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M.A. Thesis Proposal

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### Evolving Outcomes of the WPA Outcomes Statement

For years, the teaching of composition has been fraught with the tensions of competing modernist and postmodernist goals. Although the field has theoretically incorporated postmodernist views of language and language learning, it is still largely informed and shaped by the institutional mission to acculturate students to formal edited English and the conventions of academic discourse. This modernist orientation is maintained largely by those outside the field; many students, administrators (as well as the general public) still perceive effective writing instruction as decontextual, consisting of a set of codifiable “skills” that can be taught and utilized for any writing task. Such “topdown” writing instruction perpetuates a modernist perspective and ignores the postmodern disciplinary knowledge created by the field’s theory, research, and practice.

In 2001, the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) responded to this dated modernist perspective with the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, a document that attempts to accomplish both curricular standardization and recognition of the discipline’s knowledge. Delineating “what students exiting first-year composition should know and be able to do,” (Rhodes et al 12), the statement purportedly focuses on *what* should be taught but not *how*, a tactical decision made by the framers of the document to preserve instructors’ rights to comfortably teach from a variety of pedagogical and language orientations consistent with the discipline.

My thesis explores a topic that has not yet been extensively discussed with regard to the Outcomes Statement: while pedagogy and curricula are certainly not the same, curricula must perforce shape pedagogy. My project, then, will rhetorically analyze the suggested curriculum of the WPA Outcomes Statement in order to reveal its embedded ideology(ies) and pedagogical implications in the hope of contributing to the recent discussion surrounding it within the composition community.

Supporters of the Outcomes Statement claim that it creates a coherent pedagogical and curricular foundation for all first-year composition courses. Kathleen Blake Yancey, for instance, agrees that “the statement articulates what composition teachers nationwide have learned from practice, research, and theory” (OS). In her view, this practice, research, and theory has produced a new curriculum which iterates “the *content* of composition” as “[g]enre and language and rhetorical situation” (220), in other words, a postmodern awareness—an ability to view language *not* as a neutral vehicle representing an external reality but rather as representing “a discursive reality” not “an empirical one” (Brodkey xiii).

Others, however, are less sanguine about the statement. Published in 2005, *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement* included critiques of the statement by Peter Elbow and Richard Haswell. Both base their arguments on concerns about student development but do so from differing perspectives. Elbow criticizes the suggested curriculum for its very inclusion of postmodern rhetorical awareness, claiming that students should merely write and not waste time on developing a meta-awareness of language and rhetoric for which they are not yet ready. He writes that critical literacy “functions as an *impediment* to student’s mastering what I would call

the prior or foundational competences of finding lots of words that match their felt intentions” (180). In contrast, Haswell supports metacognitive learning but argues that the Outcomes Statement, despite its progressive air, still relies on a modernist foundation in its attempt to decontextually outline universal outcomes. Since learning is idiosyncratic and uneven, the many complex writing tasks outlined in the Outcomes Statement seem virtually impossible to accomplish in one course.

This idiosyncrasy further problematizes the creation of a standardized “student-centered” curriculum for U.S. writing classes which are often comprised of diverse student populations with various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. And thus a similar debate, whether to practice a modernist acculturative pedagogy or a postmodern pedagogy that meta-presents acculturation as socially constructed, rages in the ESL community as well. When examined together, the work of proponents of postmodern ESL pedagogies, such as Paul Matsuda and Sarah Benesch and the critiques of Haswell and Elbow contradict Yancey’s claim that the Outcomes Statement has resolved “the panoply of composition courses and approaches used in various programs”(215). Their research clearly demonstrates that the curriculum suggested by the Outcomes Statement contains internal contradictions that render it less theoretically unified than its proponents would like.

If postmodern disciplinary knowledge is indeed the curricular focus of the Outcomes Statement, as Yancey claims in the afterword of *The Outcomes Book*—“[i]n calling our students and ourselves to what’s visionary, we created new outcomes for all of us” (221)—then postmodern critical pedagogies would be required to enact such a curriculum, a position with which many of the document’s framers would disagree. The

Outcomes Statement obviously does not resolve the modern/postmodern dilemma and may even reinforce the tensions it was designed to ease. My thesis will extend the discussion begun in *The Outcomes Book* with an extensive rhetorical analysis of the Outcomes Statement, sorting through its internal contradictions, discussing the ideological and pedagogical implications within it, and suggesting possible ways to unify its underlying theory.

In chapter one, I will discuss the conditions surrounding the Outcome Statement's creation, including the modern/postmodern conditions contributing to the theoretical, institutional, and political climates of freshman composition today. In chapters two and three, I will rhetorically analyze the document for modernist and postmodernist orientations, respectively. In each chapter, I will analyze various discourse elements of the Outcomes Statement, including, but not limited to, organization, content, language, and valuing via absence and presence. Finally, in chapter four, I will discuss the pedagogical implications of the WPA Outcomes Statement's embedded ideology.

