

## **Making Power Flow Downhill: Composition Instruction as a Laboratory for Experiments in Political Economy**

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In this paper I am talking to composition instructors and people in the field of composition studies who believe that composition instructors and other part-time academic laborers are an exploited and oppressed labor force in universities and two- and four-year colleges. The case against the increasing exploitation of composition instructors and part-time and grad student academic labor is made powerfully in *Writing Ourselves into the Story* (Fontaine and Hunter), *Gypsy Academics* (Schell), *Textual Carnivals* (Miller), and *Will Teach for Food* (Nelson). I have nothing to add to arguments that this exploitation exists or that it is wrong and should be ended. I take those arguments as proven and address this paper to others sharing that view. My argument, then, is on *how* to struggle against the exploitation of academic laborers.

Literature on the plight of composition instructors and part-time academic laborers blames their condition mostly on the following causes:

- university administrations' desire for cheap labor (Nelson, Miller 144-159, Schell 12);

- the university's disregard for teaching in awarding compensation (Miller 191), itself blamed on:
  - the focus of composition instructors on teaching rather than publication (Tuell), and
  - lack of institutional support for research and publishing by non-tenure-track faculty (Schell 64);
- the feminine-gendered construction of composition in which the low status of composition and the low status of women are linked and feed into each other in a vicious cycle (Miller, Fontaine and Hunter, and Schell);
- the propensity of full-time faculty to identify with administrators against grad students and part-time faculty and to consolidate their own privilege at the expense of these exploited academic laborers (Nelson, especially 153-178).

And the solutions proposed in the literature are mostly these:

- request university administrations to get rid of adjunct composition jobs, not rely as heavily on grad student labor, and increase the number of tenure track positions (Fontaine and Hunter 107-122, Schell 91-99, Mendelowitz);
- request university administrations to pay adjuncts and/or grad students, higher wages (Schell 99-109, Mendelowitz);
- request university administrations to assess and value teaching like they do research and publication (Tuell);

- persuade university cultures to value “women’s work”, feminine characteristics, or feminist ethics, however those may be figured, as highly as they value the male counterparts to those things (Schell 71-89, Tuell, Miller?);
- abolish and/or restructure freshman writing (Schell 114-117);
- educate academic laborers about their working conditions (Schell 117-121);
- get adjunct and grad student labor to organize and demand higher wages (Nelson, Schell 109-113);
- persuade composition instructors and part-time faculty to publish more (Tuell).

The overwhelming bulk of the literature depends for its proposed solutions on widespread recognition of 1) the immorality or injustice of academic labor conditions and/or 2) the undesirability of those conditions for the people working in them. Recognition of injustice is proposed as the path toward just administration and institutional reorganization legislated by professional organizations like MLA and NCTE. Recognition of undesirable working conditions is proposed as the path to union organizing and collective bargaining. The proposal to persuade composition instructors to publish more is the oddball here and structurally different from all the other proposals. I will address it at length later in this paper.

Promotion of the recognition of injustice is the commonest trope in this literature, and please pardon me while I lose my composure in frustration at the endless repetition of this promotion and the naïve expectation that it will have the desired effect. Writers seem to think that because working conditions for academic laborers *are* unjust, proclaiming that injustice from the mountain tops will force the world to come to its senses and right the wrongs of academia. But if these conditions are unjust (which they are), then someone is getting more

than their fair share of the pie at the expense of those getting less. No amount of browbeating is going to make those getting more than their fair share suddenly come to their senses and redistribute their goodies equally. In fact, as every Marxist and psychoanalytic critic and everyone else in the world knows, people's sense of right and wrong seldom strays far from what they want, and the powerful can believe the most amazing things when their self-interest is at stake.

What seems stranger is when people whose self-interest is not at stake refuse to see the wrongness of academic labor conditions despite persuasive demonstrations. Michael Bérubé claims this is the case for faculty at Yale:

I want to suggest that something strange is going on here. When a professor of English begins sounding like an employer of migrant citrus workers (*at least you're being paid here – at Sunkist they give their workers only an orange a day*), or when the possessor of a named chair at one of the world's wealthiest universities insists that \$9,750 is more than adequate compensation for graduate teaching assistants, then clearly some of the protocols of the profession have gone haywire (Nelson 162).

But the full extent of the group psychosis involved in these faculty responses to GESO doesn't begin to come clear, I think, until you step back and realize that for all their bellowing and blustering, *Yale faculty had no direct stake in the prospect of unionization* (Nelson 163).

Bérubé's mystery here may be group psychosis, but it's no mystery when you look at the logic of collective action and individual interest. This case is confused by Bérubé's placing of faculty

as possibly neutral mediators between administration and students rather than seeing them as parties in two unbalanced power relations: rank and file masses vis-à-vis central administration, privileged elite vis-à-vis their students.

