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# Seeking Connection: An English Educator Speaks across a Disciplinary “Contact Zone”

Janet Alsup

In the fall of 1999, an electronic conversation occurred on the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) listserv about the pedagogical and theoretical similarities and differences between university faculty prepared in rhetoric and composition (RC) and English education (EE). The discussion began from a simple query about why it's often difficult to find qualified English education candidates for university jobs and evolved into a sometimes-heated debate about the knowledge and effectiveness of each discipline in preparing future secondary teachers. Those prepared as English educators touted the benefits of their professional backgrounds; those in the rhet/comp ranks sometimes stated that those with degrees in rhetoric and composition were preferable, even if they lacked public school teaching experience. Throughout the discussion on both lists, one theme was consistently evident—the dichotomy between “theory” (research and philosophy) and “practice” (teaching). This theory-practice split, whether real or perceived, became the primary framework listserv responders used to categorize and characterize the work of EE and RC, with EE most often associated with “practice” (hands-on work) and RC with “theory” (intellectual work).

Little about this debate is new. English education has owned responsibility for preparing secondary school teachers of “language arts” for decades, since the advent of the so-called 19th century “normal” schools and teachers’ colleges.<sup>1</sup> Making secondary English teachers scapegoats for those dissatisfied with the academic performance (and even social behavior) of adolescents in our public schools has just as long a history (see *The Manufactured Crisis*, 1995). Whenever standardized test scores don't pass muster or graduates don't have necessary workplace skills, teachers—and those who educate them—are accused of a lack of knowledge, professionalism, or com-

mitment to their profession. Similarly, RC professionals receive their share of “blame” within the university environment when college students are characterized as unable to perform reading and writing tasks at appropriate levels. RC instructors often have responsibility for teaching first-year writing, a mere one- or two-semester class that can bear full responsibility for teaching writing skills that are expected to prepare students for the rest of their collegiate and professional lives. Ironically, while both EE and RC professionals receive their share of unfair blame for the nation’s educational woes, they often don’t recognize the parallel unfair treatment of the other, despite sometimes-similar backgrounds and shared experiences.

As an academic trained not only in English education but also in rhetoric and composition, I often have noted how EE and RC professionals at times misunderstand each other’s work and consequently characterize the other as either “too theoretical” or “too practical.” As a former high school teacher now in a university setting, I have met many RC and English faculty who see my discipline as intellectually equal to theirs, but too often, I have felt little respect for my public school teaching experience or my EE training. At first, I took such elitism personally and felt that my colleagues’ responses reflected some sort of personal deficit. However, eventually I realized that what I was experiencing was larger than that: it was an institutional, disciplinary prejudice outside of my immediate, individual control. I also have realized recently that I too have been guilty of a parallel kind of bias toward my RC colleagues. While they might call me “too practical” or too concerned with pedagogy, I might very well respond that they are “too theoretical” and hence “out of touch” with the realities of the classroom. In short, we may both be guilty of stereotyping the other, often without sufficient evidence, either because of isolated personal experiences or long-standing and outdated beliefs about our respective professional work.

This theory-practice split that too often divides our disciplines became evident on the WPA list as college composition instructors defended their qualifications to teach high school pedagogy courses despite their lack of public school experience. Sometimes they even described themselves as more qualified than their EE counterparts because they hadn’t taught in high school and, as such, would spend more time on “theory” and less on “practical” issues such as discipline and classroom management. In turn, the EE faculty online often felt insulted and responded with anger and defensiveness.

Building bridges between the two disciplines seems natural and necessary to me. For example, both disciplines value pedagogy, both find it difficult to separate theory from practice, and both are concerned with teacher education, whether that education is in preparation for the high school or

the university classroom. But I also know that there are essential differences between our fields, based in different needs. For example, EE pedagogy courses must deal, to some extent, with discipline and classroom management issues since these problems are a reality of secondary school teaching. In addition, topics such as testing, grading, responding to writing, and even lesson planning manifest themselves differently at the high school and university level. However, this discussion of differences does not negate the possibility or the benefit of closer cooperation and communication between EE and RC professionals. After all, the students who come to college don't arrive newly born without previous knowledge about writing instruction in their heads. They came from a high school; high school teachers taught them. And, to complete the circle, these high school teachers were educated at universities.

