed deficit. English departments were organized primarily to do this, to teach written composition.

As HE boomed and diversified in the late 1870s and beyond, many new departments evolved from the old curriculum, to prepare students going into a range of professions beyond the ministry. The new knowledge from scientific research drove industrialization and offered new career paths for a growing middle class, as engineers, chemists, and managers. Some of the many rhetoric professors left without a four year required course joined the emerging fields that would be known as 'the humanities': history, philosophy, philology, and modern languages (including English). Like the sciences, these were all professionalizing as well, in the sense that there was now a sequence of professional preparation (through the Master's and the new PhD), and a career ladder in the rapidly expanding higher education sector, where advancement was linked, increasingly, to the production of new knowledge published in professional journals. Small universities or technical colleges formed portmanteau departments that combined required composition courses with a range of other courses in the humanities. For example, Iowa State College and MIT housed composition with history, political science, elocution (public speaking), and modern languages.

English departments began to be formed, and professors of rhetoric formed alliances with professors pursuing a wide range of intellectual interests to build a longer and more powerful network within and beyond the institution and stake out a place for themselves in the new economy of higher education. In the late 19th and early 20th century, English departments taught a range of courses linked to various careers: theatre, journalism, elocution and oratory, technical writing, business writing, and creative writing. A professor often taught several of these, as in smaller secondary schools and colleges in the US today. Such alliances strengthened English departments by increasing the sheer size of the departmental teaching staff, but it also created useful allies in the growing networks of institutional power in the new economy. Journalism, for example, developed into mass circulation publications, with networks of linked correspondents.

However, in the new regime of specialized knowledge in the emerging university, it was necessary to have a specific disciplinary object, not a wide range of social practices that used writing. To achieve an identity as disciplinary specialists, English professors quickly developed a canon of imaginative literature as disciplinary object, and an idealist orientation in contrast to the pragmatism of emerging sciences and technologies, the *applied* fields. They eschewed the study of other texts and other practices to cement their place.

Purifying the discipline: 20th century consolidation

The study of a literary canon quickly became central to English department identity. Financially, literature faculty were supported by the economic base of composition teaching. But this was writing instruction re-conceived not as rhetorical communication but as an elementary, remedial skill. The teaching or study of anything besides the literary canon was marginalized in these new English departments.

English professors who wished to study other things, often formed new departments or left English to join existing ones. In the 1910s and 1920s there was a series of rebellions within English departments—at times quite bitter—as professors with other objects of study and teaching seceded from English to form their own professional organizations. Those interested in pedagogy left in 1912 to form the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), which quickly focused on supporting and preparing high school teachers and has now become the largest professional organization of teachers in any discipline. The professional organization for academic literary critics, the Modern Languages Association (MLA), disbanded its pedagogical section in 1903, to resemble other specialized fields, which eschewed pedagogy for research. Debate, oratory, and elocution had a dramatic break with English in 1914 and formed departments of speech, and their own research traditions and professional organization (now the National Communication Association). Journalism left English departments to found its own departments and schools; its professional association began in 1917. Theatre joined with speech or fine arts, in the 1920s. The study of language, constructed differently than the study of literature, became fragmented into various branches finding homes in various departments. Philologists joined classicists in separate departments of Classics and formed the American Philological Association. The new field of linguistics founded its professional association in 1924, and the teaching of English as a second language became part of applied linguistics in the 1930s. Even the production of 'creative writing' was only given a secure, if marginal, place in English departments in the 1940s, with the creation of Master of Fine Arts programs. Significantly, the degree title drew on 'studio' pedagogy from the fine arts, not the humanities. In large part, English ceded to other fields teaching and research on the production and circulation of texts, keeping for itself only a study and teaching of reception—literary criticism, as it came to be called.

These shifts split reading from speaking and writing, and the reading was limited to a newly formed canon of texts.

Art, craft, gift, or knack? Writing and the ideology of liberal culture

English departments began largely in order to teach writing, but as English purified its object, it gradually did away with specialized upper level writing courses to leave the Freshman Composition as the sole course in the production of texts (Miller, 1997). From the 1890s to the present day, almost every student in almost every curriculum in almost every university took at least one semester of composition, often two. And to this day the majority of students enrolled in English department courses are in composition, not literature. Yet composition courses were not considered to have full status among English professors or, often, in the university as a whole. They remained on the periphery, viewed as providing remedial or preparatory support for students, often taught by junior staff or postgraduate students.

