



Baker, A. D. (Ed). (2001). Abolish or perish? Managed labor in composition: A roundtable with Sharon Crowley. *Workplace*, 7, 67-101.

## **ABOLISH OR PERISH? MANAGED LABOR IN COMPOSITION:**

*A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley*

Anthony D. Baker (Moderator)

In his 1974 survey of U.S. colleges and universities, Ron Smith found that the number of schools with a first-year composition requirement had dropped from 93.2% in 1967 to 76% in 1973 (Moghtader et al 463). Based on this and other dramatic changes in the world of academia, Smith made the following prediction: "All signs point to more schools dropping the composition requirement" (148). Turns out he was wrong. The first-year composition (fyc) requirement has become more entrenched. According to Michael Moghtader, Allana Cotch, and Kristen Hague's 2001 replication of Smith's survey, a full 97% of surveyed colleges and universities have a specific writing requirement, and in 85% of these schools the requirement is fulfilled in the English Department – read: fyc (464). The requirement, it seems, is not budging.

But it does have opponents. For the last ten years, Sharon Crowley has been calling – loudly and clearly – for the abolition of the nearly universal requirement of fyc. Her 1998 collection of essays explores in depth fyc's historical and institutional baggage and argues against the illogic of continuing its requirement. Crowley is not, however, the requirement's first detractor. Since the birth of the compulsory first-year composition course at Harvard in 1885 and its immediate adoption by most U.S. institutions of higher education, its function and worth have been at the center of often heated discussion both in English studies and across the university.

Debate about the abolition of the fyc requirement never stays within safe, well-marked boundaries. As a territory, fyc is an intersection of problems: literacy problems, pedagogical problems, theory problems, assessment problems, curricular problems, professional problems, identity problems, labor problems, management problems. Discussion of any proposal to abolish the fyc requirement will quickly turn from talk of amputation as a radical solution to talk about symptoms, vital signs, and alternatives.

The roundtable discussion that follows this introductory essay only begins with abolition. It includes voices from composition teachers from various universities, from various employment ranks, with various degrees of experience, who use the abolition call as a springboard for exploration of the issues involved with teaching writing within the managed university. Participants include full-timers and part-timers, tenure-trackers, and non-tenure-trackers, graduate students, labor scholars and activists, and composition scholars. Sharon Crowley, Walter Jacobsohn, Eric Martin, Michael Murphy, Karen Thompson, Katherine Wills, and I met online for a week-long roundtable discussion in January of 2001. In our discussion, participants freely explore the thick connections among a whole host of key issues, including tenure, collectivism, management models, ethics of service, basic material issues, and developing a rhetoric for change. We join a conversation already in progress, a debate in its second century.

## A Brief History of the First-Year Comp Abolition Debate

The call to abolish the requirement of fyc is not new. Robert Connors has characterized the discussion about the fyc requirement as cyclical, as an ebb and flow of two types of discourse: *reformism* and *abolitionism* (3). The first wave of abolitionism, which arose in the 1890s – the same decade in which the requirement was born – as based on two practical claims: first, required fyc was originally intended as a "temporary stop-gap until the secondary schools could improve"; second, the drudgery of teaching fyc was "a bad use of trained literary scholars" (Connors 5). Later waves of abolitionism illustrate the variety of complaints against its requirement, many of which are still ringing today.

Thomas Lounsbury, in 1911, claimed that "the average student loathes it," and that "under the compulsory system now prevailing the task of reading and correcting themes is one of deadly dullness," in which "more and more does the business of correcting and criticizing themes tend steadily to fall into the hands of those who . . . have themselves little experience in the practice of composition" (qtd. in Connors 7). In 1913, Preston W. Slosson proposed that a WAC program replace fyc:

The real way to make sure that every Columbia graduate, whatever his other failings, can write whatever it may be necessary for him to write as briefly, logically, and effectively as possible, is not to compel him as a freshman to write stated themes on nothing-in-particular but to insist on constant training in expression in every college course. (qtd. in Connors 8)

Alvin C. Eurich bases his 1932 call for abolition on his study of pretest-posttest compositions of freshmen in the University of Minnesota's fyc program, which claims "no measurable improvement in composition was apparent after three months of practice" (qtd. in Connors 11). In 1939, Oscar Campbell claims that teaching fyc destroys potentially strong faculty, wastes their talents, and obscures the importance of literary study (Roemer et al. 380). Leonard Greenbaum, writing in 1969, disdains the futility of fyc:

Freshman English is a luxury that consumes time, money, and the intelligence of an army of young teachers and of younger teaching fellows. It imposes the standards of taste of a single discipline upon a freshman population whose command of language is sufficient to its purpose. It seldom solves the educational problems of the students with real disabilities to speak, to read, to write. . . . It would be better to stop what we are doing, to sit still, to rest in the sun, and then to search for the populations whose problems can be solved by our professional skills. (qtd. in Connors 18)

In the 1990s, Crowley built her own call for the abolition of the fyc requirement on the following six claims: the universal requirement exploits teachers of writing, particularly part-time teachers and graduate students; the requirement exploits students; it has negative curricular effects; it negatively affects classroom climate; it has negative disciplinary and institutional effects; and the requirement of fyc has negative professional effects (241-243).

Crowley's 'New Abolition' movement differs from its predecessors in several important ways. First, the New Abolitionism is the product of "a newly scholarly and professionalized discipline of composition studies" (Connors 23). With many national journals and books devoted exclusively to composition studies, conversations concerning fyc now enjoy more constancy and sustainability, allowing for more elaboration and more venues for consensus-building. Indeed, Crowley elaborates on her earlier abolitionist stance in her 1998 volume *Composition in the University*, in which she historicizes and problematizes the functions and claims made on behalf of maintaining the fyc requirement and exponentially strengthens her argument for its abolition. Second, the New Abolitionism is being argued not between literary experts and embattled

teachers, but between "serious and prepared experts on writing issues" (Connors 23). Rather than calling for abolition from outside the field of composition studies, as Connors characterizes previous abolition movements, the New Abolitionism "is the work of insiders" (23). Third, New Abolitionists typically appeal first to student interests, and only secondarily to the interests of teachers, departments, and colleges. Connors claims that Crowley and other recent supporters of abolition are more "ideologically informed" and "sympathetic to both students and teachers in ways that few abolitionists have ever been" (24). A final distinction that sets New Abolitionism apart from its predecessors involves the status of the New Abolitionists: many are or have been writing program administrators, familiar with how to get things done practically and politically within their departments, within their institutions, and within their professional organizations (Connors 24-25).

Like its predecessors, Crowley's proposal to dismantle the fixture of the required fyc course has met with resistance. When she presented a paper calling for the abolition of the fyc requirement at the Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville in the fall of 2000, she stirred some noticeable discomfort in her audience. The ensuing series of squirming, defensive stances against abolition were nothing new to Crowley; in a later conversation, she related how she has even been booed at conferences for her abolitionist stance. Proposals to abolish the fyc requirement have been called "fundamentally elitist" (Roemer et al. 378). Joseph Harris claims that abolitionist proposals "seem to desire to get rid of the field hands in composition while somehow retaining the more leisured status of the bosses in the main house" (62). While these defenders of the fyc requirement, I think, are unnecessarily venomous, they do raise an extremely important question: What is the relationship between the call to abolish the fyc requirement and the instructors of these required courses?

At least one point that modern-day reformists and abolitionists must agree on is the shamefully marginalized status of many composition instructors. Colleges and universities are relying more and more on contingent faculty to teach fyc courses. According to a 2000 survey, 85 percent of U.S. schools with a fyc requirement employ part-time instructors to teach composition, an increase from 42 percent in 1973 (Moghtader et al. 465). On the average, one-third of the instructors who teach first-year writing courses are part-timers; one-fifth are graduate assistants (Moghtader et al. 465). Additionally, one-third of the schools surveyed offer no specific training for their composition instructors, and when training is offered, it may vary from a required course to a single, annual orientation session to an informal mentoring program (Moghtader et al. 465). These statistics should distress any one in composition. Summarizing their survey findings, Moghtader, Cotch, and Hague voice their own concerns with labor issues: it is deceptive to state that the growth in the composition requirement necessarily means that all is well with writing programs – particularly if this growth translates into an overreliance on a staffing population of part-time instructors who lack benefits, recognition, and long-term job stability. And it is from this position that any predictions about the future of the writing requirement must be made – regardless of the reformist or abolitionist side that one takes. (460)

Given the increased reliance on part-time labor, and given the recent studies of how poorly these instructors are compensated (for example, "Summary"), the need to do something about these conditions in the managed university is intensifying. *Moving a Mountain*, an extraordinary collection of essays edited by Eileen Schell and Patricia Stock, addresses this need by offering case studies that describe "strategies for transforming non-tenure-track faculty's hiring procedures, contractual arrangements, salaries and benefits, work orientation, teaching evaluation procedures, and professional development opportunities" (29). Both Joseph Harris and Michael Murphy have addressed the labor problems in composition with proposals for adjusting the configurations of the existing management model.

What happens if we consider Crowley's call for the abolition of the fyc requirement in the context of composition's labor practices? How might a discussion of abolishing fyc as a requirement illuminate features of the corporatized university? These are questions that sparked the online colloquy that follows. The alternative forum of an e-discussion enables a spontaneity and polyvocality not usually possible in

traditional modes of academic monologue. Participants in this colloquy begin with the abolition proposal and spin from it an exploration of the whole web of problems associated with teaching composition. As this discussion illustrates, consideration of a radical proposal helps us to reframe and reshape the simultaneous problems surrounding first-year composition, without necessarily attempting to close or resolve crucial academic labor issues – issues that resist tidy models or pat answers.

### Works Cited

Connors, Robert J. "The New Abolitionism: Toward a Historical Background." *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Ed. Joseph Petraglia. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995. 3-26.

Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998.

Harris, Joseph. "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition." *CCC* 52.1 (September 2000): 43-68.

Moghtader, Michael, Alanna Cotch, and Kristen Hague. "The First-Year Composition Requirement Revisited: A Survey." *CCC* 52.3 (February 2001): 455-461.

Murphy, Michael. "New Faculty for a New University: Toward a Full-Time Teaching-Intensive Faculty Track in Composition." *CCC* 52.1 (September 2000): 14-42.

Roemer, Marjorie, Lucille M. Schultz, and Russel K. Durst. "Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing." *CCC* 50.3 (February 1999): 377-392.

Schell, Eileen E., and Patricia Lambert Stock, eds. *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2001.

Smith, Ron. "The Composition Requirement Today: A Report on a Nationwide Survey of Four-Year Colleges and Universities." *CCC* 25 (1974): 138-148.

"Summary of Data from Surveys by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce." *MLA Online* 24 March 2001.

*Anthony D. Baker, The University of Louisville*

### Opening Comments

#### **Tony Baker:**

Welcome to the electronic roundtable discussion of the proposal to abolish the requirement for first-year composition. This discussion board will be operative for the week beginning Monday 1/29 and ending Sunday 2/4. Our online conversation will be published as "Abolish or Perish? Managed Labor in

Composition: A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley" in the special spring 2001 issue ("Literacy Work in the Managed University") of the online journal *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*.

I'd like to reserve this opening space for brief introductions. Since many of us have not previously met, I'm requesting that each participant write a short bio.

Here's mine: I'm Tony Baker, and I'm humbly serving as moderator/editor of the discussion. I'm a PhD candidate in the University of Louisville's rhetoric and composition program; my dissertation is an exploration of the theories and practices of student reflection in comp classrooms.

***Walter Jacobsohn:***

Walter Jacobsohn--presently on a hiatus from teaching in order to write. I have worked in a variety of institutions as a teacher of composition, intro. to lit., speech and creative writing both as "adjunct" and instructor. These institutions include LIU-Brooklyn (where I was active in promoting adjunct concerns as an officer and a member of the Executive Committee of the LIU branch of NYSUT), Queens College, Middlesex County College, and most recently Seton Hall as a full-time non-tenure track instructor of Writing.

***Michael Murphy:***

A long-time two-campus instructor, Michael Murphy is now a Visiting Assistant Professor of English and the Interim Director of Composition at Oswego State University, SUNY. He is currently soliciting submissions for *Reimagining the Instructorate: Models for Full-Time Instructorships, Lecturerships, and Preceptorships in Composition and Rhetoric*.

***Sharon Crowley:***

Hello everyone. I'm Sharon Crowley and I teach at Arizona State University. Most of my current teaching and my published work is in the history of rhetoric and composition. For about ten years now I've been advocating that the universal requirement in first-year composition be dropped. I'm very much looking forward to this discussion.

***Katherine Wills:***

Hi, everyone, I am Katherine Wills. I taught as an adjunct lecturer for eight years before entering the University of Louisville doctoral program in Rhetoric and Composition. I advocate student/teacher labor activism and collectivism as a response to managed labor practices and academic capitalism as discussed by Rhoades and Slaughter. My dissertation will focus on the effects of corporatorization on students and teaching in the composition classroom. This conversation with all of you is central to my life and work.

