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Steven Mailloux

Practices, Theories, and Traditions: Further Thoughts on the Disciplinary Identities of English and Communication Studies

I often run along a path near my home. Recently I noticed something about my behavior: On especially crowded days I seldom greet either walkers or bikers, who are often talking in couples or riding by at high speeds. But when I meet other runners, I almost always say or signal "hello." I interpret my greeting practice as a mode of identification: identifying with others sharing a running practice. For certain purposes, runners might identify with walkers and bikers, for example, in a civic action to save the path from the encroachment of housing developers. But within the group of pathway users, I identify primarily with other runners and, in a certain sense, we form a loose community of running practitioners. This is a very, very rough analogy for what happens at local university functions, at national scholarly conferences, and at non-academic events of all kinds, rhetorical contexts where disciplinary identities are established and reinforced for professional and lay audiences.

To analyze performances of disciplinary identities in more depth, I'd like to begin heuristically with a three-dimensional model for locating academic fields in relation to each other. Axis A (Disciplinary Matrices) consists of practices, theories, and traditions; Axis B (Field Boundaries) includes disciplines, interdisciplines, transdisciplines, and non-disciplines; and Axis C (Cultural Sites) comprises ideational domains, material institutions, and public spheres.[1] Academic disciplines and their subfields can be identified and compared across the different axes of this model. For example, the disciplinary matrix of English Studies includes interpretive *practices* for critically reading, researching, and teaching texts; aesthetic and other *theories* for defining textual objects of study; and evolving *traditions* of texts to be described, compared, and evaluated (canons of literary, critical, and theoretical works). In the twentieth century, English as this matrix of practices, theories, and traditions (Axis A) was identified as a separate "discipline" (Axis B) with its own ideational domain in relation to other disciplines and its own subfields, institutionalized as an academic department within the university at a certain distance from non-academic publics (Axis C).[2] In contrast to departmentalized disciplines such as history, sociology, and biology, rhetorical studies is today an *inter*discipline located in fragmented pieces

as subfields in various departments, primarily English and Communication, which have their own independent, professional disciplinary identities.

There are advantages and disadvantages in the fragmented state of rhetorical studies within the university. Interdisciplinary studies often depend upon the intellectual energies and elaborated specializations of individual disciplines that have been institutionalized as academic departments, and the location of rhetoric as a subfield within such departments enables productive exchanges between rhetorical study and a departmentalized home discipline. On the other hand, this same institutional fragmentation discourages interchange and cooperation among rhetoricians in various departments. One way to address the disadvantages of this fragmentation is to encourage cross-disciplinary dialogues about the histories and theories of the two departmentalized fields most concerned with the language arts. In "Disciplinary Identities: On the Rhetorical Paths between English and Communication Studies," I proposed contributing to such dialogues in order, as one commentator put it, to "broach the possibility of a synthesis which would unite rhetoricians of different departments . . . on the basis of both the history and theory of each field."[3]

In its historical part, my essay described three periods in the development of these disciplines during the last century: a time around 1915 when Speech separated from English and employed a scientific rhetoric to establish its disciplinary identity; a second time around 1960 when theorists such as Gadamer, Kuhn, and Perelman provided the basis for a rhetorical and hermeneutic view of disciplinarity that challenged traditional objectivist views of science; and a third time in the early 1980s when Composition Studies employed this notion of a rhetorical hermeneutic paradigm rather than a scientific model to establish its disciplinary identity. I then punctuated this three-stage, double-disciplinary history with three moments of potential intersection between English-rhetoric and Communication-rhetoric, between Composition and Speech: around 1910 right before the formal professional separation between English and Speech; around 1947 when the National Council of Teachers of English and the Speech Association of America sponsored a joint conference on communication in freshman college courses; and today with its various interdisciplinary overlaps, including work done in the rhetoric of science (and one might add in critical theory and cultural studies). I claimed that these moments of intersection were opportunities for conversation and co-operation among rhetoricians in different disciplines, opportunities that in the first two cases were missed and that in the last—that is today—should be exploited to the fullest.

One rhetorical goal of "Disciplinary Identities"—to promote discussion about rhetoric's institutional position within the university—was at least partially achieved when four responses, two from English departments and two

from Communication departments, were published in subsequent issues of *RSQ*. The criticisms contained in these responses strike me as quite convincing: I clearly got some of the rhetorical details wrong in my history, and, I have to admit, if I got too many of the details wrong then the three-stage history I tell will turn out to be useless, except as a way of initiating cross-disciplinary discussion about the multi-disciplinary histories of rhetoric as an interdiscipline. I'm sure you won't be surprised to read that I am not convinced that I got that many details wrong. Let me explain.