Interestingly enough, a conversation similar to that on the WPA list took place in the summer of 2000 on a list primarily for secondary school teachers, called NCTE-Talk. This discussion had interesting similarities to the WPA conversation, similarities that demonstrate the existing connections between the disciplines of EE and RC. For example, EE faculty and pedagogy courses also received a fair amount of criticism on NCTE-Talk, depending on the quality of the experiences teachers had in their own college education. In addition, the NCTE-Talk dialogue included a long discussion concerning what "good teaching" actually is and how one becomes such a teacher. One could say that the NCTE-Talk discussion was more about practice and the WPA discussion was more about theoretical differences and similarities; however, this generalization ignores some similarities between the two discussions that might be the basis for increased cooperation and communication between EE and CR faculty. In this essay, I hope to describe the current nature of the EE/RC split (as evidenced in the two listserv exchanges) and suggest ways this gap might be narrowed to allow for more cooperative research, teaching, and writing.

To understand this RC/EE dichotomy, I carefully analyzed both the WPA discussion list thread concerning English education (from November through December, 1999) and the NCTE-Talk list thread called "English versus English Ed" (from June through July, 2000). I am a member of both lists as were a small number of other participants; I was an active participant in the WPA discussion, while I "lurked" but didn't post on the NCTE-Talk list. My analysis consisted of careful reading of each list discussion, broad "cod-

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ing” or labeling of the talk in major categories, and then compressing and collapsing these categories into smaller, more manageable discussion themes. In my analysis, I organized the WPA list discussion into three major categories: class issues, elitism, and theoretical/pedagogical similarities and differences. I categorized the talk on the NCTE-Talk listserv into two areas: discussion about whether good teaching is innate or learned and discussion of the quality of EE programs and classes.

Because I understand that listservs are often considered “safe spaces” for intellectual debate and that using listserv posts for research may cause discomfort, I made every attempt to be open with participants about my project. In order to analyze the listserv discussions and quote selected passages I obtained written permission from each quoted participant and from the Purdue Institutional Research Board. As part of this informed consent process, I shared with list participants the exact quotes from the posts I intended to reproduce, and in one case I shared an entire draft of this essay with a participant so that he could see the context in which his words would be used. I used pseudonyms for all participants on both lists unless otherwise noted.

### Who’s the Most Qualified? English versus English Ed on WPA

On the WPA list, the discussion seemed to focus on qualifications—who is more qualified to teach EE university pedagogy courses and administer EE programs? It was a matter of “ethos”—whose knowledge and expertise was valued most in guiding the education of preservice secondary English teachers; more specifically, this knowledge and expertise was defined as either more theoretical or more experiential. One of the most prevalent issues raised is one that I label “class issues.” Postings in this category find participants writing about how and why the differences between RC and EE could almost be compared to differences in socioeconomic status and the resultant marginalization or privileging of groups. In my analysis, I labeled any statement a “class” statement if it mentioned social class directly or if it referred to class indirectly by mentioning characteristics of each discipline that resulted in one being privileged over the other. In a literal way, a greater percentage of students in English education, students who want to be high school teachers, come from lower to lower-middle class backgrounds than their English-major peers. For these students a “liberal arts” education with an emphasis in literature and the humanities is not valued.

But in the list discussion, what was more often discussed was what I will call “metaphorical class.” Most participants were not talking about actual income differentials between EE and RC students; they were talking

about the privileging of RC in English departments over EE. The English educator is often of a “lower class” in the academy because of the stigmas and stereotypes that surround the profession. Historically, secondary school teachers (especially in the public schools) have been less revered in our culture than the “university professor.” Secondary school teachers are historically female, underpaid, and expected to deal with mundane (and often anti-intellectual) tasks such as discipline; classroom management; lunch, bus and hall duty; and countless extra-curricular clubs and organizations. Meanwhile, the stereotypical professor sits in his ivory tower and, well, thinks. Of course, I exaggerate for effect, but it is true that the general societal status awarded each professional is very different. Consequently, when the high school teacher gets a PhD and moves into the office next to the professor, it seems as if the infidels have invaded the castle. Inversely, this class bias can also occur on the part of the high school teacher or EE faculty member toward the college or RC professional—e.g., the RC instructor is not doing “real,” hands-on work, or is the quintessential absent-minded professor who knows little of the “real world” of students and their intellectual or personal lives. To make matters even more complex, RC professionals have also experienced their share of this “metaphorical class” bias from literature professionals and other colleagues in English departments who often see their work as “service” labor for the “real” intellectual work of the academy. Consequently, the classism exists on many layers and levels, forming a complicated and tenuous hierarchy.