***Karen Thompson:***

Hi. Karen Thompson here finally. As a long time part-timer (22 years at Rutgers), a local and national advocate for part-timers in the AAUP, the CCCC, the MLA or wherever I can get a work in, I'm overworked. I'd like to have this conversation more leisurely, but I feel rushed (as usual) trying to wedge this in between a huge pile of papers, my representation work, and national travel (and, oh yeah, my life.) Since I already have a reputation for bluntness, I'd like to apologize in advance or at least warn folks--this feature gets exaggerated online. I tend to be more of an organizer than an academic, so that's another reason I'll probably be concise and direct.

***Eric Marshall:***

And finally...Hi everyone, I'm Eric Marshall, PhD candidate in English at the CUNY Grad Center, and adjunct lecturer in English (mostly comp) in CUNY since 1991. I'm Vice President for the Part-time Instructional Staff of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), CUNY's labor union, and have spent much of the past seven or eight years organizing part-timers into the PSC, and advocating for a more vocal, visible, knowledgeable, active part-time faculty. In CUNY, I've been involved with a number of literacy initiatives, most recently "Looking Both Ways" – which brought together CUNY writing faculty and New York City high school teachers of English and Social Studies to discuss the teaching of writing. I very much look forward to this forum.

## **Abolish or Perish? Managed Labor in Composition:** *A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley*

### **Strand 1: Dissecting the Beast**

*Walter Jacobsohn:*

[Sunday, Jan. 28, 2001, 03:05 pm]

I wanted to open with some preliminary comments because I dearly want to steer this discussion toward the labor issue and because I have a root canal on Monday morning and want to put my two cents in before that much anticipated moment. I realize I am speaking out of turn and will abide by the moderator for the rest of this discussion – I also understand that he may decide to put them aside for now, and/or that additional painful operations may be performed on them during my absence from this discussion.

I greatly admire *Composition in the University* both for its scholarship and specific arguments, but I think that its real contribution is how it exposes the far deeper ramifications of temp labor in the academy rather than just for first-year comp (fyc). It exposes a radical problem and fittingly offers a radical solution. My problems with some of the arguments and solutions offered can perhaps best be expressed in the following analogies:

A putrid monster dripping with disease and filth nevertheless provides the very needed action of bringing food to an isolated village. It accomplishes this task very inefficiently and nastily by dripping disease and filth on a good deal of the food such that a large portion of it is unusable. It also expresses itself in other forms of bad temper such as stomping on hapless villagers whenever they complain. Its two arms in which it carries the food are especially and horrifically corrupt with filth. Crowley's solution is to cut off the arm. I cannot see how the rest of the body will be reinvigorated by the removal of one of many offending protuberances. For sure, the monster will now provide less bad food, but also less good food.

On another level we can see the situation in academia as like a doctor being confronted with a patient who has gangrenous leg and who offers two solutions: I can cut off the leg and you will probably get better, but you won't have a leg, or you can take two aspirin and if you don't die, though you probably will, then you'll have two legs.

My sense of academia faced with the temp labor problem is that they have only offered the aspirin and, in that case, they had much better amputate as Crowley suggests. My own contention is that we can do much better than offer two aspirin, and we don't have to amputate. By this I don't mean that first-year comp as it stands is essential and that it should not be reformed. Nor do I mean that it cannot be usefully abolished in many cases. But first year comp is simply not the essential problem from my point of view – which is why I'd like to see this discussion focus on the larger issues of academic labor.

*Tony Baker:*

[Sunday, Jan. 28, 2001, 11:30 pm]

Walter's analogies provide a pretty vivid starting point for us – certainly more graphic and interesting than the two questions I was going to begin with:

What's the relationship between the universal composition requirement and the widespread use of flex-time, pay-per-course instructors?

How do universities and departments benefit from using temp labor for first-year writing courses?

I'm having difficulty reframing these questions in terms of Walter's "hapless villagers" or of his patient with the gangrenous leg. But I agree that it's important to not immediately jump in our conversation to examining alternatives to abolishing the requirement of fyc, although these alternatives will certainly arise. So we might devote some discussion to identifying some of the issues, trends, subtexts that are dripping all over academic laborers in fyc programs.

*Michael Murphy:*

[Monday, Jan. 29, 2001, 10:53 am]

Hi, everybody. Like Walter (are first names ok?), I'm deeply interested in the problems of academic labor: I suppose I have enough of what Slaughter and Rhoades call the "structuralist" in me to think that underlying economic relations account for much more of the circumstances of our daily work lives – and work – than we sometimes imagine, or can even recognize at any given moment. But I also don't think we can ignore the place of Composition in this discussion – or at least I don't want to move past it too quickly. Since the percentages of part-time instructors (pti's from here on out, for me) are much higher in Composition than in other disciplines (particularly literary studies, though I think this is changing), we need to think carefully about why we imagine this is so as we move to generalizations about the instructorate and larger academic workforce.

In fact, I think Sharon's article calls us to see Walter's first analogy as at least partly problematic – our students don't need Composition the way isolated villagers need food, the article seems to me to take pains to point out. In that case, who needs the monster and all its putrid dripping disease and injustice? Or at least we shouldn't inflict it on the villagers with the universal requirement.

But I find Composition much less this sort of monster than others might (and I don't mean to suggest that anyone else here, Walter or Sharon or anyone, necessarily believes in this kind of cartoon, which I think Walter meant as a kind of light-hearted, comic opening image). And I also agree – to move on to Walter's second image, I guess – that we can do better than aspirin in our efforts to make sure that required first-year courses provide useful intellectual experiences for students and exert positive forces on academic life. It's easy to stereotype Composition courses as narrow and oppressive gatekeepers focused on prescriptive approaches to mechanics and style, cleaning up the great unwashed for life at the university and in middle-management. But I believe the socio-economic – and intellectual – reality of how most Composition courses function is much more complicated than that. There's no question that the courses can be better – and here's where the bigger structural, systemic issues come in most directly for me – but they're also not at all the monster we sometimes make them, I think.

I myself really like the model that Sharon offers at the end of the chapter we all read. Though I think she's imagining a series of upper-division electives here, I don't know why some version of this couldn't be done in required first-year writing. She says: "I would hope that such a course of study would not confine students to practice in composing. Rather, it would help them to understand what composing is and to articulate the role it plays in shaping their intellectual lives" (262).

This is very consistent with my own vision for what Composition should offer beginning undergraduates. In fact, I believe our recent rearticulation of required first-year writing at Oswego, now called "College Writing I: Writers and Literacies," actually looks something like this. The description reads:

CW I asks students to explore their own expectations about the goals and purposes of written discourse, as well as those of the writing communities in which they participate, at the same time that they develop their writing skills and refine their writing processes through intensive practice. Focusing on language's function not only as a mode of communicating, but also of refining and deepening ideas as well as articulating cultural identity, CW I explores the questions: what does it mean to be a writer, and why might one choose to be one sort of writer rather than another? Attention will also be given to achieving focus, organization, and readability in texts, as well as to critical reading and research skills.

Of course, Sharon's absolutely right about the institutional and political pressures surrounding Composition: the language of course descriptions, in particular, is always something of a negotiation between a range of parties on campus trying to exert some force over literacy practices, and one always makes some concessions. And I certainly don't want to hold up our still unfolding course as a model. But I also think we shouldn't assume first-year writing is an oppressive monster and thus give up a wonderful chance to do some really meaningful work with advanced literacy practices.

And I guess that's my point: whether we agree that this is potentially meaningful work worth doing makes all the difference in how we think about the labor force doing it. [Like Walter, I too am very pressed for time this week. I'll do my best to keep up with the postings and respond as regularly as possible.]

*Walter Jacobsohn:*

[Monday, Jan. 29, 2001, 01:47 pm]

I wanted to confirm Michael's assessment of the monster – yes, I meant it as a light-hearted opening image, but I did invest it with slightly more thought. I was hoping that someone would ask about the other arm that we haven't proposed lopping off: administration. I also don't see the monster as being first-year composition or composition in general – I am talking about the university and comp. as an appendage, though I suppose I could have made that clearer. My intent is not that we should try to push for ridiculous extremes and encompass the reform of the entire university system in this discussion, but that we should constantly remember that comp does not operate in a vacuum – what purpose will comp reform serve for the university in general? who will profit from it and push for it and how and why? I don't think the labor situation in comp. is unique – presently it is more extreme than for other disciplines (if experience isn't enough, the result of the resent CAW survey demonstrates it vividly), but as Michael notes, that is changing. I don't think we can afford to ignore either the local or the larger complexities, the context for comp reform.

*Sharon Crowley:*

[Monday, Jan. 29, 2001, 06:24 pm]

Like Walter, I want to talk about the larger set of economic practices and rationalizations in which the labor conditions in composition function. I was blown away by Randy Martin's "Education as National Pedagogy" (thanks for including it in the packet, Tony) and I hope we can keep his observations about monetarization in mind as we talk. This seems like a good word to characterize what has happened to the university in the last ten years or so. Money, or better, profit, is now the bottom line. When was the last time you argued for any change at your campus(es) by claiming that your proposal would improve the quality of instruction? Those arguments just don't work any more--they're not even heard. I also don't want to lose sight of the fact that labor practices in composition are now more or less universal in undergraduate instruction, at least at Research I universities. If you haven't had a chance to look at the recent report on staffing from the American History Association I recommend that you do so. It's available

at their website and also MLA's. Comp is of course still the champ when it comes to marginal employment but other humanities disciplines (i.e. modern languages) are not far behind. So there's another "larger picture" we need to heed – the corporatization of the American university.

And I guess I'll include my standard disclaimer right off: I am not arguing that composition should be abolished. I'm interested in the institutional effects of the universal requirement, which seems to me to be a separate issue from curriculum, although it certainly effects what can be done in a composition curriculum. Hope your root canal went okay, Walter.

*Katherine Wills:*

[Monday, Jan. 29, 2001, 11:00 pm]

Walter asks "What purpose will comp. reform serve for the university in general? Who will profit from it and push for it and how and why?" This question echoes Sharon's expressed interest in the institutional effects of the universal comp requirement. Walter, if I connect what Sharon calls the "set of economic practices and rationalizations" of labor in composition to the cut line from a film about cynicism of commerce, I get a rudimentary answer: Follow the Money. Note bene: the (big) money is not going to contingent instructors – the "labor" in a labor-intensive discipline – or their professional development. What troubles me about eliminating the universal comp requirement is that I don't see any reform in the underlying institutional structures that support classrooms as profit centers. Indeed, the university bean and head counters, our comrades in the intellectual bureaucracy, might use part-timers to teach upper-level writing courses or writing in the disciplines. How does money circulate from the "cash cow" of composition through the institution? Can we conduct institutional and structural analysis at the micro-level (classroom) or macro-level--without a cash flow chart? What tools do we need?

*Karen Thompson:*

[Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2001, 03:49 pm]

Let me stir things up here further by suggesting that wherever the writing is taught (in a writing program, across the disciplines, etc.) if there are labor intensive (writing intensive) courses there will be forces trying to exploit adjuncts/grad students in those courses. Perhaps writing need not be taught at all at the university level, just presumed. So much for open enrollment. Additionally, class size strikes me as a real educational issue which interests students and instructors – especially if we're ever going to get full-timers to teach writing. Reducing class size is not easy because it speaks directly to the corporatization/monetarization dynamics. Currently, open enrollment is under attack and class size is growing (except at the most elite institutions.) Both of these issues involve the larger communities (students, their families) and they need to be involved in order for some of these things to change. Doesn't this mean that we not only have to talk about academic labor in the broad sense, but in the context of a general workforce that is increasingly contingent?

*Katherine Wills:*

[Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001, 07:54 am]

Karen, in your 1999 *Workplace* interview, you argue that people are not motivated by moral arguments; they are more readily moved by economic realities. Sharon relates the same idea that money or profit is now the bottom line in academia. At a micro-level, each composition classroom (or class taught by a part-timer) functions as a model site of surplus value for the university. The Martin article states that, at a macro level, corporatization encourages the national mobilization for globalization and hypercapitalism (Rhoades). At the institutional level, what economic arguments can we make that hiring cheap labor is a short-sighted and penurious solution? This is a tricky proposition because it appears to diminish contingent labor's job opportunities. How do we convince students, parents, legislators, and community stakeholders that cheap labor is not a value? This is a tricky, also, because many administrators currently benefit with salaries enhanced by windfall from the use of contingent labor. As Walter notes, fyc is not the essential problem.

***Karen Thompson:***

[Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001 - 10:13 am]

Great work putting together a lot of the texts. As someone else already pointed out, many educational institutions do not have education as a top priority. One of the reasons I raised class size is that is something you can talk to students and their families about--along with faculty accessibility. When I compare what goes on at a university like Duke where my son studies to the situation at Rutgers where I teach, it's obvious how much more contact he has with full professors, professors who are doing research and are involved in the workings of the institution. This has to do with class size as much as it has to do with what type of faculty are in the classroom. The only time students become aware of this problem is when they want a recommendation and their comp teacher is the only one they know. Class size and accessibility are key. Preserving opportunities for part-timers should not be an issue: there's some minimal legitimate use for contingent faculty that's unrelated to comp, and there are specific ways to protect individuals through negotiations.

