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News

What Direction for Rhet-Comp?

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PHILADELPHIA -- How should writing be taught? What should be the philosophical basis for reaching first-year students and giving them the skills they need for the rest of their college careers?

These questions drew many here Tuesday at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. Some speakers suggested that the rhetoric-composition field has lost its way, ignoring central issues while embracing the trendy. Others suggested that some of what was criticized -- in particular the study of new media and the use of new media to think about writing -- offers key tools for rhetoric-composition.

John L. Schilb, a professor of writing at Indiana University at Bloomington, was among those expressing fear that the discipline has lost its way. Schilb, who is editor of *College English*, noted that the journal recently had a special issue devoted to the rhetoric of Lincoln, and hardly anyone submitted entries. Similarly, he said, the journal has received hardly any submissions about the rhetoric of last year's presidential election, even with all of the excitement over the use of language in the Obama campaign.

It's not that those who teach composition and rhetoric aren't politically engaged, Schilb said. Anyone who checks out the listservs or listens to the conversations among those in the field would know that its scholars care deeply about the issues of the day. "I'm not accusing our field of political ignorance or apathy," he said.

Rather, he thinks there is a "mental block" and too many scholars seem focused on the same issues -- to the exclusion of the rhetoric and writing that relates to the nation-state.

What *do* people submit to the journal?

What he finds -- over and over again -- is "the drive-by Foucault quote," not used to really explore Foucault, but as an introduction to writing about "agency," a humanities term that refers to the capacity to serve as the subject or originating cause of an action.

Agency, he said, "has become a preoccupation" of the field, causing scholars to ignore state sovereignty in all its forms as somehow irrelevant.

Foucault was correct, Schilb said, to argue that not all power derives from the state and that there are actions separate from the state that have great importance to individuals. But that doesn't mean that the state no longer matters or that agency is all that matters, he says. The attitude has become, he said, that "if we don't have a full blown theory of agency, what's the point of getting out of bed?"

As an example of why the field needs to focus again on the state, Schilb noted the debates over torture during the Bush administration, and the rhetoric used to describe torture and various other words used to justify the war in Iraq or certain policies. In such an environment, he said, how can the scholars in the field not be interested in issues related to political power and its use?

Arabella Lyon, associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, offered other beliefs and interests -- beyond agency -- that may be drawing too much attention from rhet-comp scholars. Her criticism extended beyond the field, to the "intellectual bankruptcy of the humanities in the university today."

Rhetoric and composition scholars, she said, have become "mired in the trivia of disciplines" rather than focusing on the traditional

philosophers who taught "what it means to be human."

Lyon's view is that the field is too enamored with assignments that involve "writing about writing" or writing about new media. The latter may be interesting, she said, but "reduces our vision to the screen."

Where she said traditions should change is an expansion beyond the European roots of traditional philosophy (the classics) to the equivalent thinkers that inspired cultures and civilizations throughout the world. But the aim must be to focus on key thinkers who helped to define human existence, not just "glib multiculturalism."

"We need a rhetorical first year that allows space for reflection," and that can be done "expanding to human traditions beyond [those defined by] Aristotle."

One context for her view, Lyon said, is that for many students at large public universities, freshman comp is their exposure to humanities. While "the elite colleges" give students more humanities, the limited exposure of students elsewhere in the curriculum means that the courses should be the real thing.

It fell to a joint paper by Olin Bjork of the Georgia Institute of Technology and John Pedro Schwartz of American University in Beirut to offer an enthusiastic vision for a new approach to rhet-comp -- through digital work.

Much of their paper focused on making the case that there is no one digital humanities, but many -- sometimes related efforts. Some scholars are studying what takes place online; others use digital tools to analyze the printed word, just to cite two examples. They spoke of the need to understand the differences among different kinds of efforts and of the ways digital humanities can bring not only new energy to composition, but also new funds (they noted that many digital humanities projects attract outside support).

While they didn't directly challenge the critique of moves away from traditional approaches to rhet-comp, they offered concrete examples of digital programs that could advance student understanding of texts and of writing.

For instance, they cited **Sophie**, a program that allows texts to be displayed digitally in ways that allow a variety of enhancements, including links to other texts or illustrations of videos or text boxes for student and faculty responses. The emphasis was on student understanding and writing. While they argued that part of what the digital humanities offers is indeed different -- "the ability to examine differences between material and digital culture" -- other benefits are true to the roots of composition and rhetoric.

These tools "advance the traditional goals of composition pedagogy," Schwartz said.

— **Scott Jaschik**

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