Book Reviews

Joseph Petraglia, *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995), 272 pages.

Reviewed by Linda S. Bergmann, University of Missouri-Rolla

Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction, by Joseph Petraglia, is a collection of essays that reconsider from a variety of perspectives what most of the contributors call "General Writing Skills Instruction"("GWSI") particularly as this approach is manifested in first year composition courses. GWSI is based on the idea that there is a common core of writing skills that provide a basis for more specific disciplinary writing. The definition of those skills ranges, in various institutional situations, from the mechanical (spelling, basic usage, grammatical etiquette) and organizational (including thesis, transitions, and contemporary variations of the modes of discourse), to more obviously intellectual skills like critical reading and thinking. Most of the contributors to this volume cast serious doubt on the value of teaching anything like "general writing" or "general academic writing," and some, like David R. Russell, even doubt than any such a thing as "general writing skills" exists or can be taught. Coming for the most part from various venues of constructivism, the writers pursue in a number of directions the implications of the idea that writing is always domain-specific, and pursue them farther than most of us who have been involved in first year composition dare. Certainly, the essays speak to my own doubts about the value of what I have done over the years in first year composition--and I know I am not alone in my vague but persistent malaise concerning the purposes, processes, and goals of composition instruction.

The first section of the book, with articles by Robert J. Connors and Maureen Daly Goggin, places the current reconsideration of general writing skills instruction in the context of the history and the institutional situation of first year composition. From its origins at Harvard in 1885, the course was conceived as preliminary: it was supposed to overcome the

deficiencies of high school education and to prepare students for the "real writing" desired by faculty teaching upper level courses. It has thus always been a course that senior faculty want their students to have taken already, but not a course that anyone really wants to teach. And so from the beginning it has been relegated to more marginal and powerless faculty members: junior faculty, women, etc. As early as 1911, and in pretty much every generation thereafter, there have been calls for its abolition or reform; and, indeed, this volume is seen as following in that tradition, although the "new abolitionists" come from inside rather than outside the field of rhetoric and composition.

The second section looks at the social and cognitive contexts of writing classes. For me, the most telling metaphor for what we try to do in first year composition was posited by David Russell, who observes that writing is like ball playing: a course in "general ball" would not do much to improve the games of golfers, football players, and baseball players. Russell's analogy of GWSI to "general ball" highlights the issues of content, rigor, and assessment that teachers of first year composition continually face. Russell suggests replacing the mandatory composition courses that are supposed to "take care of" writing instruction with extended Writing Across the Curriculum programs, and proposes creating courses in writing that are liberal arts courses--not preliminary skills courses. A liberal arts course in rhetoric and language would teach students *about* writing rather than promise to develop writing skills; it would be discipline-specific in *our* discipline, rather than pretending to be non-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary. I must admit to having a lot of sympathy for Russell's argument, which speaks to my own dissatisfaction with "contentless" writing courses and with my soon-abandoned efforts to teach first year composition as a writing across the curriculum course.

Equally interesting is Cheryl Geisler's review of several studies that cast doubt on the general efficacy of "writing to learn"--at least as most university departments currently define undergraduate learning, and particularly in the context of general education, whose historical roots and common practices are more archival than critical. Geisler argues that "Only specialized education effects social change" (117); without a deep disciplinary context, school writing like essays and research papers--no matter how critically and creatively designed--merely reinforces students' role as consumers of knowledge. Joseph Petraglia, like Geisler and Russell, cuts through some of what have become the commonplaces and pieties of composition studies, specifically the assumption that the student should not write for the teacher and should ignore the institutional situation of the writing course. Petraglia claims that because we require a high level of pretense from our students in the "unnatural act" of classroom writing, we get distorted and contorted writing from them. If we want students to do

real writing in the classroom, he suggests, we must design assignments that rely on the actual rhetorical situation of the student, whose real audience is the teacher and whose real purpose is to demonstrate that the student understands the material that has been read and heard in the class. Petraglia draws on research that shows that much of learning to write--like language acquisition in general--is tacit rather than explicit, research that accords with at least my experience as a teacher and a writer. Aviva Freedman, and also Charles A. Hill and Lauren Resnick, continue this examination of "school writing." Freedman looks at the complexity of school writing and the relatively *greater* "teacherly support and guidance" in disciplinary classes than in composition, suggesting that students outside the academic mainstream may be disadvantaged by the tacit expectations of general writing skills courses. Hall and Resnick analyze the disjunction between school writing and workplace writing as the result of the failure of composition courses--and university education in general--to situate discourse in its social, political, and institutional context.

Two essays in the collection consider broadly philosophical issues: Daniel J. Royer speculates that GWSI, with its focus on skills, may drain the creativity from invention. Fred Kemp, in a similar view, looks at GWSI as supporting the "container model of writing," a model that can and should be superseded by the creative and dialogical potential of computer technologies. The final section of the collection offers case studies of the evolution of first year composition (Lil Brannon) and its transformation (David A. Jolliffe; David S. Kaufer and Patricia L. Dunmire). Brannon describes a program that dropped the requirement of first year composition in favor of a menu of freely selected writing courses and a strong Writing Across the Curriculum program. The programs described by Jolliffe and by Kaufer and Dunmire, who are less "abolitionists" than "reformers" of first year composition, aim to re-create the course as a domain in which serious and reflective writing actually can take place.

The final essay in the section, and in the collection for that matter, is a response by Charles Bazerman to the preceding essays. A distinguished scholar of disciplinary writing, Bazerman has some sympathy for the abolitionist position, as well as some caveats for its proponents. Bazerman warns against throwing out the composition baby with the bathwater: he reminds us that although first year composition should not be the end of writing instruction or the sole focus of research in composition studies, there is nonetheless a considerable body of research into its pedagogies and practices that has contributed to the professionalization of rhetoric and composition during the last couple of decades. He observes that although bad composition courses can be bad indeed, there are advantages to first year composition that should not be lightly dismissed. Com-

position serves as a transitional course for many students, affording entrance into the discourses of the university and a chance to reflect upon them. Bazerman warns of the danger of overly-focused education that serves merely to train students for comfortable slots in the corporate enterprise; he suggests that composition can offer a kind of critical space for the development of a self separate from, as well as responsible to, a chosen profession. I have considerable sympathy with Bazerman's concern for composition as general education, a concept which seems increasingly vulnerable to attack from both outside and inside the academy, from both the advocates of professional training and the defenders of traditional academic disciplines.

Bazerman's response underscores the fact that this is by all means an important book, one that raises crucial and complex issues in undergraduate education. This book invites us to look over our basic assumptions about the functions and practices of first year composition courses, to think seriously about what we are doing and evaluate rigorously the extent to which we succeed. I seriously doubt that many schools will move to abolish first year composition: too many graduate programs, faculty positions, and other institutional interests depend on it. But many schools are under pressure to re-think it, as state legislatures and other governing bodies press for assessment and accountability. This book offers a firm corrective to those who would mandate a return to "basics," refuting alike the advocates of teaching "general writing skills" before specific rhetorical tasks and those who would just like students to get the grammar and spelling over with before the "important" classes get underway.