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REVIEW OF  
*TERMS OF WORK FOR COMPOSITION: A MATERIALIST CRITIQUE*

by Bruce Horner  
State U of New York P, 2000

Motivated by its author's anxiety about composition's marginal position in the academy, Horner's book understands this marginal status to stem from multiple sources. Among these he cites a lack of disciplinary subject matter, particularly in comparison to composition's departmental partner, English literature; the field's grounding in pedagogy, which has less prestige than research and other scholarly activities; and the general assumption that composition classes exist solely to produce a set of specific skills transferable to other academic contexts and post-graduation jobs, unlike English literature classes that teach aesthetic appreciation—a fulfilling, although not necessarily useful, activity.

2. One means of revaluing composition has been the attempt to achieve disciplinary status by building a body of research and scholarly work. Such efforts notwithstanding, Horner claims the result has been to privilege this idea of "work" over work of lesser status—notably, the "work" of teaching; and the conditions under which that teaching is undertaken (including class size, teaching load, salaries, etc.) (1). The profession defines teaching as labor, rather than as work, and for that reason, teaching remains devalued. Of academic CVs, Horner notes, "Teaching is identified not in terms of the number of times a section has been taught . . . but [with regard to] the names of the courses taught"; and "[e]xperience in teaching a course counts for little, just as teaching a large course-load counts for little" (5). Composition courses are required and may be uniform in content and approach; therefore, they are more difficult to claim "as individually produced commodities" than are research or other kinds of classes (6).

3. Horner's book responds to this situation with "a cultural materialist critique of how, in Composition, we talk about work" (xv). He focuses on the idea of work in relationship to five other terms: "students," "politics," "academic," "traditional," and "writing"; each of these merits its own chapter-length discussion. (This structure seems inspired by Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*; and Williams and other Marxist theorists inform the book's argument throughout.)

4. Although Horner wants composition instructors "to think of what we do as located materially and historically: as material social practice" (xvii), his book functions primarily as a meta-critical analysis of the way scholars in composition studies—engaged in writing and publishing for other scholars in composition studies—talk about composition. One wonders, finally, whom is this book for? Poorly paid teachers carrying a 4-4 load with little job security will lack the time to read not just this book, but also the

numerous titles in composition studies it references and critiques. Horner's stated goal is to consider the materiality of teacher and student experiences, yet actual teachers and students rarely appear, and *their* material circumstances are strangely occluded.

5. Somewhat surprisingly, Horner rejects unionization as a solution to composition's problems. He claims that "while unionizing has foregrounded the material needs of teachers, it has largely assented to commodification of the labor of education" and may lead to "bureaucratic rationalization" of work (as was the case for secondary school teachers) (22, 25). He does not dispute that unions can improve working conditions, but he believes that unionization will also result in a loss of status that composition studies can ill afford. Drawing on bell hooks, he argues for embracing marginality: "Rather than simply taking Composition's traditional marginality . . . as a site and sign of deprivation only . . . [he argues] that we can take tradition in Composition as also a site of resistance" (208).

6. Horner's solution, articulated in the book's final chapter, is to "use composition and the teaching of composition to focus on the cultural work of and in composition" (243-244). As an example, he describes a course of his own in which he "sequenc[es] assignments so that subsequent assignments have students revisit and revise the positions they have taken in earlier papers, explicitly experiment with different positions and discourse conventions, and reflect on the significance of these experiments," thereby "responding to and re-articulating—revising—that situation of being a student in a composition course" (248, 249). The focus is not on the papers as a final product but rather on the student's engagement with writing as a social project, one that involves negotiating multiple relationships—to the authors of the texts being studied, to the teacher, and/or to the other students in the class.

7. Ultimately, Horner's strategy seems to differ little from those commonly deployed in composition classes, whereby students write to meet the expectations of different audiences, and consider where their authority as writers originates, as well as how it is constructed within the boundaries of the class. Where Horner departs from the composition instructors I know is in his insistence that this social project is more important than the text itself. Thus, his final chapter does not address aspects of the written text, such as organization and style/grammar/mechanics, except to see students' recognition of them as part of the social project. After reading a highly theorized book that nevertheless wants to minimize the rift between composition teaching and composition research, I hoped for a solution that would challenge and perhaps modify my approach to teaching composition. Unfortunately, Horner's cultural materialist approach itself militates against generalization and the formulation of specific claims for the efficacy of his methods, and therefore against the application of these methods in other classrooms. We would still appear to lack the most productive terms by which our work might materially situate itself.