

## CHAPTER 5

# HEAD TO HEAD WITH EDX?: TOWARD A NEW RHETORIC FOR ACADEMIC LABOR

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Threads: Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts; Local  
Changes to Workload, Pay, and Working Conditions

In a recent meeting with the directors of individual programs inside the English department I work in, I discovered something I found striking: even though it would clearly make institutional life easier for each of us, we all shared the same instinctive disinclination to simplify learning outcomes in our programs, as assessment experts had been counseling us to do for some time. Give yourself manageable, measurable hoops to jump through—set your bar low and clear—and things will be fine, we’d been advised. Of course, the most fundamental reason for our shared unease with this advice isn’t hard to understand: what sort of intellectual wants to caricature and minimize what he or she has spent a lifetime enriching with complication? Who likes playing dumb? But my suspicion is that there was more going on here, too—that in the back of our minds, my colleagues and I also shared an instinct to be wary about simplifying learning outcomes for something closer to *tactical* reasons. In cynical moments, I told my colleagues—unsure whether I was joking exactly or not, I think—assessment seemed to me a plot to so simplify our work that it could all eventually be pretty much outsourced anyway. The more measurable and concrete our learning outcomes—the more we talk down what we do so we can make reporting on it simpler—the more those outcomes can be plausibly met in course delivery platforms that make use of contract graders in Bangalore (June) or automated reading software for MOOCs (Markoff). None of us by any means felt any tangible threat. No one inside the institution had ever asked us to adopt a standardized exam for assessment purposes or even develop universal syllabi for commonly taught courses. But I think we all recognized intuitively that notions of education that ignore the complexity of ideas and the learning process make well-prepared, reflective teachers entirely dispensable: *If that’s really all you’re doing, what do we need you for, anyway?*

During the years when I was a two-campus adjunct, struggling to make a manageable life for myself without abandoning work that I loved, I used to joke that if it didn't pay much, at least my job was secure: nobody, I was sure, was ever going to read all those papers as well as I would for less money. I suspect at least for now that's still largely true. But it occurs to me that the pressures around the academic labor market have shifted appreciably in the last ten years, especially around the expansion of online learning, and that the same dynamic my tenure-track colleagues and I sensed in assessment at the program level also exerts itself powerfully on the struggle for improving working conditions for adjuncts: *If edX and Smarthinking can do it passably, why would administrators pay instructors any more than they do now?* This shift, I argue, gives new urgency to what should feel like very familiar arguments in composition and rhetoric for publicly acknowledging the complexity of our work in the classroom. James Berlin insisted for years that teaching bad composition courses based on impoverished and discredited notions of rhetoric gave literary studies a conveniently toothless alter-ego through which to demonstrate its own apparent rigor and seriousness, thus keeping composition-rhetoric in its place disciplinarily. Now it's clear that the more significant and insidious institutional function of popular assumptions about "bonehead English"—which is of course constantly under pressure to declare especially obvious, clearly measurable, universally agreeable learning objectives—is to keep writing teachers in their place. Which is to say poorly paid, disenfranchised, and unsupported for professional development.

As was clear to any viewer of Barbara Wolf's groundbreaking 1997 documentary *Degrees of Shame*, the first wave of contingent faculty activists in the late 1990s found understandable rhetorical power in their comparison of contingent faculty to migrant farm workers. Though of course neither the film nor the larger discourse around fairness of employment issues have proved substantially more successful in actually improving working conditions than the Edward R. Murrow film *Degrees of Shame* invokes, the terms of the argument that needed to be made in 1997 seemed clear enough. It was indeed difficult for any reasonable person to look at the swelling ranks of part-timers, who'd in many cases been working for years on short-term contracts without health or retirement benefits, representation in governance, or meaningful assurances of academic freedom, and not feel outrage. And it was equally difficult for anyone who'd worked in the field not to recognize that the best of those instructors had cultivated a significant practical expertise—often greatly exceeding that of whichever out-of-field tenure-track colleagues wound up teaching first-year writing—that was worth far more than instructors were paid. What more need contingent faculty advocates do than point this all out? What could serve higher education better than to do the right thing with their employees, which would at the same time

cultivate a stable faculty of increasingly skilled teachers and improve instruction? But technological changes in the last three or four years have begun to broaden and diversify the market for academic labor in ways that have complicated the rhetorical situation and multiplied the arguments necessary to work toward improved working conditions for contingent faculty: even if robo-professors and off-site stand-ins never replace a single instructor, their simple availability will give colleges and universities yet another disincentive to get around finally to improving working conditions for contingent faculty.

Indeed, those teaching off the tenure track in the age of automated reading software, outsourced grading services, and MOOCs may well identify more with John Henry than with Tom Joad.