Despite the economic support and large enrolments that it provided, Freshman English attracted a range of critics, usually from English departments themselves, who wished to maintain the elite status of their department against the decidedly middle-class, professional emphasis of the new university regime. Opposition to composition came from what Laurence Veysey has called 'liberal culture,' which espoused, as James Berlin put it, a 'Brahminical romanticism' in contrast to the vocational, democratic, and scientific values of the new university. The new

English departments were the staunchest advocates of liberal culture against what they saw as the encroachment of scientific and professional fields, middle class barbarisms which thwarted liberal culture's Arnoldian ideal of the 'well-rounded man,' a person with 'a wide vision of the best things which man has done or aspired after' (qtd. in Veysey, 1970, p. 186). Liberal culture claimed the mantle of the classical tradition in the university, as the keeper of Western civilization, but it was opposed to requiring classical languages, and dead set against teaching rhetoric.

Liberal culture interpreted literature in Romantic terms, and saw itself as the protector of the idealist and transcendental as opposed to the practical and positivist. As such, it even looked down on the scientific study of texts in the philological tradition (see also Waugh, this volume). Literary study, a Cornell professor wrote in 1894, achieves 'the true aim of culture,' which is 'to induce soul states or conditions, soul attitudes, to attune the inward forces to the idealized forms of nature and of human life produced by art, and not to make the head a cockloft for storing away barren knowledge' (qtd. in Veysey, 1970, p. 185). As the defenders of high culture they were proudly elitist. The democratic and pragmatic reforms that were changing the university, especially massification and scientific specialization, were a threat to the standards of taste that liberal culture defended, sometimes in social Darwinists terms. Reed College president William T. Foster in 1909 lamented 'this democratic leniency toward the unfit, favouring self-supporting students at the expense of intellectual standards' (qtd. in Veysey, 1970, p. 211). Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that many advocates of liberal culture resisted the idea that the English department should offer a 'service course' for the very scientific and professional fields that in their view threatened the position of the humanities in the new comprehensive university.

After the turn of the 19th century, many literature professors called for the 'abolition of composition.' In 1911, for example, the distinguished literary scholar, Thomas R. Lounsbury, emeritus professor of English at Yale, attacked compulsory composition courses in Harper's Magazine. He lamented that 'for a quarter of a century' he had been forced to spend 'a distinctly recognizable share of my time reading and correcting themes' (p. 866). For Lounsbury and others, it was 'scullery' to scour first year students writing for errors (the common view of writing instruction), and it took them away from higher things, such as the appreciation of 'the best which has been thought and said' (Arnold, 1869, p. viii).

The Romantic assumptions then informing literary study emphasized the mystery of the literary art—and its unteachability. As Richard Young argued, Romanticism, 'with its stress on the natural powers of the mind and the uniqueness of the creative act, leads to a repudiation of the possibility of teaching the composing process, hence the tendency to become a critical study of the products of composing and an act of editing' (1982, p. 131). Abolition was the logical result of these Romantic assumptions: If writing worthy of the name is unteachable, then composition courses are a waste of time, for the serious scholars and the gifted students who are compelled to endure it. The university has a moral obligation to remove it, abolitionists, argued. Composition represented a challenge to their core beliefs about writing and of higher education—and a drain on their time.

The abolitionists did not succeed in abolishing composition, because the wider university community and the public, with more pragmatic assumptions about writing, considered it valuable, and English departments gained a great deal from that. But literary scholars succeeded in marginalizing it and co-opting it. Typically, the first of two composition courses required of all students taught a review of Latinate grammar and school 'themes' ('How I spent my summer vacation') on the 'EDNA modes': Exposition, Description, Narration, Argument. Style and correctness were emphasized, content and communication were not. In the second semester students studied literature and wrote essays of appreciation—later, criticism. Composition thus served important purposes for English, beyond the external credit it gained them. It kept the teaching staff large, compared to other humanities departments, and it provided a platform for recruiting English majors. With a large teaching staff, there could be a division of labour that kept literary scholars from having to teach composition, at least in the larger universities.