There's a certain symmetry between the responses from the two disciplines concerned: the writers from Speech Communication say I misrepresent the history of their discipline's early days while at least one of the writers from Composition Studies claims the same about my rhetorical history of rhet/comp. In both cases, the historical issue is how important was the scientific model in the establishment and development of their respective disciplines. Mike Leff and Bill Keith, in different ways, claim I give too much importance to scientific rhetoric in the formation of the earliest disciplinary identity for Speech; while Marty Nystrand claims I don't give enough importance to that same scientific rhetoric in the establishment of Composition. Furthermore, though Leff, Keith, and Nystrand all agree that I got the rhetorical details wrong about the origins of their respective disciplines, they also claim that my mischaracterization of those origins does in fact apply quite nicely to their disciplines' later development. Keith asks: "Was the rhetorical tradition scientized within Speech Communication [as I claim about the discipline in the teens]?" "Probably not," Keith answers. "Or not until very recently, maybe the 1970s"(96). Leff calls my history a "useful and creative misreading" for, though it is wrong about the scientific origin of Speech, my "view from the outside reveals something basic" about his discipline's subsequent development: "However much rhetoricians in the field may have tried to resist the pull of scientific rhetoric, it has always been there and has exerted an influence so profound that they are sometimes unaware of its presence"(87). Leff also adds a criticism of my account of composition studies, suggesting "that scientific rhetoric has persisted longer and has had a more significant influence" than I acknowledge (89). From the rhet/comp side, Nystrand takes up this point and asserts that "Circa 1970, discourse about writing took a serious scientific turn, and the result was nothing less than the new field of Composition Studies. If Composition Studies got its start this way three decades ago," Nystrand continues, "much has changed since that time, of course, and its current configuration, especially in today's graduate programs in Rhetoric & Composition, is far closer to the rhetorical hermeneutic profile Mailloux sketches than the empirical character of its origins"(97).

What strikes me about these observations by my critics is how much we actually agree. We all agree that defining and developing disciplinary identities in Speech Communication and Composition Studies involves ongoing tensions and exchanges between scientific and non-scientific rhetorics, between empirical and interpretive models of inquiry, and between scientistic and rhetorical hermeneutic conceptions of disciplinarity. I am willing to admit that my original account needs to be revised to give more prominence to these tensions, and perhaps that issue can become a fruitful avenue for further historical discussion across and within our disciplinary boundaries. But there is more. Bill Keith's original description of my article that I quoted at the outset emphasized that I "broached the possibility of a synthesis which would unite rhetoricians of different departments . . . on the basis of both the history and theory of each field." I've been talking mostly history up til now; let me turn to theory.

Theory—what I've called meta-practice about practice—plays a significant role in any discipline's rhetorical activities at moments of origin and further development, in periods of consolidation, crisis, and transformation. Employing theories of disciplinarity forms part of a disciplines's history, and my historical account tried to specify some of the theories rhetorically employed by Speech and Composition at certain moments in their establishment and evolution. I would now like to define more clearly the theoretical notions underlying my descriptions of these theoretical moments, which are constituted by and in turn give impetus to other disciplinary practices including those rhetorical.

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, professionalized disciplines formed within the university through various rhetorical combinations of scientistic and humanistic ideologies. Put simply and redundantly, disciplinary identities based on scientistic ideology entailed empirical practices of inquiry with scientific rhetorics accompanied by scientistic justifications, all in a relation, usually of opposition, to humanistic ideologies entailing scholarly practices of inquiry with text-based interpretive rhetorics accompanied by humanistic justifications. By "scientistic" I mean the privileging of the natural sciences as a model for all disciplines of knowledge production, with an emphasis on "scientific method" in research conceived in a range of ways from empirical practices of data gathering supporting generalizations to more specific experimental hypothesis-testing in controled environments by disinterested researchers producing objective knowledge systematically arranged according to laws. By "scientific" I mean practical vocabularies and theoretical concepts borrowed from the natural and social sciences.

Humanistic models of disciplinary knowledge production are tied to scholarly traditions not only for finding truth but for shaping character and

participating in civic culture. Humanistic models can include rhetorical hermeneutic views of disciplinarity. Such rhetorical hermeneutic views emphasize interpreting, troping, arguing, and narrating in disciplinary practice. They focus on the role of interpretation and rhetoric in communal knowledge production, paradigm formation, and professional training rather than on foundationalist theory, abstract rationality, or disinterested objectivity as defining disciplinary characteristics. Such rhetorical hermeneutics rejects scientistic privileging of the natural sciences and "scientific method," instead viewing all disciplines as having their own defining rhetorical and hermeneutic practices, which might in fact include something called "scientific method." From this perspective, for example, a discipline could have a rhetoric that denies its rhetorical hermeneutic character and continues using a scientific vocabulary and a scientistic self-concept; <u>or</u> alternatively a discipline could have a rhetoric that embraces a rhetorical hermeneutic notion of its own disciplinarity but still continues using a scientific vocabulary without a scientistic self-concept; <u>or</u> there might be some other disciplinary configuration of these models and vocabularies.

