

FORUM

ISSUES ABOUT PART-TIME AND CONTINGENT FACULTY

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CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION

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From the Editor: Can the Subaltern Speak? Contingent Faculty and Institutional Narratives

Vandana Gavaskar

The unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual, is maintained by a verbal slippage. Thus Deleuze makes this remarkable pronouncement: “A theory is like a box of tools. Nothing to do with the signifier.”

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” pp. 69–70

The marginality and liminality that describe the identity, status, and roles of contingent faculty—so well-articulated in issues of *Forum*—owe a great deal to the sophisticated and theoretical understanding of power dynamics that are often economic, gendered, and cultural. The dynamics of institutional power are located in the systems and patterns of administration. There is thus an invisibility of the intellectual labor of contingent faculty that maintains or builds the stellar reputations of writing programs by translating sophisticated scholarship into day-to-day teaching practices: from the piloting of new courses and new deliveries (pedagogical, technological, and in new community contexts) to the assessment of writing, courses, and pedagogies.

Contingent faculty members have been my mentors, administrators, collaborators, and colleagues through the years. Contingent faculty serve many roles, some

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Bob Samuels, University of California, Los Angeles

Megan Fulwiler, The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York

Sue Doe, Colorado State University, Fort Collins

About *Forum*

Forum is published twice a year by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The editor, Vandana Gavaskar, invites 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.

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of which even have titles such as First-Year Writing Director, Writing Studio Director, Placement Director, or another multivalent title that turns contingent faculty into managers (or administrators) without institutional power in a status-driven community.

As a contingent faculty member for fifteen years, my experience and long-term commitments to the program that was my academic home helped me to develop a rhetorical, pedagogical, scholarly, and programmatic sophistication, but the work I produced was institutional and invisible labor which did not count for merit pay, tenure, or research and publications because I was not on a defined "track." It did make for a rich résumé, however, when I sought new employment at a place where this experience is valued.

The invisible histories of institutions are fraught by complicity in power dynamics as pointed out by *Forum* authors who do not write about contingent faculty as simply overworked and underprepared, unambitious, or in need of an "attitude adjustment," which are all constructions of the *subaltern* that serve public and institutional discourses about tenure and the state of higher education. They write about experienced and sophisticated MAs, ABDs, and PhDs who bring their scholarly and administrative abilities to the positions that make for successful writing programs everywhere.

The two essays in this issue address institutional power from the point of view of the programmatic status of Rhetoric and Composition within departments of English and in the context of institutional assessments.

Brad Hammer, outgoing *Forum* editor, describes the need to recognize power dynamics in order to gain institutional power in “The ‘Service’ of Contingency: ‘Outsiderness’ and the Commodification of Teaching.” Janet Heller writes about the disempowering use of institutional evaluations and the contributing factors of the utilitarian position of composition classes at the university in “Contingent Faculty and the Evaluation Process.”

The financial burdens on universities are coupled with the pressure to “perform.” In addition to making bridges between high school and college, we are being asked to guarantee that our graduates are employable as professional writers in increasingly varied fields. Thus the teaching effectiveness of composition is under scrutiny, and administrators and teachers of composition need to simultaneously teach, assess, and serve as consultants for university-wide complaints about the state of student writing. Consequently, more and more non-tenure line faculty are being asked to integrate their teaching with the teaching, financial, and assessment goals of the university. At the same time, hiring freezes necessitate that non-tenured and part-time faculty are being hired to serve these many different purposes. I see this as an opportunity to research the contributions of non-tenure-track faculty who are on the front line of academic excellence and who have a lot of professional experience about the state of our discipline.

As editor, I invite your contributions on the material conditions and institutional roles of non-tenure-track faculty, from multiple narrative perspectives and analyses.

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The “Service” of Contingency: Outsiderness and the Commodification of Teaching

Brad Hammer

The expansion and revenue diversification of American universities has gotten so out of hand that research universities, like UCLA, now spend less than 5% of their total budget on undergraduate instruction. No wonder universities feel free to expand class sizes and hire people off of the street to teach required courses; instruction is just a small part of what these institutions now do, and since there

are no accepted methods to judge the quality of undergraduate instruction or learning, there is no incentive for schools to put their resources into educational activities.

