

REVIEWS AT A CROSSROADS

Janis Haswell

Although book reviews are low on the hierarchical lists of academic publications, they are of strategic use in several ways. First, we expect that timely reviews of publications will keep us abreast of what is happening in our teaching fields. None of us has the time to read everything that is published. Some of us may (regrettably) rarely read the books themselves and so depend on what others say as a basis for our sense of what is being researched and debated. Second, book reviews are in effect free publicity for publishers. In fact, journals have become key marketing instruments because they target precisely the reading public that will consume the scholarly product. Third, book reviews advance the reputation and tenure-ability of scholar-authors. Few of us who write or edit academic books will be recognized in *The New York Times Review of Books*, but we all hope to be reviewed in a scholarly journal. And finally, a journal's review policy can enhance and solidify its reputation as being dedicated to a particular emphasis. Several scholars have noted that the books reviewed by *JAC*, for instance, are quite different from those reviewed in *College English* or *Assessing Writing*. When the same book occasionally is reviewed across the board, reviewers for the various journals often examine the publication from different perspectives—and this can certainly advance discourses within our discipline. For these reasons, book reviews and review essays have served (and will continue to serve) teachers and researchers of writing.

With these important functions in mind, let me cast a different eye on the practice of reviewing. We know that reviews can fail in keeping us up-to-date as we should be, because humanities journals are notorious for their temporal disconnect. The length of time from submission to publication is always months, sometimes

years, unlike science journals that must scoop each other in terms of research findings. It is not uncommon in the leading composition journals to find reviews of books that were published 2-3 years earlier. We also know that books published by “big names” in the field will always be reviewed, sometimes by several journals, occasionally even twice by the same journal, whereas other books of equal merit by lesser-known scholars may never be reviewed. There are all kinds of reasons behind this pattern. Friends like to review their friends’ publications, partaking in a sort of “you scratch my book and I’ll scratch yours” arrangement. Some academics may consider it a privilege to review a big name (big names are never reviewed by little fish). And the decision not to review certain books is one of the ways our profession censures ideas and writers.

The frequency that books from a particular press are reviewed (remember the free publicity) is directly connected to the willingness of that press to send out review copies to journals. In preparing to write this essay, I compiled lists of reviews and review essays published from 2000-2005 in the following journals: *The Journal of Teaching Writing*, *College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, and *JAC*. The presses that get more air time (the ones who aggressively send out copies to journals) are—in order—Southern Illinois, SUNY, Boynton Cook, NCTE, Erlbaum, Pittsburgh, and Utah State. Hence, our sense of current research is shaped, in part, by the publishers most willing to peddle their wares.

Despite the flaws in existing practice, my point isn’t to advocate an overhaul of the existing system, but to suggest that we expand our horizons. Scholarship has taken an important turn with the advent of Open Access Publishing—original research provided free (and immediately upon publication) to all on the internet.¹ It is incumbent upon print journals to acknowledge this shift as well as upon English teachers to be familiar with the potential and promise of OA materials. What is behind this move that radically alters the mechanisms for dispersing scholarship and research? There are many pressures within the English field itself. For

instance, there is the pressure to publish or perish. More and more professionals are depending on fewer and fewer publishing houses willing to market academic books. University presses are limiting their publications to sure winners because of shrinking budgets. They have also narrowed their lists and/or specialized in the subjects they publish. A few non-academic presses (like Routledge and Peter Lang) will publish academic work but sometimes require subvention. And print journals (especially in the sciences and professional fields) are becoming increasingly expensive while controlling the flow of information to the disciplines.²

In the past decade we have seen slow movement in the composition profession to provide wider access to previously purchased materials (as the *CCC Bibliography*) and the development of CompPile, free and open to any scholar from its inception. In a word, we are realizing (but slowly) the potential of the internet for exposure to a wider reading audience and the ability to publish instantaneously.

Teachers of writing can learn a great deal from other disciplines in their use of this important opportunity. A few Open Access initiatives in other fields may be of interest to researchers as well as teachers seeking access to a wider range of resources:³

- SPARC – The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, formed by the Association of Research Libraries (<<http://www.arl.org/sparc/>>). The purpose of SPARC is “to correct market dysfunctions in the scholarly publishing system” by supporting open access to information especially in science, technology and medicine, information otherwise controlled by costly scholarly journals. There are a series of “publishing partners” who work to make research available in a variety of academic fields: biology, medicine, and life sciences, earth sciences, mathematics, communication, and ecology. SPARC

also makes available a Directory of Open Access Journals.