The afterword of *The Outcomes Book* suggests that writing instruction is central to a liberal education and has "played a central role in the development of students intellectually and socially" (221). Yancey describes a beneficial by-product of creating a standardized composition curriculum based upon up-to-date theory and practice: "in creating a foundation for students, we created one for programs as well" (221). Despite Yancey's forward thinking, this "foundation" apparently requires a more unified theoretical base, suggesting as Susan Marie Harrington reminds us that "successful reform is an ongoing process. The dialogue must continue"(xix).

### Annotated Bibliography

Atkinson, Dwight. "Comments on Ryuko Kubota's 'Japanese Culture Constructed by Discourses: Implications for Applied Linguistics Research and ELT': Postmodern Applied Linguistics: Problems and Contradictions." *The Forum. TESOL Quarterly* 33 (1999): 736-745.

- In response to Kubota, Atkinson supports Kubota's approach to use Foucaultian discourses as a means to expose how discourses operate. He criticizes, however, critical pedagogy's "claim to moral high ground" because its ideology is exclusionary and, if coherent, foundationalist with a consequentially repressive agenda. Atkinson thus calls CP "just another aggressive (and if we believe Ellsworth, 1989, somewhat messianic) political ideology" (748).

Benesch, Sarah. "Critical Pragmatism: A Politics of L2 Composition." *On Second Language Writing*. Ed. Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. 161-172.

- Advocates "critical pragmatism", a metacognitive acculturative pedagogy that foregrounds academic discourse as historically, culturally and socially constructed.

Berlin, James. "Composition Studies and Cultural Studies: Collapsing Boundaries." *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World: Language Culture, and Pedagogy*. Eds. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998.

- Berlin reminds us that social constructionist theory “regards the subject as the product of intersecting and conflicting discourses, all part of power formations” (402), and Berlin concludes that “The role of the writing class then becomes to intervene in this process of construction, locating the conflicts in order to make them the center of writing” (402).
- . “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” *College English* 50.5 (1988): 477-94.
  - Berlin discusses the politics of discourse and their implications in the classroom.
- Bizzell, Patricia. “‘Contact Zones’ and English Studies.” *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003, 479-486.
  - Argues for a new organization of English Studies based upon contact zones. No longer would there be the division of composition and literature but rather definition via areas of focus based upon rhetorical problems.
- Bleich, David. “Learning from Everyone.” *JAEPL* 5 (1999-2000): 1-13.
  - First introducing nonmaterialist cultures (as is ours) in which written texts tend to become reified thought, epistemologically divorced from their actual “living” socially-constructed context, Bleich then advocates teaching “ from a materialist perspective. Elaborating upon this perspective, Bleich explains that a materialist view never separates meaning from language use and understands that language is never neutral but rather always imbued with a human perspective. Learning from everyone describes our authentic plastic selves that appropriate from everywhere without necessarily consciously esteeming one source of learning over another.

Breuch, Lee-Ann Kastman. "Post-Process 'Pedagogy': A Philosophical Exercise."

*JAC* 22.1 (2002): 119-50.

-Argues that "post-process theory encourages us to reexamine our definition of writing as an activity rather than a body of knowledge, our methods of teaching as indeterminate activities rather than exercises of mastery, and our communicative interactions with students as dialogic rather than monologic" (120).

Brodkey, Linda. *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

-Brodkey publishes her previous work (publications and presentations), as well as some of her students' works. An avid proponent of critical literacy, Brodkey compelling argues for critical pedagogy based upon poststructural theory.

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences."

*Criticism: Major Statements*. Eds. Kaplan and Anderson. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1966.

-Offers effective method of rhetorical analysis—to deconstruct binaries to reveal what is valued. The item scrutinized always in context of its relationship to the binary.

Elbow, Peter. "A Friendly Challenge to Push the Outcomes Statement Further."

Harrington et al. 177-190.

-As the title suggests, Elbow critiques the O.S., mainly for its focus on rhetorical knowledge.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 27 ed. New York: The Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1988.

-Originally published in 1970, this book sketches the philosophical groundings of “liberatory” pedagogy based upon the recognition that no education is neutral.

Fuery, Patrick and Nick Mansfield. *Cultural Studies and the New Humanities*.

Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1997.

-Designed as an introductory textbook of literary and cultural study theory. Has a good chapter on postmodernism.

Giroux, Susan Searls. “The Post-9//11 University and the Project of Democracy.”

*JAC* 22.1 (2002) : 57-92.

-Argues for nurturance of autonomous civic participators as necessary curricula of a university liberal education, the university being one of the few remaining public spaces.

Hardin, Joseph Marshall. *Opening Spaces: Critical Pedagogy and Resistance Theory in Composition*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001.