***Michael Murphy:***

[Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001, 10:35 am]

Not only does "follow the money" strike me as an increasingly appropriate motto for ANY analysis of academic change/politics – and, yes, Katherine, I too wish I knew the specific tools we needed to do this kind of analysis effectively! – but I think Katherine's on to another really important point in her Monday posting, too. If we stop using part-timers in Composition, the general institutional bottom line will demand that they be put to work elsewhere, that those cheap, part-timer FTE's be reabsorbed somewhere else in the university. And, if not in first-year comp, then maybe upper division Writing – or, more likely (and frighteningly, I think), in Western Civ (along with 400 other students--see Karen's Duke/Rutgers posting, minutes ago--and remember what Thomas Newkirk says about "the politics of intimacy"!) or required foreign language courses (now THERE, at least to my mind, is an elitist imposition!...). Inarguably, universities DO regard classrooms as profit centers these days – and with increasing explicitness, as Sharon points out.

The problem is that I just don't know how to overthrow this corporate sensibility in toto, at least in the short term. Over the long haul, organizing all faculty as a labor force seems to me the best way to work against it (as ironic as becoming a bargaining unit in order to resist marketplace pressures will doubtless seem – I know firsthand – to some traditional faculty, who pride themselves on a kind of monkish sense of vocation, complete with self-imposed vows of poverty). And the kinds of innovative and enlightened public/private structures Rhoades and Slaughter call for at the end of their essay – "infus[ions of] the private sphere with public forms of economic, political, and normative control" (64) – sound wonderful to me, though I can't quite envision them clearly. If anybody can help with these kinds of major structural shifts, I'm very, very interested.

But even under improved circumstances, at least the ones I can imagine right now, I think we'll always have to find ways to negotiate the university as a corporation, as a profit center – ways to argue for what we see as improvements in instruction, curriculum, and staffing by making them SOUND like smart business moves (if not immediately profitable ones, then at least good PR!). I think we have a long history of making these arguments in Composition – we've had to. And my sense is that doing useful, critical work in a corporate, managed university in the future will absolutely depend on it. I guess what it comes down to is that I see much of our hope for creating change lying in our work – and sorry to sound so mercenary about this – as sort of guerrilla rhetoricians. No?

In fact, that's what I suppose we've begun to talk about here now. I'm not sure that quality-of-instruction arguments don't have a certain power – at least a PR, lip-service value that most administrators take very seriously – but I've always argued, along with Karen, Sharon, and Katherine, that arguments from ethics, fairness-of-employment arguments, don't get us very far these days in contingent labor discussions. I think two-pronged quality-of-instruction AND economic-effectiveness approaches are most powerful right now.

It feels a little uncomfortable for many of us to say it, but like it or not we ARE, as Katherine points out, a "model site of surplus value" for universities. Composition teachers do a good job, and they do it cheap. And yet I'm not sure this has to compromise our negotiating position – that it's necessarily an argument for extending present working conditions, for continuing the exploitation of pti's. But then, I guess everybody here knows my take on this now: aren't we now in a position to at least insist that they take the "contingent" off "contingent labor"? That is: can't we take advantage of the economic value we present universities to argue for more fully professionalized – and tenurable – positions for instructors? But then, as I've said, this is obviously my own axe to grind...

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2001, 12:52 pm]

Because labor in academia is "different" on some important levels it is a mistake to assume that any sweeping reform can fix things – one of the biggest problems is that though we tout interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary we seldom look beyond our discipline even when we are dealing with issues that affect all the disciplines. Karen talks about her directness as an activist more than an academic, but the very field she suggests we enter into, parents, students, elite schools catering to the privileged vs. open enrollment is complex and fascinating – a challenge to theory (you do have to incite academics to action with more than just a reminder of their ethical responsibility – it's one of those professional deformities – not to mention needing to adapt to the power structures they are dealing with) as much as it is a challenge to forego lip service.

This brings me to issues that I think need to be dealt with:

- academics as "workers" (or not)
- the role of distance education in transforming knowledge transmission and labor
- forms of organizing and communicating: interdisciplinary, interuniversity – the forms our dialogues need to take to invite in and inform the professorate so they can communicate proactively among themselves and with a wider public...and indeed any sphere where a power base intersects with ours...the world (on that note I have been irritated by a dialogue on public intellectuals in the *Nation* which presents only sometimes justifiably a lot of the negative stereotypes of the university and university professor – in the US the university plays a huge role, directly and indirectly, in any form of intellectual life...it's not just the hidden rabbit warren where intellectuals go to escape their public responsibilities and indulge in narcissistic ideological ADD – incomprehensible babble).

The hoops we jump through are no longer rites of passage, the usual bureaucratic muddle – they are stifling, a waste of brainpower. You need local action, unions, but that is not easy and certainly no answer in itself – you also need to develop a different sense of community and real communication among higher education faculty because the old self image just isn't going to cut it – that and the rigidly hierarchical element built into it, which tenure, for all its importance for academic freedom, does help to bolster. I like Martin's idea behind his use of the term "post-modern" (in an article on the *Workplace* site) to denote a new form of action which I view as less ideologically pure and more pragmatic. There are no sweeping solutions – just a lot of constantly changing contingencies (distance education is fascinating because the medium seems especially apt for other disciplines, not labor intensive writing).

I'll give you a tentative example of something I'm working on presenting – why not create an informational network that gives everyone access to this kind of debate (my focus would be labor) using the web and eschewing individual publication in specialized journals, books etc. Get permission and reprint articles on this topic from all the disciplines (include union contracts etc. so as to make it easier for people not presently involved to get involved and take action) and keep an eye out on how we can communicate effectively to the public by explaining the issues clearly and simply. The web site itself

would be proactive but not narrowly ideological, linking to other sites that have specific takes on the subject – not repeating info – giving people access and making new connections – linking. Funding? As many professional orgs. and unions as possible – all those who could potentially benefit. Depending on funding you could give it more room or less. Obviously not a solution, but it does help to create the space that makes action easier, and that focuses academics on certain specific problems, while supplying the multitude of perspectives that help to keep the initiatives from being co-opted, that we can actually do something about. There is a lot more I can say about this particular idea – but I want to insist that this is only one small possibility among many others open to us that involves redefining ourselves in order to act effectively...not to mention a certain humility. Sorry – I really like this quote from Patricia Schroeder: "We can either wring our hands or roll up our sleeves, and I don't know anyone who can wring and roll at the same time."

***Eric Marshall:***

[Thursday, Feb. 01, 2001, 12:48 am]

I'm glad Karen pitched in with a more explicitly Labor perspective; that's what I was going to do, and now I feel I can hold off on that a bit. I, too, very much appreciate the work that Michael and Sharon (among, of course, many others) have done in this field. In the articles we read for this discussion, I agree with many of their/your premises, though not with all of the conclusions. I believe, however, that there are certain realities at work here which are too often – perhaps always – unmentioned and therefore overlooked. First, by the very nature of the discipline, composition instruction is problematic. Writing well and teaching writing well are two *very* different enterprises. Success in the former by no means ensures success in the latter. Of course comp folks know this, but do all academics? Does the public? And of course it applies in all other disciplines as well: a skilled practitioner is not necessarily a good teacher. But comp is different, seemingly. Most academics think themselves good writers. Many, perhaps most, consequently undervalue the skills involved with teaching writing well – believing, wrongly, that anyone who can write well can teach it. Thus, in many institutions, virtually all faculty, even full-timers, take their required turn with an obligatory comp section or two. Can one imagine that attitude being extended to lit courses?

Within the discipline, other problems exist. For so many of us, especially, perhaps, in urban institutions like CUNY, in many cases teaching writing has morphed into teaching the English language. These, too, are very different enterprises requiring different kinds of skills, not to mention inclinations. Their conflation (along with Composition's typical subsumption into English Lit departments) damages the respect for each, and greatly affects public (and the academy's) perceptions of both.

The status of a department, sub-department, or discipline, seems to me to be connected (for better or worse) to the level of the students in the classes: upper division courses versus lower division; courses with/for majors versus all others; composition versus literary studies. The hierarchies may be implicit, but they are nonetheless clear.

Since at least the second half of the twentieth century, the academy has privileged specialization over generalization. Perhaps comp, perceived by many as the epitome of general subjects (all students need to be able to write well; written communication skills are clear class markers in our society, most colleges require comp of all freshmen, etc.) suffers for this. One may be able to get by in the world without a basic knowledge of, say, physics, but not of writing. Hence, physics is a special skill, writing a general one, and their relative status is so reflected, as is, not coincidentally, the relative salaries paid to adjuncts in those fields at institutions without collective bargaining. It is *because* composition (like reading, though not like math--the other primary required skills) is needed in *every* college course, in *every* discipline, that it languishes in the educational basement, not *despite* that fact. That's the sad irony.

Like the others, I too believe changes need to be made. But I don't believe that the service ethic is completely misplaced, nor that the service model should be entirely replaced. We need to educate, first our

colleagues then the public, about nature of the discipline and its concomitant enterprises. We also need to get away from the rather conservative, acquiescent, and often Fordist thinking about the situation. I cannot imagine that institutionalizing a further tiering of the academy would result in anything but a further exploitation of even more people. More on the Labor perspective to follow.

## **Abolish or Perish? Managed Labor in Composition:**

*A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley*

### **Strand 2: Institutional Effects**

**Tony Baker:**

[Monday, January 29, 2001 - 10:26 pm]

I thought I'd start a new strand to create a little space to discuss Sharon's interest in the institutional effects of the universal requirement. One effect is the invisibility (both inside and outside the university) of composition as an actual area of study. In *Comp in the University*, Sharon proposes that compositionists are automatically associated with the required first-year course(s), which are still seen by non-comp folks as courses that focus on grammar and product. Thus, comp faculty are viewed as "literacy gatekeepers rather than as intellectuals and teachers" (243). An illustration: I was interviewing at MLA in December for a rhet/comp position at a small school. English faculty at this school are housed in a Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, and I was being interviewed by the chair, a philosophy professor. He was dismissive of – even angry at – my descriptions of student-centered activities and my ideas to integrate a service learning component into first-year comp classes. What he wanted to know was if I could keep bad grammar and poor spelling out of "the real classes."

When comp studies is assumed by the university to be in the service of all other courses, composition instructors are much more likely to be undervalued, underpowered, and underpaid. They're less likely to have control over the curricula in comp courses, and they're more likely to be seen as interchangeable, flexible laborers by the university and (sometimes) by their own departments.

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Wednesday, January 31, 2001 - 01:51 pm]

There is a lot I want to flesh out in this thread.. First, thanks Sharon, today I am feeling fine – dentist's appointments are nine parts anticipation and one part actual pain. As luck would have it, I had just finished reading and re-reading Sharon's book among other material including Michael's recent *CCC* essay and Karen's essay in *Moving the Mountain* in preparation for an essay I am writing (a lot of what I am going to say here are fumes from this project faced with a looming deadline – prolix prewriting). Randy Martin's introductory essay is just one part of a great collection, *Chalk Lines* (Martin & Rhoades), of which any one of the essays has something powerful to say – I can't recommend it enough. Being asked to participate in this discussion is serendipity for me.

I read comp theory and actually get a good deal of pleasure from it because, among other reasons, of its ethical consciousness and political priorities – an attitude to pedagogy which I feel is the most relevant to the situations and students we face as teachers in higher education today regardless of the discipline (a real concern for students...whom we don't want to forget here) – but I am not a comp theorist nor am I as conversant with it as the other participants in this roundtable. I know enough to be aware that a lot of what we are talking about here has been dealt with in a far more studied and sophisticated manner than I am capable of, whether in the WPA listserv or book-length essay collections or professional journals (one short essay in particular comes to mind by Richard Bullock as well as the essay "After Wyoming"). The responses to Crowley's proposal (I like Schell's characterization of it as a "modest proposal") cannot be read as reactive (whether pro or con) – they in themselves constitute pro-active statements that help to resituate comp studies in a positive manner – one example: "service" can be seen as a real strength in the

way it helps to inform both theory and practice – a form of "keeping it real," closer to students. I would like to try to keep my awareness of some of this work poised in the background.

A study at Seton Hall University demonstrated that students who went through Basic Writing (admittedly, one step before the required course) had a significantly higher retention rate and grade point average than those who had been, for whatever reason, exempted from the course. I don't mean to present this in any way as conclusive evidence, but at the very least it does help to show that the jury is still out on the usefulness of these courses. It is also interesting to note again that the Seton Hall program is NOT particularly progressive and tends to follow quite closely "current-traditional pedagogy." Yes, this study could be questioned – the point Sharon raises about the benefits of a nurturing environment that has real interaction between the professor and students rather than what is actually learned in the course can have a huge effect...but that for me is one of the genuine strong points of the "service" component – it would be nice to have all faculty for first year courses provide this kind of environment, but will it happen? How do you make it happen?...maybe comp should be showing the way more (though I duly note Karen's emphasis on class size as powerful in itself)...it's not just about writing anymore, its also about some important pedagogical principles and practices.

It's dangerous to consider any text or approach as somehow monolithic in its effect. I've had good teachers who have transformed my experience regardless of the material we studied in ways that I could hardly have imagined – yes, this argument can seem old hat, but it is not easily dismissed (after all, if we're being "guerrilla rhetoricians" that's part of our base). I don't in any way consider this an argument for keeping things the way they are, but I do consider it worth stating because among other things it brings us back to who teaches and how, often more important than what and why (to paraphrase Wilde). Just like how we teach is very important, the context in which we teach can't just be a given – it can't remain invisible.