To illustrate how this classism as well as the “theory-practice split” became evident on the WPA list discussion, I will quote a brief dialogue from the listserv discussion. These quotes, as well as all others that appear in this essay, are excerpted from the larger discussion, and I have attempted to cite them in proper context and in the chronological order in which they appeared to maintain the free-flowing nature characteristic of e-mail exchanges. The first series of exchanges concerns the professional preparation that should be required for university English education faculty:

DAN: I often wonder at this “public [school] experience requirement” and how important it might be. Aside from all of the obvious reasons people/administration want this experience, I wonder if the new and highly researched PhD’s out there might not be able to do the job even better without the field experience. (30 Nov. 1999)

LISA J. MCCLURE: [hereafter referred to as Lisa; not a pseudonym]: Don’t underestimate what can and is learned in some secondary education programs, and perhaps more importantly, don’t disregard

what a classroom teacher learns about teaching writing, literature, and discourse theory as she meets her 6 or 7 classes of 150 adolescents each day. (30 Nov. 1999)

DAN: I see strong writing and discourse theory PhD's being kept out of the education loop because they chose to pursue, in depth, what our new and future teachers, as well as their instructors, need to know. (30 Nov. 1999)

LISA: It seems to me that you as well as some others involved in this discussion are doing to English Education (EE) the same thing that literary scholars have done to Rhet/Comp for years—that is discussing the existence of a “subject matter” in EE. There is a whole discourse community that needs to be learned and understood and taught in a good EE program. (30 Nov. 1999)

Even though Dan, a PhD student in RC, recognizes in his early posts that the separation between EE and RC is a “class” issue, he continues to perpetuate such classism by describing the education of RC folks as superior to those with degrees and experience in education. By saying that RC students learn what “new and future teachers . . . need to know,” Dan could be accused of implying that EE-trained instructors don't know this information and, therefore, EE students aren't getting this vital instruction. Hence, he sets up a hierarchy of knowledge and preparation, a sort of continuum along which RC and EE fall.

In defense of EE programs, and in response to Dan, others in the WPA dialogue raised an interesting comparison between the current status of EE as a discipline and the past status of RC. Lisa made the point that RC is treating EE just as it had been treated previously by various disciplines focusing on literary theory. It took RC professors a very long time to gain respect, programs, and status in English departments. Some posts on the list urged RC folks to recognize this irony as well as the fact that RC programs often grew out of EE departments and that often RC professors started out in colleges of education. If EE is the “lower class” (practice-based) sibling of RC, much like RC used to be in relationship to literature, perhaps RC faculty could recognize this relationship and the institutional similarities that exist between the two disciplines. Such recognition might result in more cross-disciplinary respect (from both “sides”) and perhaps more professional collaboration.

Let me continue to quote from a portion of the e-mail exchange when the theory-practice split (as it is stereotypically seen to exist between EE and RC) is discussed:

LISA: Some of my colleagues in English openly state that the EE majors are second class, less bright, less qualified, less motivated, etc. If they find a really good EE major, they often counsel the student to give up her aspirations to be a secondary teacher. They won't accept papers for their literature courses that focus on, for example, how to teach Twain to high schoolers. It seems to me that whole department could contribute more to the improvement of secondary schools by acknowledging that teaching is an important occupation and that we all stand to benefit by encouraging and helping interested students to become the best teachers they can be. (1 Dec. 1999)

DAN: In a few cases, I've seen experienced high school teachers who have moved into the university after a long and drawn out graduate career as low on theory and research while high in classroom experience which often works out to be time management and discipline stuff instead of the academic stuff an English Ed course really needs to present. But my decision to move toward the terminal degree was based on the fulfillment deeper theory and study brought me. Thus, I turned down an offer to teach high school to pursue my degree. This, I think, is what happened to a lot of us who might now be applying for these positions [EE faculty positions]; yet, we can't because we sacrificed the experience factor to gain the theoretical knowledge these sorts of courses need/require. (30 Nov. 1999)

JANET: I don't think EE people have necessarily "sacrificed" theoretical knowledge to gain experience, which is what your message implies. I argue that a graduate of a strong EE program can indeed have a solid theoretical base, in addition to practical, secondary experience. (30 Nov. 1999)