—Bob Samuels, “How American Universities Became Hedge Funds,” *The Huffington Post*

For Samuels, contingency is not merely emblematic of the growing corporatization of the academy, but also symptomatic of the commodification of teaching and thereby the quality of instruction. The complex public discourse surrounding contingency is about economic drivers and cost-saving measures on the one hand and the consumer interest assumed of the readers of *The Huffington Post* on the other. For these and other institutional reasons, the American Historical Association notes that the instructorship *is* experiencing a devastating decline in the “proportion of full-time tenure-track” positions. Catherine Adamowicz points out that as educational institutions proliferate (along with less-than-gainfully employed postgraduates), “the majority of your colleagues” at two-year colleges are ad-con instructors. Economic indicators and budget issues at every campus impact the quality and contexts of teaching. In response, groups like The New Faculty Majority, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce, AAUP, and CCCC’s Committee on Part-Time, Adjunct or Contingent Labor continually examine how and if teachers of writing can alter their material and disciplinary marginalization within the university. In the context of this charge, I question whether composition and rhetoric programs, housed within departments of English and populated disproportionately with ranks off the tenure track, can provide real mechanisms for both teaching excellence and equity within an academic life subsumed by service.

In reaction to the “dead-end” commodification of instructor labor, English departments offer no real promise for a sustained existence for dedicated compositionists within the university. Beyond the obvious monetary disadvantages of contingency, there are fundamental costs to the terms of our labor that implicate, through our distinctly non-disciplinary work demarcated as “service,” excellence in both teaching and learning. The most significant of these costs, I would argue, is that the service course merely reaffirms writing instructors’ standing as workers in a way that ultimately betrays their status as intellectuals—further reinforcing the utility structure and non-disciplinary nature of writing instruction. In many ways the utilitarian nature of our core course (first-year composition) serves more to interfere with, than to secure and extend our intellectual freedom. And one can recognize that there are real (and recent and multiple) examples (from Duke to the University of Denver) of autonomous writing programs that afford instructors the spaces to

teach and belong in more collaborative and collegial ways. While these programs continue to fail to offer tenure, they produce communities of scholars committed to the first-year course in ways that extend the utilitarian goals of service, promote teaching excellence beyond a model of “skills transfer,” and house a cohort of scholars dedicated to a collective set of pedagogical and theoretical goals. In effect, these programs can more directly centralize the importance of writing instruction, build scholarly and collaborative communities of teachers, and retain/support faculty than those programs housed within departments of English. Further, these autonomous programs have the fiscal self-rule to retain the dollars they generate, whereas a lack of self-governance not only impedes teaching and learning but further allows for revenues generated by writing courses to serve as subsidies to the larger English department.

Consequently, I argue that without programmatic autonomy, not only will the monies garnered by our “service” course support the teaching loads and scholarship of others who are much less dedicated to composition, but the “service” itself further reinforces an academic hierarchy that substitutes critical inquiry for standards, reduces pedagogy to a set of skills, and further affirms and thereby privileges a hierarchical model for the modern university. The answer to this problem is not simple. But to suggest that compositionists are well-housed and welcomed within the English academy is to embrace a “worker vs. intellectual” construction for compositionist inquiry and teaching.

Sadly, the pool of available workers in composition is virtually limitless because departments of English have historically overproduced doctoral students to fill the economy of writing instruction. The creation of autonomous writing programs will end the hyperreliance on graduate labor by moving instruction outside of the English department, inevitably reducing the supply of instructors willing to work along the margins. However, for now, it is easy to hire, as cheap labor, highly qualified instructors of writing. In fact, the MLA’s Committee on Professional Employment has termed this “our scandalous overreliance on adjunct faculty members.”

