

# FORUM

ISSUES ABOUT PART-TIME AND CONTINGENT FACULTY

15.2 SPRING 2012

CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

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### **From the Editor: Contingency and the Quality of Instruction**

Brad Hammer

For the past three years, I've served as the editor of *Forum*. During this period, *Forum* has sought to name the complex pedagogical implications for student learning that accompany the uses of contingent labor within the teaching of academic writing. The essays published here have complicated our traditional thinking of adjunct labor by naming "contingency studies" as a legitimate area of inquiry within rhetoric and composition. In this, my final issue of *Forum*, I've reserved two essays whose analyses engage contingency in perhaps its most relevant form. That is, these scholar-teachers engage in a form of inquiry that seeks to alter the very quality of writing instruction.

In the first article, Amy Lynch-Binieck maintains that "no study addresses the elephant in the English department: that contingent faculty hired to teach composition are very often literature specialists" with "little or no training in composition studies." Consequently, "we have treated knowledge of composition studies as an unnecessary qualification for teaching writing." In her essay, Amy discusses the implications of this reality, not merely on the educational experiences of the students but further, on the professional development of the compositionist instructorate.

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**About Forum**

*Forum* is published twice a year by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The incoming editor, Vandana Gavaskar, welcomes you to submit essays related to non-tenure-track faculty in college English or composition. Of particular interest are impacts on the professionalization of the field of rhetoric and composition, the creation of best practices models in diverse academic environments, and the impact of accreditation standards on contingency. Administrators of writing programs and scholars in the field are invited to write about the issues from their perspective.

Essays should address theoretical and/or disciplinary debates. They will go through the standard peer review and revision process.

Submissions for the fall issue should be received no later than April 1; for the spring issue, the deadline is August 1. Note: Submissions will not be returned. Submit your work electronically and put the words "*Forum* article" in your subject line. Submissions should include your name, your title(s), your institution(s), home address and phone number, institutional address(es) and phone number(s), and if applicable, venue(s) where submission was published or presented previously.

**For further information and to make submissions, please contact Dr. Vandana Gavaskar, Editor, *Forum*, at 252-335-3720 or [vggavaskar@mail.ecsu.edu](mailto:vggavaskar@mail.ecsu.edu).**

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Extending the work of Lynch-Binieki, Sheri Rysdam demarcates the "Walmartization of the academic workforce," as the academy fills teaching roles with "whomever is willing" at excessively low pay. The pedagogical implications of these hiring practices take form in Rysdam's essay, where she delimits the long-term effects of contingency, whereby "adjuncting is not a temporary stopover" but instead "many institutions permanently rely on these positions to stay afloat," thus creating an instructorate that is "permanently impermanent."

While my editorship is now over, the work of generating scholarship within the area of contingency studies has just begun. Consequently, I ask that our readers (both contingent and tenured colleagues alike), trained in research methods, rhetoric, composition studies, education and other disciplines that focus on both teaching and learning, begin more intentionally to centralize your scholarship within those issues germane to both contingent labor and the quality of instruction. Understanding this link is perhaps our best argument for reversing a trend that now situates the vast majority of those who teach writing off the tenure track.

*Forum's* new editor is Vandana Gavaskar, Elizabeth City State University, North Carolina. Her call for submissions is to the left.

## **Toward a Qualitative Study of Contingency and Teaching Practices**

Amy Lynch-Binieck

I am a product of higher education's contingent labor system. I spent two years as a teaching assistant and ten years as an adjunct before finding my current full-time tenure-track position teaching writing at a public university. The majority of courses I helmed in those twelve years were in composition—this despite the fact that my background was in literature. I only began to study composition formally in a doctoral program during the last two years of my contingent work. In the process, I became more and more aware that none of my several employers (I worked for three post-secondary institutions, often during the same semester) openly questioned my knowledge of how students acquire advanced literacy. I reflected on my own lack of training and pedagogical, theoretical, and professional knowledge of composition, something none of my employers had cared to notice—that is, they may have noticed, but hiring me indicated that they did not care. For most of my career, I held a master's degree in English but had taken only a single course in teaching writing. Indeed, it would not have been convenient for the administration to acknowledge my lack of composition study, nor economically profitable to replace me with a full-time professor of composition.