- E-Print Network <<http://www.osti.gov/eprints/>>.⁴ This resource serves as a gateway to over 18,200 web sites and databases in the sciences and technical fields. The Network is an “integrated network of electronic scientific and technical information created by scientists and research engineers active in their respective fields, intended for use by other scientists, engineers, and students at advanced levels.”
- California Digital Library <<http://www.cdlib.org>>. CDL “pursues technological innovations that enhance services for accessing, sharing, manipulating, and integrating scholarly content in all forms.” CDL was developed because the circulation of scholarship in journals “has become expensive, restrictive, and increasingly limited in its ability to make information accessible.” This site features E-scholarship editions of 2000 books originally published by the UC press. There is also an E-scholarly repository site with some 7880 papers, access to over 70,000 images, along with hundreds of diaries and journals, as well as links to the digital holdings (organized by topic) in the UC library system (see <<http://californiadigitallibrary.org/collections/>>).⁵
- HighWire Press of Stanford University Libraries <<http://highwire.stanford.edu/lists/freeart.dtl>>. In August 2005 HighWire was assisting in the online publication of 937,915 free full-text articles and 2,470,099 total articles.⁶

There are recent innovations in the particular field of composition. The WAC Clearinghouse at <<http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>> is publishing a scholarly series of Open Access materials called *Perspectives on Writing*. The first volume, edited by

Charles Bazerman and David R. Russell and called *Writing Selves/Writing Societies*, looks at the interaction of human activity and writing from three perspectives: “the role of writing in producing work and the economy; the role of writing in creating, maintaining, and transforming socially located selves and communities; and the role of writing formal education.” The same website also details Bazerman’s Series of Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition (published jointly with Parlor Press). This multi-volume project will survey “what has been learned through research and practice as composition has emerged as an academic discipline over the last half century.” Volume I (2004) is Janice M. Lauer’s *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition*. In 2005 Volume II became available: *Reference Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum*, edited by Charles Bazerman, Joseph Little, Lisa Bethel, Teri Chavkin, Danielle Fouquette, and Janet Garufis. Projected for 2006-2007 are volumes on basic writing, writing program administrators, genre, community and outreach, argumentation, collaborative writing and group work, and expressive writing. Also of note is David Russell’s Series of Landmark Publications in Writing Studies, which is a collection of “republished books that have made a significant impact on writing-across-the-curriculum theory and practice.” Finally, there is RhetNet Books, “a dialogic publishing (ad)venture” founded by Eric Crump. Listed are Beth W. Baldwin’s *Conversations: Computer-Mediated Dialogue, Multi-logue, and Learning* and Beth Baldwin and Tim Flood’s *The Rhetorical Dimensions of Cyberspace*.

Academic publishing stands at a cross-roads. *JTW* will certainly continue to welcome insightful reviews and review essays on scholarly print publications of interest to K-12 and college-level writing teachers. I will especially welcome reviews of books from presses that have been “underrepresented” in composition journals—the likes of Cambridge, Oxford, Duke, Longman, Chicago, Harvard, Yale, Ohio, Cornell, Palgrave, Nebraska, Peter Lang (see Pet Belanoff’s review essay this issue), Blackwell, Routledge, and MIT. Not even in the category of “rarely” are publications from outside the U.S., despite active research

(particularly in K-12) published in English by European university presses.⁷ Reviewing scholarship from these outlets will require initiative, for few if any review copies will come across an editor's desk.

I also want to extend a special invitation for two lines of inquiry as they apply to teachers of writing on all levels:

1. books reviews and review essays focused on individual titles in Open Access publications, and
2. analysis / debate on OA venues themselves—what they provide in terms of quality and access, how they are changing the profession—and what forces are resisting their entry into academe.

Please send your suggested title and vita to my address below. The deadline for submissions for the fall 2006 issues of *JTW* is August 15, 2006.

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Notes

^{1.} This definition is from The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP), which distinguishes between Full Open Access Journals, Delayed Open Access Journals, and Optional Open Access Journals. See <<http://www.alpsp.org>>.

^{2.} In the March 2001 issues of *Journal of Insect Science*, editor Henry Hagedorn explained why he had resigned his position as editor of *Archives* to start an E-Journal. After *Archives* was bought from Allen Press by Wiley-Liss, institution subscription rates rose from \$250/year to \$1,000 and then \$2,000/year. See <<http://www.insectscience.org/about/change/openletter/>>

^{3.} My thanks to Reference/Distributed Learning specialist Denise Landry-Hyde at the Jeff and Mary Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, for her expertise in state-of-the-art electronic publication in fields outside of English.

^{4.} The site defines E-Prints as “scientific or technical documents circulated electronically to facilitate peer exchange and scientific advancement. Included are pre-publication drafts of journal articles (preprints), scholarly papers, technical communications, or similar documents relaying research results among peer groups.”

^{5.} For further discussion of the UC open access initiative, see “Reshaping Scholarly Communication” at <<http://osc.universityofcalifornia.edu/>>.

^{6.} For more complete summaries, see Hanna Kwasik and Pauline Fulda’s “Open Access and Scholarly Communication—A Selection of Key Web Sites” at <<http://www.isl.org/05-summer/internet.html>> and Adrian K. Ho’s and Charles W. Bailey, Jr.’s “Open Access Webliography” at <<http://www.escholarlypub.com/cwb/oaw.htm>>.

^{7.} As an example, see discussions of International Composition publications on COMPFAQs at <<http://comppile.tamucc.edu/wiki/CompFAQsInternational/InternationalCompStudies>>.

