



# Rhetoric & Writing at BGSU

## Rhetoric & Writing Notes - Winter 2002

### Issue Five Winter 2002

#### From the R&W Program Self-Study: Alumni and Program Quality

An important indicator of the quality of a program . . . is the success graduates have securing positions for which they have trained. So the placement figures . . . speak very positively about the Rhetoric & Writing Program. 66% of graduates in the focus years of this self-study took initial tenure-line positions, compared to a national figure of 55% in MLA's most recent placement census. In addition, two graduates took open-ended administrative positions (one of which was later converted to tenure-line) and two others initially took temporary positions but had tenure line positions a year later. . . . Another indicator . . . is the sort of work [alumni] do when they assume faculty positions. . . . For example, the program's first four graduates have, over the years, served in the following leadership roles at their institutions: Adult Education Division Head, Director of Placement Testing, Writing Center Director, Director of Professional Writing MA Program, and English Department Head. Program graduates since 1990 have taken important leadership roles on their campuses. They have administered first-year writing programs, writing centers, or writing placement programs (9 graduates); written significant instructional grants (4); chaired an English department (1); coordinated an English department's MAT in English Program (1) and its undergraduate program (1); and coordinated business writing instruction for a business administration department (1).

Graduates since 1990 also have provided leadership beyond their institutions, e.g.: as Web Editor of Business Communication Quarterly; as coordinator of a state-funded program for faculty development of Ohio high school English teachers; and as officers of the National Association of Developmental Education, the Pennsylvania College English Association, the Ohio Association of Two-Year Colleges. At least 62% of graduates since 1990 . . . have publications or conference presentations on their records . . . . This is noteworthy since most program graduates are in positions with heavy teaching loads and . . . many of them also serve in significant leadership roles.

#### Some Recent News from R&W Program Alumni

Brad Barry (1998): Recently, Brad was elected to the Faculty Senate at Dixie State College of Utah. He worked with another colleague to develop "Writing in the Professions," an advanced writing course in the business program. And has been chairing his department's accreditation self-study. Brad spoke on "Interview Projects for Business Writing Courses" at the Association for Business Communication in October, and he gave a presentation on "The Motivational Effects of a Weekly Capstone Seminar Course on the Learning Community Writer" at the CCCC in March.

Gail Corso (1991): In August, Gail became the Coordinator of Communication Arts, English, and Writing in the Arts and Sciences Division at Neumann College. In cooperation with the college's Gerontology Program, she facilitates a monthly Senior Citizen's Writing Workshop in which several students are completing service projects. Since August, Gail has been Book Review Co-Editor of the online journal Kairos. She also consults on on-line assessment for the Educational Testing Service and is an occasional reviewer for a major text publisher. At the 2001 CCCC, Gail gave a presentation on "Practices, Principles and Essences: How a WPA at a Small Liberal Arts College Functions within Her Community and Its Values."

Lynette Porter (1989): Recently, Lynette learned that her proposal was accepted for Developing Online Educational Curriculum: Methods and Technologies; she is writing toward early 2003 publication. And the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University faculty member has two articles in the Proceedings of the 2001 Society for Technical Communication meeting: "Making the Grade, or How to Upgrade an Online Class," "Planning a Community: The Value of Online Learning Communities in Technical Communication." Lynette spoke on "The Role of the Shaman on U.S. TV" at the Popular Culture Association/ American Culture Association conference in April. And at the Popular Culture Association of the South in October, she presented "Instantaneous, Empowering, and Invisible: The World of Online Writing Communities."