For a very long time, I was underprepared and overwhelmed, working hard to do right by my students while juggling multiple jobs to keep my income sufficient. I prided myself on my teaching, but I knew well that contingent status limited my practice. One-on-one conferences become impractical in a bull-pen office, and multiple drafts of assignments impossible when teaching six classes at three institutions. Employers often limit pedagogical choices, too. In perhaps the only nod to my lack of expertise, one writing program administrator (WPA) handed me a textbook and a curriculum, prepackaged for my convenience. If I found the institution's approach unsuitable to my students' needs, I would never have said so aloud. I needed the paycheck. Despite my dedication to my students and my craft, I was not the teacher I wanted to be.

Nor was I alone in my struggle with teaching well in the context of my contingency. I met many fellow adjuncts who worked hard and long hours, but like me, relied primarily on textbooks, WPAs, and teacher-talk (a.k.a. lore) to shape their writing assignments, or whose pedagogical choices were restricted by heavy teaching loads, often strung across more than one institution. However, when one looks beyond the anecdotal for evidence of the relationship between contingency and teaching quality, the research is lacking. The study most closely linking teaching

practices and contingent status is Paul Umbach's "How Effective Are They? Exploring the Impact of Contingent Faculty on Undergraduate Education." Analyzing data collected in the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement administered to 132 institutions in 2004, Umbach found that "compared with their tenured and tenure-track peers, contingent faculty . . . are underperforming in their delivery of undergraduate instruction" (110). Specifically, "part-time faculty interact with students less frequently, use active and collaborative techniques less often, spend less time preparing for class, and have lower academic expectations than their tenured and tenure-track peers" (110). Full-time contingent faculty also spend less time interacting with students and "require slightly less effort from their students," but spend "more time than tenured and tenure-track faculty preparing for class" (110).

Umbach notes that while claims about the effectiveness of contingent faculty abound, both positive and negative, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on the subject (92). Likewise, Benjamin Ernst laments the lack of research into the effects of contingent faculty on student learning (4), and Audrey J. Jaeger and M. Kevin Eagan assert that, "future research must address the quality of instruction, as [their own] research focused solely on quantity and did not consider what was happening within each classroom taught by a contingent faculty member" (532). The literature simply does not provide much in the way of insight into contingent instructors' practices and choices. Analyses of surveys and institutional data reveal systematic hiring trends (Reichard; "Disciplinary Research"); the difficult workloads and many obstacles to teaching that those with contingent status face (Baldwin and Chronister; Gappa and Leslie; Ernst); and a negative correlation between contingent teachers and student retention and graduation rates (Bettinger and Long; Harrington and Schibik [cited in Umbach]; Eagan and Jaeger; Ehrenberg and Zhang; Jaeger and Eagan; Jaeger). Doe et al. analyze teaching logs of contingent faculty, revealing that teaching, planning, and grading dominate their very full work days (435); contingent faculty in this study also completed quite a bit of scholarship and service, which often went both unsupported and unreported in their departments (438-42).

Yet this work does not directly demonstrate how the types and quality of pedagogical choices are linked to work status. That is, researchers consider which activities contingent faculty perform in their offices (when they have them) and classrooms, but do not specifically investigate how the terms of their employment affect the methods and materials they use. While it is stated that contingent workers have less time, support, and freedom in the formation of their pedagogies, their processes remain undocumented. Moreover, writing instruction, while historically dominated by contingent faculty, has not been the particular focus of contingent research; articles tend toward the editorial and the theoretical, except in documenting

