

History of Composition
ENGL 7801/8801
Spring 2020
Mondays @ 5:30 p.m.

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; and 3) the “new science” to study the processes of composition, drawing on the methodologies and approaches of psychology, linguistics, education, and other social sciences. Phelps contends that because each of these diverse intellectual traditions has its own disciplinary conceptions and research methodologies, “the founders of composition studies built into its structure a theory/practice dichotomy that continues to haunt its discourse and practices.” This course traces the particular historical arc of those traditions as they manifest in composition studies and explores the social forces and cultural values that have informed writing instruction over the past century or so.

We will begin by viewing the teaching of composition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through a range of historical texts and contemporary accounts as a means of carefully considering how—and why—the first-year writing course came to define college composition. We will then move to the emergence of composition studies as a discipline within English studies, focusing particularly on the period from the mid-1960s to 2000. We will conclude by exploring some of the ways the discipline historicizes itself. Throughout our work we will be alert to the implications of composition history for both practitioners and scholars.

Readings include an array of landmark essays and book chapters. Participants will also be asked to independently read one “classic” text and report on its disciplinary contribution (and your estimation of it) to the class. The seminar paper is an historical review of a contemporary topic or issue related to the teaching of writing.