

REVIEWS

Scott, Tony. *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition.* Logan: Utah State UP, 2009.

Reviewed by Catherine Quick

In addition to being the title of Tony Scott's enlightening analysis of capitalism, labor and freshman composition, "Dangerous Writing" is the name of fiction writing workshops taught by Tom Spanbauer in Portland, Oregon. Chuck Palahnuik, the author of *Fight Club*, is Spanbauer's most famous student. I assume the naming of the book is simply an interesting coincidence, given that Scott does not mention Spanbauer. But the connection is apt. Spanbauer teaches a form of minimalist writing that taps into cultural and personal taboos—what scares the author, explored from a perspective of brutal honesty. Scott is certainly not a minimalist. In fact, his work occasionally suffers from the overly convoluted and esoteric writing style so typical of scholarly discourse in rhetoric and composition (of which most of us—reviewer included—are guilty). But Scott most certainly is writing dangerously. He bravely confronts, with brutal honesty, what scares the rhetoric and composition scholar—the contradiction between our field as a scholarly discipline that seeks academic legitimacy and the realities of the market-driven, bureaucratic, and labor-exploiting practices of the freshman composition programs that keep many of us gainfully employed.

Scott approaches this conundrum from a political economic perspective. His book, in part, presents his method for teaching first-year composition, which invites students to explore the world of work in politically significant ways. He teaches at a "second-tier" institution with primarily working-class students, noting that most college students are no longer from privileged backgrounds, nor are the majority getting their education at elite institutions. School is not the central activity of these students'

lives; school is secondary to work and family. Scott cites data from the National Center for Educational Statistics showing that most students identify themselves primarily as workers rather than students. Professionals in adult education circles have suggested re-labeling this so-called “non-traditional” student as the “new-traditional” or “now-traditional” student, to reflect the reality that four-year, full-time college attendance is no longer the norm in American higher education (Kennan & Lopez 2005).

This reality calls for a rethinking of composition pedagogy that accounts for the situatedness of students’ lives in the labor market and their usually unquestioned inculcation in the values of a fast-capitalist society. Scott promotes a pedagogy in first-year writing courses that recognizes college students are not learning to enter the working world—they are already there. Scott’s students “write about their own lives as workers, they interview others about aspects of the work they do, they examine the discourse of work on the job and at school, and they research broad topics that shape the terms of work in and out of education” (162). The goal is for students “to connect the terms of day-to-day work in and out of school with general policy/political issues” (163), such as globalization, women in the workplace, the Wal-mart economy, etc. The readings and the writing/research sequence invite students to take a dialectical stance toward contradictions in their self-identifications as worker and student. However, the extended case study of Sophia illustrates that some students resist this dialectic, seeking closure in the hopeful mythology of the by-your-bootstraps success narrative. This narrative holds powerful sway over the students Scott seeks to engage; college for them is not the place to interrogate the world of work, but to help them up the ladder of success within that world. Scott’s pedagogy forces questioning of this deeply held conviction in light of an ultimately exploitative economic system. While he considers the conclusion of Sophia’s work “unsatisfying” (178) in terms of his goal, it’s clear that his approach is successful in exposing students to the implications of participation in a capitalist society.

If Scott had done nothing more than present his approach to teaching first-year composition, this book would have been an interesting, potentially useful—but ultimately forgettable—foray into a composition pedagogy appropriate for non-traditional students. But Scott's purpose is decidedly *not* to promote specific pedagogy. Instead, he practices what he preaches to his students by confronting his own working world with the same dialectical interrogation he asks of them. He points out the great irony of the rhetoric and composition discipline:

We have argued for the dignity of students from all walks of life, even as we have managed, researched, and theorized a project that continues to be built on labor conditions that aren't conducive to living with dignity (a living wage, health insurance, and secure employment). (43)

According to Scott, the rhetoric and composition professional, often found in WPA roles, functions as middle management for an enterprise that exploits cheap and readily available labor, the English adjunct, for cost-saving purposes. This insight is, of course, nothing new—much has been written on the plight of contingent labor in composition.