#### A Rhetoric & Writing Notes Editorial

##### Early Scholarship Can Have Continuing Impact

One of the pleasant surprises a scholar can experience is finding, in a new book or article, words from her or his own earlier

Janet Auten, a 1989 graduate of the Rhetoric & Writing Program, provides an illustration of how early work can have a continuing life. Toward the end of the 1980s, Janet did research on teacher commentary and worked with advisor Alice Calderonello on a dissertation providing Theoretical Analysis of Teacher Commentary on Student Writing. In the early 1990's, Janet published two articles on that topic: "A Rhetoric of Teacher Commentary" in *Focuses* and "How Students Read Us" in *The Writing Instructor*. Now, a dozen years after she finished the dissertation and a decade since the second article, Janet Auten still finds her work being used as background and direction pointing in scholarship on teacher response.

The December 2001 issue of CCC includes "Moving beyond the Written Comment" by Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O'Neill. The focus of the article is implied by its subtitle, "Narrowing the Gap between Response Practice and Research." Fife and O'Neill mention or quote Auten's articles a number of times, most significantly to begin the section on "Theorizing the need for new research designs" (309-10): In her recent effort to examine how authority is distributed in response practices, Janet Auten observes that teacher commentary is one of many manifestations of "teacher talk" that usually conforms to the Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse: In composition classes, teachers Initiate action in giving a writing assignment. But ordinary rules of asking and receiving information rarely apply here. Instead, the teacher is an "asker who already knows the answer," and therefore the student must Respond, as expected, with a display of appropriate knowledge. The student composition, then, fits neatly into the pattern, ready for the teacher to Evaluate-in the form of commentary with a grade. ("Rhetoric" 5)

Following Auten's analysis of the way student texts and teachers' response can fit into the usual structure of school discourse, we can see how envisioning a conversation in which the student participates only by providing a text to which the teacher responds (and even revises in response to the teacher's comments to which the teacher again responds with commentary that functions as an evaluation of the student's efforts) structures this response exchange in a way that offers the student limited authority and may limit the student's learning and engagement throughout the writing process.

Auten argues that any commentary on student texts attributes greater authority to the commentor. She contends that "it is the nature of teacher commentary to displace the authority of the student as writer and emphasize the commentor's authority. Simply altering one's style of commenting or the tone of the teaching 'voice'-the voice authority-still leaves the textual problem in place" ("Rhetoric" 6).

Auten's analysis suggests a drawback of much of the empirical research on response and the advice it offers teachers: By framing the problem of response as a "textual problem" and suggesting textual solutions (like changing one's commenting style), we still leave unaddressed the larger structures for discourse that shift authority to the teacher and away from the student. Auten suggests that we need to move from a textual framing of the commentary "problem" to a contextual one: Many comment studies are teacher-focused, and they imply that if somehow comments were more cogently written and more carefully offered, then hapless student readers would at last "catch on." But the challenge for teachers in writing comments is not just to be clear or "audience aware" but to reconcile their context for writing comments with students' awareness and ability to read comments. ("Rhetoric" 13-14)

In order to reconcile our context for commentary with our students, Auten suggests that we introduce students to our purposes by giving them a "rhetoric of commentary": explaining why we use certain kinds of comments and the results we intend these approaches to yield. Auten's attempt to make response research more aware of context is an important one. But such a contextual focus for research also needs to be extended to include the way writing and response are structured in the classroom and how this implies certain patterns of discourse.

Jane Mathison Fife and Peggy O'Neill. "Moving beyond the Written Comment: Narrowing the Gap between Response Practice and Research." *College Composition and Communication* 53.2 (Dec. 2001): 300-21.

What I hope you sense, here, is that dissertations and early articles based on them are a lot more than lines on CVs. They can have continuing impact on the profession--even years later--when scholars build on them in their research and publications. (RCG)

### **Some Works by Janet Auten**

*The Voice in the Margins: A Theoretical Analysis of Teacher Commentary on Student Writing*. BGSU Ph.D. Dissertation, 1989 (Advisor, Alice Calderonello).

"A Rhetoric of Teacher Commentary: The Complexity of Response to Student Writing," *Focuses* 4 (1991), 3-18.

"How Students Read Us: Audience Awareness and Teacher Commentary on Writing," *The Writing Instructor* 11 (1992), 83-94.