This second major category of comments posted to the WPA list is what I call "elitist" comments, and the above posts are examples from this category. Elitism is very close to my discussion of social class, but it goes one step further: Instead of only setting up a hierarchy of class between the two disciplines, these comments assume that this hierarchy is accurate and a self-evident truth that EE occupies a lower status position. For example, in his post above, Dan makes several generalizations: that graduate programs in EE are low on theory, that EE folks mostly teach about discipline and time management, that teaching about discipline and time management is not worthy of the students' time, and that EE instructors of pedagogy courses

don't teach "academic stuff" (i.e., theory or pedagogical "content," such as structuring lessons).

Of course, Dan's generalizations have questionable accuracy. But what they seem to do is perpetuate a hierarchy of intellectual rigor and educa-

Despite the reluctance of many on the WPA list to generalize or stereotype, many could tell stories of their colleagues falling into this trap, the trap of labeling EE faculty as practitioners and RC faculty as theorists, the trap created by the theory-practice binary.

tional backgrounds that clearly puts EE graduate students (and PhD's) on the bottom and RC students and faculty at the top. This conversation continued throughout several posts, with many comments about the "marginalization" of EE people in English departments by English department faculty. Despite the reluctance of many participants on the WPA list to generalize or stereotype, many could tell stories of their colleagues falling into this trap, the trap of labeling EE faculty as practitioners and RC faculty as theo-

rists, the trap created by the theory-practice binary.

What follows is more from the exchange, here concerning the similarities between EE and RC that could be built upon for increased communication and collaboration:

LARRY: Both [EE and RC disciplines] are really about literacy and literacy instruction and the overlap between them is more substantive and interesting than their divergences. (1 Dec. 1999)

BEN: In my department, the rhetoric and composition program grew out of the English Ed program, and I studied with people in English Ed at the University of Texas, including faculty such as James Kinneavy and students such as Cindy Selfe. I am thus wondering about the observation that EE and RC are really two different cultures because if this is the case then rhetoric and composition has a major problem that can be depicted as a growing up and forgetting our working-class roots. (1 Dec. 1999)

This third main discussion thread on the WPA list dialogue is one I'm calling "theoretical and pedagogical similarities and differences." The most obvious similarity between our disciplines is that they both are about the teaching of English or literacy, a field of study that can be defined broadly or narrowly, depending on the context in which it is taught, a field that acknowledges many of the same educational theorists, such as Kinneavy, Selfe, Moffett, and Elbow. In addition to this focus on literacy education—

reading, writing, speaking, and listening and their cultural contexts—another important similarity between the disciplines is their focus on teacher education. English education faculty are not the only faculty involved in teacher preparation. While EE instructors teach preservice secondary teachers, RC faculty educate novice teaching assistants, who often teach first-year composition. Consequently, both often teach pedagogy classes (although EE faculty usually teach more of these courses), both conduct workshops and mentoring sessions for practicing teachers or TA's, and both often conduct research relating to pedagogy.

Another theoretical, as well as practical, similarity between RC and EE alluded to on the list is the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) connection. Writing Across the Curriculum has been a priority in both RC and EE departments for years, albeit in slightly different ways. As far as EE is concerned, the National Writing Project introduced WAC to their field.<sup>2</sup> The NWP has spearheaded major initiatives for teachers of all disciplines to include writing instruction in their classes and has encouraged the use of writing to facilitate students' learning, not just to display their knowledge. RC faculty also have adopted WAC as a philosophical staple, although they have not looked to the NWP for this knowledge. Instead, the RC discipline has read theorists such as Toby Fulwiler and Ann Berthoff and used their ideas to create "writing intensive" courses or WAC programs on university campuses that require writing to be infused into all subject areas.

However, as I mentioned earlier, there are unavoidable (and even desirable) differences between teaching high school and college students, and these differences were often noted in the listserv exchange. High school and college teachers work within unique institutional constraints. There simply aren't too many college teachers who have to do "bus duty," roost out the smokers in the boys' bathroom at lunch, or break up a fight in the hallway between classes (not to mention the other innumerable minutiae such as enforcing gum-chewing rules and dealing with the countless interruptions from assemblies, class picture days, and intercom announcements). But to many high school teachers, these chores and irritations are daily occurrences, and to say that these things don't affect pedagogy, or teacher education, is simply naïve. On the other hand, college and university professors have to deal with the demands of heavy publishing and research expectations in order to earn tenure, expectations that high school teachers simply do not face. While trying to build disciplinary bridges, it is important to recognize that some differences will remain and are essential to work effectively in each discipline.