The good news, of course, is that while rock-drilling machines seem ultimately to have worked, readings offered by either machines or those urged to read like them don't and can't. Or at least they can't if we insist on defining the task in a way that acknowledges the complexity of what real readers—and thus dedicated faculty-mentors—do. While we can't hope to show that we can read papers faster or cheaper than machines or grading services, we need more than ever to show that what matters is that we read them *far better*. As such, this chapter will explore the strategic and rhetorical importance of cultivating a discourse about teaching writing that makes both its labor-intensive nature and its considerable complexities clear. We have little chance of improving the material conditions of writing teachers unless we insist emphatically on the real, demonstrated complexity and urgency of their work.

## FROM TOM JOAD TO JOHN HENRY: MOOCS, AUTOMATION, AND OUTSOURCING

American higher education is almost certainly evolving faster and undergoing greater changes right now than it has in decades, at least since the GI Bill, and these changes revolve clearly around the expansion of for-profit providers. *College Inc.*, Public Broadcasting's much-viewed 2010 examination of the University of Phoenix and other for-profits, documents this expansion insightfully, estimating that by 2009 for-profit colleges and universities enrolled 10 percent of all U.S. post-secondary students, receiving about a fourth of federal student aid and accounting for a stunning *44 percent of student loan defaults* (Frontline). Of course, the expansion of corporate enterprise in higher education has been most conspicuous at the level of degree-granting institutions, with slickly conceived marketing plans designed to cast for-profits—despite extraordinarily high tuition rates—as the defenders of a forgotten educational underclass (as in the famous *I am a Phoenix* ad campaign) and to legitimate them with the trappings

of traditional colleges and universities (consider University of Phoenix Stadium, the naming rights to which cost \$154 million, which hosts the Fiesta Bowl as well as the NFL's Cardinals, and which doubtless helps reinforce the misimpression for many that Phoenix's online courses are an extension of face-to-face instruction offered on a central physical campus. But this expansion has been at least as prolific at the level of niche-oriented academic service providers, whose function is far less visible to the average U.S. education consumer. Though the landscape of such providers will almost certainly have moved on by the time this chapter is published, at its writing some of the more striking of these ventures include learning outcomes management firms like EduMetry, eLumen, and TracDat, which compile student responses to assessment instruments indexed to departmental learning outcomes; VirtualTA, a division of learning assessment firm EduMetry that outsources the grading of student writing to readers mainly in India, Singapore, and Malaysia (June); Smarthinking and TutorVista, both acquired by Pearson in 2010, which offer online tutoring services to colleges and universities that find setting up their own student support services too expensive or too complicated; Smarthinking's subsidiary, StraighterLine, which under the motto "the shortest distance between you and your degree" offers open enrollment Gen Ed courses for \$99 a month; Professor Direct, the new division of StraighterLine that takes the downward pressure of competition in the academic labor market to new extremes, inviting faculty to *set their own tuition rates*, calculating for themselves the personal and marketplace break-even points for taking on yet one more student (\$149 . . . \$119 . . . \$99?); and of course, the MOOC providers Coursera, Udacity, and EdX, which have famously created the possibility of truly mass instruction online, enrolling thousands or tens of thousands of students in a single course tuition-free, an arrangement made tenable as a for-credit enterprise largely by the promise to create automated reading and grading software.

Of course, higher education is increasingly suffused with corporate involvement at every level, even in quarters traditionally imagined steadfastly not-for-profit. Educational Testing Services and the College Board, which many argue look more and more like for-profit corporations over the last twenty years or so, are often cited as examples. Created in 1947 as the test administration arm of the College Board—and technically still a nonprofit foundation—ETS now sells prep books for its own exams, chief among them the ubiquitous SAT, pays its CEO nearly three-quarters of a million dollars in salary (Americans for Educational Testing Reform, "Scorecard"), and in 2007 acquired Prometric, a test development and delivery provider once owned by Sylvan Learning, for \$435 million from Thomson Corp. (Cho), running it since then as a for-profit subsidiary. The closely allied College Board, founded in 1900 to democratize higher

education by creating exams that would fairly assess students' abilities and thus de-emphasize the importance of elite Eastern prep schools in the college admissions process—and still registered like ETS with the federal government as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization—reported gross 2009 profits of \$53 million, or 8.6 percent of revenues, and paid its president \$1.3 million the same year (Americans for Educational Testing Reform, “President”). And of course, the largest education corporations are more and more deeply involved in the articulation of policy and curricula all the time: Pearson, purveyor of textbooks, teaching materials, teacher assessment programs, and most anything else public education consumes, is also, notoriously, the principle developer and administrator of the highly controversial Common Core Standards—making \$500 million of its annual \$9 billion profits from its five-year Common Core testing contract with the State of Texas alone (Figueroa). Indeed, the creeping influence of the for-profits is well documented: building on his long, eloquent worries about “the reduction of writing to job skills” (10), Doug Hesse’s “Who Speaks for Writing?” tells the powerful story of NCTE and MLA’s fruitless attempts to intervene in the production of the Common Core Standards—and by extension to have a seat generally at what’s become the increasingly corporate table of literacy education. The counsel of faculty in Writing Studies, Hesse concludes, was “missing in the development stages, sought during the end game and pretty much after the fact, then ignored” (11).

