

Imagining a Field United: Argument as Common Ground for Literature and Composition

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“English studies is in crisis,” wrote James Berlin 1996, since “virtually no feature of the discipline can be considered beyond dispute” (xi). A few years later, the MLA president noted that English is beset by “fragmentation, an often reckless abandonment of what could be a common intellectual pursuit in favor of highly specialized, exclusivist . . . approaches” (Said 3). Years before either of those statements, Richard Lanham had worried that “[g]ulfs seem to threaten us everywhere we turn . . . in English studies”—including the gulf “between English literary study and English composition” (1). This gulf, in Robert Scholes’s words, is “an invidious binary opposition between writing teachers and literary scholars” (35) that makes the English department what Ross Winterowd sees as “a house divided against itself” (205).

And the gulf may be widening, if James Seitz is correct in his recent study of literacy, curricular reform, and teaching in English. In the decade just past, Seitz writes, “composition and literary studies have in many respects

continued to move their separate ways” (19).
“Compared to the 1980s, when numerous scholars from ‘literature’ as from ‘composition’ regularly made claims for a version of English studies dependent upon a thoroughgoing integration of reading and writing,” Seitz notes, the 1990s “witnessed far less attention to the means by which the pervasive barriers between these fields might be eradicated” (18).

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Concern about the “barriers” and “fragmentation” of English lurks behind this essay, as it does behind an article Amy J. Devitt recently published on rhetorical and literary theories of genre. In her introduction, Devitt raises an issue critical for the future of our field: “whether we in English studies can hang together topically—that is, whether we can see ourselves as sharing a common object of study.” If we can, Devitt writes, “then a greater argument can be made that we in English should work to maintain our connections, for our different methodologies and questions can complement and contribute to one another’s research and teaching.” But if we can’t—if the “different subdisciplines of English” have “no more in common with one another than do the studies of history and literature, or philosophy and composition”—then “the question of whether English constitutes a discipline is strictly a political question . . . answerable in

terms of political expediency or public perception more than in terms of disciplinarity” (Devitt 696).

For quite some time, I’ve been thinking about the lack of a common “intellectual pursuit” that gives rise to the concerns in the first paragraph, particularly the “gulf” between composition and literature, what it means for the future of English studies, and whether (to adapt Devitt’s phrasing) faculty in composition and literature share a common object of study and teaching. Recently, my thinking has been influenced by Gerald Graff’s assertion that since literary criticism is “an extension of the general field of rhetoric and argumentation,” an “implicit commitment to teaching argumentation” potentially “binds literature and composition teachers together” in a way that “can bridge the notorious gulf between literary and composition studies” (329).

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This idea—that “implicit commitment to teaching argumentation” might “bridge the notorious gulf between literary and composition

studies”—struck my imagination. So as I began a sabbatical research project in 1999, I hoped my work would verify Graff’s statement and show that argument is such a compelling area of agreement among literature and composition faculty that it can serve as an intellectual center for English studies. My research sprawled over a range of subjects (diverse definitions of rhetoric, instances of literary scholarship and pedagogy, contrasting views of argument, professional motivations and behavior of faculty members) and ultimately brought me to more modest conclusions than I had hoped for when I started—imaginings about argument as an intellectual center for English studies that should be clear by the end of this essay. But before I start working toward that point, I should address the underlying premise that literary study is “an extension of the general field of rhetoric and argumentation.”

Graff, there, fuses “rhetoric” and “argumentation” in a way that might seem to make my project (at least that part of it dealing with conceptual agreement among literature and composition faculty) a study in the obvious. After all, argument is a key element of rhetoric, and rhetoric is a cross-over term common in literary study. Decades ago, for instance, M. H. Abrams wrote that “[t]he perspectives, much of the basic vocabulary, and many of the characteristic topics of pragmatic criticism originated in the classical theory of rhetoric” (14). Rhetoric is “probably the oldest form of ‘literary criticism’ in the world” (205), wrote Terry Eagleton a quarter century later. And six years after that, Jonathan Culler

described rhetoric as a source of integration for English and noted that such different theorists as Eagleton and Paul de Man “have proposed that literary studies be reconceived as (or give way to) an expanded rhetoric” (118).