## Who's the Best Teacher? English versus English Ed on NCTE-Talk

The discussion on the NCTE-Talk list was different from the WPA dialogue in several ways. While it also revolved around a discussion of a theory-practice split, the NCTE-Talk discussion placed this split in the context of secondary English language arts teaching, framing some high school teachers as more “theoretical” (and usually less connected to colleges of education) and others as more “practical” (and less connected to English departments). Most interesting, perhaps, was the time spent analyzing whether being an “excellent” teacher was a characteristic that could be learned, or if one simply had to be born with good teacher “genes.” The respondents who were “pro” colleges of education usually seemed to believe that a good teacher could be “made,” while those having little respect for schools for education claimed that truly excellent teaching is a gift given to a select few, regardless of educational background. A respondent I call Mary, who received her degree in English and not education, was the foremost proponent of the “nature” argument online, insisting several times that good teachers can not be made. She was a strong believer that excellent teachers are, instead, born. She initiated a conversation with this assertion, a conversation that evolved into a discussion about the merits of EE programs:

MARY: I believe that TRULY EXCELLENT teachers are born, not made. This is not to say that a “teacher” can’t be made, but if the person has to be taught everything that goes into superlative teaching, is that person a brilliant teacher? I don’t think so. (17 June 2000)

What implications might a philosophy such as Mary’s have on teacher education programs? In fact, Mary suggests later that perhaps teacher education programs are not necessary at all:

MARY: It’s completely possible to become a secondary teacher without going through an undergrad education program as one’s major or minor or student teaching. As the teacher shortage increases, I predict that more states will begin allowing districts to certify liberal arts grads on the job. I believe that, properly mentored, on the job training is far superior to undergrad methods and theory drudgery. I’m living (albeit anecdotal) proof. (20 June 2000)

Mary’s post was representative of those written by educators unhappy or unfamiliar with schools of education. From their perspective, explicit training in education seemed unnecessary, even undesirable, for future or practicing English teachers to be truly “excellent” at their chosen work.

The second strand of talk on the NCTE-Talk listserv discussion concerned education pedagogy courses participants had taken and how useful they deemed them to be. This discussion thread relates to the nature/nurture discussion detailed above, because if one believes good teaching to be innate and not learned, then it would follow that classes about “how to teach” would be unnecessary and pointless. Consequently, Mary, the main proponent of the “nature” argument, posted the most emphatically about the worthlessness of education methods courses. Mary admits that she came to English teaching “through the back door” and therefore did not experience effective English education instruction. Mary’s point is well taken; however, she ignores the logical reverse: Is it equally possible for a good teacher to come to secondary teaching the traditional way, through a teacher education program? Pat and Maria also note this oversight:

PAT: When you listen to new teachers on the NCTE lists, not many of them wish they’d had another course in 17th century metaphysical poetry. They know what to teach for the most part; it’s the how that overwhelms them at times as they realize that teaching the way they were taught doesn’t work very well any more. (16 June 2000)

MARIA: What transformed me as a teacher was my master’s in EE at Florida State, where I studied contemporary literature theory, its applications to teaching, assessment, theory and practice in teaching rhetoric and composition, and much more. (16 June 2000)

Pat and Maria cite positive experiences in EE programs and with pedagogy courses. They seem to take the “nurture” stance to teacher development—one can learn to be an effective teacher, and there are effective EE programs in existence that provide this education. What’s especially interesting about Maria’s post is that she credits her education for supplying her with knowledge of both theory and pedagogy, hence undermining the theory-practice split, and she specifically mentions learning about the theory and practice of “rhetoric and composition,” a specialization often not credited to high school teachers, as was demonstrated by the WPA list exchange.