But more narrowly defined educational course and service providers like VirtualTA and StraighterLine fly generally under the radar of public attention, much less visibly than ETS, Pearson, or the University of Phoenix. No one who applies to the University of Houston School of Law necessarily knows that his or her work might well be outsourced for reading to VirtualTA, and no one at Colorado State has likely been alerted in the university’s glossy literature that his or her peers might earn credit for classes through StraighterLine.

Indeed, no one entering my own institution five years ago would have known, either, that the tutoring services it offered in writing were to be administered for the academic year by Smarthinking, an administrative decision made quickly over the preceding summer without faculty consultation in response to long-felt pressure to reform the campus writing center. Faculty groups were invited in the fall to participate in the evaluation of the service, set up as a pilot, and what my department’s College Writing Committee found after submitting some of our own students’ papers for tutoring actually exceeded our worst suspicions. To our ears, responses to student work sounded clearly canned, pasted largely or wholly from standing language the company or individual online tutors had developed. The advice offered was disablingly commonsensical and over-general, full of inane clichés and reductive acronyms to represent the “proper” features

of an academic essay. And “e-structors,” as Smarthinking calls its tutors, almost never connected the advice they offered to details from the student text at hand: they seemed to have read the text only as closely as they needed to in order to make a reasonable guess at which canned lecture to give tutees (thesis, organization, complete sentences). Having worked in writing centers before, committee members initially found the thirty minutes Smarthinking charged for working with each student astonishingly low for a process that they assumed must necessarily involve evaluating the student’s written description of the sort of help they needed, reading the student’s text itself, deciding what needed to be done with it, considering how to present that advice to the student, and composing an effective written response—a process of course complicated by the fact that most “e-structors” would be unable to have back-and-forth exchanges with students or read facial expressions. And wouldn’t Smarthinking want to claim as much time as it could in any case? But after reading their responses, we understood: for Smarthinking, reading papers was indeed a fast and dirty business. Thirty minutes *was* sufficient, perhaps *more* than they needed. In fact, though we know nothing about the remuneration of Smarthinking tutors, the responses we read made committee members—all longtime two-campus adjuncts who knew all about the pressure to produce rushed, superficial readings of student work and what it takes to resist it—feel certain that e-structors must be paid not by the hour but by the *piece*. And we guessed that many were actually written in less than thirty minutes. It was, we remarked with irony, precisely the sort of superficial feedback we struggle so hard to discourage students from giving to peers in course workshops, and we worried, further, that it would not only offer students bad advice but also that it would model such advice powerfully for them. It was hard not to worry by extension, moreover, that whatever signals it gave to students about appropriate levels of response from teachers might ultimately be communicated to instructors as well (both new instructors without well-developed habits of response as well as veteran instructors who were experienced but staggered by overwork). Normalizing Smarthinking’s expectations about what it means to read and respond to a draft, we felt sure, could do nothing good for the larger culture of writing on campus.

I want to be careful not to suggest here that the attention to cost-effectiveness of any of these services—or even their for-profit nature—should indict or disqualify them. Indeed, I have myself pointed out in the past that the rhetoric of cost-effectiveness can at times be invoked to great effect on behalf of contingent faculty in part-time roles—and I still take this to be true. But our committee’s worries about Smarthinking speak directly to what’s most troubling about the recent expansion of for-profit providers in education. What’s really insidious about all these services—outsourced tutoring, grading software, commercially

conceived MOOCs—is their target: the intellectual intimacy between students and teachers, which their success depends directly on devaluing. In the clichéd discourse of retail, warmly embraced on most provider websites, teachers are essentially middle men to be cut out. Indeed, the profitability of each of these services depends squarely on *a diminished capacity for student-teacher interaction*. The shortest distance between students and their degrees, as StraighterLine imagines it, is clearly one uncluttered with the messiness—and expense—of real teachers.