-Hardin reviews the discipline’s seemingly contradictory missions and argues for critical pedagogy as a means to increasing student student agency. He also distinguishes between reproductive and resistance theories, advocating the latter and attempts to resolve the issue of postmodern ethics. Either Hardin’s discussion of ethics seems weak and needs to be extended or I didn’t understand it (will reread).

Harrington, Susanmarie. “Celebrating and Complicating the Outcomes Statement.”

Introduction. Harrington et al. xv-xix.

Harrington, Susanmarie., et al. *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement*. Logan, Utah: Utah UP, 2005.



As the title suggests, the book is an anthology of articles about the WPA Outcomes Statement, including its history, underlying theory, applications, and future.

Haswell, Richard. "Outcomes and the Developing Learner." Harrington et al. 191-200.

Haswell critiques the OS from the perspective of lifespan development theory which posits life changes that "form sequences, normative in terms of and usually across class, sex, and culture" and which are "directional" in that they become more complex (192). He suggests that if the OS sorted "writing processes, skills, knowledge, and metaknowledge into four categories: already internalized, in acquisition, in doubt, and for the future" it would be much more realistic (196).

Liu, Tessie. "Teaching the Differences Among Women from a Historical Perspective: Rethinking Race and Gender as Social Categories." *Unequal Sisters*. Eds. Vicki Ruiz and Ellen Carol Dubois. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge. 571-82.

- Liu discusses the concept of race as a fundamental building block of society, a concept so deeply ingrained in our societal organization that it functions epistemically, governing our institutions as well as our individual perceptions and behaviors. Race and family are essentially synonymous, and they define those with "common substance," a notion which is founded on biological ties constituting and continuing to constitute relationships among people which are perceived as "indelible and nonvoluntary" (577), thus serving, Liu explains, to define communities by demarcating members from non-members. The success of racial metaphors, she points out, rests in "the malleability of common substance":

Logan, Shirley Wilson. “‘When and Where I Enter’: Race, Gender, and Composition Studies.” *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*. Eds. Susan C.

Jarratt and Lynn Worsham. New York: MLA 1998. 45-57.

-Discusses racial and gender issues she has faced in the classroom and frames them in an historical context.

Mclaren, Peter, ed. *Revolutionary Multiculturalism: Pedagogies of Dissent for the New Millennium*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.

-an anthology I plan to read. McLaren writes or cowrites most of the articles, and the bibliography is extensive. The final article has a section entitled “The Struggle for the Ethical Self.”

Malinowitz, Harriet. “Writing in the Disciplines.” *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*. Eds. Susan Jarratt and Lynn Worsham. New York: MLA, 1998

-Malinowitz discusses the ideologies embedded in the disciplines. She asserts that dominant forces in disciplines frequently silence the scholarly input of the marginalized thereby biasing knowledge-making: “a synchronic analysis of intradisciplinary disagreement would reveal a more unsettling picture, one in which truth doesn’t simply triumph but is the pawn of political maneuvering and human prejudice” (299). She supports this statement with vivid examples and writes, “Consider also the immense difficulty, until the 1990’s of sustaining an academic career if one produced queer scholarship or insisted that nutrition was a vital component of allopathic medical training” (299).

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Eds. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 581-597.

- In this essay, Mary Pratt introduces and defines the term *contact zones* and discusses attempts to decenter the European white perspective of Western civilization courses.

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary*. New York:1989.

- Rose embeds a theoretical discussion of marginalized students within a chronicle of his own struggles as an educationally underprepared student.

Sleeter, Christine E., and Peter McLaren, eds. *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.

- an anthology full of relevant articles, one of which parallels multicultural and critical pedagogies. Contains both articles about theory and others recounting pedagogical experiences.

Sparrow, Lise. "Another Reader Reacts...Comments on Dwight Atkinson's 'TESOL and Culture.'" The Forum. *TESOL Quarterly*. 34 (2000): 744-747.

- Like Spiegal, Sparrow also criticizes Atkinson's article from the perspective that his discussion omits the importance of institutional and pedagogical values in cultural studies. She calls to her professional colleagues to be willing to ground themselves in the *values* they hold for their students and communities" (750).: "[W]e must have the *moral fortitude* as a profession to recognize that our language policies and personal approaches to teaching are

rooted in cultural and moral landscapes. We should neither teach received views of culture nor place our profession in the *quicksands of moral relativity as we enter a new millennium*" (my italics 750).

Winans, Amy. "Local Pedagogies and Race: Interrogating White Safety in the Rural College Classroom." *College English* 67.3 (2005): 253-273.

-Winans discusses whiteness studies assignments she uses to teach composition to a predominately white student population in rural Pennsylvania. She argues that "[e]xploring race helps students learn to think and write critically" (254).

"WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 23.1/2 (Fall/Winter 1999): 59-66. Rpt. in Harrington et al.

Yancey, Kathleen. "Bowling Together: Developing, Distributing, and Using the WPA Outcomes Statement—and Making Cultural Change." Afterword. Harrington et al. 211-21.