A few dissenters held out for a broader understanding of writing before WWII, and they formed in 1949 the CCCC, which eventually professionalized the teaching of writing in English departments. The study of writing has steadily grown, to the extent that it is now officially recognized as a discipline by the National Research Council and the US Department of Education (which keep statistics on degrees awarded), because it has separate undergraduate and post-graduate programs in sufficient numbers, and its own journals, professional organizations, and so on. Composition teachers and courses have made measurable though modest gains in academia, but controversies over teaching academic writing in English departments persist.

Alliances and futures: 21st century restructuring

The professionalization of composition over the last four decades has meant that English departments have research programs in writing (academic, professional, etc.) and can and do hire permanent teaching staff who have PhD degrees they. Almost all English departments have at least one specialist in what is called Writing Studies, or Rhetoric and Composition. It is now expected that a member of department with a PhD in writing will direct the composition courses (formerly they were typically directed by junior literature faculty). And most research universities have several tenured faculty members in writing, often enough to support one of the 70-some PhD degrees in writing studies. However, this is not true of the most prestigious universities. The eight Ivy League schools, the nine University of California campuses, and a few others (Stanford, MIT) have writing *programs*—often quite comprehensive—but these are usually directed by staff without regular appointments in the English department (and often without security of employment). By contrast, more than 30 universities have separate *departments* of writing with their own permanent faculty and governance (e.g., University of Minnesota Twin Cities, University of California Santa Barbara and Davis) (Independent, n.d.).

Before turning to the impact of the professionalization of composition on English departments, I must explain what writing experts do in addition to their research—those typical activities of US higher education to support academic and other kinds of writing, which I previewed in the first paragraph.

'First-Year' composition (FYC) courses

Taught in sections of from 15 to 30 students (21.5 mean), FYC enrols most of the 4.5 million first-year students in US colleges and universities each year (Horning, 2007). More than two thirds of the sections are taught by part-time teachers without permanent contracts, or by graduate students (a situation common in many departments in the US, unfortunately). So the reality is that English staff with a PhD in composition provide a good deal of management and training for large numbers of staff who have no previous training in the teaching of writing, a situation that some in composition criticize (Bousquet, 2010). Permanent posts in literature for PhDs are shrinking at the rate of 10% a decade (despite steady growth in student population), while permanent posts in composition have soared. This means that many in the first-year composition workforce are underemployed literature PhDs reporting to a supervisor with a doctorate in composition—who herself largely teaches upper-division and graduate classes in rhetoric or specialized practices of writing. This also means that writing program administrators, with a PhD in composition, oversee training and supervision in a way not typical of most teaching staff in academic departments. They serve as intellectual leaders in the way a chair professor might in the British system. With this experience, many go on to become deans and higher university administrators.

The professional organization (The Council of Writing Program Administrators) provides an Outcomes Statement (WPA Outcomes, 2014) that largely guides the curriculum, and informs teaching staff from other fields and policy makers as to the aims and goals of academic writing development. But there are multiple approaches to achieving those outcomes, some compatible or hybrid, others rather distinct. Few of these approaches emphasize the teaching of discrete linguistic features. The cognitive and social processes of writing have been the focus, including collaboration in writing, as well as situated practices such as community outreach. Again, a bit of history is necessary.

Writing teachers professionalized in the 1970s by drawing insights from two main research traditions, rhetoric and psychology. These influences are clear in the Statement of Outcomes and in the dominant teaching practices of FYC. Rhetoric, which had continued to be studied and development in speech departments after speech teachers broke away from English departments in 1915, was revived by some few teachers and researchers in English departments in the 1960s and adapted to written discourse. The revival of rhetoric in English pushed writing instruction away from an emphasis on formal aspects of writing (the EDNA modes, stylistic exercises, and formal grammar) and toward an emphasis on rhetorical—communicative—aspects of writing. Students are asked to analyse the purpose(s) and audience(s) of their writing, the genre expectations of the situation, and persuasive effects. In addition to looking at stylistic and mechanical features, they discuss finding and organizing what they have to say—what the classical rhetoric tradition terms invention and arrangement. Again, there is a range of theoretical and pedagogical approaches in this tradition (for an overview, see Bazerman, 2008, chapter 28).

