

English 7801-001/8801-001

Spring 2016

History of Composition

This course traces the recent historical arc of rhetoric and composition. In the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, Louise Weatherbee Phelps notes that composition studies “brought into uneasy coalition the motives, ideas, and values of at least three major traditions: 1) the teaching tradition; 2) the revised interest in classical rhetoric and the rhetorical tradition; 3) the “new science” to study the processes of composition, drawing on the methodologies and approaches of psychology, linguistics, education, and other social sciences. We will explore how those traditions serve as historical antecedents and contemporary influences for contemporary college writing studies. Because writing instruction never occurs *in vacuo*, we will engage the social forces and cultural values by which writing instruction has been informed. Writing instruction began in antiquity, and we will necessarily refer to those rhetorical traditions from which college writing emerged. Our specific departure point, however, will be 1966, and our especial focus will be the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and the establishment of rhetoric and composition as a significant discipline within English studies and English departments.

Students will complete a research project on a topic of their own choosing, and the range of topics is rich and diverse. For example, there is important work to be done regarding literacy instruction among African Americans and other historically marginalized groups. Women have played vital roles in the emergence and establishment of composition studies, and gender considerations could be a powerful aspect to explore historically. Other scholars have turned from historical considerations of composition in the colleges to considerations of writing instruction in American schools. Some participants may be interested in examining the writing practices found in antiquity or the Renaissance while others may choose to examine current theory or practices through a historical lens.