percentages of categories of faculty. Significantly, no study addresses the elephant in the English department: that contingent faculty hired to teach composition are very often literature specialists, as I once was, with little or no training in composition studies. The primary qualifications for teaching writing appear to be a master's degree and previous experience teaching writing specialty and disciplinarity are beside the point. I do not mean to imply that teachers trained primarily in literature *cannot* be successful composition teachers; rather, I believe it is important finally to acknowledge that, despite our graduate programs, conferences and journals, we have treated knowledge of composition studies as an unnecessary qualification for teaching writing. As George Hillocks notes, "Today, on the one hand, we hear from the writing establishment that writing is a special craft that requires a trained professorate. But college and school personnel administrators tell us, through their actions, that nearly anyone can teach it" (4). In the English department, teaching is "generic: Once one knows how to teach, one can teach anything" (3). It is high time we investigate the effects of asking so many teachers to work not only in temporary, tentative positions, but outside of their areas of study as a condition of their employment. Anecdotally, I can testify to the many literature teachers who have come to me or my compositionist colleagues for advice, working hard to create successful composition classrooms, but feeling frustrated. I have been that teacher, too, afraid to admit to my department chair that I was unsure how to teach a composition course when doing so might be more than enough grounds for my dismissal and easy replacement by the next adjunct in line.

I was especially interested, then, in the September 2010 issue of *Forum*, wherein Irvin Peckham and Brad Hammer propose that in order to promote real progress in creating more equitable labor practices and a reduction in the reliance on contingent composition instructors, the CCCC Executive Committee should fund a variety of research projects, including, "with the goal of arguing more forcefully for full-time positions, research [into] the causal links between the quality of writing instruction and the reliance on part-time labor" (A6). I am in the process of constructing a study that will focus on this connection between labor and pedagogy.

I intend my research to address the pedagogical consequences of our labor practices by directly addressing the quality of composition teaching. I will focus on the complex relationships among labor practices in the corporatized university, the status of composition studies in higher education, and the pedagogical practices that dominate in writing classrooms. It is my intent that the resulting data be used to critique current labor practices and to argue more successfully for improved working conditions.

This qualitative study will focus on contingent teachers in Pennsylvania. (I am in the process of obtaining IRB permissions for specific sites.) My tentative research plan is to build a series of case studies using a combination of interviews, classroom observations, and syllabi analyses. While existing studies using large surveys and institutional data have the advantage of generalizability, they are better suited to identifying *what* happens and to *whom*; case studies are often better suited to *how* and *why* questions (Yin). Robert Yin argues that “surveys can try to deal with phenomenon and context, but their ability to investigate the context is extremely limited.” In contrast, case studies may reveal a more nuanced and detailed understanding of how contingency influences teachers’ pedagogical decisions. I see as a crucial component to this method the ability to inquire into teachers’ expertise in composition studies, allowing me to understand better how the common practice in English departments of hiring contingent workers for courses outside of their specialties affects instruction.

My research questions currently include the following:

- How does employment status [part-time temporary, full-time temporary] influence the pedagogical or curricular choices of composition teachers?
- How do the resources and working environment at an institution affect the contingent teacher’s pedagogical or curricular choices?
- How does a teacher’s disciplinary background (for example, in literature studies or composition studies) influence these choices?
- To what extent does the teaching in composition courses at the institution reflect a foundation in the field of composition?

My study will extend the issues raised and analyzed, if not qualitatively studied, in the field of composition. The works of Henry Giroux, Marc Bousquet, and James Sledd, for example, all discuss the challenges faced by instructors in a system that relies more and more on a contingent workforce. Publications stop short of documenting and critiquing actual classroom practices, however; instead discussing the state of composition instruction in abstractions, or in terms of the resources unavailable to the contingent teachers. Bousquet has perhaps come closest to a direct critique of teaching in *How the University Works*:

In English departments, it is now typical for students to take nearly all first-year, and many lower-division, and some advanced topics courses from nondegreed persons who are imperfectly attuned to disciplinary knowledge and who may or may not have an active research agenda or a future in the profession. (42)

Yet scholars have done little in the way of investigating the tangible effects of staffing practices on composition pedagogy. We do not know specifically how composition teaching differs across employment status and degree.