Eileen Schell gets closer to the crux of the biscuit when she ascribes the failure of oppressed academic laborers to improve their situation to “higher education illiteracy” (117). She gives an anecdote describing the vehemence of a male graduate student at her claim at a conference that “exploitative working conditions and non-tenure-track teaching jobs were likely to be the future of many English graduate students.” The graduate student responded that

we should be worried about “poetry, literature, and great thought” and not about something as mundane as working conditions. This graduate student, although highly intelligent, was suffering from higher education illiteracy. Fueled by idealistic myths he saw no connection between his intellectual work and his status as a worker. The price for higher education illiteracy, however, is an increasing loss of control of one’s working conditions, hence one’s academic freedom. Without knowledge or organized action we cannot act--we can only react... (119)

Schell is almost right that increased knowledge would allow for the kind of collective action she’s calling for. But blaming ostensible false consciousness on idealistic myths, on Bérubé’s group psychosis, is to be fooled by ideological appearances. It’s not that the falsely conscious fail to perceive their self-interest correctly, what they fail to perceive is their group interest. But those people who do correctly perceive their group interest are not doing any better for themselves than those who don’t, in fact, they may be doing worse. Those striving to improve the lot of composition instructors collectively have not yet proposed solutions that work

before a critical mass is reached, and generally that critical mass isn't reached. But come up with an effective means for powerless individuals to gain power (preferably for their group as well as themselves) and they will drop their false consciousness faster than a hot potato.

The dynamics I refer to here are described by economist Mancur Olson ("Logic of Collective Action") and more recently by Todd Sandler ("Collective Action"). The prisoner's dilemma is the classic example of the rule that

*rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests. In other words, even if all of the individuals in a large group are rational and self-interested, and would gain if, as a group, they acted to achieve their common interest or objective, they will still not voluntarily act to achieve that common or group interest. (Olson 2)*

The prisoner's dilemma is the most famous and striking, if not the most accurate, example of this rule. It goes like this: two people carrying weapons are picked up by police near the scene of an armed robbery. The prosecutor has enough evidence to convict them on weapons charges, but not for the robbery itself. The prosecutor puts the prisoners in two rooms and makes each the following offer: if they confess and the other prisoner doesn't confess, they get one year and the other gets ten; if they both confess, each gets seven years; if neither confesses, they can only be convicted on the weapons charges, and each gets two years. The dominant strategy in this scenario is to confess; so the normal outcome is for both prisoners to confess, which means they each get seven years, a much worse outcome for them than if neither confessed and they each got two years. But confessing is the dominant strategy because no matter what the other prisoner does, the result for one prisoner is always better by confessing than by not confessing. Individual rationality results in group psychosis.

But as Mancur Olson explains in his forward to Sandler's *Collective Action*, the prisoner's dilemma is an extremely odd case since there are two parties to the collective action and communication between them is impossible. The irrationality exemplified in the prisoner's dilemma scenario increases with larger groups and decreases somewhat with communication.

A better illustration that occurs in more real-life situations is the so-called "Tragedy of the Commons" (Hardin): To a pasture open to all, herders bring their cattle to graze. As long as their numbers are small, there is no problem. When the numbers of herders and cattle increase sufficiently, however, the land will be grazed beyond its carrying capacity and be ruined for everyone. If the number of grazing cattle was kept below the carrying capacity, the commons could last forever. But for each herder the benefit of bringing one more animal to graze is enjoyed by that herder alone, while the cost to the commons is shared equally amongst all the herders.

Generally, if a collective good is worth its cost, a small group will pay the price and a large group will not. Large groups depend on various mechanisms for getting their members to contribute to the collective good involuntarily, since the tendency in a large group is for any given member to take a "free ride" and benefit from the good without paying for it.

In the introduction to *Will Work for Food*, Cary Nelson calls for union organizing, and particularly for developing ties with other organized employees at universities; clerical, maintenance, and food service workers. He identifies university administrators' push for cheap labor as a relatively new phenomenon.

Nelson begins his introduction to *Will Teach for Food* with some horrific quotes exemplifying the ill treatment of part-time academic labor, then he says,

As universities struggle with increasingly constrained budgets, the temptation to make ends meet by exploiting more vulnerable employees grows daily. Industry meanwhile provides a handbook of relevant strategies and techniques: make paying workers as little as possible a basic managerial principle and goal; deny employee benefits any time you can get away with it;...[the list is long and awful]...minimize what different classes of employees know about each other's compensation; promote an ideology of loyalty, dedication, and service dependent on self-denial; establish a climate of vulnerability, job insecurity, and competing interests. Of course many financially healthy and successful corporations adopt these ruthless strategies simply to increase their profits. Here and there across the country a wealthy private college or university does the same; one of those...is Yale University, which impoverishes workers simply to raise its already comfortable profit margin and enlarge its five-billion-dollar endowment (3).

Here, in a nutshell, is the problem as blamed on university administrators, certainly the likeliest culprits we're apt to find. In her forward to the book, Barbara Ehrenreich explains the trend in the general economy towards greater concentration of wealth, greater disparity between rich and poor as the rich exercise ever more efficient methods of robbing the poor and middle class, methods such as downsizing, cutting benefits, replacing full-time workers with low-paid part-time workers, and constructing two-tier work structures such as the one that exists between tenure-track faculty and part-time, adjunct, and grad student faculty.

