

**WORK**

**W**ithin the “field” of Composition, *work* has three distinct usages. First, in a usage closely aligned with a general trend in the culture to restrict the term’s meaning to “paid employment,” it is invoked in debate over the *conditions* of teachers’ work: class size, teaching load, salaries, office facilities, clerical support, library resources, use of adjunct and part timers, withholding of tenure and tenure lines for composition faculty, and the “feminization” of composition teaching evidenced by such conditions (Williams, *Keywords* 281–82).<sup>1</sup> Second, in much scholarly debate in Composition, *work* is used almost exclusively to refer to written texts. The question “What are you working on,” for example, typically refers to the texts one is producing rather than to any other activities in which one might also be engaged (E. Watkins 11, 12, 85; see also Varnum 9, 114, 212). A third meaning refers to the actual concrete activities of teaching, as in the “work” of teaching. Significantly, however, this meaning is distinctly subordinate to the second and commonly subsumed by the first: teachers who daily spend hours interacting with students in classrooms and writing responses to student writing speak of their “own work” as something with which these activities compete: *their* work is the texts they produce when not engaged in such activities, which are understood as labor benefiting others, exchanged for pay—that is, as “paid employment.”

It would be tempting to see these different meanings as pointing to disparate issues: the first, a matter of fair employment practices; the second, a matter of quirks in a profession's self-identification, the third, an issue of the "craft" of teaching and its lamentably low status. I would argue, however, that we can effectively address issues of working conditions, referred to in the first usage, only by confronting contradictions in the second and third definitions of academic work evidenced in the subordination of the activity of teaching to the production of scholarly texts. This subordination and subsumption of the work of teaching to the production of written texts constitute the playing out at the site of Composition of contradictions in more general conceptions of work. These contradictions are manifested in the distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor and in the commodification of intellectual labor. The distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor denies the location of "mental" labor in the material conditions of available technological and other material resources (e.g., computers, libraries, office space, writing materials, communication facilities, time, quiet, and the funding for these; as well as conditions of bodily health), and the social relations of the production of "mental" work (e.g., at the most immediate professional level, networks, institutions, training, rank; and at more general levels, the relations contributing to the institutionalization of such work). And that distinction denies as well the "intellectuality" of "manual," "unskilled" work.

Labor is commodified when the value of the product of that labor is identified as an objective property of the product itself (see Marx, *Capital* I, 153–54). In the academy, intellectual labor, in the form of "scholarship," is deemed to be one's *own* work, treated as divorced from material social conditions, a product of the autonomous scholar. It is thereby commodified, simultaneously with commodification of the scholar herself. In contrast, the value of the product of teaching is more clearly tied to material social conditions—which students, what class size, what school, what term, taught in what facilities and with what resources. Because these ties make the work of teaching resistant to such commodification, it tends to be viewed within the academy not as work at all but as labor, exploited by the institution. The work of Composition, insofar as it is identified with teaching, thus is in a double bind: it is less readily

susceptible to traditional academic forms of commodification because of its ties to student bodies and institutional resources and conditions. At the same time, its attempts to valorize its work threaten either to deprive it of its identity as Composition by removing it from teaching, or to seal its fate as alienated labor owned, and exploited, by the institution.

In this chapter, I begin by examining the operation of these contradictions in academic representations of work generally. I then turn more specifically to the negotiation of these contradictions in representations of work in English and in Composition. Composition's location on the border between the realms of the academic and the social, as these are conventionally understood, lead it both to experience and respond differently to such contradictions in its work. To illustrate, I examine different strategies either contributing to or resisting the commodification of Composition's work in its treatment of pedagogies and in its efforts at "professional" organization.

### Work in the Academy

The peculiar relegation of *work* to designate only the production of academic texts, far from being restricted to Composition, is endemic to discussions of academic activities within the academy (see, for example, Guskin 5; Varnum 219). Characteristic features of the genre of the academic curriculum vitae (CV) illustrate this conception of work, as do institutions' promotional literature. (A column on "Faculty News" in my own institution's biweekly newsletter *OnCampus*, for example, is devoted almost entirely to brief notices of faculty publications and conference presentations.) A typical academic CV consists of a series of lists of accomplishments categorized by type: publications (or categories of publication), conference papers, invited lectures, grants, "manuscripts in circulation," and, significantly, "work (i.e., writing projects) in progress." One's teaching is, at most, represented in lists of courses taught, ideally those which the individual has developed. Other activities, lumped under "service," are identified by committee name or position held.