My article's claim was that a nineteenth-century positivistic, scientistic model of disciplinarity was used in the legitimation rhetoric of Speech Communication in the teens; while a rhetorical hermeneutic model of disciplinarity was used by Composition Studies in the early eighties, even by those compositionists who used a scientific vocabulary. My critics persuasively point out that a humanistic rhetoric and identification competed with the scientific rhetoric and scientistic identification in the case of Speech; while a scientific rhetoric supplemented or competed with a rhetorical hermeneutic identification in the case of Composition. To develop a fuller, more persuasive history, then, we need to work out in more detail how these different disciplinary rhetorics, these vocabularies and self-concepts, played out at different times in different places within different disciplinary identities.

Let me return now to the broader framework with which I began: the three-dimensional model for locating disciplines in relation to each other. To describe the histories and theories of particular disciplines, as I have done so far for English and Speech, is to focus on aspects of Axis A, disciplinary matrices of practices, theories and traditions, which include theoretical models and rhetorical practices of self-understanding and academic legitimation. I have said nothing as yet about objects of study or canonical traditions in each discipline. Historically, a significant distinction between rhetorical study within English and Speech has been the emphasis on written rhetoric in the former case and oral rhetoric in the latter. As Leff points out, however, this distinction has become blurred in the current work of rhetoricians in both disciplines:

> Within the field of English, studies of literary fiction are now supplemented by attention to texts such as the oratory of Fanny Wright and Frederick Douglass or the proceedings of Congressional committees that once were grist only for the mills of Speech-Communication. Meanwhile, critics in Speech-Communication no longer sustain concentrated attention on oratorical texts and overtly political issues but have appropriated a variety of objects for study, including scientific monographs, fiction, film, and material artifacts such as monuments and museums, that fall outside the ambit of public rhetoric as traditionally conceived. (Leff 85)

There is also now a major overlap in the canonical traditions valued by the disciplinary-specific rhetorical studies practiced in English and Speech, though as with shared objects of study the overlap in canons is marked by significant disciplinary differences in genre selections, interpretive questions, and methodological approaches.[4] These canonical traditions combine with practices and theories to constitute the disciplinary matrices of English and Speech

But how might we best understand the disciplinarity these practices, theories, and traditions constitute? This leads back to Axis B, which includes disciplines, interdisciplines, transdisciplines, and non-disciplines. To raise the question of disciplinarity allows me to make some final comments on academic disciplines and their relations to the non-academic and to note, at least in passing, my own interdisciplinary interests in tracking the rhetorical paths of thought.

Academic disciplines are hierarchically organized, institutionally supported, self-perpetuating networks of practices in knowledge production and transmission. As such, they are technologized reductions, methologized encapsulations, explicit formalizations of practical, non-methodic, non-formalizable activities of coping with and in the world. That is, disciplines are, most fundamentally, the transformation of practical wisdom into accredited techniques, of *phronesis* into *techne*.[5] This transformation of everyday phronesis into specialized techne becomes part of the conditions of possibility for the paths of thought in any community. In tracking these paths, then, one must trace the rhetorical hermeneutic practices of disciplines against the background of everyday activities in the world, disciplinary techne in the context of extradisciplinary phronesis. This extradisciplinary phronesis, always itself historically situated and thus potentially changing, provides a contingent theoretical practice through which disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and nondisciplinarity can be thought and perhaps transformed. This practical wisdom makes up part of both the object and context of inquiry, forming a temporary ground for both self-reflection and potential reformation. Such revisions can begin by giving historical accounts of the

history of particular disciplines, their domestic identity formations and their foreign relations with other disciplines. These foreign relations include shared sets of interdisciplinary practices as well as academic extensions of phronetic political concerns of everyday life beyond the academy.

Disciplinary identities are formed through these domestic and foreign relations, through agents working within the heterogeneous practices, theories, goals, and other elements of a disciplinary community. These enabling conditions establish the boundaries, minimally or maximally porous at different times and in different places, between one disciplinary community and others and between the academy and lay public spheres. English Departments, the Modern Language Association, and 4Cs are institutional and professional sites fostering at least one disciplinary identity; and Communication Departments and the National Communication Association are sites fostering another disciplinary identity. Most rhetorical scholars work within these disciplinary identities as they also identify with their interdisciplinary field of rhetoric. English and Speech Communication as departmentalized disciplines, then, currently provide the intellectual/material conditions of possibility for exchange and cooperation among many rhetoricians, and it will prove useful to continue discussing the histories, theories, and practices shared by the rhetoricians so located.