These trends are indeed apparent all over the profit and nonprofit economies. Rapacious management strategies seem to spread from the for-profit world to the non-for-profit world, and are particularly repugnant and frightening when they reach the not-for-profit world. Because for-profit corporations *are* for profit, they're founded on an ideology of financial self-interest before all else. But not-for-profit organizations are supposed to exist for the public benefit. They are not supposed to forward their financial self-interest at the expense of their clients or employees.

Cary Nelson describes university administrators as different now than at some other time, greedier, more committed to exploitative, bottom-line oriented business practices. In the same book, however, he includes accounts of the rapacity of the Yale University administration going back to the thirties. It seems, though, that the exploitation practiced by that university preyed on clerical and service workers in the past and has only begun victimizing graduate TAs in the last few decades.

There's no consensus as to why college administrators are acting more and more like their corporate counterparts. Maybe they've always been that way, but probably not. Maybe the spirit of Reaganomics seeped into their bones in the 1980s and has been trickling down ever since. My own hypothesis is that there was never before the sixties such a great number of people volubly committed to making their livings doing socially beneficial and intellectually stimulating work—and when these conscientious masses appeared on the scene, they presented opportunities for exploitation irresistible to their employers.

Whatever the cause of administrative rapacity, the writers on the topic of the plight of academic laborers seem to be in universal agreement on this: if only the administrators would

act with basic decency and humanity, if only they would act rationally, if only they would stop telling lies and acting like corporate CEOs, if only they would pay people fairly, all these problems would be solved.

In order to understand general trends toward increasingly centralized power we should look at the growth of what Robert Frank and Philip Cook call winner-take-all markets. They illustrate the trend with a quote from Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Bluebeard*:

...simply moderate giftedness has been made worthless by the printing press and radio and television and satellites and all that. A moderately gifted person who would have been a community treasure a thousand years ago has to give up, has to go into some other line of work, since modern communications has put him or her into daily competition with nothing but the world's champions.... The entire planet can get along nicely now with maybe a dozen champion performers in each area of human giftedness. (Frank and Cook 1)

Winner-take-all markets are characterized by extreme concentration in the benefits awarded to top performers in a field generally at the expense of somewhat less than top performers in that field. Frank and Cook claim that these markets are becoming increasingly common and that markets with these characteristics are becoming increasingly skewed towards the top. The causes for the growth of these markets vary from field to field, and the costs and benefits of powerfully skewed compensation structures vary from field to field.

...although the competition for top slots in winner-take-all markets does indeed attract our most talented and productive workers, it also generates two forms of waste: first, by attracting too many contestants, and second, by giving rise to unproductive patterns of consumption and investment as contestants vie with one another for top positions....Winner-take-all markets attract too many contestants in part because of a common human frailty with respect to gambling—namely, our tendency to overestimate our chances of winning....Survey evidence consistently shows, for example, that some 80 percent of us think we are better-than-average drivers, and that even more of us think of ourselves as more productive than the average worker....It is not surprising that there are bad outcomes when people make important decisions on the basis of inaccurate information. What is perhaps less expected is that too many contestants tend to compete in winner-take-all markets even when people have completely accurate assessments of their odds of winning....Book publishing is a lottery of the purest sort, with a handful of best-selling authors receiving more than \$10 million per book while armies of equally talented writers earn next to nothing....The incentives for authors to go on [wasteful and exhausting] book tours and for athletes to consume anabolic steroids are much like the incentives for rival nations to engage in military arms races. Each side suffers an unacceptable loss of position if it buys no arms while its rival does. Yet weaponry is costly, and when both sides buy arms, both do worse than if neither had. We will argue that winner-take-all markets spawn a host of what might be called “situational arms races,” which augment the losses stemming from overcrowding....growing salaries and shrinking teaching

loads [for top professors] are best understood as natural consequences of positional arms races in higher education (8-13).

Frank and Cook attribute much of the growth of winner-take-all markets to increasing distribution efficiency. “To be a player in the tire market in northern Ohio, it was once sufficient to be the best tire maker in that part of the state. But the well-informed consumers of northern Ohio—like their counterparts everywhere else—now choose from among only a handful of the best tire producers worldwide. (46)

This phenomenon looms just as ominously in the field of knowledge production in the age of mechanical and electronic reproduction: knowledge appears eminently transportable, replicable, and deliverable. This is one arena where postmodernism has the potential to save the day: because it can demonstrate that knowledge is *not* transportable, replicable, and deliverable, which could be the key to reversing the growth of winner-take-all markets in the knowledge industry. The best thought is *not* the best thought everywhere. And the best thought of dead or inaccessible people is worth little in comparison with the thought of even mediocre living, present, accessible thinkers who can respond to local situations and who can engage in discussion and interaction with those who use their knowledge.

I don't care how brilliant a professor is, they're worthless to me if they're too busy or famous to give me time and attention. But by flocking to the brilliant professors we justify increases in their prestige and compensation at the expense of accessible professors who then become so ill-treated and demoralized that they can't help us either. But knowing about this mechanism will not reverse it if even tiny amounts of the stingy, overcrowded, arrogant attention of famous professors is more effective in getting students what they want than the caring and patient attention of less famous professors. You would have to change what students want to

combat this mechanism. And if what students want is to be famous professors themselves, combatting this mechanism is hopeless.