### Meeting at the “Contact Zone”

Mary Louise Pratt (1991) defines the “contact zone” as

social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (p. 34)

Pratt is discussing teaching literary texts produced by diverse groups during the same historical period so that the “contacts” and contrasts between them will become evident. The goal is that students reading the texts will begin to see diversity as unavoidable and even positive, instead of seeing certain groups as always privileged and others as continually marginalized. In a College English article, Pat Bizzell (1994) took Pratt’s idea and applied it to her ideal reorganization of English studies as a whole, whereby professors would structure their courses (and even their research interests) around “contact zones” or problems in societies and cultures that are reflected in texts. Students could then read and analyze these texts in the context of the historical realities that produced them. She writes that within this structure “students would learn to critique strategies of negotiating difference in the writing of others and to practice them in their own” (p. 169).

Pratt’s concept of contact zones is relevant to the relationship between EE and RC. There seems to be a clashing of these two “cultures,” as the listserv dialogues demonstrate. Anthropologists and folklorists define culture as a set of behaviors or beliefs shared by a group of people. If we extrapolate from this definition and view EE and RC as two cultures, two metaphorical societies of sorts, we can see how their ideologies and priorities may “clash.” As we saw in the listserv, EE instructors might value secondary school experience for their instructors, while RC faculty might not see as much value in this experience. Similarly, practices that are deemed effective in pedagogy courses by EE instructors (i.e., lesson planning, strategies for inductive teaching techniques, etc.) may not be valued as highly by those in RC who might, for example, believe that high school writing teachers need a stronger education in rhetoric or composition theory than they presently receive. In addition, like other historical contact zones, each culture, to some extent, misunderstands the other and thus defines it through a series of stereotypical lenses that don’t accurately reflect reality. In the case we saw, EE trained academics stereotype RC faculty as theory-obsessed and more “intellectual,” and RC faculty label EE PhD’s as non-intellectual and too practical minded. Consequently, these clashes and misunderstandings lead to power relationships that often privilege RC over EE in university settings where theory is very often valued over practice and where RC itself is often the lower class “sibling” of literature programs.

So what can be learned from Pratt and Bizzell about contact zones that can improve the EE/RC relationship and balance this power more fairly? Just as Pratt sees the contact zone as a space of potential learning and growth when students read and grapple with literatures of other cultures, I see the contact zone, this space of conflict, as a potential site of increased under-

standing and mutual respect. However, before this positive result can be realized, both cultures must re-examine their beliefs about the other. This shift could occur in professional forums, on listservs, at conferences, and in professional journals (such as this one) that recognize the importance of cross-disciplinary work. These forums could be concrete sites where the contact zone is evident and where discussion of the issues and ideas in conflict can lead to greater understanding and mutual respect instead of anger, frustration, and further division. While the discourse that occurred on both the WPA and NCTE-Talk lists was at times heated and angry, it allowed an open and free sharing of ideas, a sharing that brought many unexamined biases to the surface and consequently forced list participants to re-think some long-held assumptions. Such sharing and re-thinking, while not always resulting in a total reformation of attitude, is invaluable in the continuing dialogue between our disciplines.

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### A Clash of “Discourse” Communities

A new understanding can be brought to the concept of contact zones as well as to this specific debate by examining the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault, often described as the most prominent “theorist of power” in the 20th century, wrote several texts about authority, power, discourse, and the creation of different “disciplines.”<sup>3</sup> Foucault talks about both discourse and disciplines in new ways, different from the commonly understood definitions of the terms. As McHoul and Grace (1993) write,

Foucault thinks of discourse in terms of bodies of knowledge. His use of the concept moves it away from something to do with language and closer towards the concept of discipline. We use the word discipline here in two senses: as referring to scholarly disciplines such as science, medicine, psychiatry, sociology and so on; and as referring to disciplinary institutions of social control such as the prison, the school, the hospital, the confessional and so on. (p. 26)

English education and rhetoric/composition are “disciplines” in the first sense McHoul and Grace note—scholarly disciplines. They are also disciplines in the second sense—institutions of social control or social power. The discourse, or language, used by a certain discipline both creates and is created by that discipline. Therefore, Foucault would say that the discourse EE faculty

use to describe their field, their priorities, their goals for teaching and for teacher education define their discipline and, in essence, have created their discipline by differentiating it from others, such as literature or RC. It's equally true that RC has, through its own texts and discourse, developed an individual discipline that has individual merit and an independent existence.