This gap is understandable. We are loath to critique the work of a labor force in a tenuous atmosphere of contingent contracts, attrition of tenure, and competition for a shrinking pool of resources. Scholars are naturally first drawn to arguments for better working conditions or securing tenure lines. Moreover, composition scholars have a history of caution in regards to pedagogical research. Both Stephen North and Wendy Bishop, for example, have addressed the potential for research into pedagogical practices to turn into condescension, to create a tension between those who self-identify as composition scholars and those who identify as practitioners. The lack of qualitative research in this area may be directly tied to these concerns. We are wary of asking contingent workers to make themselves further vulnerable by becoming the object of research—research that may put their work in a negative light. At bottom, no one wants to risk insulting or endangering a colleague.

Indeed, the existing research leads me to hypothesize that contingent composition teachers make pedagogical decisions in much the same way I did as an adjunct. Lack of resources combined with heavy workloads may lead to methods chosen for their time-saving properties or familiarity rather than their efficacy. While contingent faculty may spend a great deal of time preparing for class (Umbach 110; Doe et al. 438–42), their imperfect disciplinary knowledge may result in an ignorance of best practices or a reliance on textbooks for guidance. Limited or no academic freedom may further affect their teaching. On this subject, Thompson argues, “When academic freedom is weak, quality education becomes threatened by conformity, mediocrity, and the safest approaches..., grade inflation, and choosing to protect one’s position rather than extend students’ horizons” (45). Bradley likewise suspects that “largely unprotected against sudden termination of their employment, contingent faculty have every incentive to avoid taking risks in the classroom or tackling controversial subjects.” In my own adjunct career, I had to make some difficult pedagogical choices, and I now have the luxury of admitting that some were bad. In other instances, I had no choices, and I cringe at the materials I was sometimes obliged to use. I suspect that the subjects of my study, with anonymity, may report similar experiences.

I shared a draft of my research plan in a monthly writing workshop for faculty in my department, and I held my breath when the contingent faculty in the room spoke up, fearing they would express feeling threatened or suggest that I would not find willing subjects. To my pleasant surprise, these faculty were each excited by

the prospect of the work, seeing it as allied with their best interests. They appreciated that I would be conducting research genuinely concerned with their teaching, positioning them as professionals rather than simply a flex-labor force. In this vein, Hammer asserts that “without a strong push toward research . . . the causal links between labor practices and pedagogy will be ongoingly voiced by those with the needs and values of those steeped in administration and ‘service’ and outside the core values of compositionist literature” (A3). Certainly, my intent is not to discredit the work of contingent composition teachers, but rather to challenge a labor system that puts them in the position of teaching out of their disciplines, with limited resources and say in their department. As a means of encouraging reform, I hope to demonstrate that current labor practices negatively affect the quality of teaching.

Finally, I will continually resist allowing the research to position contingent and tenure-track / tenured professors as adversaries. Peckham and Hammer note that giving into an adversarial role results in “disabling their ability to unite in opposition to the system of exploitation” (A4). Given the American Federation of Teacher’s 2009 report that contingent workers now make up the majority of faculty in higher education, we cannot afford to ignore any avenue of argument, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

I welcome suggestions and critiques of this research plan. Please contact me at [lynchbin@kutztown.edu](mailto:lynchbin@kutztown.edu).

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## **The Political Economy of Contingency**

Sheri Rysdam

In her 2007 book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein demonstrates the ways that fast capitalism thrives on natural disasters and political upheaval. When people experience extreme shock and fear, they are more vulnerable to exploitive economies. "Disaster capitalism," to Klein, "raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities" (6). This concept may seem all too familiar for many working in higher education. As budgets are cut and colleagues are let go, members of the academic community become fearful and are more vulnerable to the perfect storm in which Klein's "disaster capitalism" thrives. In addition to layoffs and increased teaching loads and class sizes, an increased reliance on adjunct

or contingent faculty is one logical outcome of budget cuts and political uncertainty. Part of what Klein reveals is that emotions from disasters make fast-capitalist economies incredibly political and powerful.