To go back again to Michael's example of the course he developed: I want to know how much institutional support you have in the creation and implementation of this course, how much innovation is welcomed, do the faculty and administration respect and encourage these efforts with some general understanding of the discipline and its importance, and of course, who teaches and what kind of status are they given, etc. Otherwise you get the kind of impossible situation that Tony experienced in his job interview...innovations are window dressing and you're essentially a droid; your job is to grammarize so that real faculty don't have to bother (which some might argue has its own value that we shouldn't be so quick to denigrate – it does involve giving students access to the university – empowering). Acknowledging the precariousness of our efforts, we are not alone, is important to actually getting things done...that and a lot of perseverance and patience. Another example for me of "context" is the move by the part-time faculty forum to document good employment professional practices (there was a good overview of the Syracuse program recently) which I think is very needed so that we can actually discuss this as more than abstract principles that too many academics don't think applies to their particular situation...the problem is each situation is going to be unique – it's even ironic that departments with the best practices are often the ones with the most lopsided ratios of p/t to f/t faculty...of course, it's cost effective so they can afford it.

*Michael Murphy:*

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 12:13 pm]

Wow, Walter -- a lot to respond to! First, I agree wholeheartedly with what you say (and you too to some extent, Eric, though I'm just now getting to your posting) about the importance of class size and the kinds of intellectual intimacy that happen at least partly as a result in Composition courses – and seldom elsewhere in the university. This is what I meant by citing Thomas Newkirk. In a study of Barrett Wendell's experiences offering highly individualized writing instruction at Harvard, Newkirk sees this dynamic at work as far back as the late 19th century, and – like you, I think – he imagines this dedication to close work with students as perhaps an even more important part of the intellectual function of first-year comp courses than theoretical orientation. It's the REALLY loaded political question in Comp, he

contends – much more than the question of whether we teach rhetoric for the meritocracy or writing as self-expression or even writing as ideology critique – in part because it's predicated on all the issues we've been talking about. It costs universities money to support student work in this way.

That idea's also behind a very large part of my full-time instructorships argument, I think: I worry a little that the teaching function of academia has gotten obscured behind the glamour and prestige of its research function, which as Zelda Gamson points out in *Chalk Lines* (which IS wonderful -- I got it after reading the two selections for this roundtable) expanded immensely during academia's post-WWII, GI Bill boom cycle. And I think that really supporting the work of the instructorate – which developed largely as a way to take up the teaching slack when academic budgets got tighter again in the 1980s – is one way to begin to cultivate this sometimes forgotten teaching function anew.

One related aside here: people have been making comments here and there in this discussion about the burgeoning managerial class in higher education. I have great sympathy with these comments, and I would suggest that much of the impulse to see the rising instructorate as the emblem of a corporatized academia is kind of misdirecting our collective ire about the situation. A blood-letting/exorcism, even? The instructorate is only corporate academia's most conspicuous--and vulnerable--manifestation. Blaming the instructorate for the rise of academia's corporate sensibility while ignoring the proliferation of its middle managers (as some faculty in my experience do) strikes me as not unlike blaming "the welfare state" for oppressive middle-class income tax rates while assenting blithely to estate tax abolition (as so many middle-class Americans do).

Now to Walter's questions about our course and working conditions. It's too early for me to say whether our work will amount to "window-dressing," as curricular innovations CAN – but my inclination right now is to expect a good deal more. As I said, the course is still unfolding: the new descriptions and titles (it's actually part of a four-course sequence) only go on the books this spring and get taken up by faculty writing syllabi in the fall. So only then, and in the year or two following, will we really know what people will do with the description.

But, certainly, I have my hopes. And part of this is because it's MY sense that the sort of expectations that you experienced in your interview, Tony, are very much on the wane, especially in English departments. I sense both great enthusiasm for innovation here at Oswego, Walter – in fact, our proposal was approved unanimously by dep't faculty, and we developed it working pretty closely with Writing Across the Curriculum – and very little concern that we project any kind of grammar-and-mechanics-police image across campus, let alone really do it. (Though I won't say that there aren't some people in other disciplines here who expect this.) My idea has always been that we should take advantage of the position the service expectation affords us and redefine the service we provide (what do we really think it means to be a literate person?), and I get the sense that there's plenty of room for that here.

Now, your other questions. Like most depts, we're not model employers – or at least not innovators – with respect to the part-timer question. We teach about 40 sections of Composition each semester, and I'd say that on average about half of those sections are taught by part-timers who also teach a range of literary studies courses, mainly but not exclusively at the lower division (about \$2500 per section, but full benefits), quarter by tenure-line full-timers, and quarter by people on a variety of other kinds of appts – term appt. full-timers, Writing Center staff members, and a couple of graduate students here and there. In fact, I myself am not on a tenure line – I'm a term-appointed, year-to-year full-timer replacing the current Composition Director while he's on sabbatical. And I suppose that alone – along with the disproportionate use of pti's for Writing courses – says something about how Composition has been regarded here in the past (and of course in the field in general: we're not an anomaly) – though I think that's changing. I like my tenure-line colleagues and find them thoughtful and energetic teachers, and my sense is that they like my work, are interested in developments in teaching Writing, and would like to keep me around – I certainly don't feel like a droid, or like I'm perceived as one. There's no question that it's not a position of

unqualified strength and security for me – or for pti's – but so far thinking meaningfully about Comp feels very workable here.

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 08:35 am]

Michael – it sounds like a very good situation to be in – enviable even. It helps to have a working WAC initiative (a pretty good sign of a faculty's awareness and appreciation of writing and comp.) It's wonderful to be able to do real work – reminds us of why we got into this profession. I think it's perhaps a problem to always see the worst case scenario as defining all, but I also think that the worst case scenario is the truer picture, and it's not getting any better. This said, we can't forget that there are real positive openings and even new awarenesses worth exploring.

Nothing could be truer that the rise in administration costs/managerial class (and perks and inanities) and the corresponding downtrend in % of budgets allocated to instruction is a scary and serious phenomenon, but I don't think anybody who has thought about the issue has missed that (though I agree that there are significant numbers of faculty who ignore this phenomenon...among many other things). I'm not sure who is blaming the instructorate or on what basis or what exactly is misdirected (which aspect of it? are you talking about the popular perception? pti's criticizing tenured? Maybe I misunderstood you here)...but I think it's harder to attack the managerial class problem because of the traditional hierarchies and divisions of labor, the paternalism that too many academics take for granted as insuring and protecting their privileges. It has always struck me how little academics get down to the nitty-gritty and actually analyze budget allocations. All too often it seems like they accept the part of the budget that they are given to play with in committee as being the real university budget, much like my hyperactive nephews and nieces think they have prepared the Thanksgiving meal when we send them outside to shuck the corn so we can cook. Why does a university president need three speech writers on her staff? To better sell the university? The opportunity to question why the assistant to the assistant to the vice-president gets his office remodeled at \$50,000 a pop seldom appears, though we know the answer, to entertain prospective customers and donors you need Tuscan leather and Waterford crystal. Oh, and let's not talk about sports....

The thing is, we're also talking about an increasingly complex system which demands that either academics take it on themselves, or you hire specialized support staff (both usually). As the university goes corporate it creates needs that it "has" to fulfill – this doesn't always mean that these are jobs we might necessarily respect or that it hires the best and the brightest--but it also doesn't necessarily mean that these are people paid a lot to sit on their butts – they do work, often essential work, many of them with far less job security than the professorate – more than a few will supplement their incomes with adjunct teaching, and more than a few do excellent work for admirable programs – though I have not yet seen a university managerial staff that is the model of efficiency...or that has the health and excellence of instruction as their top priority. The high-paid provosts, deans, vice presidents are relatively few...as with the salaries of some full tenured professors my problem is not that they earn so much (though the contrast can be very instructive), it's that the majority of the faculty earn so little...bringing me back to technology and distance education and the specialists needed there – the model for those kind of enterprises are already with us.

**Michael Murphy:**

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 12:03 pm]

I'm not sure my present position IS ideal, Walter: I think it can be really difficult (and, well, dangerous) to direct a program which affects all of the tenured professorate in a dep't and has a tangible effect on students in all disciplines – as Composition does – without tenure, or at least without being on a tenure line. But as I said, it's been workable so far – and as you point out, that work can be really gratifying.

18. You're right that we should avoid cheap shots against those who perform important non-academic roles in good faith in university life (if I'm understanding your point correctly). Among other things, universities need to manage their employees' benefits packages, raise funds for a variety of purposes

(many of them directly academic), prepare for large-scale reviews by accrediting agencies, etc. – all jobs which faculty don't want to do but which they benefit from, as you point out. But I also think there's a pretty thick layer of managers – deans of students, associate v.p.'s for retention, directors of product marketing, etc. – who are, all things considered, a good deal more deeply involved in the corporate functions of the university than most other employees. It's my experience that these people – who unlike the Director of Parking or a tech support worker, are usually paid pretty well (better than most faculty in the Humanities, I'd say, and God knows better than instructors) – also tend to be less critical in their participation in the kinds of programs I mentioned in my ALSO post yesterday, for instance ("whole student" stuff, etc.) than most faculty, including pti's. My point is that many people – including both many traditional faculty and many observers outside the university – have come to understand part-timers as the great emblems of the encroachment on academia of marketplace forces that compromise academic interests while by and large forgetting about this managerial layer (which I see as much less few in number than you do). This is the "misdirection" I'm talking about.

And yes, you're clearly right about faculty and budgets – your hyperactive-kids-shucking-corn image is both beautiful and right on the money. Though I'm not sure this is entirely evidence of the out-of-touchness of faculty. I've been in University Senate meetings when budget numbers come out (in long heavy packets!), and I know how impenetrable they are. I don't believe this is at all accidental.

## **Abolish or Perish? Managed Labor in Composition:**

*A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley*

### **Strand 3: Alternatives?**

***Tony Baker:***

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 10:38 am]

Can we explore Eric's last comment: "I cannot imagine that institutionalizing a further tiering of the academy would result in anything but a further exploitation of even more people"? This further tiering is exactly how some universities are dealing with the problem of part-time instructors. I've heard Dickie Selfe at the 2000 Watson Conference in Louisville extol the benefits of working as a full-time non-tenure-track instructor, and in "New Faculty for a New University," Michael proposes the invention of teaching-intensive tenure-track lines for non-research composition faculty: "a formalization of the heterogeneity that now exists on most campuses" (25). What are the benefits and pitfalls of converting part-time, pay-per-course positions to full-time teaching-intensive positions? What are other labor alternatives?

***Walter Jacobsohn:***

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 11:30 am]

The non-tenure track instructor position and the whole idea of conversion opens a big can of worms – I've been involved in helping to create this position in one institution (only to see the idea co-opted and vitiated...but not altogether), hired into a newly created one where I experienced both the best and worst of the idea, and worked as a non-tenure instructor for one semester in a community college – the only place where it worked well because its function was either truly temporary (a way of not hiring adjuncts when enrollments demanded flex labor) or leading to hiring as a tenure-track instructor based on the needs of the department. Even at its best, when the initial motivation for it is clearly worked out based on a specific institutional need that can't effectively be dealt with in any other way, it can't just be created and then become a permanent part of the faculties organization -- it is a contingent move that needs to be scrutinized and changed constantly. Generally administration is not just interested as a cost-saving or even quality of instruction move – it really does give them the possibility of controlling the institutional/instructional life of an institution – all of faculty (though it may not look like an immediate

threat) – because it is very hard to prevent the institution from hiring non-tenure track as a way of replacing tenure lines. As many f/t faculty will say, "Why not just make it tenure track? So maybe these new comp and 'teaching' faculty won't have the publications to actually get tenure, but that's at least six years of a good job. Maybe you can even help to change the rules during those six years such that teaching and valuable contributions to the life of the institution gain more weight in tenure review."

I think it can be an excellent constructive move, especially when there are strongly-worded longer term contracts in place of tenure – and it can be a disaster. One of the best essays I have read recently is a co-authored piece by Richard Jewell and Chris Anson "Shadows of the Mountain." I like a lot of what Michael has to say on the subject – but I think there are limitations as to what kind of institution this position will be a good move for (from the faculty and instructional point of view, of course).

***Eric Marshall:***

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 11:40 am]

Admittedly, Michael's suggestion is appealing in some respects. I recall Louis K. Menand making a very similar argument in the *Sunday New York Times Magazine* several years ago, though his, I believe, was more focused on the conception of doctoral level education and the production of college teachers. Still, from a Labor perspective, it's a disconcerting prospect.

Contrary to Michael's impressionistic assessment of working conditions for adjuncts – the veracity of which I do not doubt on his campuses – all the surveys I've seen, including the two I've conducted in CUNY, suggest that adjuncts do not have (nor feel they have) job security – de facto, de jure, or de rigueur – and don't feel professionalized. In fact, salaries are inequitably low (cf. even the MLA's absurdly inflated numbers reported in their survey of member organizations); salaries bear no correlation to the cost of living; adjuncts often receive no benefits or contractual job security; they are typically not paid for out-of-class contact with students; they typically have little if any office space; and they have little if any input as to the courses they teach. And this is in what is generally identified as a two-tier system (though I believe that is highly debatable – just talk to almost any junior faculty or to full-time lecturers, lab technicians, etc.). Why would further tiering not further exacerbate the problem? Would the addition of job security in the form of tenure forestall the, perhaps inevitable, stratification of the tenured ranks: senior research faculty – junior research faculty – teaching faculty? If not, then all we've really done is trade job security for increased workload, and possibly lower pay relative to our colleagues. And, of course, the tenure review process would need to be similarly bifurcated and reconceived.