Consequently, the discourse of each has, in part, defined each discipline, and each discipline exists partially because of its ability to differentiate itself from other English-related fields. Therefore, stating such differences in belief or ideology is essential to the continued existence of each discipline. However, Foucault believed that such differences are spoken through and result in power differentials between and among disciplines. These power differentials are not inherently bad or wrong; they are, instead, unavoidable:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

However, Foucault also recognizes that sometimes power can be misused and that unfair differentials in power can result in the unfair marginalization of one group or discipline. Consequently, even though the enactments and arrangements of power are an unavoidable part of life, those without power can resist and possibly create new power relationships that are more equitable. How can this resistance happen successfully? Foucault gives many examples of ways that disciplines have shifted, merged, and differentiated. For example, McHoul and Grace write that:

Foucault himself notes how nineteenth-century biological concepts were imported into sociology and linguistics. But this relationship between science and the social sciences can be reversed. Think of how terms like "genetic code," "genetic information," and "messenger RNA" as used in genetics have been taken from linguistics and information theory. And lastly we can see that a theory once exclusive to one discipline can be dropped and taken over by another. (p. 47)

Obviously, disciplines are in a continuous state of flux and development. At one time, departments of rhetoric and composition did not exist, and instructors with literary training taught composition courses. I'm not suggesting here that EE and RC should merge and become one discipline. As I

discussed earlier, I think that there are real differences between their roles in academia that support the separate existence of each. What I am suggesting is that there are more similarities and areas of overlap than both disciplines realize, and it would be to the benefit of both (as well as to their students) to recognize these theoretical, ideological, and pedagogical connections, while respecting clear differences. If we look at the concept of discipline through the lens of Foucault, it becomes easier to understand why they have developed distinctly and how easy it might be to “share” knowledge across the contact zone.

### Concluding Thoughts: Using the Contact Zone as a Positive Space

My analysis of the two listserv discussions suggests there are several similarities and points of connection between EE and RC: We both teach and value teaching and teachers. We are all intellectuals and value theory that guides our practice. We are interested in literacy issues. We teach undergraduate and graduate students with interests similar to our own. Sometimes we even teach the same students. At some universities and colleges, we share departments, office space, and financial resources. I am pleased that my new position at Purdue University is a joint appointment in English and English education; I believe the RC faculty here have a great deal of respect for my work, and I value the opportunity to work with these colleagues on a daily basis. As my current position shows me, the perceived theory-practice split that often divides our disciplines is false and misleading in many ways. As I’ve discussed here, these labels are sometimes used to incorrectly and unfairly characterize the professional work of both disciplines. Furthermore, it is ironic and a little surprising that two professions that often speak and write about bridging the theory-practice gap in their respective fields perpetuate this binary when interacting with each other. Berthoff (1981), for example, writes extensively about the desirability of merging theory and practice in order to produce what she calls “method” in the classroom, a type of “pedagogy of knowing” in which theory and practice work as dialectical intellectual processes (p. 19). Berthoff is speaking of the teaching of composition, but her argument could be applied to the potential “dialectical” relationship between theory and practice both within and between the disciplines of EE and RC.

Other EE people have experienced working relationships with those in RC or English departments, relationships that I think can serve as models for all of us. An example from my own department is the collaborative writing of Shirley Rose (RC) and Margaret Finders (EE). Their co-authored es-

say focuses on their mutual interest in educating teachers, and they introduce their text by describing their commonalities despite their different disciplinary affiliations:

As a director of a first-year college composition program and a teacher in English education we share with many of our readers a responsibility for educating writing teachers. Because we both work with novice teachers of writing—Shirley with relatively inexperienced teaching assistants and Margaret with preservice teachers who are students in English education—we are especially aware that much about teaching is learned from experience. The discipline of reflective practice we want these new teachers to develop requires constant assessing and questioning of experience. Such reflection contributes to experiential learning by allowing for detachment and distance from action itself; however, as Donald Schön has pointed out, reflection requires a “looking back” or recollection. (Rose & Finders, 1998, p. 33)

Rose and Finders go on to describe their strategy of “situated performances,” or role-playing scenarios that allow students (pre-service and novice teachers) to experience problematic teaching situations and experiment with possible reactions or solutions, all within the “safe” context of a pedagogy class. Rose and Finders both give examples of how the strategy worked successfully with their very different students and, perhaps even more interestingly, both cite theory and research from their own discipline that supports the technique. For example, readers of the article see references to John Dewey and Lester Faigley, as well as to Donald Schön, Min-Zhan Lu, and Bruce Horner. Rose and Finders’s work is a real-life example of EE and RC faculty making new meaning from within the contact zone.