At an academic integrity conference I attended about ten years ago, keynote speaker Gary Pavela talked about being deeply affected on a tour of the Vatican by the tradition of mentorship depicted in Raphael's *The School of Athens*, at the very center of which appear Plato and his student Aristotle, strolling forward together but with eyes locked, as if engrossed in some eternal dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Pavela

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<sup>1</sup> It seems to me too interesting an index of the embeddedness of the for-profit spirit in higher education to ignore that this detail from Raphael's famous fresco now forms the centerpiece of the [academicintegrityseminar.com](http://academicintegrityseminar.com) home page set up by Pavela, noted Academic Integrity researcher Don McCabe, and research economist DeForest McDuff, who provide on-line seminars on academic integrity—at \$100 per student—to the colleges and universities who contract with them. The website explains:

Plato and Aristotle were properly depicted by Raphael in his wonderful "School of Athens" as former teacher and student who developed a lifelong friendship in the pursuit of truth. That



took this as an inspiring symbol of a sacrosanct commitment educators make to students and their disciplines: real education is about authentic, disinterested exchanges between mentors and mentees around ideas both care about deeply. This part of the presentation seemed to me undeniable, and still does: if we give students less than this, then of course we get what we ask for with respect to rates of student dishonesty. But it occurred to me then—as a faculty member at a public university where keeping class sizes small was a continual struggle—that the material circumstances surrounding instruction had everything to do with the possibilities for cultivating this sort of intimacy, which obviously can't be sustained in classes with enrollments numbering in three figures.<sup>2</sup> This dynamic seems much clearer now, though, a decade later, in the context of the sort of educational outsourcing I have begun to describe: How does one maintain a platonic intimacy with a student whose work is evaluated for its conformity to a standardized rubric by a contract grader 8,000 miles away?

If it's increasingly the popular perception that education no longer requires this sort of close work between teachers and students—that it can be done in a lecture hall with clickers or from home behind a laptop, asynchronously and at your convenience—it has much to do with the sort of exchange we've come to imagine that learning constitutes. After a number of years in which it seemed critiqued to the point of final irrelevance, the notion of education as the transmission of content—and instrumental content, at that—is experienced for more and more people as a largely unchallenged norm. A well-meaning and good-willed middle-class acquaintance, not herself a college graduate, recently asked me if I really needed to bother actually attending the graduate seminar I was rushing off to. She wasn't joking or commiserating with me about a busy schedule. I'd already given students the readings, which she assumed must contain what they needed to know, and they were smart enough to have made their way

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spirit—friendship, intellectual curiosity, and dialogue about how a good and worthy life might be defined—forms the core of our work.

Clearly, the academic integrity movement has not inherited Socrates' distaste for accepting compensation in exchange for wisdom.

2 It's instructive here to consider the infamous 2001 cheating scandal at the University of Virginia, a campus well-known for its long-established Honor Code, administered and adjudicated by a student-run Honor Committee. The incident resulted in the suspension of forty-five undergraduates, and the University was widely lauded as a courageous defender of intellectual integrity and upholder of academic principle. Much less often reported, however, is that the 145 students charged with plagiarism were enrolled in an introductory physics course that routinely seated between 300 and 500 students (Trex)—and that the cheating was only discovered after a disgruntled student who'd received a bad grade for honest work reported the widespread practice to the course professor, who'd been unable to read student work even closely enough to recognize that a significant percentage of his students' papers were in fact "virtual replicas" of others submitted across five semesters (Schemo).



into a graduate course—what could there be to talk about? Maybe some of the students had somehow not obtained the text? The knowledge had already been transmitted, she figured—so maybe I needed to be there to give them an exam?

If arguing for worklife improvements for non-tenure-track faculty teaching writing means arguing for the importance and complexity of their work—and I think it does now more than ever—then these arguments depend fundamentally on distinguishing the teaching of writing clearly from this sort of simple positivist transmission. We need to insist that writing—and by extension the exchanges between writing teachers and their students—are about the construction and not the transfer of knowledge. This is an idea that will seem familiar enough, certainly, to most teachers of writing—and would have even before Paolo Freire began to talk about “the banking concept of education” forty-five years ago—but it is increasingly foreign to our students and to those outside academia.

Of course, this larger project begins with mounting a calculated and principled resistance to the ongoing inducement to reduce our work to easily quantifiable goals: we need ourselves to acknowledge the complexity of our own work. Whenever we mechanize any aspect of our practice for the sake of convenience (relying on exams or exam scores for placement) or accept without protest an administrative charge that ignores the messy reality of how writing actually works (developing a generic rubric for the evaluation of writing across campus—even if it never gets used), we run a calculated risk. But resisting the transmission model of learning and its underlying positivism also means working against the increasing cultural authority of technology, equated by many with science. We need to demonstrate what Haswell and Wilson’s *Human Readers Petition* insists powerfully: that there are some things technology can’t do. Convincing people of this is not as easy as it sounds, I think, and it will get more difficult as reading software gets more sophisticated.<sup>3</sup> And by all means we need to embrace technological tools, which many have pointed out are daily reinventing what we mean by “writing.” But in the end, writing and reading aren’t language processing. Both require *a transaction between human minds*—even in solitary texts, when writers struggle to articulate and refine ideas for themselves, or in most machine code, since most applications are of course written to be experienced ultimately by human users. The still unreleased software that EdX keeps promising its users reportedly works by emulating the readings of its MOOC instructors, so that