6. And so, Tony asks, what are the Labor alternatives to this? I, too, would like to explore this essential question before our discussion ends.

***Karen Thompson:***

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 01:32 pm]

The faculty is already heavily tiered, even within the ranks of the tenured. The major breaks just occur between tenure-track and non-tenure-track and between full-time and part-time. Minimal criteria to address this situation would insist on only fractional part-time appointments (no per course instruction), and that non-tenure-track appointments be associated with a mechanism to become tenure-track or at least include some job security carrying due process and academic freedom. I'll leave clarifying "insist" to someone else.

***Walter Jacobsohn:***

[Thursday, February 01, 2001 - 05:05 pm]

"Labor" is presently the clearest position we can take...but labor too needs to enter into dialogue with the needs of disciplines, the exigencies apparent in the implementation of new technologies, the nature of academic work, and of course very different local histories and missions – these are difficult but needed enterprises. To put in another way – all this talk now about contingent faculty seems to be in the process of inventing a new academic discipline – but that's not the core of what we want, we want to do

something about it and so we need to be very careful both how we express our positions and how we react to counterpositions...further complicated by the fact that we either are not sure about what "academia" is let alone how to define those who labor for and in it or have very different ideas of its place and function. What will pull all the stakeholders together (more or less)? In this process a lot of illusions need to be shed and a lot of theoretical constructions need to be put on the table (some of them very valuable, particularly the semi-Marxist model) that seem to underlie many of our arguments, including my own (a certain naive idealism and propensity for dramatic romanticization seem to be my strong points--hell, it works for me). We are beginning something....

I'll give you an example--one of the main impetuses for us in trying to create new Lectureships in significant numbers (between 20 and 40) through union negotiation and converting adjuncts to full-time non-tenure track positions (and we wanted to avoid making them solely teaching positions for a lot of good reasons, some of which Eric emphasizes...but that's another discussion) in 1995 contract negotiations (there is a huge difference between non-tenure track positions being negotiated and being created by administration) at LIU-Brooklyn was to create a base for further political action in an institution which was and is overtly adjunct driven – everything is paid for by the money that adjuncts bring in – there is no real profit from f/t faculty teaching...the lines are clearly drawn about bottom-line interests, and the majority of the adjuncts kept quiet then and still do. We saw lecturers as a bridge – a way of keeping the dialogue alive, investing power in a movement to change things by making concrete moves (and appealing to a lot of adjuncts' self-interest). We wanted the union to have complete oversight (to remove these positions at the next contract negotiations for instance if they became suspect), but give these positions a chance. (By the way, we got this opening because of ethics – the "rules" and principles by which faculty associations and even unions define themselves – they couldn't deny us access to the process). My point of view was that if successful, whether they kept these positions or not, we would have the faculty's and union's attention which could open up the possibility of new moves. When it didn't happen it was a large part of the demise of our adjunct organization's effectiveness and the subsequent taking over of this idea by f/t faculty who implemented it five years later in a very modest way (and the modest part I am grateful for...except now they'll make it permanent). What continued was the f/t faculty feeding off of adjunct faculty labor by using our "threat" to call for the creation of a large number of tenure track positions...not positions emphasizing teaching mind you, and no conversions...because you need a national search of course. We encouraged it in a bid to raise our gravitas and the beginning of a real joining of interest...and got a slightly changed status quo instead. This kind of situation doesn't hold true for CUNY which is far vaster and more complicated--there is a different chain of power and responsibility--far different moves are needed there.

I've said it before and I'll say it again – even though Eric's assessment of adjuncts and their working conditions is the one most real to me, I see the lectureship move as potentially a way of moving from third class to second class--to actually getting on the map, out of invisibility. Stratification, bifurcation...it's all there, it's just largely invisible. Which do you prefer?

As for the tenure process--it's already being "reconceived" in many cases towards a greater research and publication requirement...why should universities make teaching a requirement when they got the adjuncts to teach? And since that's worked so well – why not make people work even more all the way around...all of us know the drill all too well. Which leads me to my two inevitable conclusions, the only people I trust in these debates are those who are furious, and I wish I could be as pointed and succinct as Karen and Katherine.

*Katherine Wills:*

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 10:19 am]

Thank you for crediting me with succinctness, Walter. I must admit, however, that the brevity and directness of my of my conversation comes from, well, I admit it, being limited in how I see labor and fyc. I like the word economics because it roots everything in oikos, or the house. When one's house is in order,

then one has economic health. When the academy profits by the future solvency of its students and workers, it is in disarray. This is neither good business nor good education. The best of business understands good will and long-term vision. We also teach by how we live. The question in this post is How do we make it more expensive to use contingent labor than to have full-time, full-status, full-benefits for all?

Alt 1: Collectivism. Canada's activism encourages me. I look to the success of the stalwart Canadian 3903 York University picket lines and Carleton 4600 negotiations. Weeks of picket lines significantly changed York and influenced Carleton with the threat of loss of revenue. How can we encourage American professorate to unite with university staff, graduate students and contingent labor for fair labor practices and against chasing the dollar, job security, and class elitism? How do we chip at those unexamined economic practices and rationalizations?

***Eric Marshall:***

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 11:35 am]

I completely agree with Walter; and, of course, Katherine asks the right questions, as well. As I've said earlier, I have great sympathy for the conversion argument. But I still wonder whether conceiving a move from third to second class, as Walter suggests, is enough. It strikes me as at least a little acquiescent, anything less than a full court press for increased full-time tenure-track lines, that is. I mean, let's face it, a lectureship, for many – including many current adjuncts – is not the objective.

I think Walter is quite right when he writes that Labor "needs to enter into dialogue with the needs of disciplines . . . the nature of academic work." But an organized labor movement seems to be/provide the best means to achieve what we really want: changed public and political attitudes towards higher education (especially public higher ed), and re-investment in higher education. This, I believe, must be part of the long-term solution to the problem.

Like Katherine, many of us have been lobbying for years to make part-time faculty cost-ineffective to management, believing that by removing the economic incentive to using part-time labor we would solve the problem. And while this is undoubtedly true to an extent, there are other incentives to management that this does not address, such as their desire for flexibility. It is in management's interest, they seem to believe, to have a large portion of their workforce not just part-time, but also contingent, allowing for staffing and scheduling changes made at (and often after) the last minute. We must consider larger solutions to these systemic problems, and these solutions must include wide-scale public, political, pressure which can only come from a serious re-education and lobbying campaign. An organized labor movement can accomplish this, and, to an extent, is already doing so around the country, see California, for one example.

***Michael Murphy:***

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 11:55 am]

Sorry, Katherine and Eric--I didn't see your most recent messages pop up as I was composing what follows. Instead of trying to modify, I'll respond separately. So before this gets any older, I'll go ahead and send it in.... Walter's clearly right about the virtues of succinctness – which I've obviously never possessed! But this is a REALLY complicated question, requiring that one qualifies EVERYTHING one says over and over. As has been pointed out, conditions are wildly different on different campuses with different economic circumstances, different senses of mission, different faculty traditions, etc. – and of course in different disciplines, too.

Which leads me to my first qualification. Eric is right: we should be thinking about a whole range of alternatives – career-track, full-time instructor lines is only one of them – because, as Walter points out, the positions I've described are just not applicable in all situations, even if you accept their usefulness in some. Just before my paper was published, some people in my present dept wanted to try to create

positions on this model. But there's ALREADY a relatively teaching-intensive load in this dep't (though there's been a recent effort to change this), and I had to respond that I didn't think the positions were workable in that context.

And – succinctness be damned (sorry Walter) – I think I need to keep qualifying – or at least clarifying – for a while here in response to some of yesterday's thoughts in order to suggest more clearly my sense of how the positions might work, as I say in the article, "in all writing programs or English departments where full-time faculty get a load reduction for research and where regular part-time faculty are now used extensively."

First, I want to reaffirm my sense (as Karen and Walter do to some extent too, I think) that we're not talking about a FURTHER tiering of the academy: what my friends call the "teaching substructure" already exists, has for at least fifteen years. There's no question in my mind that we already have a clearly multi-tiered system, with at least a couple of layers of professorial stars (those who make appearances on *Charlie Rose* or even *The Today Show* and those who attract graduate students in the univ. glossy literature) on top. My sense of the political value of formalized, full-time positions is (as Walter says) that they eliminate (or at least significantly decrease) the instructorate's invisibility--which is, at present, a MAJOR part of its disempowerment.

Also – though I know this would be a major change – I'm NOT arguing for non-tenurable instructorships. What I want to at least move for is tenurable positions with tenure reimagined in terms (i.e., dump published research!) appropriate for the positions. Of course, these details need to be worked out – what exactly DOES certify someone for a teaching faculty position, which in some sense does constitute a genuinely new faculty identity in post-secondary ed (perhaps we should be looking to community colleges and teaching-intensive liberal arts colleges for the answer)? But I think there are already some precedents (if not models) for this. UC Santa Barbara has a "security of employment" track for full-time lecturers (though I understand recently that it's very under-utilized). Eric (and others) might tell us – hasn't CUNY for many years had "Certificates of Continuous Employment" for 5-year-plus full-time instructors (though I'm told they're falling out of favor with CUNY administrators)? I know that the university I describe in the article is just now moving toward these positions, and one of the issues the vice-chancellor seems most committed to (I'm told – of course, I see all this from a distance on my new campus) is "a tenure-like arrangement of some sort." Traditional full-timers always seem squeamish about calling it "tenure," and frankly I don't care: they can have the title and the mystique, just give instructors (again pretty much whatever they decide they want to call them) the money and the guarantee! Equitable pay, job security, and real academic freedom.

Of course, all the terms of these arrangements have to be worked out. I'm not part of the negotiations around these new positions on my former campus, so I frankly don't know about proposed salaries, teaching load, administrative expectations, support for professional development, tenure expectations, etc., etc. – but rest assured that if I was there I would. These are the fights we will have to fight everywhere over and over. I see no shortcuts – there will always be worries, no matter what solutions we find to this problem.

About the state of part-time life and working conditions, Eric is also right. I'm sure that the working conditions I describe sound downright decadent to many part-timers. I recognize that, as I say in the article, what I describe is not now the norm in the discipline, and that many part-timers do still struggle under really woeful working conditions. (Part of this, I think, has to do with comparative labor pools – it's a buyer's market in most urban centers like New York.) But my contention is that as it becomes clearer and clearer that the other layers of the academic hierarchy depend squarely on the ftes instructors generate, conditions will continue to improve. And I think now's the moment when campuses with positions like the ones I've described can be revailed upon to move to something better – some version of real, enfranchised academic citizenship. My hope is that as these positions are created – and precedents are established –

they'll be moved for and put in place elsewhere on the basis of these precedents. Someone (Eric maybe?) mentioned the good practices section of the Part-Time Forum and how helpful it was to see these descriptions as a precedent. Please understand that it's my hope that my article's discussion of working conditions will serve something of the same function (and I know at least one campus where it's been cited in negotiations with a dean about changes and another where a part-timer wanted a copy for the same reason). We certainly don't want to put an artificially happy face on life as a pti; but if we suggest that terrible working conditions are universal, administrators will feel sure they can continue to get away with them!

Those are about all the qualifications I can think of for now. I hope long, infrequent postings like this one don't work against useful give-and-take here. I wish I had time to do several short postings rather than a single long one daily and will try to shoot for that in our time remaining.

But one question I'd ask. I sense some reluctance to configure full-time "teaching only" positions, especially from Walter – and particularly to reimagine tenure requirements on a teaching-only basis. I'm not sure I understand why. Apprehensions about not being taken seriously by the traditionally defined professorate? If so, I don't see how this ISN'T the case now... And I believe full-time lecturers will cultivate their own sources of clout (particularly with student constituencies) that might keep these prejudices in check.

ALSO: I know I don't want to divert this discussion – both of full-time instructorships and of other alternatives – which I think in the end may be the most important one we can have. But there's something unrelated that's been bouncing around in my head as a result of previous discussion. I don't know in what thread it should be inserted – and our time is getting close to up – so I'll just blurt it out here in an effort to get it on the table in case anyone else is interested. Feel free to respond (if anyone is interested enough) back on the dissecting-the-beast strand (I THINK that's where I read the discussion that prompted it) or anywhere else.

In terms of general modes of resistance to academic corporatization – separate from staffing and abolitionist concerns – it strikes me that there is much we can do as classroom teachers. That is, I guess I feel like there are a number of ways I feel my students being pulled into the corporate function of the university, often (in particular) being interpellated to roles as educational consumers. Many of the mechanisms through which this is accomplished are often perceived as enlightened reforms, so they seem to me especially insidious. I'm wondering if they seem suspicious to others as well, and the degree to which people imagine that resisting them (and other practices like them) might be a useful part of this more general resistance. What I have in mind (at the moment) are:

- *Service learning*--potentially a way for universities to capitalize on the unpaid labor of students, sometimes against their will, for very valuable public relations purposes?
- *Internship/"externship" arrangements*--a way to enlist professional schools in a system whereby, essentially, workers are made to serve pretty exploitative apprenticeships--sometimes even to pay for those apprenticeships THEMSELVES (there are some arrangements, I'm told, where students actually pay tuition for "practical experience" in a field!...)?
- *The "whole student" movement*, whereby faculty and student spaces once considered private--dorm life, weekend leisure, social life--become part of the educational experience. A way both to encroach on and control these spaces, to demand more work from faculty, and to encourage students to look for as much happy, comfortable--managed--experience for their tuition dollar as possible?