One common criticism of this way of representing academic work, especially within Composition, highlights the relative emphasis given scholarship in comparison to teaching. Lists of publications

and other presentations of research, for example, are often given more prominence in CVs than the lists of courses taught or services rendered. Insofar as Composition's identity is more closely tied to teaching than other disciplines, this devaluing of teaching would appear to threaten the status of Composition itself. A second, closely related criticism, often originating outside the academy, emphasizes the inverse relation between the work given prominence in the academy and the social utility of the work. The obscurity of academics' research topics makes academics the butt of late-night talk show jokes; legislators asked to fund academic work increasingly complain about universities' lack of emphasis on teaching and service to the community (see Plater).

One leftist response to such criticisms argues that tailoring one's work to serve the needs of an unjust society is to perpetuate such injustices: we cannot in good faith direct our efforts to training students to be exploited, alienated workers (see C. Freedman 80). Thus it might be argued that to de-emphasize those activities over which we have least control and which respond most directly to the demands of capital is part of a conscientious refusal to perform the task assigned to us by capital, to revel defiantly in the "unproductive," unreified work of scholarship (see Ebert; Hansen 260). Evan Watkins notes the attractiveness, for example, of arguments that "the 'value' of literature' is finally how it has neither value nor use," for such a valuation establishes literary study as a means to escape "the relentless colonizing of behavior that characterizes the expansion of industrial and then postindustrial capitalism" (164). Such arguments present the choice of a career in English literary study as a moral one of sacrificing lucre to pursue an ideal of individual, imaginative freedom (210). However, as Carl Freedman has argued, while the "unproductive" work associated with scholarship does appear to operate under conditions of significantly greater freedom over time, place, and pace of work, work content and significance, "[t]he price exacted for this freedom is more severe intellectual subjection to capitalist relations." In fact, even more than the manual laborer, the intellectual worker is "in certain respects the most completely imprisoned by the commodity structure" (Freedman 79). It may be true that intellectuals "own," in some sense, at least some of the means of scholarly production: in the form of knowledge and skills and control over the time and

specific focus of their concrete labor (though, as suggested above, they do not control the full panoply of material resources that make their work possible and shape that work). However, the social relations of their work require its commodification. Such arguments, in other words, confuse a degree of apparent freedom in concrete labor practices with freedom from the extraction of exchange value from those practices, ignoring the larger social location and organization of scholarly labor.

The ways in which the work of both teaching and scholarship (as well as service) are represented in academic CVs demonstrate such imprisonment in the commodity structure: not simply what is included, but how it is represented, and about what it is silent. For all such work is represented precisely as a commodity, prized for its exchange value, as is the individual herself (cf. Faigley 142). Publications, courses, grants, even service positions are identified as items somehow belonging to, or in the possession of, the CV author, and so part of the "package" acquired through hiring that author (see Lunsford and Ede 168). Teaching is identified not in terms of the number of times a section has been taught, or how many course sections the faculty member has taught per term, but the names of the courses taught. A course developed by the author, and so ostensibly belonging to her, carries more exchange value than a course repeatedly assigned to her by an institution. This valuation is illustrated by my own institution's form for faculty to use in preparing their annual "Professional Activities Record," used to determine salaries, which allows faculty to highlight only that teaching which involves a "new" course or "innovative methods." Experience in teaching a course counts for little, just as teaching a large course-load counts for little, and just as a large number of years devoted to a single intellectual project not represented by publications is not advertised. The fact that one has been thinking about a given topic for ten years, far from demonstrating work, can suggest inefficiency, a lack of "productivity," just as to say one has been teaching an assigned course for ten years or teaching four sections a term may suggest not one's work but either one's staleness or one's subordinate position to the institution assigning one's tasks.

In this light, the much-decried devaluation of teaching in the academy has less to do with any actual specific commitment, or lack of commitment, among faculty to teaching instead of research.<sup>2</sup>