Andrew Ross claims that “academic work becomes labor only when the morality of employment is called into question, as has been the case with the casualization of teaching in recent years.” Union official John Wilhelm suggests a similar causality when he says (Nelson 42) that unions tend to work either in the mode of business negotiators or in the mode of activists struggling for justice. He explains that union members do and should think of the union as a collective bargaining body, but when Yale (the case he is talking about) perceives this, they interpret it as complacency and take the opportunity to attack and take back concessions they’ve made to the union in previous times. In response to losses, then, union organizers must try to mobilize their members once again for another struggle for justice.

This is a demoralizing pattern. Business as usual for the administration tends to win out against business as usual for workers and unions, but moralistic rhetoric of workers and unions wins out against the moralistic rhetoric of administrations. Except the maintenance of this moralistic rhetoric is exhausting, and the language of this rhetoric loses force through continued use. After some victories, unions have to wait thirty or forty years before they can rally outrage at the daily abuses of administrators once again. The task of union organizers is Sisyphisean; the task of administrators is like a ride through the country with the wind at your back.

We have to look carefully at where we use the language of justice and where we use the language of efficacy. These two languages imply different sorts of organizing techniques. The

language of justice is founded on some sense of fairness, decency, and compassion. The language of efficacy tends to be founded on a bottom-line valuation of self-interest. When groups come into conflict, both of these languages invariably come into play for both sides and tend to get mixed in all sorts of abominable configurations despite the fact that they have essentially different logics and always contradict each other. The language of justice and morality is always used hypocritically by very powerful parties in disputes, because those parties know that actual fairness will work to their disadvantage, but the *language* of fairness might help to defend their advantage. The language of justice seems to be the best strategy for less powerful parties in disputes because a fair outcome will work to their advantage. But the problem with this language is that it encourages hypocrisy on the part of the other party, and since the dispute devolves into the production of ever more righteous claims and justifications, it exhausts everyone who hears it

I'm not arguing that we shouldn't be guided by moral concerns or ethical standards, nor that we should abandon the language of morality, but we must use considerations of efficacy in the pursuit of our moral ends, and we shouldn't be afraid to use the language of efficacy to help us.

A primary tool in considering the efficacy of any social action is the concept of feedback loops. A positive feedback loop is an operation which increases an output which becomes input for a subsequent occurrence of that operation. For instance, an operation that centralizes authority increases the authority centrally available for a subsequent operation that centralizes authority. A negative feedback loop decreases an output which becomes input for a subsequent operation. For instance, an operation initiated by a central authority which diffuses authority decreases the authority centrally available for subsequent operations. It should be obvious

from these examples that authorities who centralize their power tend to be more prevalent and more powerful than authorities who diffuse theirs.

That doesn't mean we should all become power hungry, it means we should try to use positive feedback loops rather than negative feedback loops in our efforts to equitably distribute authority—if we can discover positive feedback loops to help us. In the same way that a power grab by an individual at the expense of a group (or a small, elite group at the expense of a exploitable group) can increase that individual's effectiveness in future power grabs, so can a power grab by a group at the expense of an individual increase future effectiveness. But if the newly won power disrupts the group's cohesion, the power grab will not result in a positive feedback loop.

In all these sorts of relationships:

- apprentice – master
  
- student – professor
  
- TA – professor
  
- faculty – administrators
  
- composition instructors – composition scholars
  
- rank and file members of an academic field – leaders in that field
  
- rank and file members of a union – leaders of that union

the first party supports the power of the second party in exchange for patronage, protection, advancement, and the good of the collective field vis-a-vis other groups outside that field. When the demands of the second party exceed the benefits bestowed on the first party, the first party would be wise to leave the relationship. What all of us need as students, apprentices, junior members of fields, etc., are reliable methods of evaluating the costs and benefits of our apprenticeship. Without these methods we make things worse for ourselves and everyone else in positions like our own.

Allowing oneself to be exploited by ruthless institutions for the sake of one's moral integrity and generosity should be considered not only naïve or stupid, but *immoral*. Morality exists as a guide for behavior largely so that individual self-interest won't cause excessive damage to groups. But the individual moral grandeur of those who sacrifice high salaries so they can teach and study writing and perform other public service for pittance wages, when they are taken in the aggregate, create a class of people exploitable by savvy social engineers who choose to exploit them—a class of people quickly sinking into the poverty and degradation they attempt to raise others out of. Individual moral integrity becomes class suicide. This is bad for everyone, and therefore immoral!

When people make and consider proposals for humane political activism, they seem to judge those proposals by the criteria of truth, justice, fairness, and compassion. Effectiveness often fades out of the argument as if such noble proposals should be above vulgar instrumental concerns. I want to offer the following set of criteria. We should come up with activist proposals that:

- involve positive feedback loops—but not positive feedback loops that tend to replicate the oppressive situation with different oppressors;
- provide benefits for group *and* individual, and those should be tied together (and/or group benefits should be excludable?);
- are immediately beneficial and don't depend on achieving critical mass or widespread acceptance;
- are beneficial in the long term for the majority of people as well as the activists in the unlikely event that they do succeed and gain widespread acceptance;
- don't provoke hostility from established powers prematurely, i.e., before they can defend themselves; and
- allow for simultaneous action on different, even contradictory, fronts, so that if one plan fails, another might succeed.