Sorry if I've raised this in an inappropriate place. Please ignore it all if it's excrescent.

**Michael Murphy:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 12:22 pm]

As I've said here before, I agree wholeheartedly with the union idea. There are lots of potential obstacles, I think, that it's easy to underestimate – particularly ones having to do with many traditional academics' reluctance to (1) understand what they do as labor and (2) identify with the interests of instructors, who they often want to see as compromised or even failed academics. (Sounds to me like Walter can speak to this in his LIU experiences?) But unionizing seems to me the best hope for forcing change. I know my own union at SUNY has made some moderate gains for part-time faculty, but I think we might expect more, in particular, from a bigger, more inclusive union.

I'd also like to worry Eric's point about lecturerships a bit, at least if I understand it correctly. I'm not at all sure that part-timers necessarily want to become professors. I know I can speak from my own experience here: though I'm very happy with my new job, I'm certain I NEVER would have left the instructorate if I could have made a career of it. I LOVED what I did as an instructor, and I loved the space I occupied in academia – the kind of faculty identity I felt I was cultivating. And I know a tremendous number of instructors who feel the same way – who have no desire to go on to do active research or prepare graduate students or whatever. In fact, I've had conversations with a number of Ph.D. students in Comp and Rhet that reflect something similar – they want to find some sleepy little college out of the research loop and just teaching writing to undergraduates. Don't get me wrong: there ARE instructors who want to become professors. But I don't feel like this is a universal feeling at all. I wonder if any good surveys have been done on this aspect of it all? I apologize if I've misunderstood here, Eric.

**Sharon Crowley:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 12:32 pm]

Hello, all. Sorry for my absence from the discussion for the past couple of days. Like everyone else here, I find that duty calls, and calls, and calls. . . . I'll try to check in often over the weekend. I submit that one thing being taken for granted in this thread of the discussion is that tenure is a sure thing. I don't think we can assume that tenure will continue to be awarded to any but the "stars" – the folks who require security of contract in order to be lured from one university to another. Obviously, the number of tenured positions in the academy has steadily dwindled since the number of untenurable positions began to rise. Now I'm not making this point because I am in sympathy in any way with presently full-time/tenured/tenurable faculty, who have in general selfishly protected their class interests to the point where they can be regarded as colluding with management. But I do think we need to consider, when we are discussing "tiers" of employment in the academy, that the tier of full-time tenured faculty will soon shrink even further – to perhaps five or ten percent of all faculty, at least in the humanities and other disciplines that are not money-makers or useful in enhancing the university's public relations. What will be the effects for all academic workers when there is virtually no tenure? Shouldn't we begin trying to imagine how to structure in the fairest way possible an academic labor force that for the most part will never be tenurable? I know that the usual reasons given by administration for the increase in part-time (hah!) employment is financial. But it is also true that tenure protects academic freedom. Since university administrators are now management rather than faculty, the last thing they want is a lot of people on their staff who can object to management's staffing and curricular policies (see the current brouhaha at Boston College, for example, where tenured faculty are having screaming conniptions about a new requirement that they be in their offices four days a week). Hence the attempts to get rid of tenure in Texas and Arizona (successful), and Minnesota (not), and the actual dwindling of the tenured ranks everywhere in the country. So: don't we have to adopt some other model of employment patterns? Surely not that used in corporations. So what?

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 01:19 pm]

Katherine, the bluntest, most infuriating, and most challenging that I've gotten is that adjuncts have to

refuse to work for such low wages – I should stop there, but I also think that there is a real possibility that just that sort of thing might happen, with and without activism. Simply, the last few generations of adjuncts have often been animated by a combination of idealism/altruism and intellectual and social ambition – as attainment of the conditions for these motivations become less and less possible to sustain, you're going to get a corresponding reluctance to go into this profession – not good for students or higher education (at least in the short run), but possibly very good for labor movements.

But this is only part of the picture. You also have the possibility of new kinds of academics and part-timers--masterful manipulators and free spirits with very few illusions (in both the "good" and "bad" varieties), who will have less and less loyalty to the institutions they teach through and a corresponding selfishness or freedom to follow through on whatever program they "believe" in (hmm, has this happened already?)--the ability to play the system....This is why I think the right is crazy to ignore this problem, or even think that the university going corporate makes sense--they should be sweating and throwing piles of money at higher education, enacting minimum academic wages...the present university system has actually contained political activism, whether of the right or left (not entirely a bad thing...maybe), for reasons of its structure and removal from everyday life (and that's a whole nother topic), but that won't hold up. Maybe the culture wars aren't dead?

And then there's the realistic picture – the further division of academia into elite and professional schools to better mirror the division of society at large. The professional schools are for training to become good citizens and docile workers in the corporate world, the elite schools for top level management with the corresponding teachers and training appropriate to both, with the elite schools maintaining, by and large, the old system. Perhaps by becoming or accepting being professional schools, labor activism for higher education professionals, working on a much more limited definition of their profession, has a much better chance of making inroads, but you also lose a lot of what I think has attracted so many of us to higher education.

And then there's this kind of conversation, and all the other conversations and actions that inform us and that we are trying to reflect...sometimes this kind of speculation is useful...sometimes not.

...All of the above and a whole lot more (yeah, Aronowitz doesn't have the only last best job in America, being an independent scholar, a euphemism for unemployed, has its advantages. I get to think and write all day – I hope I haven't cluttered this discussion with my drafting (okay, I have – maybe you can be thankful that this is only a small percentage of it?). And I agree with Eric's positions in principle – except that I don't think that we have the means yet for a full court press – and yes, perhaps I'm being shortsighted here and/or unaware of important developments.

For Michael, I think the way you are defending your position is cogent and admirable giving me cause to rethink much, but I do have some serious problems on some points which makes me see a little negative edge to the larger argument:

For one, "We certainly don't want to put an artificially happy face on life as a pti; but if we suggest that terrible working conditions are universal, administrators will feel sure they can continue to get away with them!" I have a really hard time with this – I see where you are coming from, but I can't help seeing this as misplaced and even dishonest...for "negotiation" purposes you don't have to emphasize conditions, but you don't need to mislead either...I'm not even sure it is constructive – administrators love it when faculty think they are stupid...sometimes I think they count on it. I'm a little angry with you because everything you said leading up to this statement carried a lot of weight.

You seem to construct this vision of administrators as powerful figures that need to be coaxed, and coddled and humored, but you seem to forget that they are doing the same thing to you – they have an interest in these positions that doesn't necessarily coincide with yours (believe me) – I know you know

this, but it isn't visible enough – all in all your position is primarily ethical disguised as realpolitick...yeah, I can identify with that, but because it's transparent, it's not necessarily a strength.

Next – Yes, I don't want to consider tenure on a teaching only basis (student evaluations?, observations?). Active participation in a field and scholarship in alternative forms, panels, conferences, participation in the academic life of a community and the larger community, ...service?...now we're talking, though I suspect you wouldn't disagree...and I of course agree that juried publications don't necessarily mean very much...okay, here I'm being dishonest, though I think that constructing a binary of teaching vs. research obscures very important issues and creates many dangers. From my point of view your "[ALSO](#)" doesn't divert the discussion at all – it connects in every which way with everything and reminds me of larger issues involved that need to be thought through – I'm grateful for it.

**Karen Thompson:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 02:37 pm]

Since Sharon brings up the Boston University situation, it's instructive to note that the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article on that topic ("It's 10 a.m. Do You Know Where Your Professors Are?" making faculty accessibility an issue) says "Ultimately, if professors can't prove they're doing their share, they should be reduced to part-time status." Now, to be fair the *CHE* is talking about the stance of those making the new proposals at BU to require 4-day presence on campus, but I'm amused by the threat. After all, some of us have been trying for years to warn tenured faculty that they will be dragged down if they don't work to raise us (part-timers) up.

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 05:14 pm ]

Michael – "[ALSO](#)" raises the big question of whether a corrupt system doesn't corrupt everything that passes through it. Both openings and deadends here – insidious plot? no – but not easy to take on either since these services and programs can accomplish goals diametrically opposed to what was intended.

42. Sharon – I'm curious, given the discussion on tenure vs. tenure track, teaching and research, what do you see happening? What is inevitable (at least from what you can see from the present moment) and what can be changed? I say this because ultimately any idea I have for the future involves academic freedom (and I might add – a society worth having it in) of one kind or another and all that it entails – are you saying that this is already an anachronism? Wouldn't fair and no tenure be a contradiction?

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 05:22 pm]

OK – maybe a form of tenure controlled by the faculty union?

**Michael Murphy:**

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 12:25 pm]

You raise a good point about the tenuousness of tenure in general these days, Sharon. And – let me know if I'm misreading – but your thoughts on "the usual reasons given by administration for the increase in part-time (hah?) [and thus non-tenure track?] employment" strike me as almost exactly the same point I was making in the "Great Tenure Debate" section of the *CCC* piece: the idea that tenure's expensive is just an administrative alibi for controlling academic freedom and--maybe even more important – maintaining the invisibility and marginality of large numbers of faculty. (I find the maintaining-flexibility-of-labor-pool arguments a little less compelling because I find there's less fluctuation in demand for instructors than many people assume – the courses get taught over and over, semester after semester in very predictable numbers.) But I'm not sure what other employment models we should be looking for. I'm very much attracted (I THINK) to Walter's vision of – what? – rogue adjuncts: "new kinds of academics and part-timers – masterful manipulators and free spirits (in both the 'good' and 'bad' varieties), who will have less and less loyalty to the institutions they teach through and...freedom to follow through on whatever program they 'believe' in...the ability to play the system." Certainly goes my "guerrilla rhetoricians" one better! Guerrilla professors, I suppose! But as compelling and romantic as this somehow sounds, I'm not

sure it's really very sustainable – as you say, Walter, this kind of marginal contingency is pretty much what we have now, and while our best adjuncts can turn marginality into a kind of brash, savvy intellectual independence, we wouldn't all be talking now if we were all ultimately happy with it. Though tenure's clearly already a compromised system, and though we should continue planning creative alternatives, I'm not yet ready to give up on the tenure fight. (I can tell from your MOST recent posting, Walter, that you're not either.)

Also, Walter, I'm not positive I understand your anger exactly. Frankly, much as Sharon says she expects audiences to react "with incomprehension or defensiveness" when she talks about abolition, I expected many readers to be angry with my article – some of the traditional professorate angry that I'd sold out the research ideal (which I don't believe) and some instructors angry that my depiction of working conditions was so different from their own that it must be artificial or false (which I also don't believe). Though I'm a little confused by your discussion, I'm guessing you mean the latter of these? If so, I don't think I'm being either dishonest or misleading, as you say. In fact, I'd not only say that I'm not misrepresenting working conditions to negotiate in bad faith (your charge as I understand it); I'd also say that those working conditions have actually been misrepresented in large part for such purposes in the past – extreme conditions are not universal, as many have wanted to imply in order to prompt change – as well as that this implication isn't a very effective tactic in the end. I don't mean to construct administrators as all-powerful – or stupid – but I do believe that if they don't see any comparable institutions with recognizably better conditions for instructors, they won't ever feel much pressure to change. It's essentially a labor-market consideration for them: they'll pay the going rate, not only for salaries but for all the rest too. So if we never acknowledge that there are good pti positions because we want to impress people with the urgency of the situation (which is my sense of what often happens – and shouldn't), then this "going rate" never becomes public. And instructors get less.

You're right that you refine and complicate "teaching-only" review much as I would – though in the case of comp I'd probably add practice (writing, editing, publishing, etc.). Like you, I'm also wary of too easy and narrow teaching vs. research binaries – see the end of the 3rd section in the *CCC* piece – but I'm not sure separate tracks necessarily have to do this. (Certainly, we don't want instructors who know nothing about the field because they have no contact with research, or to perpetuate the dumb stereotype of researchers as people who hate to teach...)

Thanks for your thoughts on the [ALSO](#) section – though I'd still love to hear more about the specifics of the "every which way" connections you mention. No question these kinds of developments are always a mixed bag as far as "corruption" goes and that – well – no one has to be plotting for things to have insidious effects.

*Sharon Crowley:*

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 06:32 pm]

I'll try to address Walter's question about the connection between tenure and fairness. (I like his idea about union-negotiated tenure BTW). Let me lay all this out in a simple-minded way so I can get it straight for myself. In theory, tenure confers two things on academics: security of contract and academic freedom. In practice, tenure has also conferred status as well. Obviously, marginally employed academics have none of these things. As far as I can see, tenure still protects academic freedom, at least in more privileged institutions, and that is why it is under siege in the corporate university, as I suggested in another post. I'm not sure that it still protects security of contract – now it's just harder to fire a tenured faculty member than an untenured one (unless he or she is proven guilty of something heinous like sexual harassment). Here in Arizona, for example, tenured faculty undergo annual review just like untenured faculty. All the work entailed in that wouldn't happen if somebody somewhere wasn't reserving the right to fire someone someday. As for the status issue, I think that status accrues to faculty members not so much because they have tenure as because they do research. And the research has to be of a specific nature, too. As people in composition know, it can't be too pedagogical or classroom-based, or it loses status. So marginally

employed people, who have all they can do to keep up with their teaching, are systematically barred from achieving status in two ways – the research they have time to do (and which they might prefer to do) is pedagogical; plus, they are not eligible for tenure.