A second seminal research tradition was psychology. By observing writers at work, interviewing them about their writing (often as they were writing), and other means (more recently keystroke recording, eye movement tracking, etc.), the processes involved in writing became an object of study and teaching, as well as the products of writing, the final texts. This change of emphasis from product to process showed that writing is recursive rather than linear, and even the best writers spend a great deal of effort revising. This led to assignments that extended over time and involved several steps and multiple drafts, as well as feedback *during* the process in addition to a final comment and mark (practices which have since spread to elementary and secondary school US writing instruction) (Nystrand, 1993).

Educational psychology and sociology of education also encouraged an emphasis on the critical thinking involved in writing (as well as reading), and the relation of writing to learning. Similarly, the possibility for personal and civic development through writing received attention. The relationship of writing to personal development (brought from UK secondary education in the 1970s) was emphasized in some versions of FYC, and in other versions a critical awareness: 'the relationships among language, knowledge, and power,' as the WPA Outcomes Statement (2014) puts it (Nystrand, 1993).

The teaching of formal grammar waned, in response to research that showed it was more effectively taught in the context of the students' writing process (though this has remained controversial) (Lancaster & Olinger, 2014). Before the professionalization of composition, the most important subject of writing was imaginative literature. But that has largely changed so that students read a much wider variety of texts—mainly non-fiction—and write on a much wider array of topics and issues. The emphasis is on communication, in which correctness is only a part.

Writing centers

Well over half of the 4000+ institutions of higher education in the US have a 'writing center,' a place where students (and sometimes researchers) can get individual or small group help with their writing, usually provided by graduate students, undergraduate 'peer tutors,' or part-time help (The Writing Center Directory, n.d.). Some institutions had these as early as the 1920s, but they were expressly based on a remedial or deficit model—and even called 'writing hospitals' or 'clinics.' With the professionalization of composition these centers expanded in their numbers and their roles, under the assumption that writers of all abilities and experience may at times need help with a new writing task.

The approach again focuses on the processes of writing—developing and organizing ideas and resources, revision for an audience (teacher or other), overcoming blocks and gaining confidence—as a means of helping students grow as writers and learners. The approach eschews proofreading or editing student work, which is considered counterproductive in the long run and under certain circumstances unethical (Clark, 1988).

Some institutions have specialized centers for different disciplines. Others have undergraduate Writing Fellows attached to courses or curricula to provide specialized tutoring. There are, increasingly, post-graduate writing centers (including one at Yale) to help those writing MA and PhD theses. And writing centers have become an international phenomenon now, with professional organizations in Europe, North Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines programs (WAC/WID)

As composition professionalized in the 1970s, it became clear that FYC and writing centers needed the support of teachers in the disciplines to develop students' writing in their various fields, and the specific genres they wrote. Research into the writing in different disciplines showed that writing is much more than an autonomous transcription of speech or thought, a mere conduit or transmission of pre-existing ideas. It is a tool for generating, (re)organizing, and deepening ideas. As E. M. Forster put it, 'How can I know what I think until I see what I say?' Or as another novelist, C. Day-Lewis, put it, we not only 'write in order to be understood, we write in order to understand.' (Emig, 1977)

The central theoretical concept is that students not only learn to write but also write to learn. Writing is a tool for *learning* and intellectual development, not merely a tool for assessing learning. Thus writing can be a means of engaging students with the problems and methods of a discipline as well as a means of sorting students.

James Britton's work (1975) inspired the language-across-the-curriculum (LAC) movement at the secondary level in the UK, which in turn inspired the writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) or writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) movement in US higher education, beginning in the 1970s. According to the most recent survey (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), more than half of institutions of higher education in the US and Canada who responded have some program to improve student writing in the disciplines—and student learning through writing. Some 65% of PhD-granting universities reported such a program. WAC/WID programs, unlike FYC and Writing Centers, are focused mainly on teaching staff, in the various disciplines and departments. They involve such activities as workshops for university teachers to learn techniques for improving students' learning through their writing, consultations with teachers and departments, improving assessment of writing, and so on (Bazerman et al., 2005). And there are research and intervention efforts in many countries, though with different histories, such as Australia, France, Colombia, Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland, and many others (International WAC, n.d.).