The rest of this paper will examine one fascinating proposal, that composition instructors publish more as a way of increasing their status.

*Analysis of text dissemination and power – responding to calls for more  
teachers to write*

An interesting contradiction arises in calls for instructor/faculty assessment based on teaching as much as on publishing and research: that these calls arise in the form of published essays

that will tend to raise the status of the person who wrote them without raising the status of those the article ostensibly attempts to raise the status of.

A twist on this contradiction appears when Cynthia Tuell cites Theresa Enos as calling for more women to publish in composition studies, which Tuell addresses as a call for composition instructors in general to publish writing about teaching (136). She cites Stephen North argument “that our increasingly professionalized field increasingly devalues teaching” (135). North says, “The spectacle of so many once and future Practitioners scrambling to find academic respectability by invoking the authority of any mode of inquiry *except* their own, *except* practice, can hardly be described as dignified” (quoted in Tuell 136). Tuell fails to see the social contradiction in proposal that writing teachers should write about teaching, though she does level a legitimate critique of it on individual grounds:

Perhaps true heroines, mythical supermoms, *can* do it all [teach and publish about teaching]. I worry though, that the energy we put into producing the “neater, more linear, more certain” ideas that can be published, that can reach and speak to a national audience, is energy taken away from the experiential ideas we form and apply daily, hourly, in dialogue with our essential local audience, our students.

If serious scholars do write about teaching practice, that might have the result of raising the status of teaching. But to some degree the medium is always the message, and the status increase accruing to the one who writes about teaching will tend to undercut the status that might accrue to those the writing is about.

Discussions of status and changing status relations (whether one is speaking more or less specifically about salaries, tenure, benefits, office space, respect, voice in departmental affairs, or interpersonal relationships), especially discussions of status in the service of egalitarian aims, become confused and counterproductive without a distinction between forms of status that exist in limited quantities and forms that exist in unlimited quantities. In most cases, status refers to generally hierarchical social relations, so that increases in one party's status structurally necessitate decreases in another party's status (Hirsch). Of course, every human being *could* respect every other human being, so we could say that respect exists in unlimited quantities. Unless we assume, for instance, that people grant respect only to those who make more than the median income, and, of course, it is not possible that everyone make more than the median income.

When one is speaking about changes in status relations and speaking about forms of status that exist in limited quantities, it is also important to distinguish between the social groupings among which the status relations change. For instance: if serious composition scholars write about teaching practice, they may increase the status of everyone in the field of composition, instructors and researchers alike, vis-à-vis other surrounding fields, while at the same time increasing their own personal status vis-à-vis others in their own field. The effect on instructors then, is an increase and a decrease. Since the decrease occurs in a smaller social context and the increase in a larger social context, both resulting from the same small event, I suspect the decrease will be felt more powerfully than the increase.

But Tuell doesn't reject the idea of composition instructors publishing to increase their status on the basis of these general social effects. She rejects this suggestion *as advice to composition instructors*, advice which would increase the status of those individuals who took the advice

along with the status of the field as a whole, and she rejects it because the individuals who took that advice would have to sacrifice some of the energy they give to their essential local audience, their students.

She's right, to a degree. Insofar as the supermom devotes her attention to being super, to winning status for herself, it seems that she would indeed neglect her students. But if the suggestion here is to write about teaching, then it seems that she might pay *more* attention to her students in her efforts to win status.

And Tuell is probably right that if the supermom puts her energy "into producing the 'neater, more linear, more certain' ideas that can be published, that can reach and speak to an national audience", that could pose a burden that would cause her to neglect her students. But if she's really *writing about teaching*, why wouldn't she use a form appropriate to her subject, a form that maybe isn't neater and more linear – possibly even a form that *wouldn't* speak to a national audience. Don't we all, in this field, believe in writing to learn and learning to write? Competent composition teachers/researchers should be able to discover or invent forms of writing about teaching that improve their teaching.

Tuell's argument against writing about teaching on the grounds that it leads one to neglect teaching doesn't hold water. A better argument against writing about teaching can be stated this way: An instructor writes about her teaching, we'll call her Bob. Through this process Bob becomes a better teacher, but at the same time she acquires status after publishing and is finally able to get the tenure track position she's been denied so long. Now she doesn't have to teach composition anymore. That might seem pretty creepy, but wait! those are just the tangible, individual effects; what about the minute economic effects? First the universe of

already tenure track faculty resents Bob's promotion because now they have to share their pie with one more person. She's making at least twice as much money as she was before, which means that they have to fire one of her fellow instructors, or, more likely, they fire a tenure track and hire another instructor in Bob's place, or, even more likely, they fire five tenure tracks and hire fifteen instructors in her place, whom she can now supervise since she's got such good experience. By publishing writing about teaching she has brought honor upon the field and raised everybody's status just very slightly, and gotten some very good rewards for herself, so her accomplishment looks extremely enviable to everyone in her old job. But there's only so many journal articles and books published in a year, and Bob's are taking the space that might have gone to one of her colleagues, and by taking one of the sought-after tenure track positions, she's made the job market worse for everyone else who wants one. So, anyway, in this example, publishing and promotion constitutes one great leap for a composition instructor, a few miniscule degradations in a lengthy series of degradations for composition instructor-kind.