3 Indeed, I worry that we’ve become complacent in our humanist dismissals of artificial intelligence: it’s a reassuring half-lie—whistling in the dark, even—when we tell our students that grammar check doesn’t work. Aren’t we all pretty sure deep-down that it can and at some point will? And I don’t just mean more consistent structural analyses of sentences and more qualified judgments about error: I don’t see why applications can’t do web scans to make informed assessments about usage and register, pass judgment on style and other rhetorical choices—perhaps even assess novelty.

after reading seventy or eighty papers closely, the same standards can be applied to thousands. But no matter how refined, variable, and sophisticated, autopilot is still autopilot. An algorithm can never serve as what Paolo Freire would have called a “co-inquirer.” As Ann Harrington and Charles Moran pointed out over a decade ago, writing meant to be processed by an application rather than a human mind *isn’t* writing. And it doesn’t get “read,” either. This is the battle we need to fight in order to convince people that machines will always be an inferior replacement for human mentors—and that those mentors are well worth what they cost.

This is a daunting prospect, certainly, and forecasts for the future of the humanities are notoriously gloomy. But I think that we have reason for a level of optimism, or at least that there exists a greater recognition of the complexity of our work in certain quarters than we sometimes assume. When my department last year succeeded in bringing our central administration to the table to renegotiate instructors’ salaries, we were all quite astonished and heartened to find that they readily agreed to consider funding a roughly *sixty-five* percent *raise* for our part-time faculty. We never argued hard for this—we didn’t need to. Eventually, the department balked in the interests of collectivity when it discovered that this figure wouldn’t be extended to other academic units on campus, which administrators deemed prohibitively expensive. So the matter went back to the union, and the administration responded to a proposal of the same figure we discussed with them by essentially spreading across the campus as a whole what they’d planned on spending to raise adjunct salaries in the English department—which of course resulted in a very nominal raise in the end. These disappointing results aside, I take the administration’s willingness to negotiate with us—and not with part-time colleagues in other departments—as an indication of its recognition of the complexity and labor-intensive nature of teaching writing, and it seems to me a heartening sign. It’s worth noting, too, that students themselves seem increasingly disenchanted with online courses, and reports are that they are likewise disinclined to enroll in MOOCs even when they bear credit (Weiner)—an indication that they too recognize something of the complexity of authentic teaching and learning. The growing backlash against the Common Core standards and excessive testing, what’s more, create great synergy with the arguments we might make against automation in higher education. And it’s very significant that these arguments stand for the first time in years, if ever, to unite and not divide constituencies in academic labor—unlike arguments for improving the working conditions of part-time faculty, which many in the professoriate have long regarded as against their interests and as potentially damaging to tenure as an institution. My own best guess, for what it’s worth, is that eventually the University of Phoenix and Coursera may well go away on their own under the

pressure of woeful student placement and loan default rates on one hand and simple student disinterest and disengagement on the other. But of course, both have done and can continue to do significant damage to public expectations about learning and the role of teachers before then—and almost certainly the teacherless dynamic in higher education will find new forms afterward. This is not a fight likely to end anytime soon, then, but it's also not one we're necessarily destined to lose.

## **OWNING ONE'S EXPERTISE: INSTRUCTORS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Of course, it's often observed that the greatest source of damage to the public image of first-year writing teachers is the staffing practices of college writing programs themselves, which have long been notorious for hiring faculty with minimal experience and preparation only days before courses are scheduled to begin as new sections are opened or other faculty resign at the last minute.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for these practices aren't hard to recognize: it's understandably difficult to find and retain qualified faculty to teach for a fraction of what the colleges that employ them hope their graduates will earn in their own starting positions. In this way, underfunding the field becomes its own tautological justification, at once both cause and effect. This is why one of Hesse's prescriptions for empowering Composition and Rhetoric in the larger culture rightly speaks so directly to professional development:

... let's expect all writing teachers to know the field's history, research, practices, and contestations and be able to justify their teaching within that knowledge. Historically, the dismissive treatment of writing and its teachers may have blunted this expectation. (21)

Indeed, insisting on the complexity of teaching first-year writing depends on cultivating a faculty who appreciate that complexity and are able to develop courses that bespeak it.