Tony Scott's book, *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, documents the workhorse position of the contingent worker, providing examples of part-time or adjunct workers who pick up a motley mix of traditional and online classes and may "teach" over a thousand writers at a time. He shares the shocking account of Lindsay Hutton, who taught 1,940 students in one semester (180). Hutton reads approximately 9,700 pages every time her 1,940 students turn in a five-page essay. The quality of instruction suffers when teachers work in this kind of paper-grading factory. This scenario not only has a broad impact on teachers, students, and the larger learning community, but it also reveals something about how the university economy is changing. Scott writes, "If we are looking for starting points for an examination of class in America, we need look no further than our own writing classrooms, where we are likely to find a part-time worker teaching a classroom full of part-time workers" (129). The growing emphasis on profit over product has many traditional educational institutions relying on aggressive business models and increasingly on part-time employees, who provide the kind of labor that can process thousands of pages of student papers for a fraction of what full-time faculty earn. This is a model that, at its core, is based on increasing capital at the expense and exploitation of its employees and the students it "serves."

Unless this system changes, the numbers of adjunct and outsourced, online faculty will only increase. According to the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (CAW),

In 1970 faculty members in part-time positions represented only 22.0% of all faculty members teaching in US colleges and universities; in 2007 they represented 48.7%. Of faculty members who are full-time, well over a third do not have access to tenure. When graduate teaching assistants are included in the calculations, barely one quarter of the instructional staff are full-time and have access to tenure. (1)

The "Initial Report on Survey of CCCC Members" in 2009 supports these data, finding that only 16.2% of writing classes are taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty. In her article, "Depending on the Contingent: The Hidden Costs for History," Linda Kerber reveals similar statistics in the history department. She writes, "the proportion of history faculty employed part-time at four-year institutions in 2003 was roughly 25 percent, a figure that contrasts sharply with the situation in 1981; if one includes two-year institutions as well, barely 57 percent of the history faculty were

employed on the tenure ladder.” With contingent faculty on the rise, Kerber explains how institutions make subtle changes that have major long-term impacts:

When a selective four-year college hires a historian to replace a tenured member who goes on leave, with a teaching load comparable to that of the permanent faculty member and with full fringe benefits, that is one kind of contingent employment; when that same college hires the same historian the next year with the same teaching load but no fringe benefits, the employment has changed considerably for the worse.

Clearly, the corporate model of reliance on cheap, part-time help has infiltrated institutions of higher education.

Evidence is mounting against the sustainability and ethics of the over-reliance on contingent faculty. The business model that supports a contingent culture in universities is similar to Walmart’s business model, which relies on cheap, part-time labor to decrease wages and health insurance costs (“The Wal-Martization”). Likewise, the University of Phoenix has been under fire for its questionable business practices. The university follows a fast-capitalist business model that places profit over product. Students take out huge government loans to pay for an education that holds no promise of a better-paying job. With 420,000 students, the University of Phoenix accepted \$3.2 billion in student aid from the US government in 2009 alone (Coutts). Eighty-six percent of the school’s income came from government aid (Goodman). Though the University of Phoenix is a for-profit school, it is alarming when public schools begin to follow suit. The “Wal-Martization” of the academic workforce is increasingly evident, but it is an unsustainable and exploitive business model for teachers and students alike. By keeping teachers at part-time status, instructors can easily be denied health insurance and shut out of shared governance in their departments.

The infiltration of such an economic model does not only impact faculty. Poor and working-class students are also vulnerable. In his article, “How America’s Universities Became Hedge Funds,” Bob Samuels criticizes the increasingly free-market model that universities are following. Samuels goes so far as to call institutions of higher education hedge funds because they participate in high-risk loans and investments. As part of their business model, institutions seek out wealthy students who have more money to spend at the school and who are more likely to donate later in life. Samuels explains it this way:

Universities now believe that to get the “best” students, they have to offer the best aid packages, and what has happened is that many top universities have moved much of their financial aid from need to merit. . . . The end result of switching from a need-based to a merit-based financial aid system is that lower- and middle-class students

end up subsidizing the wealthiest students because in order to give the top students large aid packages, the universities have to raise the tuition on everyone else.