This scenario is a specific example of the general rule that when one person acquires some of a limited resource (like most forms of status), everyone else taken collectively experiences a net loss of that resource.

Publishing is a particularly peculiar instance of this rule. When someone publishes a great book or article in some field, everyone in that field is grateful and delighted to be enriched by the wisdom in that publication. If the article (we'll call it an article) is very great, people may read it all the way to the end, and then they may even read it again; and if they write about it, they might read it a few more times; and then they might talk about it and get other people to read it and assign it to their students. That's a lot of reading to be engaged in and encouraged

by one reader, especially considering that there is way more to read than any reader can read. But if that reader is also a writer, to encourage others to read someone else's work might actually be quite reckless, since other readers also have limited reading time. So, for every I who is a writer we may propose the sentiment: "all reading of other people's work diminishes the available time that people could be reading *my* work." This seems to be a silly sentiment because every act of reading of not-my-work diminishes the reservoir of time for reading my-work so very, very slightly. But in fact this sentiment is dead serious because the great unwashed masses of writing written are crowded out of ever being read by a large number but tiny percentage of works that do get read.

Being read is the wealth of writing. And as with money, unprecedented numbers of rich people have only increased the gap between rich and poor.

It's a dangerous business saying that teachers should write. Reading time real estate in composition/rhetoric (and most fields) is pricier than downtown Tokyo with just the scholars publishing. It may be that the more crowded a field is with writing, the more readers in that field tend to read only the works of the most famous writers. Let the teachers start writing and the submissions to composition's handful of journals will skyrocket; reading of those submissions by editorial staff will deteriorate in quality because of the volume of material to read; the only submissions that will receive quality readings are those written by already famous writers. The number of journals would then expand to accommodate the great volume of submissions. The number of readers of those journals would not expand nearly so much. So those readers would be beleaguered by that many more journals. They'd devote half their reading time to skimming and browsing through the overwhelming mass; with the remainder

they'd cut back to reading seriously only what was prestigious beyond dispute. Democratization is a funny business.

But let's look just a little closer at what's happening in these economic models of reading time I'm describing. A new piece enters the world of what's read in a given field. All other pieces taken together in that field experience a net loss of reading time. But where does that loss occur in particular? Amongst the least famous, least established pieces. The most established pieces are established; a new piece isn't going to crowd them out. New pieces crowd out pieces at the bottom.

Here's what I mean by pieces at the bottom. We'll say that any given piece is read a certain number of times a year. (Let's confine the discussion to pieces read more than a year after publication for the sake of simplicity.) The most famous pieces (in a small field like composition) might be read 10,000 times a year. A mediumly famous piece might be read a few hundred to a few thousand times a year. A piece at what I'm calling the bottom would be read a few to a couple hundred times a year. These are the pieces with the greatest tendency to be crowded out by new entries into the field. And this is the way they get crowded out: new pieces at the bottom crowd out on average an equivalent number of old pieces at the bottom. A new mediumly famous piece can crowd out a few to a few hundred pieces at the bottom. A new very famous piece can crowd out thousands of pieces at the bottom. Over time the tendency is apparently to have fewer and fewer pieces at the bottom.

### **Reading-Writing Collectives**

Here is one proposal for countering the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't economics of conventional publishing.

All members of a reading-writing collective agree to read and thoughtfully respond to writing submitted by other members to the collective.

The size of the collective is limited by the reading time its members are willing to commit to it.

Members of the collective will circulate requests and proposals for papers as well as finished papers so that writers will know they have an interested audience before they write something.

Various arrangements might be proposed for maintaining group cohesion and an egalitarian structure. The collective might decide that certain papers or certain parts of papers merit preservation or endorsement by the collective. A collection of preserved work might be required reading for new members, or work might be published with the collective's endorsement or under the collective's name. To prevent the formation of gross power imbalances within the collective, members might decide that endorsed papers become collective property and subject to some form of collective revision. The collective might decide that endorsed papers or all papers written for the collective will be owned and copyrighted by the collective. It would be interesting to see the results of such extreme group ownership rules on the cohesiveness and character of the group. Group ownership might preserve egalitarian relations within the collective, but relations between the collective and the outside world could continue to follow current publishing conventions.

Alternatively, collectives of collectives might form. These could be structured so that collectives read the endorsed works of other collectives. Also, requests for papers that have not been met to the satisfaction of one collective might be sent to other collectives.

None of these arrangements would need to preclude members of these reading-writing collectives from reading and writing in their traditional ways as independent individuals as well. The time commitment to the collective would probably reduce an individual's reading time outside the collective, but it would generally be to the collectives' benefit to have their members reading widely outside the collective as well as in it.

The arrangements outlined here are only a preliminary brainstorm of what might be done. Reading groups and writing groups, of course, have existed for generations. Anne Ruggles Gere and Laura Jane Roop describe various ways in which Nineteenth Century women's literary clubs allowed for writing, solidarity, and collective benefit that might not have been possible in other contexts.