In the spring of 2012, I was approached by the Writing Program director at a local two-year college, Malkiel Choseed at Onondaga Community College, about exactly this problem. He was troubled by how little the faculty teaching in his program—both contingent and tenure-track—knew about fundamental issues in composition studies, and after trying with mixed success to set up a

<sup>4</sup> See "Who is Professor 'Staff' and How Can This Person Teach So Many Classes?", a report of The Center for the Future of Higher Education, for a systematic review and discussion of these practices.

departmental reading group, he was looking for new ways to incent busy instructors to do some structured reading and thinking in the field. How might it complicate and enrich the course designs or classroom practices of instructors, he wondered, if they knew about David Bartholomae's critique of surface correctness, what Kathleen Blake Yancey had to say about digital literacy, or Rebecca Moore Howard's work on plagiarism and intellectual property? And typically, his program hired from a labor pool—essentially the same one as ours—in which an awareness of this work was quite unusual. His idea was to offer graduate credits for a course in composition theory, which his administration indicated a willingness to pay for. The financial commitment was slow to be finalized—indeed, funding wasn't made official until the course was in its third week—but as we worked out the administrative details, we discovered that we were peculiarly situated to make this arrangement work. By a little-used provision of the large state university system that housed both the community college and my own campus, we could offer the course for a discounted rate, reducing the already reasonable graduate tuition by almost a third to around \$850, as long as it was paid by the institution and not the individual (an arrangement which would make it qualify as a “contract course”).<sup>5</sup> This meant that the college could offer faculty members a three-credit graduate course for a little less than the price of attendance at most national conferences—a very compelling professional development experience for administrators making public claims about their commitment to writing. What's more, the faculty union on the state system's four-year campuses (different from the two-year campus' union) had a program for tuition remission that would allow faculty on those campuses to take the course entirely without charge to their institutions. This meant that within a driving radius of an hour or so, we could draw faculty who might be in a position to take the course for free from roughly ten two-year and four four-year institutions, including my own.

This realization in turn led to more serious discussion of a prospect we'd both considered in our earliest talks: expanding the number of courses we might offer in order to develop a certificate, which we thought would have special appeal for contingent faculty. The experience of participants in the spring 2013 course, eager for more work in composition theory, confirmed our suspicions about this appeal, and it's our hope at this point that we might ultimately be able to offer a four-course certificate in teaching first-year writing. Given the current limits of my department, this certificate would have to depend in large part on visiting faculty, likely including WPAs on two or three local campuses. But faculty mem-

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5 Sadly, as this chapter goes to publication, I've been informed by administrators on my campus that this crucial provision is no longer in place. If we can offer a discounted tuition, we'll need to fund it differently, and if we aren't able to find alternative funding, this arrangement will be less attractive to the community colleges we've been working with.

bers from a comp-rhet doctoral program nearby—a couple of whom expressed some interest in the chance to work with local teachers of writing in order to improve practice on a regional basis—provide another potential resource for this program. For those faculty, already teaching graduate courses, the commitment might be relatively simple—another one-night-a-week section of whatever they were teaching in a given semester on a rotating basis once every two years or so. This would mean that contingent faculty would have a chance not only to read work by—but to meet and work with—some of the leading scholars in the field nationally, an understandably exciting prospect.

Ultimately, we imagine, it's conceivable that a program like this could in the future have a transformative effect on a whole regional market for teachers of first-year writing. How powerful would it be in negotiations over salary and appointments if the expectation was not only that teaching first-year writing required some significant level of training but also that most teachers in the labor pool indeed had that training?

Of course, I want to be clear that this is all still in the earliest stages of speculative planning, more a vision and a hope at this point than anything else. And even if everything went exactly right, we recognize that like all attempts to address labor problems in the field, this program too would be a compromise. In the best of all possible worlds, faculty teaching writing everywhere would have not four courses but Ph.D.s in composition-rhetoric. They wouldn't need to do graduate work on a night-school basis after long days of teaching (and likely before long nights of grading) but would have a true grad school experience with the funding that allowed them proper space to read and think imaginatively. And we wouldn't depend on the good will of talented research faculty to, in effect, accept a course overload at the same rate we pay part-time faculty teaching first-year writing (a new form of labor exploitation, undeniably, even while it says something admirable about the faculty members willing to take on this work).

Still, as compromises go, this strikes me as a good one—probably for all involved, in fact. For one thing, it's an opportunity to complicate and enrich instruction in the region substantially. I asked participants in the pilot section not to write conventional graduate papers for the course but to prepare something that would use course readings and ideas to inform some aspect of their professional lives—for example, articulating a new approach to using peer revision, revising a departmental plagiarism policy, or developing a writing across the curriculum workshop for colleagues in different disciplines. Among the projects participants chose to pursue were one piece of conventional scholarly writing—a conference paper that was in fact submitted to and included in early versions of this volume—but also a new course unit on digital literacy centered on student work with digital stories, an overhauled modes course intended to challenge

departmental prescriptions emphasizing formal approaches to teaching first-year writing, and the organization of a regional conference. Both the students enrolled in first-year writing courses and the programs they take them in will be better off for this work, I think.