The students most vulnerable to this economic model are often new to higher education and pursue college degrees at any cost.

My experience as an adjunct, commuting between two colleges, is a case in point. Stories like mine are not commonly discussed because adjunct faculty are notoriously absent from conferences and departmental meetings. The problem is so real that the following statement was made by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce:

Despite their permanence and vital contributions, full- and part-time non-tenure-track faculty members are often shortchanged by colleges and universities—in hiring, salaries, office space and equipment, as well as opportunities for review of job performance and professional development and advancement as both teachers and scholars. (2)

With heavy teaching loads, large class sizes, and no additional compensation, adjunct faculty are often voiceless within our professional, scholarly, and institutional contexts.

When I worked as an adjunct, I was paid between \$1,500 and \$2,000 per class, with no possibility of benefits or raises. In three years, I taught approximately 50 college-level writing courses—up to seven classes per semester. I worked for twelve semesters (including summers), often teaching the maximum adjunct course load. I spent so much time grading papers, preparing for class, answering email, consulting with students, and commuting between campuses, that I averaged less than minimum wage. In one year, I earned exactly \$9,738.00 from one college for three full semesters (Fall, Spring, and Summer) in what would have been considered a full course load for a tenured colleague at many institutions. The implications of this overworked, underpaid labor reflect the quality of the education students receive, and these forms of exploitation work to devalue the work of composition.

Cary Nelson agrees that this work is devalued when he writes, “I would now find it *demoralizing and intolerable* to have to grade hundreds of composition papers each semester. There is no way I could do it as carefully and thoroughly as my graduate students do” (21). The assumption here is that while nobody wants to be bothered with teaching introductory composition courses under these conditions, those with the least power—graduate students and part-time faculty—are relegated to those positions. Victor Villanueva writes about the ways that hegemony affects wage earners: “We are aware. We know. We know that others gain wealth and power at the expense of our labors. We know, but we accept. Acceptance is a form

of consent" (126). If working as an integral cog is a form of acceptance, perpetuating an oppressive system, then all participants are responsible through that consent.

While an academic post provides a form of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu), inhabiting an adjunct position makes impossible the earning of a living wage in a market economy. This is not just a problem for adjuncts. In his article, "Meet the New Boss, Same as the Old Boss: Class Consciousness in Composition," Joseph Harris addresses the ways that the lure of cultural capital creates economic exploitation. Harris notes that oftentimes people are motivated to work for a university because of prestige. They may even endure exploitation to maintain their positions. In order to address this exploitation, we must see that "we are indeed workers in a corporate system that we hope to reform, rather than persisting in fantasies of escaping that system, of operating in some pure space as critics who may happen to work at a university but who are somehow not of it" (Harris 51). Harris demonstrates the need to improve working conditions for writing teachers and to effectively decrease the exploitation that so readily occurs amongst composition teachers.

Generally, composition courses are taught by whoever is willing—often unqualified teachers who know more about Shakespeare than the rhetorical triangle. When I was an adjunct, I never thought my position was permanent. I (perhaps naively) viewed my sojourn in the world of part-time employment as a kind of low-paying internship. I juggled the chaotic teaching schedule for three years with the ultimate goal of landing a full-time, tenure-track position. But adjuncting is not a temporary stopover. Many institutions permanently rely on these positions to stay afloat. Teachers are permanently impermanent. When a retired, tenured faculty member is replaced with four less expensive adjunct instructors, the shift indicates a fast-capitalist model that may not be easily reversible. The consequences of such an economic model are far-reaching and change both the institution and the people it employs. Fast capitalism is an increasingly familiar model that preys on "shock" and fear to edge out tenure with part-time and contingent faculty. If Naomi Klein's premise holds, as fear increases during difficult times, teachers and administrators will notice a shift toward more exploitive economic models and a growing culture of contingency.

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