Clubs such as the Saturday Morning Club strengthened the gender identity of women, allowing them to take pleasure in themselves without reference to the patriarchal world. Indeed SMC members avoided the kind of competitiveness and honing of oratorical skills that would have enabled them to enter the public arena, preferring to concentrate on language designed to strengthen their relationship to one another (15).

They avoided the competitiveness necessary for public discourse without diminishing the seriousness of their writing. Writing in the Saturday Morning Club was required of its members beginning in 1874 when the club was three years old as a way of bolstering flagging interest and attendance. The club has survived for more than a century since then.

I proffer the design of reading-writing collectives as outlined above particularly with composition instructors in mind. Tuell is right that it is difficult to impossible for most writing

instructors to write for publication—and even if they did, the market would bear only a limited number of them actually publishing.

A reading-writing collective of composition instructors, however, could give these potential writers a guaranteed audience and at the same time change the genre conventions expected of them so that the burden of writing might not be so great. As a PhD student I am beginning to learn the burdens of writing for an academic audience and am convinced that many of them have more to do with restricting access to envied resources than with intellectual integrity.

A reading-writing collective would allow composition instructors to write for an audience of common interest, which opens up possibilities for more efficacious writing because it frees members from having to defend themselves from arguments of people hostile to their shared interest. In a paper like the current one, for instance, I would much prefer to have control over who actually reads it, both so I wouldn't have to make awkward declarations in the paper itself of who the intended audience is, and because I don't like the idea of announcing plans for political struggle in public where they can be read and responded to by hostile parties as quickly as by friendly parties.

In the face of encroaching winner-take-all markets, a two-tier composition labor market, second class status of composition within English departments, falling status of English within the university, increasing corporatization of universities, and the isolation and vulnerability of part-time academic laborers, reading-writing collectives are one possible way of creating solidarity, combating the star system insofar as it exists within composition, and deriving the benefits of producing and consuming scholarship in a direct and efficient way for composition instructors.

I've received an interesting pair of comments on drafts of this paper: 1) that the focus on the prisoner's dilemma or the Tragedy of the Commons promotes an ideology of individual rationality and self-interest when such an ideology is both wrong and undesirable; and 2) that communities like the reading-writing collectives I've described already exist in the academic world in the form of small disciplinary specializations in which authors write for each other and read each other's work. These are reasonable comments which both constitute misunderstandings of what I'm trying to say here, so let me explain why they constitute misunderstandings.

Indeed the prisoners dilemma and the tragedy of the commons are used primarily in the discussions of economists and game theorists who assume a kind of individual rationality and self-interest. This view would seem to preclude a variety of other ideas about why people do things against their apparent self-interest. Marx and Althusser have their ideas about class ideology and the economic determination of false consciousness by domination; Freud has his ideas about neurosis and the frustration of rational aims by unconscious desire. Foucault has his explanations of power in terms of panopticons and self-enforcing micro-hegemonics whereby subjects are subjected to powers that oppress them through discursive practices those subjects partake in and use for their own advantage and disadvantage, keeping themselves and their peers under micro-surveillance from every angle. I subscribe to all of these, and in addition, my favorite explanation for individual irrationality comes from my understanding of Deleuze and Guattari, from whom I gather that every individual is composed of countless desiring machines spanning linkages beyond any discernable individual boundaries and also segmenting the discernable individual into conflicting desiring machines—so the question of

irrationality hardly arises: every desiring machine may act rationally towards its own desire, but the desires of any given individual are myriad and conflicting. These are all, I'm sure, more accurate pictures of individual desire than what is imagined by hyper-rational economists and game theorists. But they are hermeneutic models, complex, metaphorical, and intuitively satisfying representations of existing behavior. They are not, however, all that helpful as instruments for achieving desired behavior. Enlightened postmodernists may tell us that any desire is as implicated in hegemonic ideology as any other, and they may give us intuitively satisfying pictures of how these desires insinuate themselves into every crevice of perpetual domination. But you, my intended audience, and I have specific desires we hold to and intend to achieve whatever obstacles lie in our path: that respect should be afforded to all (or at least many) members of our disciplines, not just those stars at the top; that opportunities for meaningful work, intellectual congress, and economic security should be available to more people, not less. We do not want to live in a world populated by a small handful of great geniuses and countless masses of mediocre drones consigned to do dreary work given meaning, if at all, not by ourselves or our peers, but by the enlightened conversations of those lucky few the rest of us eavesdrop on and stand in awe of. No, I've read my Paulo Freire, and I will be doing him honor when finally I learn to forget his name, forget his patronage, and go out amongst my students and friends to co-create that small but brilliant light that we ourselves can bask in. We are not piggy banks for the reception of Freire's countlessly replicated words--we are human beings, we can make our own words.

My stance is full of contradictions, and obviously I owe debts to Freire, Foucault, Olson, Tuell, Miller, Nelson and others and am willing to invoke their ideas for inspiration and their names for authority. This paper participates in the patronage system it hopes to disassemble. I

acknowledge and am grateful for the contributions to human thought, disciplinary thought, and my own thought made by the thinkers I cite; but when the contributions of these thinkers crowd out the possibility that others might think significantly as well, when the attention bestowed on the famous means that other thinkers are denied the possibility of contributing to the discourses around them, then we need to rethink the patronage system.