However, Scott extends the discussion to consider implications of this situation beyond program management into writing pedagogy and research. Chapter 2, for instance (“Writing the Program: The Genre Function of the Writing Textbook”), analyzes how “the genre of the writing textbook has . . . evolved to respond to the terms of labor in composition” (73). The textbook role in the bureaucratic enterprise has been “a relatively cheap and efficient means of controlling the pedagogies” in writing classes (66); they promote “a monolithic and innocuous” (69) view of student writing that minimizes diversity and the potential social impact of student writing. In other words, textbooks make the enterprise of teaching composition cheap, easy, and relatively standard—a mass-produced product of student writing and teaching. Scott examined syllabi of and conducted interviews with

twenty-one teachers who adjunct at a representative university, asking questions to elicit information about their identification as professionals and their textbook use. His results identify a clear disconnect between the scholarly world of rhetoric and composition and the commercial world of textbooks. The textbook world, for those teaching as contingent labor in composition, seems to be the driving force behind their pedagogy and professional identification, as the textbook, not an individual theory of literacy or learning, directs their practice in the classroom. Textbook choice, even if the choice is made by a rhetoric and composition scholar (or written by one), also seems to be based more on bureaucratic concerns—cost, appropriateness for non-specialists, consistency with goals, types of assignments, availability of apparatus, etc.—rather than the soundness or currency of the book’s theoretical perspective. Scott’s detailed and astute analysis demonstrates significant connection between the labor situation and pedagogy in first-year composition. The needs of a contingent labor source and the bureaucratic imperative for cost savings and efficiency directly influence pedagogy through the medium of the textbook. Although the scope of his single-institution study is admittedly limited (and thus the conclusions), his analysis contributes important insights into the ongoing conversations about relationship of theory and praxis in rhetoric and composition.

Chapter 5 provides another example, critiquing what Scott sees as an extreme version of factory-style and market-driven composition—the ICON (Interactive Composition Online) at Texas Tech, in which the system’s data compilation features are highlighted in its promotion, rather than the effectiveness of the pedagogy. ICON is the ultimate in cost-efficiency and measurement, central concerns of a bureaucratic management, but supposedly not those of a profession concerned with literacy and learning. Writing becomes “an alienating exercise in assessment and data collection” (183), a university-level parallel to the testing mania that has engulfed K-12 education.

It is in this same chapter, however, that the one important weakness of the book becomes apparent. Scott elucidates the problems well and his critiques of the influence of the fast-capitalist system on composition pedagogy are insightful. But Chapter 5, which is the book's conclusion, indicates that Scott may not be quite sure what might result from his observations. He recognizes that pragmatism, as exemplified through textbook choice or a fully systematized practice like ICON, is sometimes necessary for WPAs. But he also believes "that it is essential to continually name the contradictions and inadequacies in our programs, scholarship, and pedagogy—to keep pushing the issues to the forefront and be willing to make strategic, if controversial, moves to address them" (186). His only concrete suggestion for such a move? "Cutting back or eliminating first-year writing programs at many sites and concentrating on the upper-division courses and majors" (186). This suggestion would certainly meet the "strategic" and "controversial" requirements, and I realize it is not meant to be a concrete plan of action, rather a point in the ongoing dialectic over the purpose of first-year writing programs and their relationship to the field of rhetoric (and perhaps an example of the titular "dangerous" writing). But the statement also badly needs unpacking in the same labor-focused terms of his otherwise careful analysis. There seems to be little, if no, understanding that this statement implies assumptions about class and hierarchy that directly contradict the rest of the book. It implies that the answer to contradictions raised by contingent employment in the rhetoric and composition field is to have no employment at all. This statement reinforces the us/them class dichotomy that the book wants us to find so uncomfortable. By itself, this statement might not mean so much, but it highlights a major contradiction inherent in the book—it is a work that explores the relationship between theory and praxis, but does not seriously examine the effect of its conclusions on praxis or on the individuals whose lives and livelihood might be affected.

Despite this one objection, I strongly recommend the book, especially to rhetoric and composition professionals who are in

similar institutions to Scotts', in which the majority of students are workers first. But it is important to those at more traditional institutions as well. Our profession needs to rethink how we put theory into practice to address the realities of contemporary students and the exploitive labor situation that has evolved within first-year writing. Scott's book provides an excellent and provocative starting point for this essential conversation. To paraphrase Scott's title, let's "think dangerously" about who we are as rhetoric and composition scholars, and more importantly, who we should be.

Work Cited

Kennan, Estela, and Estela Lopez. "Finding Alternate Degree Paths for Non-traditional, NOW-traditional Students." *Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education* 15 (2005): 21-22.