But the complexity of rhetoric, which includes far more than argument, frustrates this too-easy approach to unity in our field. Consider, for instance, some words on the subject in J. Hillis Miller’s “The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time.” The essay says that “the development of integrated programs in reading well and in writing well is the major challenge to our profession,” and Miller advances rhetorical study as “the key to this integration” (93). At the same time, the essay offers the following comment about rhetoric, “a two branched discipline ever since the Greeks”:

It would oversimplify to say that the study of rhetoric as persuasion belongs to expository writing while the study of figurative language belongs to programs in literature. Nevertheless, the relative emphases go in those directions. (96-97)

Rather than urge unity around common concerns, this passage implies a reason—grounded in rhetoric itself—to have different emphases in literature and composition instruction. This out-of-context snippet from Miller’s essay suggests the difficulty of trying to see rhetoric, broadly conceived, as an effective common ground for scholarship and teaching in literary and composition studies. For as John Schilb has noted, “[w]hereas composition theory tends to follow

Aristotle, linking rhetoric with persuasion, poststructuralist literary theory has often followed Paul de Man, seeing rhetoric as the destabilizing interplay of tropes” (97).

“And what of the “implicit commitment to teaching argumentation” . . . that Graff believes has the potential to bring literature and composition faculty together? This, my research suggests, may provide the strongest evidence of argument’s potential as common ground among literature and composition faculty.”

That sort of dichotomy (of which my research yielded many examples) limits the role of “rhetoric” as an intellectual center for English. But “argument” clearly is important within literary study, in the practice of literary scholars and often, as well, in the content of their scholarship. As I put it in the conclusion of an unpublished essay on “Argument in Literary Study,”

. . . Annette Kolodny casts substantial matters of literature and theory as arguable propositions, and . . . Jane Tompkins sees critics’ arguments as central to the reputation of literary figures and to canon formation. Later, Stanley Fish

says that the critic's "purpose is to persuade the rest of us to the version of the facts he espouses," and Steven Mailloux writes that "theories can be defined . . . by the arguments **they make in relation to . . . competing theories."** Then Ellen Rooney explores the **"problematic of general persuasion"** that she believes "dominates American literary theory." All this, of course, doesn't prove Gerald Graff's claim that "literary criticism (including literary theory)" is "an extension of the general field of . . . argumentation." But it does at least point in that direction.

And what of the "implicit commitment to teaching argumentation" (329, emphasis added) that Graff believes has the potential to bring literature and composition faculty together? This, my research suggests, may provide the strongest evidence of argument's potential as common ground among literature and composition faculty. For argument has a special relationship to reading and writing that can attract intellectual interest and prompt pedagogical action from scholars and teachers in composition and literature.

In English departments across the country, of course, some rhetoric faculty are teaching courses that stress argument, and others are pursuing writing-in-the-disciplines work across the campus, even as some of their literature colleagues are teaching or developing first courses that embody textbook advice such as this from Michael Meyer's Thinking and Writing about Literature:

Most writing assignments in a literature course require you to persuade readers that your thesis is reasonable and supported with evidence. Papers that report information without comment or evaluation are simply summaries. . . . In developing a thesis, remember that you are expected not merely to present information but to argue a point. . . . Arguing about literature . . . requires that you present your interpretation of a work (or a portion of it) by supporting your thesis with clearly defined terms, ample evidence, and a detailed analysis of relevant portions of the text. (9)

It doesn't take too much imagination to sense how an "argument agenda" could bring such faculty together to work on the undergraduate curriculum for majors and minors.