For “commitment” is not seen as a relevant criterion. Rather, it may have more to do with the difficulty of claiming courses as individually produced commodities (cf. E. Watkins 218–20). Courses remain commodities, but they are more commonly the product of—owned by—institutions rather than individuals, and are advertised as such—for example, in universities’ course “catalogues.” Indeed, one argument made against teaching “on-line” is that the process of placing coursework on-line not only restructures that work, allowing for greater control and scrutiny of faculty performance and course content and intensifying the work of teaching, but it also better enables institutions to claim ownership of those materials and take possession of faculty’s knowledge and course design skill embodied in the course materials. On-line teaching thus may pose a threat to faculty jobs (Blumenstyk; Guernsey and Young; Noble 46–47; see also Rhoades chapter 5).<sup>3</sup> The identification of courses by title, number, and credit hours abstracts courses from their social historical locations, leading to a kind of false advertising in which courses are listed that may never, in fact, be offered, and obscuring differences between those sections of a course that are. On the other hand, while institutions advertise courses as products to entice student-consumers, the institutional origin, location, and production of courses argues against an individual academic advertising his labor in teaching them unless he can highlight the specificity of his labor as his. For example, if I want to claim any individual credit for teaching an English composition course students are required to take and I am required to teach, I must somehow document, for my “Professional Activities Record,” that “my” teaching uses “innovative” methods for which I can claim authorship; I can’t simply say I, rather than someone else, did the teaching.

Courses are clearly institutional products (of the specific college or university, or are “institutions” themselves, such as the ubiquitous Freshman Comp), and thus firmly grounded in material social conditions of time and place. By contrast, scholarly writing—associated with freedom from constraints of time and place and subject—is also commonly *dissociated* from any specific institution, thus obscuring the materiality of such work. Scholarly writing is made to appear to be the product of purely individual mental labor, the result of being a careful, insightful thinker rather than being

the product of appropriate time and access to specific people, books and computers, and an institutional position. While research grants might appear to highlight the dependence of scholarship on material resources, this relation of dependence is obscured by the common practice of identifying grants as in themselves discrete manifestations of the scholar's intellectual worthiness, listed in CVs as accomplishments, not explanations for how the scholar has managed to produce so much. The more the materiality of scholarly work is denied, the more the scholar can claim his work as "his own" rather than as made possible by specific material social circumstances.<sup>4</sup> That same denial of materiality is effected by academic institutions through their efforts to give their physical plants a "bucolic" appearance, and by professors' fabled absent-mindedness and indifference to material pleasures (see Fish, "Unbearable").

The practices I've described are so commonplace, so pervasive as aspects of both academic culture and late twentieth-century Western culture generally, as are the ideological assumptions driving them, that it is worth risking a restatement of the obvious to point to the contradictions embedded in the ways of defining work that these practices embody. There is, first of all, the ideological distinction between intellectual ("mental") and non-intellectual ("manual") labor, a distinction underlying the division of labor whose appearance Marx identifies as the moment at which all true division of labor arises (Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* 20). This distinction overlooks both the materiality of intellectual labor and what we might term the "intellectuality" of so-called manual, or "unskilled," labor (see Hull 16). More specifically, it overlooks, first, the location of intellectual labor in the conditions of material social history; second, the fact that those called out and self-nominated as intellectuals represent "only a particular sector of intellectual labor" (excluding, for example, journalists, technicians, managers, administrators, clergy, etc.; see Guillory 122, 131); and, third, the intellectual abilities called for in the practice of work deemed (by those not engaging in it) "unskilled" (see Kusterer). Accusations of the "politicization" of the academy (whether by the left or the right) depend on a prior denial of the location of the work of academics in material social history (see Horner, "Discoursing" 203; Nelson 140;

Mines; Soley). The designation of “intellectual” is restricted to workers who can credibly maintain just such denials. Richard Hofstadter, for example, claims that academics whose “ends are set from some interest or vantage point *outside* the intellectual process itself” don’t count as intellectuals proper; rather, he brands them “zealots” or “mental technicians” (27).

The distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor underlying derisions of the intellectual abilities of those populations working outside professional realms is now being challenged by studies of “everyday cognition” operating in the seemingly most mundane of tasks (Kusterer; Lave), and by identifications of what Houston Baker has termed “vernacular theory” and Michel Foucault has called “subjugated knowledges” (see McLaughlin 5–7). As Shoshona Zuboff argues, “action-centered” skills, which she distinguishes from “intellective” skills, nonetheless incorporate significant knowledge, but because this knowledge remains necessarily tacit, it is not recognized (186–88). Charles Darrach, in his study of work on the production floor of a California manufacturer of computer workstations, found that while production workers, management, and engineers all saw the work of computer assembly and testing as “simple” (256), analysis of actual workplace activities revealed not only that workers who lacked ostensibly “required” skills remained valuable employees, but also that they possessed many other skills important to their work unrecognized by management (263–65). Similarly, Jean Lave concludes from studies of people’s everyday arithmetic practices in specific settings that cognition “is distributed—stretched over, not divided among—mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings” (1). And Thomas McLaughlin argues from his analysis of the theorizing of various non-“theorists” that “it isn’t only ‘theorists’ who raise important questions about the premises that guide cultural practice” (5). So, just as work deemed “intellectual” is inherently material in its location, involving far more than purely “mental” activity and capacities, so work deemed “non-intellectual” involves significant, if commonly unrecognized, “mental” capacity and activity.

The distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual work persists, however, because of the class interests it serves. For the distinction designates some labor, and so some laborers, “higher” than others by reason of the ostensibly greater intellectuality of



their work, deserving of both greater status and rewards. Indeed, within this discourse, to designate academics as “laborers,” or even “workers,” seems counterintuitive, suspect, or perverse, for it implies a link between those officially distinguished as intellectuals and others that the distinction is intended to obscure (cf. L. R. Pratt 36–37; E. Watkins 11; Rhoades 127). My point in highlighting this link, however, is not to encourage an anti-intellectualism, to propose eliminating the category of “intellectual,” or to overlook the material differences between those designated intellectual and those not. What matters is the purpose for which the category of “intellectual” is being invoked. The materialist approach to intellectuality I am advocating would insist on the material specificity and historicity of the kind of mental and material work involved in any intellectual practice. We can grant the “self-determined” character of work Hofstadter sees as distinctively intellectual, but only if we understand that “self,” and so that self’s intellectual work, as inherently social, material, and historical, no less than the work of, say, meatpackers. Intellectuals, in this sense, as Gramsci pointed out, differ from non-intellectuals not by their innate possession of an intellectual capability foreign to others but by their social position as people paid to do a kind of work called “intellectual” (304). Rather than denigrating or praising what passes for intellectual work for its intellectuality, we need to insist on the material social conditions making that work possible and shaping it; we cannot use its “intellectuality” as a basis for denying its materiality.

The distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual labor is embodied by the commodification of intellectual labor, which belies the location of that work in time as ongoing, processual, and social. While I’ll have more to say about the specific commodification of writing in chapter 6, here I’ll simply recall that, for example, even that intellectual work given prominence in academic CVs appears in reduced, reified form: as individual items removed not only from the material resources making the work possible (listings of grants, for example, are kept separate from listings of publications) but also from the ongoing activity of writing and thinking and the contributions of those other than the “author” to that writing and thinking—contributions both to its formation and to shaping its reception. Or, to point to the institutional commodity of “the course,” the contributions to the work and very constitution of any course

made by individual faculty, specific students, and less easily identifiable factors of institutional, regional, and national history and circumstance are erased in course catalogues, as are the specific meanings that specific actors in actual course sections take from the concrete activities in which they engage for “the course.”

### **“Work” in English**

Within English, we can see evidence of attempts both to counter and conceal these contradictions embedded in the commodification of academic work in “Making Faculty Work Visible,” the 1996 Report of the MLA Commission on Professional Service. While making gestures to recognize the material social conditions contributing to the production of academic work, the report contains those gestures by its commitment to a meritocratic ideology opposed to recognizing either the contribution such conditions make to that work or the social relations responsible for establishing the criteria by which that work is evaluated. Responding to increasing tensions between universities’ teaching and research missions and increasing demands on faculty to engage in “service” (7–8), the report argues that not only scholarship but also service and teaching represent sites for significant intellectual work, and so ought to merit reward (12–13, 20, 29). As the Commission explains, “the degree of intellectual work [in a site] is not in some predictable way intrinsic to the task or activity but is a function of both circumstance and choice” (19). These observations suggest an attempt by the Commission to blur common distinctions between “intellectual” and “non-intellectual” work by insisting on the intellectuality of those faculty work activities traditionally deemed to lack it. The Commission observes that “the present model of faculty work conceals and thereby protects from criticism a set of tacit equations between the type of work done (named teaching, research, or service) and the specific character and values attributed to that work” so that research has come to serve as “metonym for intellectual work” (11), at the expense of recognizing the intellectual demands of work at the other sites.