Our greatest hope for this sort of a certificate, though, is that it will improve the job prospects of the contingent faculty involved. Faculty on tenure-track search committees at community colleges tell me that they find any documented coursework in composition very compelling: they say they want more than anything else to hire good colleagues who can help them solve pedagogical and curricular problems and that, though most of them have trained in literature, their main pedagogical and curricular project is *always* teaching writing. I know that having taken a course or two in composition theory has played an important role in the employment success of a number of graduate students from our M.A. program now on tenure lines at community colleges. I believe a certificate would have a similar effect. More importantly, though, I think a certificate program would make it easier to argue for significant worklife improvements for contingent faculty on their present campuses. Understanding all the arguments against them—and recognizing that they too are a compromise—I’ve argued on my own campus for a very long time that we need to establish senior instructor positions with full-time loads, significantly better pay, expanded roles, and enhanced job security, and as the prospect of such positions finally materializes slowly, it occurs to me that campus administrators would see a certificate like the one I’ve described as a meaningful qualifying credential. And I think they should.

But this same dynamic works on a larger scale as well, I think. How might it affect work in the field—and how colleges and universities were willing to fund it—if the rest of the world saw college-level writing and rhetoric teachers as expert practitioners with a demonstrated grasp of a tangibly shared set of texts and ideas who spoke a common disciplinary language? This, of course, is not the only front on which to fight the teacherless dynamic in higher education. Some, like Eileen Schell, have pointed out the continued importance of organizing in response to the globalizing of the academic labor market online, for example, arguing for the cultivation of “open source” unions (Schell). But whether writing teachers are organized as bargaining units or not, I believe that cultivating this sort of a professional identity for teachers of writing is a key part of getting colleges and universities to invest in teachers—and not in machines and outsourcing.

## A TALE OF TWO VISIONS: REEMPLOYING THE SOPHISTS

Much celebrated in the last twenty-five years by composition theorists for epistemological reasons—but generally ignored as a labor model—the ancient Greek

Sophists have something important to tell us about actually achieving this sort of identity, I think. Of course, the Sophists, who have never had very good press, make an unlikely model of professional ethos. They were the notorious whipping boys for Socrates in Plato's dialogues, where they were depicted as shiftily, opportunistic double-talkers, providing a convenient foil for sober, disinterested Platonic rationalism. And the Sophistic tradition is invoked most in the common pejorative "sophistry," a word recognizable through most of the history of western Europe (from Medieval Latin to Old French to Middle and Modern English, according to the O.E.D.) as a byword for specious reasoning. Sharon Crowley argued passionately in "A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry," however, that this was a misrepresentation seized upon by science and rationalist philosophy in order to discourage public deliberation about debatable ideas, which would be resolved instead by experts with special power to ascertain truth. In actuality, according to rhetoricians like Crowley and Susan Jarrett in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Sophists were principled relativists who'd anticipated much contemporary philosophy and rhetorical theory by recognizing the constructed nature of knowledge and the inherent interestedness of all positions and perspectives—and who were for that reason committed not to self-interest and deception, as Plato's readers generally imagined, but to democracy and inclusion. As what some called "New Sophist" scholarship had it in the 1990s, the Sophists were the enlightened and unfairly maligned antidote to pompous Platonic idealism, giving the lie to self-congratulatory patrician assumptions about philosophy and truth.

But it's clear, too, that Socrates and Plato objected to the Sophists as much out of a distaste with their life's work—which took them slumming in the earliest markets for rhetoric and rhetoricians—as out of any objection to their teachings. Protagoras and Gorgias were not noblemen expounding on the steps of the Academy in studied disinterest, but itinerant teachers and advisors—the very first professional writers and language consultants in some sense—who, much to the outrage of Socrates, accepted money for their efforts as both teachers and rhetoricians. They didn't just talk about the way language created knowledge in social contexts from a disembodied distance but participated in the process, intervening in public arguments and teaching others how to do the same. And they embraced their embeddedness in that process.

I can think of little that should put us more in mind of the army of contingent faculty in composition and rhetoric than this description of the Sophists. If Protagoras were alive today, he'd almost certainly be a two-campus part-timer who blogged on the side and edited copy when he needed extra cash. And it's hard for me not to connect their tenure-track critics to the disapproving patrician nobles dispensing wisdom about writing from above, but recoiling in distaste



with the willingness of “comp droids” to sell out “serious” intellectual work by participating in the production and dissemination of real text on the ground—supplementing their incomes by writing grants, blogs, articles for alumni magazines, or anything else they find alternately interesting or profitable. Defenders of the professorial tradition against the continuing encroachment of academia’s *real* great unwashed—not student “outlanders,” as Patricia Bizzell once put it, that is, but the growing instructorate who meet them in first-year writing courses—share more here with Plato and Socrates than they like to think.