Bill Keith notes that one of the central animating myths of Communication-rhetoricians is the importance of rhetorical training as a preparation for democratic citizenship. He seems to believe that this core belief differentiates rhetoricians in Speech from those in English. But writing from within English composition studies, Tom Miller contradicts this assumption. Miller agrees with much of my original *RSQ* piece but adds an important supplement, an emphasis on rhetoric's political traditions and potential political effects outside the academy. Miller comments that my "rhetorical hermeneutics" is a useful phrase "in so far as it gives priority to situated practical action, for too many hermeneutics are too little interested in the pragmatic institutional and political involvements that make rhetoric more than merely academic"(107). Miller goes on to argue that "as rhetoricians, we ought to look beyond traditional disciplinary identifications to consider how we can collaborate with practitioners of the arts of rhetoric across and beyond the academy who share pragmatic commitments to advancing social reforms and debating questions about what purposes such reforms should serve" (115). Most usefully for cross-disciplinary dialogue and cooperation, Miller suggests that these "collaborations in rhetorical studies" between English and Communications be identified "with a pragmatic commitment to progressive political alliances, which would be enhanced if communications studies of social movements, organizational cultures, and mass media were combined

with the literacy work and outreach efforts supported by comprehensive composition programs" (108).

Following such recommendations could lead to the politically progressive results that Miller and many of us desire. Even more likely is the fact that such a collaborative effort will call directly upon the democratic traditions associated with rhetoric, those political traditions that Keith sees as central to the disciplinary identity of communication-rhetoricians but that many of us wish for rhetoricians in general. But, as rhetoricians, we also need to acknowledge how variably contingent such progressive political results or such democratic interdisciplinary identifications will turn out to be, how fully our rhetorical success depends on unpredictable local, national, and even global conditions for cooperation across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. Still, even the *attempt* at multi-disciplinary alliances of rhetoricians increases the likelihood that the disadvantages of institutional fragmentation will be overcome. I see these ongoing *RSQ* exchanges about disciplinary histories and the establishment of a new organization, the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, as evidence suggesting that closer foreign relations can take place among rhetoricians in different disciplines. Future efforts and these current accomplishments hold promise that we may indeed do a lot more than simply greet each other as we together run, walk, or ride along today's rhetorical paths of disciplinary thought.

Notes

[1] For a related discussion of disciplinary matrices, see Kuhn 182-87; and on disciplines and interdisciplines, see Klein. For discussion of historical approaches to disciplinarity and bibliographies of specific disciplinary histories, see Graham, Lepenies and Weingart; Messer-Davidow, Shumway and Sylvan; Goggin; Anderson and Valente.

[2] There are various ways to use this heuristic to think about disciplinary identities. For example, disciplinary practitioners self-identify with a certain matrix of practices, theories, and traditions defining their specific discipline (Axis A), which is different from but related to other academic disciplines and interdisciplines (Axis B) and to academic institutions and non-academic publics (Axis C). I am hesitant to provide a graphic representation of this three-dimensional model, partly because it is only a heuristic and works rather inexactly as a model for "graphing" related elements. True, the plane of Axis A does cut across Axis B at any of its points; that is, we can say that a disciplinary practice (such as writing pedagogy, literary history, or speech criticism) could in a certain sense be "graphed" on Axis A (in relation to its own disciplinary matrix of practices, theories, and traditions) and on Axis B (as part of a bounded disciplinary field rather than as an interdisciplinary practice shared across disciplines). But Axis C (Cultural Sites) doesn't quite work that way (or does it?): a disciplinary practice is always located simultaneously in relation to all of the points on Axis C, in relation to an ideational domain (e.g., the notion of a textual interpretation), a material institution (e.g., a graduate program in a research university), and public spheres (e.g.,

non-academic book review networks). That is, the points on Axes A and B mark distinct ways that a practice is understood and used at a particular moment (e.g., publishing literary criticism—not explicit theorizing—as a disciplinary rather than an interdisciplinary practice); but the points on Axis C name the always *multiple* settings in cultural time and space that a practice occupies.

[3] William Keith's description for the panel "History, Theory, and Synthesis: Building Bridges Between Composition and Speech" in the Program for the Tenth Biennial Conference of the Rhetoric Society of America (25 May 2002).

[4] Compare, for example, Brummett's *Reading Rhetorical Theory* with Bizzell and Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition.*

[5] Among many twentieth-century discussions of *phronesis* and *techne*, see especially Heidegger, Gadamer, and Bernstein. My own use of the terms here is only meant to be suggestive; I attempt a more precise historical and theoretical account in "Rhetorical Hermeneutics Still Again."

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