

*Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change*, edited by Peter Smagorinsky. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. 308 pp.

Reviewed by Misty Dawn Carmichael, Georgia State University

Rather than begin *Research on Composition* with a preface that the reader may or may not read, Smagorinsky leads the compilation by omitting the preface and penning chapter 1 himself, titling it “Overview.” In this overview Smagorinsky explains the purpose of the book, which is to pick up where George Hillocks’s review of writing research left off in 1983. Smagorinsky cites the numerous changes in the discipline of composition studies as reason for his book, and loosely covers the advent of teacher research, multimodal conceptions of composition, family and community literacy, and writing in the workplace and professions. After justifying the need for his book, Smagorinsky moves on to reveal his method behind the organization of the text based on current projects in composition. I find it odd and perhaps even a bit distrustful of the reader that Smagorinsky didn’t situate this introductory material in a preface. I am more skeptical, however, of the book’s goal: to review over twenty years of composition in one sitting, is rather ambitious. Smagorinsky claims to follow Braddock and Hillocks, but has difficulty compressing the surge of interest in composition into one book.

*Research on Composition* has no section headers, only chapters, which makes the book a bit difficult to survey considering the vastness of the topic. The three main themes of the texts are developments in composition writing, composition pedagogy or learning methods, and general advancements within the field of rhetoric and composition. These categories rely heavily on intra-interpretation of various elements within the discipline of composition (which are almost never viewed in isolation, hence the rhetoric emphasis), but for the sake of this review the book is generally separated by these categories.

The most evident and recurrent theme in Smagorinsky’s collection is that of developments in composition writing. Chapter 2 specifically addresses the cognitivist movement and how that has shaped educators’ views of literacy development in preschool and elementary writing. Extensive research since the mid-1980s has caused a “social turn” by integrating Vygotskian activity theory, ethnographies, dialogism, and New Literacy studies into the way teachers guide beginning writers through cultural interpretation. This turn occurred because writing in the classroom community is shaped by how children interpret these elements, including literature, pop culture, and peer culture. Composition research has also extended to investigate which specific

writing tasks classroom settings and technologies “enhance cognitive and social purposes for writing” (36).

The chapter concerning middle and high school composition begins by addressing the problems associated with writing assessment, dividing problems of national, state and IEA standards of testing and how research on these tests reveals race, class, and gender bias—something suspected but not confirmed through research before 1983. Also since that time the concepts of writing to learn and learning to write have been introduced as a tool for fostering writing. Rhetorical teaching skills are stressed.

Before the mid-eighties, composition at the postsecondary level was characterized as current-traditional. Much work has been done since then researching the student writer, the teacher, and the contexts in which postsecondary education takes place. In line with chapters 2 and 3, chapter 4 focuses on the social turn composition has taken in the last two decades. With this turn comes a focus on gender issues, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, and service learning, and how studying these factors has contributed to the democratization of education. After covering all the grade levels and educational stages in teaching, the next set of advancements covered is writing in terms of advancement via teacher research.

Although not much thought or respect was given to teacher research previous to the late 60s, teacher research has grown to the status of “indispensable.” Collectively, teacher research has investigated a long line of “How do”-type questions, which this chapter systematically answers with recent research findings:

- How do students develop as writers? (111)
- How do teachers use writing to learn about students and become better teachers of writing? (115)
- How do teachers teach writing? (119)
- How do students use writing to make meaning of and act upon their worlds? (125)

This chapter ends with a short assessment of how far teacher research has come, making minor assumptions about the future of this research. A similar generic treatment is given to the topic of workplace writing. The advancements in these areas, however, can hardly be covered in any single chapter. To the author’s credit, chapter 5 is both dense and as thorough as any article seeking to cover over twenty years of said research in so few words.