Despite the report’s efforts to revalue teaching and service, its central concern with how to reward faculty members leads it into

contradictions. First, in pursuing that concern, it insists that faculty work that can be shown to be “intellectual” merits greater reward than work that cannot be shown to be intellectual, even if the latter contributes crucially to intellectual work, as the report acknowledges many activities do (14, 15): “What matters for assessing and rewarding faculty work,” they warn, “is whether it is viewed as intellectual work or professional citizenship” (24). In other words, while recognizing that intellectual work occurs in activities other than traditional scholarship, and that such work depends on a host of other labor activities (e.g., of “professional citizenship”) and material social conditions, the Commission still insists on maintaining individual faculty members’ intellectual “property rights” over the work made possible, in fact, by that other, presumably less “intellectual” labor and those specific material social circumstances. These other tasks may be labor and time-intensive, but if they do not make sufficient conceptual demands to qualify as intellectual work, they merit less reward (26). On the other hand, the relative time and labor intensity of work deemed intellectual is not broached, since to do so would be to acknowledge the materiality of intellectuality. Thus labor and time intensity of a task are not considered legitimate criteria for evaluating merit, only a commodified intellectuality. We can see this insistence on the criterion of commodified intellectuality in the care the report exerts to distinguish the intelligence called upon in “intellectual” work as qualitatively different from the intelligence called upon in everyday activities. Some intellectuality, it seems, is more intellectual than others. As it warns,

For the purposes of faculty rewards, significant intellectual work should be recognizably an outgrowth of faculty members’ professional expertise, rather than simply of their general knowledge and skills as educated, intelligent people. . . . [Moreover,] [i]ntellectual work as understood in the academic setting is not simply any intelligent behavior or activities and accomplishments that demonstrate a certain degree of professional skill and knowledge. (16)

Thus the Commission insists on distinguishing intellectual work not only from the intelligence of “educated, intelligent people” but

also from intelligence demonstrating “a certain degree of professional skill and knowledge.” And the purpose of these distinctions is, as the report indicates, to determine merit. To honor these other manifestations of intelligence would necessarily undermine the variable both by which faculty generally are deemed more meritorious than non-faculty and by which some faculty or work activities are deemed more meritorious than others. Further, it would require acknowledging that this extra degree of intellectuality may be attributable not simply to the faculty member exhibiting it, as a commodity herself (like a better-quality television commanding a higher price), but to a different set of material circumstances. Like whites denying the role their privileges as whites have played in their successes, faculty—and academic institutions generally—resist drawing attention to the role specific material circumstances have played in producing “their” intellectual accomplishments.

This denial has now put the academy, and the humanities in particular, in crisis. The academy’s commitment to an ideology of intellectual meritocracy valuing intellectuality for its own sake increasingly hampers its ability to persuade the “outside” public to fund it (see Plater 23; L. R. Pratt 36–37). There is simply less and less of a market for the kind of cultural capital it has traditionally produced: intellectuality, as a commodity, no longer sells. And within the academy, faculty committed to a view of their work as located outside the realm of material conditions find it difficult even to conceive of arguments against administration efforts to increase work expectations. At my own university, for example, *faculty* proposals to intensify faculty work in general education or advising, say, rarely consider what faculty will be expected to do less of in order that they may devote more attention to such matters. The very question would frame the issue as one of labor, and faculty cannot recognize their work as labor without putting at risk the class cultural status they enjoy as professional academics engaged in ostensibly non-material work. While faculty are and have always been vocal about feeling pressured, their commitment to their own status as non-laborers whose work is located outside the material realm both accounts for that pressure—when taking on projects, they often fail to consider the material demands, most obviously time, that such projects will require—and stands in the way of offering much resistance to it. John Guillory describes faculty thus

straddling a “theoretical torsion” in class position between the alternatives of capitalization and proletarianization:

the torque embodied in intellectual labor can be released in [either] direction. . . . This is to say both that knowledge, like money, is only capital when it is capitalized, when it produces the effect of *embourgeoisement*; and conversely, that knowledge can be devalued in such a way that its possessors become indistinguishable from wage-labor—a process of proletarianization marking the history of, for example, primary-school teachers and secretaries. (125)

This torsion is felt particularly by humanities faculty, thrown into crisis, Guillory argues, not because of the “politicization” of the humanities but because of their increasingly marginal role as instruments of ideological reproduction. There is, he observes, “a certain inverse relation between the organic significance of sectors of intellectual labor to the process of production [of the socioeconomic system] and the measure of work autonomy (and thus potential intellectual autonomy) granted to those sectors” (128). If humanities faculty are granted greater work and intellectual autonomy, it is because their work appears to be organically insignificant to such (re)production.<sup>5</sup> The explicitly political stances taken by some members of that faculty can thus be understood as an index of that inverse relation (Guillory 128–29; cf. Kramnick 90). What now places the humanities in serious crisis, according to Guillory, is the declining value of their cultural capital. While earlier humanists were responsible for producing and maintaining a useful (to the dominant socioeconomic order) ideological distinction between bourgeois and lower classes, that distinction is now effected not through that status hierarchy but through the ideology of “productivity” and “upward mobility” (134–35).