It’s hard for me not to think of this side of the Sophists when I think about the best of my non-tenure-track colleagues: Carol, the romance novelist who gave students the most layered, insightful, tangible advice about editors and audiences I’ve ever heard; Steve, the performance poet who lionized Ginsberg, quit teaching for a year to help write the Massachusetts state budget as Communications Director for the State Senate Ways and Means Committee, and ran a classroom with all the energy and engagement of a good poetry slam; or Henry, the accomplished fiddle player and sometime writer of folk songs who taught professional writing but made a significant part of his living as a freelance editor and the co-author of a psychopharmacology textbook.

In “Teaching On and Off the Tenure Track,” a careful reflection on the 2008 report of the committee he led for the MLA’s Association of Departments of English (Modern Language Association) on staffing trends, David Bartholomae addresses the issue of striking a balance between teaching and research in the field as a matter of making sure the two dimensions of academic work don’t pull irretrievably apart. For Bartholomae, this means that teaching-intensive faculty need to maintain a connection to scholarship in the field, even if they don’t see research as their primary interest, but also (and much to his credit, I think) that research faculty teach regularly at the lower division—not so beginning undergraduates can learn from them, but so they can learn from the undergraduates. Bartholomae writes:

It is not simply the case that the curriculum needs to be in touch with current research; it is not simply that students can profit by contact with leading researchers; it is that current research needs to be informed by the issues raised in lower division courses, issues having to do with ordinary language, with reading and writing as practices broadly distributed. English, as a field of study, is impoverished when it loses touch with the lower division. (19)

I agree entirely. But it also occurs to me that in rhetoric, scholarship is not the only form of significant intellectual work that faculty can bring to their

classrooms. Many part-time faculty have experiences as practicing rhetors that inform their teaching in very meaningful ways. So while research and teaching need to be conversant, *I think the range of possibilities for “research” in composition and rhetoric also define different legitimate professional identities in the field*—if not separate faculty tracks, then at least different emphases. If our faculties don’t look like the faculties in philosophy, maybe that’s appropriate. I worry that the field runs the risk of losing a very important dimension of its real disciplinary expertise if we don’t make places for both scholar-teachers and teacher-rhetors.

How’s this related to my own vision for the future of contingent faculty? I’d love to see teaching faculty in my own program on 4/4 loads, one section of which each semester included work across campus as liaisons to faculty and students in various colleges, roles I’d institutionalize as fellows in our writing across the curriculum program. Their appointments would be contingent on some significant level of graduate work in composition-rhetoric—perhaps enrollment in the certificate program I’ve described—and, on nine-month contracts, they would also be required in the summer to have significant experiences as practicing rhetors that they might bring to their teaching. The choice of what to write would be up to them—music and arts reviews, technical documents, local journalism, political materials, ad copy, grants, organizational documents for local nonprofits, or more than likely, some combination of different sorts of writing—but they would include this work in portfolios for review just as faculty in traditional professorial lines include scholarship in tenure, promotion, and merit reviews. Like Protagoras, Gorgias, and the rest, they’d doubtless develop expertise in specific sorts of writing, and this expertise would speak to the disciplinary constituencies they served on campus. How helpful would it be to our School of Business if they had a writing fellow who spent summers writing up studies on publicly held corporations for accounting agencies or helping prepare a guide for human resources managers on the Affordable Care Act? What if a fellow in the School of Education developed multi-media textbooks, a fellow in the social sciences worked as a media consultant for local political campaigns, a fellow in the natural sciences wrote NSF grants, or a fellow in the humanities worked for Literacy Volunteers or wrote arts journalism for an alternative weekly?

Imagining the roles for these faculty is an important project, since teaching-intensive positions clearly aren’t going away, as Bartholomae’s ADE study points out. Even the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), long reluctant to endorse the expansion of teaching-intensive positions on the grounds that they contributed to the erosion of tenure-track privilege, now formally recognizes them and calls for their tenurability (AAUP). And the most vociferous former critics of full-time lectureships now either work in or in fact direct programs that employ them. The reason for this isn’t hard to identify.

My worry is that if it's not some form of this vision of the field that defines its future—one that acknowledges the developed expertise of non-professorial faculty and cultivates their often significant skills as writers in given genres and socio-rhetorical contexts—then it's likely some version of Smarthinking and Coursera's.

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