Despite these positive examples of dialogue and connection between the disciplines, there is clearly more work to be done. Dilworth and McCracken (1998) discuss the implications of a 1992 survey of 48 English and English education professors sponsored by NCTE. One of the findings they note concerns collaboration between English and English education faculty. They write that “English professors must find time to meet together with English education professors regularly in order to acknowledge and explore perceived differences and to discover our common ground” and “English and English education professors need to examine and revise our own teaching so that it represents an effort to model a coherent, principled pedagogy” (p. 359). Dilworth and McCracken suggest that through this increased communication and collaborative work, faculty of both disciplines can help English education students “build bridges” between the sometimes diverse theory and practice they are exposed to in their English and English education courses and consequently become better secondary English teachers.

One example of this bridge-building can be seen in the recent increase in conference panels made up of both RC and EE instructors and faculty who discuss issues of joint concern. At the spring 2000 CCCC conference, for example, Bush and Moriarty presented a panel called "Transcending Disciplinary Knowledge: Challenges and Opportunities in Teaching 'Composition for Teachers' Courses." During this panel, they described how they each teach a pedagogy course for secondary EE undergraduates, even though they hail from opposite disciplinary backgrounds: Bush from EE and Moriarty from RC. By explaining their unique strengths and challenges and making it evident that their collaboration has improved both of their courses, Bush and Moriarty demonstrated a positive cooperative relationship across disciplines.

At the 2001 CCCC convention there were over a dozen panels related to EE/RC communication and collaboration as well as two workshops and two special interest groups. Interestingly enough, a few participants on the WPA listserv exchange attended some of these sessions and voiced interest in continued collaborations. At the November 2000 NCTE convention I participated in a roundtable discussion with both EE and RC specialists that was attended by more than fifty secondary teachers during which we discussed how to more effectively prepare high school writers for college writing courses. This large number of panels and presentations about EE/RC articulation is a strong sign that an even more positive, cross-disciplinary working relationship may lie ahead.

There are several journals in our fields that could continue to be forums for articles about such EE/RC collaborations, including English Education, English Journal, College Composition and Communication, The Journal of Writing Program Administration (WPA), and a new journal out of Duke University, *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. Each of these journals seems open to engaging in discussions about pedagogy and research that either occurs in both disciplines or is applicable to those working in both fields. These publications, as well as professional conferences, can provide opportunities for explicit communication about increased cooperation between our disciplines.

Again, let me say that my intent is not to erase or deny important differences between our two disciplines. Such denial would actually be contrary to Pratt's notion of the contact zone, which, in her words, doesn't require consensus in ideas and opinions but instead a clashing of them. Bizzell takes this idea one step further by calling for a productive clashing of these ideas in which new, more complex and useful knowledge would be created. Bizzell asks, in a sense, what is the point of engaging in conflict simply for conflict's sake? Shouldn't we be interested in doing something

positive with the conflict, such as heightening mutual understanding and increasing opportunities for collaboration? Of course I would say yes. We should take advantage of the contact zone and work within and through its tensions to emerge as two disciplines that while not completely sharing a discourse and ideology, recognize the connections that do exist and understand the potential for future cooperation for the eventual benefit of both.

## Notes

1. *Teacher Education in America: A Documentary History* (Teachers College Press, 1965) and *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (University of Wisconsin, 1989) are both excellent sources about the beginnings and subsequent history of American teacher education. Both describe the advent of the “normal” schools, which were among the first institutions that sought to professionalize teachers through specific teacher education programs.

2. The National Writing Project (NWP) was founded at Berkeley in 1974. Among its other goals, including the commitment to teachers teaching other teachers and a deep respect for primary and secondary teachers as professionals, its proponents believe that writing is fundamental to learning at all levels and in all disciplines. There are many similarities between the WAC movement and the NWP. In fact, both Susan McLeod and David R. Russell call the NWP the secondary equivalent of WAC. Many of the specific pedagogical practices that are recommended in WAC programs or workshops are also those used often in NWP Institutes and in secondary education pedagogy courses: namely, an emphasis on and understanding that writing is used “to learn” in addition to “to communicate.”

3. Foucault’s works include *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1973), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), *The History of Sexuality* (1979), and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (1980).

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