In response, humanities faculty have attempted to resuscitate the value of their cultural capital by sacrificing their work autonomy, submitting their own labor to the norms of “productivity,” captured in the “publish or perish” imperative (135–36). This has led to their imprisonment in the commodity structure discussed above. However, their ideological commitment to locating their work outside the realm of the material undermines even their efforts at

such productivity. While they are increasingly pressed into both "service" duties and demands for greater scholarly productivity, they have no way of addressing the material demands such service and scholarly productivity both require. To ask for more time, for example, would be to admit that their "intellectual" work was not independent of material social conditions but the product of "labor," and so to admit to their status as laborers. But whatever intellectual autonomy they now preserve can seem precious little reward for the work time demands they are now expected to meet.

### **"Work" in Composition**

Composition, of course, occupies a marginal position in relation to English studies, the "humanities," and the academy generally. As a consequence, its experience of and responses to the torsion between capitalization and proletarianization differ from that of faculty more comfortably ensconced within these other realms. Most obviously, composition faculty do not enjoy the same degree of work or intellectual autonomy enjoyed by these other faculty (cf. E. Watkins 138). Following Guillory's argument, this can be accounted for by the perceived greater organic significance of Composition's intellectual labor to the process of socioeconomic production. Paradoxically, if Composition were thought to matter less to that process, it would enjoy greater status and greater work and intellectual autonomy. Indeed, the public furor over the proposed first-year English course at the University of Texas, Austin, highlights above all both the perceived significance of Composition's labor to the public and the consequent lesser degree of autonomy the public is willing to grant Composition. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, "Autonomy is increasingly difficult to attain and defend the further one moves away from those fields whose autonomy is protected by both the esoteric obscurity of their products and the absence of directly social 'interest' in their stakes" ("Corporatism" 104). Thus, while the public has long treated the obscurity and politicization of MLA conference paper topics as fodder for jokes, it views what happens in composition courses as no joking matter. Indeed, particularly among conservative writers, there is the expectation, even demand, that composition courses be not simply "basic" but dull

routine (see, for example, MacDonald 3–4, Traub 18; cf. Coles, “Teaching Writing, Teaching Literature” 4, 13).

Compositionists have responded to the torsion between capitalization and proletarianization of their labor primarily in one of two conflicting ways, taking the form of the by now familiar debates between practitioners and scholars, teaching and research, experience and theory. On the one hand, some have attempted to “professionalize”: they seek academic disciplinary status for Composition by directing their efforts at producing knowledge about writing in general on which composition “scholars” (or “researchers”) can claim professional expertise. This knowledge they produce in the commodified form of publications. However, these efforts threaten to distance Composition from its material ties to and identification with teaching. This has led, as David Bartholomae has noted, to the odd phenomenon of a “career” in Composition “that has everything to do with status and identity in English and little to do with the organization, management, and evaluation of student writing, except perhaps as an administrative problem.” Thus we now have specialists “in” Composition who never teach composition (“What” 23).

Alternatively, and often in response to these efforts at professionalization, others locate themselves insistently in the composition classroom, asking of any knowledge, “How can I use this in my teaching?” These faculty define their own knowledge in terms of their experience of what “works” in the classroom, and pride themselves on their dedication to their teaching and their students. In so doing, however, they increase the marginality of their position in the academy and subject themselves to ever more degrading working conditions, since their “work” is deemed not work at all but labor exploited to produce the commodity of writing “skills” and future skilled employees.

Despite the animosity of the debate between these positions, both largely accept as a given the commodification of their work as the production of *economic* exchange value in a way that distinguishes Composition from literary study, the humanities, and the academy generally. For both represent responses to a felt lack of work and intellectual autonomy not experienced in these other spheres. The absence of any parallel debate within the realm of literary study—between, say, teachers and literary theorists—registers this difference.<sup>6</sup> Although debates such as the “canon wars”

rage in literary study, these rarely address work practices of the profession, focusing instead primarily on methodologies of interpretation and the specific texts on which to exercise those methodologies.<sup>7</sup> The different position of Composition and its work in relation to the academic and the larger social realm is revealed further by the resemblance of debates in Composition, indeed their intersection, with those ongoing in the “field” of primary and secondary school education between teachers and researchers, or teachers and educational administrators, and between these educators and the public.