If this is all correct, then our new fantastic system of fair academic labor practices will have to attach job security, academic freedom, and status to whatever faculty members define themselves as doing professionally – see the wonderful list in Michael's essay for starters. I envision a system wherein Mary could aim for tenure as a teacher-researcher, while John could define himself (for as long as he wished) as a poet-teacher, and so on. Is this total pie in the sky or could we actually achieve something like this?

*Walter Jacobsohn:*

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 07:23 pm]

Michael – about conditions I will have to continue to disagree, about comparisons, you're absolutely right that that is the way it is done, and frankly, that whole model of having someone else do it first before we'll do it drives me nuts (it's not even always a model of efficiency), but, yes – it better explains the position you're taking (not clear at first)...and makes my diatribe...ummm...partly foolish...it's that ethical thing I don't want to get rid of though I'm fully aware of how it can make me less than pragmatic. I would have attacked THAT rather than question how you need to operate in that model (first things first – though the comparison model can be used very advantageously if you're willing to put in the work). Anyway – I'm out of the loop, so I haven't heard any other points of view on your proposals outside of this panel.

This said – the distinctions and connections in your strategies, core principles, and basic facts is not something I am entirely comfortable with in your argument in the CCC essay – though it may all come down to a basic disagreement about some of the facts and their ramifications. It also seems to me that the way some of your argument can be seen and used falls into the claws of those who want to maintain contingency and move to better control and downgrade the profession as a whole (and what doesn't and what are our real options right now?), clearly not your intention...i.e. the best thing you can do to have nothing happen is have the stakeholders fight over the portion of the pie that they have been given rather than demonstrate a clear need for more pie ("that very few in America are willing to pay more than they do now for higher education" how much of a university budget actually gets put into instruction...why would the American public have to pay any more...maybe we could shift priorities?...you yourself mention something in that area). By taking a position that has narrow uses and needs to be very carefully qualified and yet often presenting it as a solution across the board (allowing it to be heard as such is probably a better qualification on my part) for a problem where the primary stakeholders have very little control over the process to make sure that it's done in the best way for them, you're walking a very narrow tightrope. For one, you're challenging some of the principles that make change possible – solidarity – to include a consciousness and awareness of those worse off and the possibilities open to them when you present goals and positions...offering a solution that gives them access too – you mean to, but I don't think you do enough – some of the places that will try this seem to me to be the places that need it the least (and even then use these positions to hire people for less when they could have actually paid them more...and now they get to look virtuous about it) – and then again I think there are other places where this would be a great move, and they might actually do it.

It's very easy to misunderstand (and I'm not sure it is entirely a misunderstanding) your concluding statements "I propose reimagining the ways that the roles now played by regular part-time faculty might be institutionalized"...if you already understand MANY adjuncts' roles as entirely compromised and question the value of institutionalizing anything compromised into an already compromised system (for instance, who would grant tenure and what criteria would they devise? would they want to make teaching faculty distinct from them as a way of protecting their privileges...granting tenure only to those who view them as top dogs, the real academics? wouldn't you start to see gender/race inequalities here? – yes, the big who and how questions pop up) then red flags will wave high. My bottom line is that you took the challenge and opened up a lot of important issues and I agree with you about a lot of things, especially

about making things visible and recognizing the less than ideal situation we are in and the moves that can be made there – it is a positive move – now you're getting hit over the head (sometimes rightly so...and I REALLY like the way you are responding to it...but you're so wrong about your attitude to working conditions that it makes my head hurt...it's like, what's better, an 80 hour work week with ice cream on Sunday, or an 80 hour work week with no ice cream – you want to bring out that distinction as being very important (you're almost happy people and you're less happy people working under much too similar conditions) and then the distinction between 40 hours and 60 hours (teaching vs. research) as being less important). I'll explain further if you want...there is a whole lot more, I just can't resist obscure analogies.

53. My problem is more with the difference between what we want to happen with these kinds of moves and what will actually happen once we begin to invest the time and energy into them...will the ways they will be co-opted be even worse than the benefits they will undoubtedly bring (mostly, again, because of a lack of power to control the process)? I am not so worried about further division given the present system, but still, will it really enable visibility and action on the parts of "converted" adjuncts? Will being an adjunct for them just seem like a distant nightmare? But then why advocate against these positions and end up indirectly defending the already compromised status quo (hoping that it will fall apart more efficiently if we allow it to stagnate and putrefy untouched). No answers. Local "answers" for individual campuses are already very complicated, maybe the best place to start to see how it works – to my mind not a systemic solution. An important move – in a funny way I think it has more political weight if it isn't just applied to composition or any traditional "service" type disciplines. A call for a more "teaching"-centered higher education system (been there?)? And yes, a widening of the possibilities for faculty identity. I want to stay open on this. Right now all of it, for and against, seems half cooked to me probably because adjuncts/"contingent" faculty are between a rock and a hard place, both "inside" and "outside" the system and having to undergo the flaws of both subject positions and the contradictions (and yes, there are benefits too). The groundwork that would make your work more powerful hasn't really been done yet (among other things what do these adjuncts really want? – forget hearsay...though that's all I got now too) – your ideas help to remind me of how much still needs to be done. (I hope my comments make at least a little sense. I seem to be criticizing you for not making the perfect argument – take that as a compliment.)

And now I just read Sharon's post...you know, of course, that I consider pie in the sky a nutritious part of a healthy life. It is about control – and who should have control and how we get control...and control over something worth having, right? (Just to make all of you laugh – there's a party of 27 people downstairs and lots of good food – and I'm up here typing away – uh oh, I've been discovered –)

***Eric Marshall:***

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 12:16 pm]

Michael, I think you are quite right about adjuncts and career interests. Many don't want to be full-time tenured faculty, and many don't want to do research. There is, of course, a difference between wanting to be part-time and wanting to be contingent (or exploited, etc.), and I know your proposal attempts to address this distinction. In CUNY we do have Lectureships: full-time, non-tenure track, non-research positions. Lecturers teach a heavier load than their tenure-track colleagues (at least at our senior colleges), and their salaries are below those of Assistant Profs. After 5 years they are eligible for Certificates of Continuous Employment (CCE's), which grant them a tenure-like job security. But, Michael, what you heard about the Lecturer line seems to be true, the administration may be phasing them out in favor of cheaper, more "flexible" part-timers and substitute full-timers.

There has been for some time now a bit of a hue and cry, in CUNY and elsewhere, to convert adjuncts (in large numbers or percentages) into lecturers. But as long as these teaching-intensive non-research positions are also non-tenure track and are paid below tenure track scale, I'm skeptical about institutionalizing conversion. And of course for those many adjuncts who do aspire to full-time tenure track jobs, the workload of a lecturer (27 hours per year currently in CUNY, or a 5/4 load) makes it virtually impossible to keep up with the research and writing necessary to compete for tenure track jobs. I believe this may be one of the issues our colleagues down at Georgia State are facing with their

conversion experiment.

Again, I appreciate the thinking going into these proposals, as well as the spirit and sentiment that drives that thinking. But a national/international discourse on the future of the profession (and the professorate) that doesn't call for a campaign of public and political re-education about higher ed and the need to support it, financially and otherwise, falls short of the mark. We can no longer put bandaids on gaping wounds.

*Michael Murphy:*

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 06:45 pm]

Agreed entirely about the alternative approaches to tenure business, Sharon. You know how I feel about too narrow approaches to faculty identity. And I don't think it's unimaginable pie-in-the-sky at all. While maximal flexibility sounds wonderful, though, I DO worry a bit that there may be problems it's difficult now to anticipate with drifting in and out of different tracks, however they're defined (research, teaching, creative work, etc). I worry particularly that the teaching track will be a space faculty are forced into when their output in other fields is deemed insufficient. Not only would this be a way to demand more for less, I think, but also a way to reinforce the sense once again that teaching faculty are second- (or third-!) class academics.

Walter, I'm grateful for your really thoughtful, good-willed, vital, honest advocacy; I wish I could have persuaded you a LITTLE more, since you seem to me just the kind of person – and teacher – I'd like to be able to persuade. But I very much appreciate your willingness to try my arguments on imaginatively – and to show your unfolding thoughts in so unguarded a way on the page (or screen, I guess). I don't know that I have time to respond to your most recent posting really fully, but let me offer a few hit-and-miss responses.

First, you're right: we may just have to agree to disagree about the state of conditions – but be aware (again) that I'm not claiming that the conditions that characterized my double part-time work are at all universal. And remember my contention that even if no other institutions in the country shared them (which I'd have a hard time believing – in fact, KNOW isn't true) the fact that they're in place here isn't accidental or incidental: I believe that there are major, systemic, structural economic forces that put them into place. Essentially, pti's do a really good job at work that's usually seen as essential at comparatively bargain rates. I'm only proposing that we recognize this and try to use it to our best advantage.

You're right that these positions and the arguments for them CAN "fall into the claws of those who want to maintain contingency and move to better control and downgrade the profession as a whole," that "some of the places that will try this seem to me to be the places that need it the least," and that "who would grant tenure?" and "would they want to make teaching faculty distinct...as a way of protecting their privileges...granting tenure only to those who view them as top dogs, the real academics?" are REALLY important questions. (In fact, see my note on Sharon's tenure post above.) There are ALL KINDS of potential dangers. But – as I said in my last posting – these are fights we'll necessarily have to fight along the way. There are no short-cuts around this, I think. But I think they're fights worth having – and that we're going to have to fight many of them in any case, no matter what we try to do on behalf of pti's. Are we better off staying where we are now? (And, no, I don't believe that cooption is unavoidable – if one did, then why ever work for anything?..)

I like the spiritedness of your analogy, but I don't believe I'm talking about adding ice cream on Sundays to an 80-hour week. What I'm moving for is a system that would provide a reasonable teaching load on a single campus, representation in faculty governance, eligibility for tenure and the academic freedom (whether now irremediably compromised or not) that comes with it, full-time benefits, and a reasonable salary (in relation to professorial salaries) with the possibility of advancement across a career. I don't think these would be incidental improvements. I also don't think it will be easy to make this happen, but I

believe the pti's I know deserve nothing less, and I want to work toward it.

You're right that "Right now all of it, for and against, seems half cooked" and that "the groundwork" isn't in place yet. Clearly, there's much to be figured out, but I take us to be doing that work now. No? Isn't that how change gets started? I don't mean for what I've proposed to "be heard" as a solution across the board-- I tried hard to qualify myself in the *CCC* piece – and it seems to me a problem if that's the way it reads. I'll try harder in the future. Still, I think teaching-intensive positions could have a pretty significant effect on the tenor of academic culture generally, even if they're only deployed on research university campuses. Anyway, if pie-in-the-sky seems to you nutritious, then I hope this continues to seem worth chewing on, if not entirely appetizing. Thanks again for the really fascinating discussion.

*Michael Murphy:*

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 07:05 pm]

Thanks for the CUNY update, Eric. I hope all of you at CUNY – or ALL OF US in the profession! – can work against the phasing out process there, at least if that's the will of CUNY instructors (sounds as if it is from your description).

I agree about tenure – it's no less incidental for lecturers than professors. And believe me, I know firsthand about the difficulty of doing research while teaching five courses! (That's one of the reasons I worry about mixing teaching and research tracks where these positions are put in place.) Also, please don't mistake my sympathies – I'm ALL FOR "public and political re-education about higher ed and the need to support it." I just don't see gaining universal support for 2-2 loads everywhere as a likely outcome. (Though show me where to sign up and I'll be there!...)

## **Abolish or Perish? Managed Labor in Composition:**

*A Roundtable with Sharon Crowley*

### **Strand 4: The Requirement and Drudgery**

*Sharon Crowley:*

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 01:17 pm]

Stirring up the pot here. We're having an exciting discussion about labor in another thread here. So I want to throw out a (possibly dead on arrival) fish in a new thread: I got invited to be in this forum because I gave a paper at the recent Louisville conference in which I critiqued essays by Michael and Joe Harris that appeared in the fall issue of *CCC*. The paper was received as my papers on the first-year requirement usually are – with incomprehension and/or defensiveness. I didn't hear much at the conference that raised my hopes about the future of required first-year composition until I heard Tony's fine paper on labor issues. That cheered me enormously, mostly just because it was a fine paper and it was there, on the program with all those other papers patting the profession (ourselves) on the back for the self-sacrificing way we conduct ourselves professionally, helping the masses of students out of the illiteracy they bring us ad infinitum ad nauseum. But I was also cheered because it signified to me that a new generation of college-level teachers are able to view their work in the only sane way left to view it, as labor. This generation (some of its members anyhow) will not fall for the academic myth that professors are supposed to be unworldly people who have a divine calling to save the world from itself.