A strange thing about this call for the democratizing of discourse is that I make it to people who don't feel the need for it, or who imagine they won't feel the need for it when they get their PhDs or publish the manuscript they're working on. People tell me the reading-writing collectives I'm proposing are much like what already happens in small disciplinary specializations and in small scholarly communities. What they seem not to notice is that these communities exist generally where there is funding they can draw into themselves. This funding does not come from the community itself, but from outside, and it supports the community of writers writing for each other. If writers writing for each other were not getting outside funding, then the size of any writing community would be strongly influenced by the allocation of reading time amongst its members, and when a community was too large to accommodate new members, new communities offering similar benefits would arise. This is how circles of friends often work. But when communities are able to command resources drawn from outside the community itself—funding, respect, paying readers—then inclusion in those communities becomes more desirable than the benefits provided by the community itself would allow, and other communities that can't command these resources seem to offer so few benefits that they can't attract members at all. This then creates a situation in which funded communities attract more members than they can accommodate with equitable reading

time relations within the community, so they become skewed towards the top as winner-take-all type markets.

When I recommend reading-writing collectives, the idea here is basically for a writing community that supplies its writers with intelligent, interested readers and fruitful discussion, but *not* with outside resources such as funding, respect beyond the borders of the collective, or paying readers. Insofar as the collective wins these resources, it makes itself more desirable than other collectives and more desirable than the benefits it can provide for itself, and therefore attracts more members than it can accommodate equitably. Reading-writing collectives offer extremely modest benefits to their members, but these benefits are available to any collective that sticks together and follows the rules it has made for itself. This is why I compared them to nineteenth century women's literary groups and not to small academic specializations.

Two more economic models show why such a collective is desirable despite the sacrifices joining such a collective might entail: namely, the lottery and the mutual aid society. In a lottery 1,200,000 people each pay a dollar and one person wins \$1,000,000 and the lottery commission retains \$200,000. This is very good for the one person, very good for the lottery commission, and not so bad for 1,199,999 people who lost. But the general effect for 99.9999% of lottery ticket buyers is to enrich others at their own expense and to destroy opportunities for working together with other ticket buyers in ways that enrich many of them.

In a mutual aid society, on the other hand, 60 people with something in common (that they are Asian immigrants, for instance) each contribute \$100 a month to a single pot and that single pot, \$6,000 is given to one of the members. Over the course of a five-year period, every

member receives the whole pot once. Members use the pot in order to start or build businesses which bring more money into the community and make it possible, for instance, for members who receive the pot early in the cycle to contribute more than others later on. The payoff, of course, is infinitesimal in comparison to the lottery, \$6,000 for a \$100 ticket rather than \$1,000,000 for a \$1 ticket; but *everybody* wins; and those who do win give back to the community, they don't make off with the spoils and thereafter have to protect themselves from the envy of those who were once their peers.

Academic communities are not like reading-writing collectives because they are hybrids, mutual aid society on the inside, lottery on the outside, and a powerful tendency for both outside and inside relations to become continually skewed towards lottery, winner-take-all dynamics. Academic communities have a nice feature, which is that once they become too skewed, new members have a tendency to abandon those communities and start new ones. These new communities begin with a more level playing field and progressively skew towards the top once again. However, in a world of ever more efficient delivery mechanisms and corporatization of the university, third party profiteers (like the lottery commission) are getting so powerful that the ability of new members to strike off and begin new communities is seriously threatened.

As I progress through a PhD program in Writing Studies, the chances are looking slightly better that I might find a cushy spot in some discipline somewhere and find audiences willing to read my work (or at least buy journals in which my work might appear); and maybe I project myself faster towards that goal by writing papers like this. What I still haven't forgotten, though, and leave traces like this so that I might not be able to forget it later, is the frustration, despair, and sour grapes I felt for ten years reading and writing and engaging in intellectual

activity outside the academic world. I wasn't bitter because no one would pay me for my writing, I was making decent money as a computer programmer. I was bitter because I could barely get anyone to *read* my writing. Everyone who might have been interested in what I was writing about was too busy reading famous writers. I didn't have the credentials or the disciplinary knowledge or connections to get published. I was frozen out of serious intellectual discourse because I had decided to go it alone. When I realized this, I tried to find others similarly desirous of intellectual discourse and did find a few as demoralized and isolated as myself. We made an effort but were just barely able to give each other the respectful attention and reading time we needed since we were all so busy with our fantasies of leaving the rest of the ragtag bunch behind and joining the ranks of real writers.

So here I am, getting the credentials, the contacts, the disciplinary knowledge, so that I can someday steal attention away from the unwashed masses of uncredentialed writers rotting away in obscurity like I've been the last ten years. This is not a good system. Enos is right: writing teachers should write about teaching; but we shouldn't do it for the fame or status we're frozen out of and that no more than a few can ever enjoy. We should write for our peers and read our peers' writing and create for ourselves meaningful communities that no scarcity or competition or academic downsizing can freeze us out of.

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