One example of such work is the sophomore course—one developed "over ten years with the help of dedicated colleagues" (18)—that Monika Brown discusses in the pages of the CEA Critic. Brown describes a course in which students read and debate a range of theoretical materials and selected literary works so that "through one another and through guided contact with professional writing" they begin to join "today's critical conversation" (25). For instance, the "culminating assignment" of one unit

invites each student to participate further in the conversation of critics by preparing, writing, and revising with peer [and teacher] assistance a

900-to-1000 word original critical essay. The essay takes a position in a critical debate already explored in class: whether [for example] A Doll's House is feminist . . . or how a film interprets Tess's character. The student writer . . . must formulate a position to debate, support it with evidence from the literary work, and incorporate, respond to, and document relevant passages from three or four critics. . . . (23)

This approach, Brown notes, “is no radical departure from traditional classroom practice” (23). But the “class debates and guided writing activities offer training for the rising English major and future English teacher as they create a classroom interpretive community” and help “make students conscious of the diversity of modern critical views and the assumptions that underlie modern approaches to literary analysis” (23–24).

Another example of the argument agenda at work is the course Judith Ferster described in a paper at the 1999 CCC meeting. The paper, “Teaching Argument Through Literature in First Year Composition,” featured a late-in-the-semester assignment in which students used careful reading, library research, journals, and short writings to find an appropriate interpretative framework for a small group of literary works and then use that framework as context in a paper drawing on print and Internet sources as well as on the works themselves. Behind the assignment lay the Toulmin model of argument, with its “claims,” “reasons,” and

“warrants.” Course instruction fused argument and literature by particularizing matters of literary study as warrants that can work to ground arguments about works of literature. For instance:

- **“If an element of the work (e.g., a word, a pictorial image, a figure of speech) is repeated . . . , it may be thematically important.”**
- **“If every time one element appears, another is also repeated, the connection between them (the fact that they vary together), may be thematically important.”**
- **“If a work that appears on the surface to be simple can be shown to have a deeper complexity . . . , it may be evaluated more positively than on first viewing.”**

And argument shaped specific statements on the assignment sheet, for example:

- **“Your thesis can make a claim about the usefulness of looking at these texts together.”**
- **You should “address an audience made up of people who disagree with your point of view.”**
- **Try to “persuade your audience that you are correct or at least to open their minds a little to your point of view.”**

One motive for the class Ferster described is clear in her title—teaching argument through literature. But Ferster also told her audience that the approach had been developed so that the first-year writing course could give students something required in no other general education course at her university—experience reading and

writing about literature. In serving both of those ends, Ferster's approach suggests that argument and literature can work together in courses that stress thoughtful reading of literature as well as argument's concerns for analysis, logic, audience-awareness, and persuasive evidence.

A different sort of example is the upper-level course James Kastely describes in College English. This upper-level course centers on Sophocles's Antigone as a way to avoid problems that Kastely sees in the way argument usually is taught: failure to engage students adequately and productively with positions other than their own, and resistance to the differences that mark culture and discourse in our world (see 222–23). Kastely's approach is suggested by his title, "From Formalism to Inquiry: A Model of Argument in Antigone." He proposes teaching argument in "a course in which argument itself is seen as problematic and hence in need of philosophical interrogation" (223). And he sees Antigone as an especially productive focus for instruction "because it challenges the very possibility of argument" (224).

Over some twenty pages, Kastely works with a wide variety of sources, including Sophocles's play itself, to show that "[t]exts like Antigone offer an alternative to the current teaching of argument, for they . . . offer no easy or mechanical solutions but pose argument as a problem and offer it for serious reflection" (239). And it isn't necessary to unravel Kastely's careful and interesting argument to realize the inherent interconnection of argument and literature in Kastely's proposal that Antigone and similar literary works should

be taught as theoretical works in argument. These works would allow us to teach argument as a philosophical or political problem and not as a mode of presenting evidence for purposes of justifying claims. Instead, they would raise questions as to why arguments so often fail, and they would open students to questions of why, given the unlikelihood of success, someone might argue. And a course based on such texts would train students . . . that the point of serious exchange is not to . . . seek domination or control but to risk understandings in the hope of discovering new understandings of themselves and others. . . . (239–40, emphasis added)