In a large-scale survey (NSSE, 2008) of more than 23,000 students in 82 US universities found that writing *with certain qualities* contributes significantly to student engagement and learning. The report concluded (pp. 20-21):

> …when institutions provided students with extensive, intellectually challenging writing activities, the students engaged in more deep learning activities such as analysis, synthesis, integration of ideas from various sources, and grappled more with course ideas both in and out of the classroom. In turn, students whose faculty assigned projects with these same characteristics reported greater personal, social, practical, and academic learning and development.

In this view, writing is important to student learning, but also to the intellectual activity of the disciplines. Researchers also use writing to learn themselves, as well as to communicate with others. And they use highly differentiated forms (genres) of writing to do their work and 'discuss' it in scholarly publications. Simply put, writing is specialized as well as transversal. There are many aspects of writing that are similar in all fields. All use the same basic grammar and spelling, and all pose problems, cite previous literature, give their methods and results, and so on. But they do so in very different ways, such that the writing in one field is often unintelligible to researchers in another. Recently, research on how students transfer skills from general composition courses to courses in their disciplines—and from academia to workplaces—has become central to writing studies. (For policy documents, see WPA Outcomes Statement, 2014. For an overview of research see Brent, 2011)

TESOL and Applied Linguistics

The university-level teaching of English as a second/other language (TESOL) has generally been separate from composition and literary studies, though courses for English language learners are sometimes—though not generally—housed in English departments. ESOL is usually taught in pre-university credit courses to prepare international students. But in the last decade there has been renewed interest within composition and applied linguistics (though not within English departments generally) in integrating second/other writing with Writing Studies. Almost 20% of the US population speaks English as a second or other language, so efforts to broaden enrolment of recent immigrants and their children in higher education are growing, along with efforts to recruit international students (and the revenue they bring to higher education). The CCCC and TESOL are beginning to collaborate institutionally on policy (see CCCC Statement, n.d.), and there is a good deal more research on English language learners coming out of composition, which deals more directly with the teaching of English to immigrants, children of immigrants (the so-called Generation 1.5) and bilingualism in higher education. (For an overview, see Silva and Matsuda, 2012.)

What writing means to 'English'

Now that we've looked at what writing specialists do, we return to their place in English departments and curricula.

The number of English majors per/100 university graduates has remained remarkably steady since 1950 (and before), at between 4 and 5 per cent—apart from a bubble between about 1965 and 1975 (Bachelor's, n.d.). Though English, along with other disciplines in the arts and sciences, has lost share to business and most other professional fields, English is now holding its own relative to the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math). It has twice as many majors as physics, three times as many as math and statistics combined. And it is the largest of the humanities, with four times as many as philosophy.

However, as we noted, the steady number of English majors masks a major shift away from literary study, toward new areas devoted to the production of texts. A growing number of universities have a four-year curriculum in technical writing or some more general version of Writing Studies. There are new courses offered in Digital Humanities and other areas that have a more specific relation to employability. The world runs on writing, even more so with the writing-based World Wide Web, where multi-media composition and digital publication are central. And these new areas of English Studies (as it is coming to be called) reflecting this diversity, are specifically interested in the production and circulation of texts in society, as well as the traditional study of the reception of specifically literary texts by academic literary critics. This new writing research sometimes uses empirical, even statistical methods (e.g., computerized text analysis). And this shift from literary study to creative and professional writing has major implications for English departments.

Post-graduate education and the job market

More than 120 universities in the US grant a PhD degree in English (NRC, n.d.). The vast majority of them are in still in literature. Teaching in a PhD-granting department is highly desirable because one can teach post-graduate students over an extended period of time. Indeed, the median time to complete a PhD in the humanities (nine years) is almost twice that of almost all other fields (Laurence, 2014).

Yet there are not now enough posts for these new PhDs—and have not been since the 1970s. Bosquet summarizing a 2008 report notes that between 1993 and 2004 English lost 3,000 tenure-track positions, equivalent to 10% of the total. This is a higher percentage than any other field, and even the other humanities and social science fields mostly held their own. Noting more recent trends, Bousquet adds, 'Even that understates the case, since more than a third of the new tenurable hires have not been in traditional literary fields but in composition, rhetoric, theory, cultural studies, new media, and digital humanities' (Bousquet, 2014, p. A42).