In short, unlike literary study, the value that counts in Compositional work is rarely imagined as value “intrinsic” to the work itself, but as the economic exchange value of the commodified literacy skills which Composition is expected to produce (just as K–12 education is expected to produce skilled citizens). For that reason, just as concrete labor in industrial production is subject to redesign to meet the needs of abstract labor, for example, via “Taylorization,” the concrete labor of teaching in Composition is also always at risk of being completely redesigned by the dominant. A narrow sense of the social relations of production in Composition is thus recognized—social relations in which Composition plays a distinctly subordinate role—distinguishing the place of work in Composition from work in literary study. Work in Composition is recognized for, or defined as, the production of economic capital in the form of the commodified literacy skills to meet “society’s” demands (including the “demands” of other academic disciplines). Indeed, Compositionists have sometimes exploited this recognition to make greater claims for material support from society in order to address the constant laments of a “literacy crisis” (Faigley 50, 67; Nelson and Bérubé 18–19). The bargain Composition thus makes of selling its labor to others continues to overlook the full materiality of writing as social practice rather than reified textual object or isolated skill. Moreover, it also makes explicit the material conditions of intellectual work that the academy remains loath to acknowledge. This provides yet another reason for the academy to keep Composition on the margins, and reinforces its subordination to both the academy and “society.” And finally, this bargain condemns those in Composition to further relinquishing control over their labor practices: accepting the challenge to produce “outcomes” invites public scrutiny of the work of composition teachers to which college and



university literature teachers have never been subjected, but with which those in K-12 education are all too familiar.

While attempts to “professionalize” Composition might seem to resist such surrender by constructing a discipline of knowledge about writing “in general,” even that knowledge produced is subjected to judgment by teachers and the public for the implications it has for writing instruction in ways unimaginable for the knowledge produced in literary study. Moreover, teachers’ claims to professional expertise about Composition undermine their efforts to recruit others to shoulder part of the labor of teaching composition. In my own department, at least some faculty without claims to expertise in Composition have bitterly resisted efforts in the past to require them to teach one section per year of the composition course required of all first-year students. Pointing to the reputed expertise of “the composition folk” among the faculty, they confessed their own ignorance about the subject and so their unsuitability for teaching it. Thus, defining composition as a reified “subject” rather than a labor-intensive activity (indisputably far more labor-intensive than the teaching of literature) has worked against efforts at equitable labor practices. Further, defining Composition as a body of knowledge over which professionals can claim expertise has, until recently, led to the neglect of the wide range of writing practices outside the academy, in what Anne Ruggles Gere refers to as the “extracurriculum” of Composition operating in individuals’ informal writing activities, community writing groups, literary clubs, lyceums, self-help groups and guides, and the like. For recognition of this extracurriculum would place writing outside the claimed territory of the professional discipline of Composition as “author” of that subject. Hence the particular angst of the debate over professionalism within Composition, fueling charges and countercharges of self-interested careerism and betrayal, exploitation and obstructionism, elitism and anti-intellectualism (see, for example, Dobrin chapter 1; Gunner, “The Fate”; and the exchange between Rouse and Gerald Graff).

Subsequent chapters chart specific manifestations of the commodification of work in Composition. Here, however, let me outline avenues by which it has attempted to resist commodification of the work with which it is most closely identified, the teaching of writing. Commodification of teaching occurs most obviously when

Composition succumbs to the temptation to define its work in terms of “outcomes” or “results.” We can see such moves not only in those arguments for pedagogies that have “practical” results evidenced in the texts students produce, their grades, or their subsequent employment, but also in those arguments for pedagogies effecting socially liberatory change. It would be futile, and wrong, to ignore the relation of work in Composition to work in and on the social. But defining our work only in terms of such outcomes overlooks the location of that work within the material social process itself—for instance, the students, class size, teaching loads, teaching facilities, ongoing history, and the host of institutional, social, and personal pressures on students—and thus the overdetermined nature of the work “accomplished” at that site.<sup>8</sup> While I’ll have more to say about this in “Politics,” here it is worth observing that such a view treats the students, their skills, or their consciousness as commodities (i.e., as Composition’s “products”). Thus an emphasis on pedagogical “outcomes” or “results” abstracts the labor of composition, denying its materiality by concealing the contribution of not just teachers but students, institutions, and specific social, material, historical circumstances to its accomplishments. Just as the notion of skills requirements, as Darrah observes, “abstracts people from the specific, concrete contexts in which they work by treating the workplace as a mere backdrop to their actions” (252), so this emphasis on outcomes ignores the ways in which the mere “backdrop” of a specific site of teaching and learning in fact interacts with the imagined “outcomes” or “results” reported. Further, it ignores the various other contingencies affecting what happens to these “results”—skills, competencies, changed consciousness—as the students move to other locations. As Allan Luke points out, for example, any “cultural capital” an individual acquires through literacy education “only counts and works in combination with people’s *economic capital* and *social capital*” (“Getting” 307).