Naturally workplace writing, chapter 9, has become a major focus in the US due to both our capitalistic society and the ongoing democratization of education. Beaufort takes progressing technology into account when

discussing these phenomena, but cannot possibly cover all developments and impacts since 1983 in one chapter. She makes a valiant effort, however, neglecting deep discussion on technical writing theory in the process, neglecting to discuss the ongoing debate concerning composition researchers' reluctance to embrace empirical methods. She does, however, link school to work and research to theory with transfer of learning. Multi-modality undoubtedly governs how well we function in our mandatory multi-tasking workforce. She concludes chapter 9 by stressing the importance of teaching writers to be able to "transition from one writing context to the next" (235).

Chapters 6 and 8, which both deal with literacy and learning in the family community, provide a bridge between the two topics of developments in composition writing and composition pedagogy or learning methods. Leki, Cumming, and Silva, experts in the area, struggle to summarize the advancements. Since the early 90s, English academics have more seriously considered ESL composition as an integral part of the field of composition. The prevalence of English as the dominant language of commerce, among many other variables, has caused a contextually-focused shift and an entirely separate set of curricula has been organized for ESL students. In the ESL composition realm, social, political, and ideological considerations have found solid support. Research in this arena has proved that ESL students need, "unique educational consideration," mostly because of diverse cultural backgrounds and their own social climate (155). Research reveals that L2 writers face many of the same obstacles that native English speakers face, but the approach to teaching an understanding of composing processes must consider the cultural background of the students' native language in development of learning strategies.

Next, Cushman, Barbier, Marzak, and Petrone tackle developments in family and community literacy since 1984. Literacy did not pluralize in the discipline of English without some turmoil and upheaval. This should come as no surprise—the ethnocentric results of colonialism are still quite visible in Africa and India. So, appropriately, chapter 8 starts by noting the opposition this segment of research had to overcome. However, research through ethnographies and other qualitative methods has fostered a more diverse understanding of literacy, building on the works of Taylor and Heath since 1983. Much of our understanding about family and community literacy relies on our understanding of identity within each culture. This presents teachers with many challenges that are still being heavily researched.

Between these transitional chapters on literacy and ESL, chapter 7, reviews and rehashes the controversy within the discipline of English—namely the "tension [that] persists between those who 'teach writing' and those who 'teach literature'" (182). This is arguably the greatest obstacle. Chapter 7 and 10, on rhetoric research and composition's historical studies respectively,

comprise the more general advancements within these two fields. Since 1983, chapter 7 asserts, a sociolinguistic emphasis has prioritized language-critical pedagogy and inspired a rift “between rhetorical theory and composition practice” as well (177). However, shifts towards teaching language as a social phenomenon allows students to understand and perhaps better control or even manipulate their social situation to their advantage. These ideologic dynamics are still fiery and oft not-popularly received by the more traditional sect of English. Chapter 7 is left relatively open-ended, as more pop-culture and visually-interpreted rhetoric is still in the process of both being defined and finding their place in the field.

Chapter 10 begins with an overview of all the rhetorical factors that create the current situation of composition studies, then moves on to address the specific circumstances in Mass education, elementary and secondary schooling. Russell comments on the superb quality of composition research done since 1984, and partly attributes the rise in importance of the field within English to this historical research. He concludes with a call to action for further research, and particularly debate on research. This debate, he argues, will stimulate and push the field to even greater levels of progress and status.

Although notably mentioned, perhaps at the expense of Technical Writing in chapter 9, glaringly absent are chapters that solely address advancements in the study of visual rhetorics and technology in composition. These topics are frequently touched on in nearly every chapter, but they are denied focus.

These issues so crucial in the research and progression of the socially constructed influence on composition (arguably ruling the last 2 decades), certainly merit their own chapters in composition research. However, the urgent and continuously changing pace of new technologies would quickly render any technology-based section outdated soon after publication. And until compositionists can get over their own biases against modernity, which, ironically, they seek to challenge with “teachers of literature” in chapter 7, visual rhetorics will remain a topic for semiotic and linguistic professionals to address and debate.

Atlanta, GA