Tenure-track literature teachers are teaching larger classes and are being replaced by part-time and contingent faculty. The economic downturn beginning in 2007 was especially hard on English departments. From 2005 to 2012, tenure track positions advertised in English declined by 40% (Modern Languages Association, 2013).

For many years, the ethics of admitting more students to literature-focussed English PhD degree programs than the number of likely available posts have been discussed. While persons holding such a doctorate are among the least unemployed in the United States, they are increasingly either underemployed—in 'permanently temporary' faculty positions—or employed in what we have come to call an 'alternative career.' Now even the most prestigious English departments are having difficulty placing their PhD graduates in tenure-track faculty positions. Beginning around 1990, the lack of posts for PhDs trained in literary criticism prompted, for the first time, graduate faculty and professional associations such as the MLA to describe the literature PhD in terms of its relevance to employment opportunities outside the academy. However, relations between literature professors and the publishing and entertainment industries are not institutionalized in the US, and are without even an effective 'old boy' network to help post-doctoral students along the path to other careers. Today, holders of literature doctorates are increasingly entering programs that retrain them in composition and new media, such as Georgia Tech’s Brittain Postdoctoral Fellows program. Currently this retraining, perhaps including earning a graduate certificate in composition, makes literature doctorates more employable, as the growth in composition and rhetoric and professional writing still outstrips the ability of doctoral programs to produce doctorates in these fields, as it has for many years (Brittain, n.d.). Indeed, many senior scholars in writing studies have a PhD in literary criticism (including the author of this chapter).

Scholarly alliances and futures

Despite the historical and very real tensions between writing studies and literary criticism, there is much common ground, and potential for that common ground to be greater. Most scholars of writing studies have a background in literary studies, and most literary scholars have taught composition, most often as a way of financing their MA and PhD studies. Indeed, that is the primary way PhDs in literary criticism are financed.

Two recent trends in scholarship have influenced both writing studies and literary criticism. One is commonly known in the US as (British) Cultural Studies, (after the former department at the University of Birmingham in the UK) which, like composition, goes beyond a relatively fixed canon to study texts of any sort in any medium, including those in business, industry, government and non-profit sectors. Similarly, literary scholars have widened their scope, though most often they focus on texts produced for leisure and entertainment: comics, video games, and so forth. For many foundational figures on both sides of the aisle, such as James Berlin and Richard Ohmann, British Cultural Studies has served as a common point of reference. Nonetheless, very few texts from the worlds of work have become objects of analysis by academic literary critics.

A second trend connecting literary studies and composition in the US is technology, by way of pedagogies of digital publication and the growing field of scholarly production now known as 'digital humanities' (see also Deegan and Hayler, this volume). The connections between writing and technology (and reading and technology) are becoming more important to both fields, as more and more writing and reading are digital (Bousquet, 2010). Moreover, tools for both creating and analysing texts are also increasingly digital, with computer analysis of large numbers of texts and writers possible. This poses identity challenges to academic literary criticism, as it brings in empirical, statistical approaches and—more challenging still—objects of study such as the production, circulation, and consumption of texts in society, which writing studies is specifically interested in and literary studies has not much been. But if younger scholars in both fields continue to explore these new methods and objects of research, there may well be more common ground in the future.

Conclusion

For the present, literary critics are still in control of the great majority of English departments, and in most departments scholars of rhetoric, composition and digital publication are content to remain in the minority, as long as they have their own upper level and post-graduate courses and curricula alongside those of literary criticism and creative writing. This arrangement provides literary criticism with funding, through teaching composition, for its MA and PhD students and for some PhDs who cannot find posts teaching literature. But trends in enrolments and in scholarship (as well as trends in society that drive these) over the last three decades suggest that the study and teaching of writing as more than a remedial skill will continue to wax, and traditional literary study will continue to wane. The future of English in U.S higher education will in no small measure depend on departments' response to these trends. The world runs on writing today as never before. And considering writing as intellectually interesting may have certain benefits for English, as well as for culture and society beyond them (Bazerman, 2003).

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Notes

[1]This and the following historical account are drawn from Russell 1988; Russell 2002a; Russell 2002b. Other histories include Crowley, 1998; Connors 1997; Miller, 1997.