This commodification of teaching as the production of results has its mirror in Composition’s imaginings of pedagogy as a privileged, autonomous site of work. Tom Fox notes that regardless of any social, postmodern understandings we may favor,

composition’s focus on the classroom pulls us the other way, towards idiosyncrasy, individual students and their successes,

“good” days in single classrooms. Our experience is parceled out into 50- or 75-minute classes, and we talk about how each class differs from the others. No doubt we experience our classrooms this way because of the fact that we teach in these time periods and we grade individual students. But the institutional shape of our experience and the political theories that we admire thus may work against each other—the former towards atomistic and individualist views and the latter towards multiple, social frameworks. (“Proceeding” 569)

This institutional reification of teaching experience extends not only to thinking of individual students, class meetings, and course sections but to specific pedagogies. Often framed in terms of “what works” or “worked,” we isolate specific pedagogical techniques from the immediate material circumstances of their use, locating our work (and that of our students) not in the social, historical material process but in commodifications of that work. Such commodification is manifested in the design of courses, in their public presentation, and in the neglect of specific material constraints on any pedagogy. What is concealed in such commodifications is the contradiction between the undeniable location of pedagogical work in the contingencies of material social history and the representation of that work as a commodity divorced from those contingencies and the labor involved in the work.

Increasingly, however, compositionists are beginning to re-imagine, and re-present, pedagogies as strategic responses to specific situations rather than in more commodified forms. For example, accounts of basic writing pedagogies gathered in the February 1996 issue of *College Composition and Communication* insist on locating them as strategic responses to specific institutional and historical conditions (Grego and Thompson; Soliday, “From the Margins to the Mainstream”; Anokye; Duffey; Rodby). All the writers present an institutionally designated form, “basic writing,” as at best a site for strategic action—most prominently, the strategy of “mainstreaming” basic writers. But all of them also imagine any “basic writing” strategy in the context of specific historical and material pressures on those students and teachers served by it: the historical “feminization” of work in composition, especially basic writing; the absence of credit granted for students’

work and tuition paid for “remedial” courses; the pervasive “downsizing” of funding for education; the “remedial” function of composition historically. Moreover, they locate their own work in the specifics of their own institutions, rejecting the application of the pedagogies they describe universally to all institutions. Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson report on the strategy of a writing “studio” program they developed in response to a state-mandated elimination of credit for basic writing, but caution, “The Studio is not a destination which we urge others to pursue simply as some latest trend” (82). Mary Soliday, while describing what appears to be an effective FIPSE-funded project at the City University of New York in which basic writing students are placed in “mainstream” courses, warns that “institutional politics contextualize a mainstreamed course, and once the new course is no longer protected by the prestige and funding of a special grant, politics can redefine the course’s original goals”; consequently, “we have to be acutely aware of our role in a potential struggle over redefining the considerable territory which constitutes remedial education within an institution” (“From the Margins” 96). For example, Soliday notes the danger that administrators might well view mainstreaming not “as a method of enhancing instruction for open admissions students, [but] for cutting costs by eliminating remedial courses and the students these courses traditionally have served” (97). Suellynn Duffey, in her response to Grego and Thompson and to Soliday, echoes such cautions about the effects of such strategies on the material lives of students and teachers, stating “neither [article] should convince us to mainstream basic writing students at our own institutions” (104). Rather, while she sees Grego and Thompson’s article illustrating that “mainstreaming can work, [it] should not be seen as evidence that mainstreaming is a desirable alternative to tracking. Instead, it describes several adaptations to enforced mainstreaming, but those adaptations argue neither for nor against it” (105). And Judith Rodby ends her response by calling for more talk and writing to each other “comparing and developing a *variety* of political strategies, private and covert, deliberate and public, to preserve the integrity of our work with students and their writing” (111, emphasis mine). Rodby’s call is especially important in confirming both the value and the dynamics of such discourse: while rejecting any reified notions of basic writing, she insists on