In my paper at Louisville, I hinted that one of the effects of the universal requirement in first-year composition is that its curricula are standardized to the point that actually teaching the class is drudgery. Because I am a coward I did not deliver the section of the paper which argued that – given the conservatism of most WPAs, who owe their relatively cushy jobs to their allegiance to administration – what is often said about the first-year composition curriculum (anyone can teach comp) is often distressingly true. WPAs force teachers to offer a highly formalized and standardized curriculum using mass-market textbooks that have all the life edited out of them. Now I know that many teachers resist this

pressure and do imaginative and good work in their first-year classrooms. But when those teachers are marginally employed, that resistance is very risky. I know many very talented teachers who have decided to just go with the mandated textbook and syllabus in order to keep their jobs. If I am right about this, one effect of the requirement is to reduce the quality of instruction offered in first-year composition.

Let me repeat: this is not a critique of composition teachers. I'm trying to look at the first-year requirement as a system of exclusions and reductions, and that sort of look leads me to the conclusion I have drawn here.

***Karen Thompson:***

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 02:02 pm]

I don't mean to sound stubborn or repetitive, but Sharon reminds me that reducing class size goes a long way toward addressing that drudgery and job security has everything to do with taking risks in the classroom.

***Tony Baker:***

[Friday, February 02, 2001 - 06:27 pm]

A correction: The "fine paper" to which Sharon alludes was actually written and delivered by my colleague, Tony Scott, one of the co-editors (along with myself) of this special issue of *Workplace*. Sharon is absolutely right that Tony Scott's paper was one of the high points of the Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition this past fall of 2000. Just want to make sure that I don't get credit for the other Tony's good work.

I originally approached Sharon about this roundtable after her presentation on the abolition of the first-year comp requirement stirred some noticeable discomfort in her audience at the Watson Conference. Rather than a series of squirming, defensive stances against abolition, what I wanted to see happen was an informed, intelligent conversation about the issues provoked by Sharon's call for abolition. Michael's and Joseph Harris's *CCC* articles are certainly part of such a conversation, but the formal exchange of scholarship in journal articles and books lacks the organic immediacy that a forum like this e-roundtable (round-e-table?) allows and encourages. Anyway, I'm extremely pleased to be a part of this important discussion.

Something to further illustrate the connection Sharon is making in this thread: again, from my recent job-search experience. It doesn't surprise me to encounter standardized fyc writing curricula, with prescribed texts and readers. However, I was taken aback when I interviewed with a school that has a standardized composition curriculum articulated in its handbook for part-time instructors, complete with prescribed texts. As an incoming tenure-track faculty member, though, I was told that the standardized curriculum would not apply to me. The standard syllabus and texts were standard only for non-tenure-trackers, who apparently shouldn't be allowed any autonomy in course design.

***Michael Murphy:***

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 11:56 am]

Agreed, Karen (#4). And of course I also feel strongly – as everybody knows by now, I guess! – that there are many other ways we can support teachers (in addition to lowering class sizes but short of abolition) that will help keep the course from being taught in ways that make it drudgery for either students or teachers. As everybody's been pointing out lately (see Tony, #7), issues of basic academic freedom (choices of texts, class procedures, policies, goals) is clearly one of them – and I don't think that even under present circumstances it HAS to be this way. If we believe that the teachers are by and large good and the course can be taught well but the circumstances are bad, then I say we keep working – hard – on the circumstances.

Agreed also, Sharon, about the coming of a new academic generation comfortable with its labor identity (as you know from the *CCC* piece). Clearly, it's about time.

**Sharon Crowley:**

[Saturday, February 03, 2001 - 06:09 pm]

My abject apologies to Tony Scott! Michael, I don't think that you have yet addressed the point I tried to make in my last post – that it is the requirement that mandates standardized curricula. Would you address that connection? I'm looking for good arguments against it. Thanks.

**Michael Murphy:**

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 05:32 pm]

I didn't realize this point was addressed specifically to me, Sharon. Actually, though, this is the issue I wanted to talk about at the beginning of this discussion – see my first posting ([Dissecting 8-10](#)) – because I think much of our response to the labor situation in comp depends on it. Other people seemed to want to pursue the labor issues more directly (again, see those earlier postings).

In the limited time we have left, I'll at least point out the fact that the required course simply DOESN'T mandate standardized curricula in many dep'ts/programs. As really narrow, dogmatic, anti-intellectual, and oppressive as some really bad single-reader, single-assignment sequence, exit-exam programs are, there are many others that are NOT. I gave you the course description for our new ENG 102 (required fyc) at Oswego – pretty broad parameters, I think, which are nonetheless about as narrowly as I can imagine EVER circumscribing a course focus for teachers. And to be honest, I worried about THAT when we did it. Our one (much-debated) concession to the standardizers was to agree to a common handbook (Hacker); I can't imagine we would ever consider prescribing a text, reader, assignments, activities, even pedagogical goals (again, within very broad parameters like our description's). And it's not my sense AT ALL that we're an anomaly in this respect. My guess is that the tendency toward standardization has MUCH more to do with the different cultures of different institutions than the requirement – that's why I'm committed to working on the required course instead of getting rid of it. It seems to me on the basis of my experience pretty much demonstrable fact that curricula don't HAVE to be standardized; if there's a tendency for them to become standardized – and I agree there has been and continues to be in many places – then I want to work against that tendency.

In fact, I'd say that in terms of the typical content of the course, we've been talking about a stereotype of first-year Writing here that's – well, honestly, a little silly. I honestly think I could count on one hand the number of instructors I've know in twelve years of teaching (ptis, profs, tas, whatever) who thought of the course as "a series of exercises in formal fluency plus instruction in usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation" (255), as you put it. Spelling? Really?

What really happens in the course – or what can and should – is much harder to argue against than this strawman stereotype, much more complicated and interesting and useful. And the fact of the requirement gives us a space in which to work against exactly the impoverished and pernicious assumptions about language, knowledge, and their implications in class politics (or imagined lack thereof!) on which the old skills-and-drills courses were based.

One quick example, because I know I'm going on here much longer than I probably should. But I want to suggest a little of what I mean by using the service ethic – and the requirement – as a forum in which to work against what it's often associated with. One of the best – and most central – discussions in my own fyc courses is almost always (of course, depending on students' interests and how they steer the course) focused on Geneva Smitherman's work on non-standard grammars. Students are astonished to consider that "grammar" is not science, that grammars are arbitrary, inherently "right" linguistically speaking (by nature of their very functionality), and – of course – deeply implicated in an economy of class judgments and prejudices. In fact, they tell me they take these ideas with them when they leave the course and go on

to do work in other courses and disciplines (where faculty often have astonishingly narrow, chauvinistic ideas about what counts for effective, appropriate discourse), as well as when they speak and write with people outside the academy. And, without the required course, this just wouldn't happen very often: they can talk about this all in the Linguistics Dep't until they're blue in the face, but since only a small handful of students ever take those courses, nobody really cares. Indeed, though recent work suggests it clearly hasn't been an unqualified success, what kind of a dialogue could the CCCC Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language ever have had without the first-year requirement?

I think something similar happens – or can – with Comp and WAC. Why do we HAVE to imagine Comp as a place that simply facilitates students' abilities to pick up disciplinary discourse seamlessly – facilitates the process by which students are indoctrinated into a discipline and its attendant worldviews? Can't Comp courses (at the first-year level and beyond) serve as a place where students are encouraged to think deeply about those discourses as knowledge forms with different kinds of cultural currencies that they might either trade on - or resist – in a range of ways? I suggest that many Comp courses already do this, and that there's plenty of space for doing more of it (and other things, too) within the contested institutional terrain of Composition in the future.

Again, sorry – I'm going on much longer than I should here on the last day, though there's SO much more left to be said than we have time for. But for now, suffice it to say that I believe there are tremendous opportunities in the course that we risk giving up through what I see as – simply enough – throwing out the baby with the bath. In my dep't, they keep asking me to teach upper division seminars and grad courses, but for me these courses are really a bit of a distraction and a duty, a way to buy the chance to do what I'm really most interested in. Truth be told, teaching required first-year Writing is hands down the most fascinating, consuming, pedagogically valuable thing I do.

But then I know my perspective may be limited on this, or at least unusual. Let me return your question for me, Sharon, in a different form: what can you do to persuade me that my preference for and allegiance to the first year course is misguided, that the required fyc HAS to be coopted drudgery?

***Sharon Crowley:***

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 09:14 pm]

Hi Michael: I don't say that the required course HAS to be coopted drudgery. I say that it often IS. I'm happy to hear that you haven't experienced it to be that way in your professional life. I know that what follows is cheap one-upping (of a sort I swore I would never do when I became an old fart and here I am doing it). I've been teaching in first-year composition programs since 1971 in several different universities, I've been attending CCCC for the same thirty years, and in 1990 I traveled around the country talking to marginally employed teachers as part of my work with the Wyoming Resolution. I must have talked with at least a hundred teachers of the required first-year course in that time. What I see, and what teachers tell me they are forced to do in required programs, is what I describe in the book. Last fall, a new WPA on the WPA-L listserv asked subscribers to name a list of recommended textbooks that he/she could require teachers to use in the course. Most all of the initial recommendations were for modes-based texts (somebody actually recommended Barnett and Stubbs, which surprised even me) until hipper subscribers pointed out the pedagogical incorrectness of such choices. Now I know in my bones that good teachers would not use such books and teach formalized standardized courses if they had their druthers. But marginally employed teachers don't get their druthers very often. Gotta go – it's almost time for the X-files and Mulder's back tonight!

***Tony Baker:***

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 02:57 pm]

I'd like to extend my thanks you all for contributing your valuable time and informed opinions to this discussion. It's been a real learning experience for me. I know it's only 2:55 Sunday afternoon, but I'm

going to be unwired for the rest of the day and for tomorrow too. Please feel free to continue the discussion for the rest of the day. Thanks once again.

**Michael Murphy:**

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 07:15 pm]

Thanks for arranging this all, Tony. To all participants: it's been really interesting and invigorating. I really enjoyed it.

**Walter Jacobsohn:**

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 09:27 pm]

I want more time to respond and ask questions – I agree with Eric about the importance of what has been happening in California over many years – it's particularly important if we want to go national. I would even like it if I could just post parts of stray drafts, including a response to Sharon (thanks for aiding and abetting our digressions from fyc...or were they digressions?) of which this part may be worth saying: ...I wish that more academics genuinely wanted to save the world from itself...that at least is an opening for dialogue--far too many think we're basically \*\*\*\*\*, and that includes the best. That's why I persist in believing that composition and its "service ethic", however mealy-mouthed, creates space accessible to change and action, more so than what is offered by many others in the university. Yes, not enough.

Thanks Michael, you realize, of course, that your intelligence and graciousness are completely disarming – you've challenged me on a lot of my basic assumptions, and I too wish I had more time to respond – in many ways you help to demonstrate the limitations of the "logic" I have been following (part of a long unposted response to ALSO). If my "unguarded" responses have been too aggressive without that adding to their substance then I apologize sincerely (but the 80 hours plus ice cream on Sundays refers to conditions as they are now – in no way does it refer to your proposal...which is 60 hours – I should just take it, I'm well aware that you could point out my many other lapses if you so chose). I don't disagree with the principle – even less now that I have heard you defend it, but I still have reservations – which won't prevent me from using your proposal as a model if the circumstances seem right (with special care to "insist" on the language used to protect it).

"Alt. 1" ([Alternatives 13](#)) hasn't left my mind – it makes any effort on my part to just think and write uncomfortable – and that's how it should be. On the other hand, I wish that the other parties in this conversation had the luxury of time that I have right now – I would have liked to hear more of what they think is happening and where they believe things should go. I think it would have been helpful for many. It's a long haul. And thanks to Tony and *Workplace* – I want to see more of these conversations. Keep pushing the limits!

**Eric Marshall:**

[Sunday, February 04, 2001 - 11:40 pm]

Tony, thanks for arranging this forum. Sharon, Michael, Walter, Katherine, Karen, thanks for sharing your invaluable time and experience. This has been a real education for me, too. I wish we had more time. And I wish it wasn't the first week of the new semester for us! Anyway, I look forward to continuing the discussion in the future in other venues. Keep fighting the good fight!

One parting thought, as I feel I never really offered a direct response to the question of abolition of fyc. In short, I don't think fyc should be abolished. But having taught it at three different institutions, in the form of nearly half a dozen different courses, I'm not entirely clear as to what we mean by fyc. We aren't merely discussing the abolition of required courses, or even required writing courses. So what then?

The very wide range of abilities, experiences, educations, and facilities with language and communication of today's freshmen seems to make the concept of fyc a slippery one at best. Clearly, some students need help learning basic research paper writing skills, and at Queens College, where I teach, that falls to fyc.

Some are already beyond that, and their needs are perhaps more rhetorical. But many (perhaps most), require work on skills even more basic: grammar, syntax, vocabulary, diction, development of theses, analyses, argumentation, and so on. If this does not fall into the often stigmatized class of remediation – and often it doesn't – then it must be part of fyc. These three categories cut a pretty wide swath for fyc. All the above skills, of course, are fundamental to a college education that isn't parochially vocational (and probably even to one that is). So if all students need the skills, why not require the courses that teach and hone them? And why dismiss need-based arguments in their defense?