James Kastely’s article suggests how complexities of argument can be understood—and taught—by focusing on works of literature. Judith Ferster’s effort to phrase literary principles as “warrants” suggests that argument can be used to help general students read perceptively and write convincingly about works of literature. Monica Brown’s course involves majors and minors in the persuasive give-and-take that makes “critical debate” much more than a metaphor within literary study. Together, these three approaches reflect a very positive intellectual and professional interest in relationships linking reading, writing and argument—relationships I’ve found phrased in a variety of ways:

- **Teaching writing “as a way of learning to read and reading closely as a model of careful writing is to guide students to the discovery of the powers of language: should that not be the chief mission of any and all English departments?” (Berthoff**

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- **Helping students read a literary work closely enough “to recognize that it has an argument” because it is the “ability to recognize the argument” that will allow them “to summarize the text and to talk or write about it intelligently” (Marius 179–80)**
 - **Teaching “reading and writing as interconnected activities” by means of which students “can conjecture a text’s . . . argument and can establish a responsible critical dialogue with it, as well as with the text they compose in response to it” (Salvatori 195)**
 - **Naming critical reading “as the center of our discipline” and “stressing it in our teaching and writing” so that we can say “that we teach students how to follow and conduct complex arguments” (Peltason 17).**
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"Both of those things—intellectual interest in argument and willingness to carry that interest into pedagogy—suggest argument’s potential to serve as a common point for professional activity by scholar-teachers concerned about undergraduate education."

Beyond intellectual and professional interest in reading, writing, and argument, the three courses just discussed show that some faculty are acting **on their concerns to bring argument and literature together in the undergraduate English curriculum. Both of those things—intellectual interest in argument and willingness to carry that interest into pedagogy—suggest argument’s potential to serve as a common point for professional activity by scholar-teachers concerned about undergraduate education.**

Among faculty interested in perceptive reading, good writing, or effective undergraduate education—the many scholar-teachers represented here by Brown, Ferster, and Kastely—argument has considerable power to motivate common priorities in teaching and scholarship. For these women and men, argument is an intellectual center for their work as teachers and scholars. As they do this work—collaborative curricular development among literature and rhetoric faculty, for instance, or individual research leading to provocative and persuasive articles—they share the intellectual and professional potential of argument with campus colleagues as well as a wider circle of professional colleagues who encounter their ideas in conference sessions or in the pages of journals they read. When some of these colleagues are intrigued or challenged by what they hear or read about that work, the circle of scholar-teachers will expand and the level of cooperative professional activity centered on argument will grow. And it is through this process that I imagine argument serving as common ground for literature and composition

faculty and bringing a measure of greater unity to English studies.

That is a less definitive and optimistic conclusion than I had hoped to reach when I began exploring the idea that “implicit commitment to teaching argumentation” potentially “binds literature and composition teachers together” in a way that “can bridge the notorious gulf between literary and composition studies” (Graff 329). Or maybe I should say it is a more realistic conclusion. For my research over the past year, and more, drove home for me things that daily frustrate cooperation within English studies: bedrock disagreements about the nature of English, the motivations and personal attitudes faculty bring to professional discussions, and the way faculty use argument in their professional lives.

Those are matters for continuing research, and maybe future articles. And while they temper optimism, they do not invalidate the evidence that argument, a central concern of rhetoric and of many composition faculty, is important in literary study and in literature teaching. Many faculty in literature and composition, then, share argument as (to adapt Devitt’s words) a common object of study and teaching. For that reason, I believe, “a greater argument can be made that we in English should work to maintain our connections, for our different methodologies and questions can complement and contribute to one another’s research and teaching” (Devitt 696).

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