We’ve all heard the reports of the English major in decline since the glory days of the 1970s. The 2001–2002 report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major indicates that “the number of degree recipients” has actually “increased slightly” (68). Yet, when compared to the total number of degrees awarded in US institutions, the number of English majors has been in almost steady decline for men and women since 1993 (91). Given this reality, our writing courses are not only offsetting the costs of sustaining the literature faculty, they are subsidizing their very existence. Yet our rank and remuneration are unaffected by our economic and pedagogic value to the department.

Consequently, exploitation at the rank of composition instructor occurs due to several factors, all centered, I argue, on composition's tenuously staked disciplinary and service-based relationship to the academy—within departments of English. By way of example, Intro to Psychology, although widely studied by undergraduates, is not part of a university-wide charge for remedial service like first-year writing. Nor is it taught with the utilitarian goal of improving a skill set. Rather, it is seen as a subject-specific survey course, with a body of research that lays the foundation for later studies within psychology. Conversely, first-year writing instruction is not taught as an introductory survey, research, or theory course in English, rhetoric, or composition studies. It is taught as a set of discrete “transferable” skills often understood as remedial service. Further, unlike introductory psychology courses that are a valued part of the curriculum, first-year writing stands completely outside the English major (though it's true that there are a few campuses on which an independent writing major or minor are available—generally, even in these settings, first-year writing does not fulfill any disciplinary requirements). Clearly, even within our own departments, first-year writing is seen as something *other* than what we do. Yet, at virtually every state university, the number of sections of first-year English well outnumbers all other departmental offerings and therefore revenues from which compositionists do not profit.

The institutional history of this strange “otherness/outsiderness” is fundamentally related to the “enlisting” of service by the larger university. Through the ever-corporatizing model of the academy, English departments became willing to take on this non-disciplinary task because it helps, in the most uncollegial of ways, to “generate revenue by hiring low-paid. . . workers” to do “subordinate work.” These “changes in the economy” (Berlin XV) helped legitimize the service role of composition within departments of English, reinforcing our lack of disciplinarity and further perpetuating our sense of marginalization. As such, departments of English, who make their reputations in literary criticism, post-colonial theory, etc., are then forced to meet this economic charge with an unwilling faculty and thereby begin to imagine this work not as an authentic component of a prescribed course of study in English, but rather as fulfilling some basic utilitarian need of the university, a need that is best serviced at the lowest and least professional of ranks.

Reality dictates that universities take on many graduate students as cheap labor knowing that very few will ever find tenure track or even sustainable academic jobs. Understanding this, the MLA Committee on Professional Employment stated that “Higher education in the fields our organization represents has reached a crisis” (Preface). As part of this same report, it is stated that there is a need to bring the number of graduate students in line with the actual number of available jobs. So, even with this direct charge from our leadership, why do we still over-produce

PhDs in English? Simply put, as the major declines in relevancy within the academy, English departments will not kill the cash cow. The fact that there are no jobs for graduates in English programs is not news. Yet these programs and now “post-doctoral instructorships in writing” persist as a sham. In fact, the MLA, faced with this “crisis” of employment, has charged graduate programs to understand that “it is imperative” that “these programs find ways to convince all students of the value of teaching in lower-division courses” (Preface). These lower-division courses are inevitably first-year composition and, once these graduate students, usually anxious to teach Foucault or Milton or Hurston — are convinced of the utilitarian need to serve up sections of surface correctness and thesis development as a service, the system works not to educate but rather to produce a saleable “commodity” (Horner and Trimbur 5).

To avoid this commodification of our work, I argue that compositionists need a new strategy, one that rejects the labor model through unionization of workers and rather seeks to honor our status as intellectuals. This strategy should acknowledge, through the mechanisms of disciplinary autonomy, that composition is a serious field of inquiry and argue for and name our own richer definitions of intellectual service. To accomplish this, the field must first find a unique voice (defined through the development of our own physical space, outside of English) where we might begin to establish the disciplinary autonomy that has been so long in the works.

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Brad Hammer is the director of Writing in the Disciplines at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is also the former editor of Forum and chair of the CCCC Committee on Part-Time, Adjunct, or Contingent Labor.

Contingent Faculty and the Evaluation Process

Janet Ruth Heller

Administrators base the evaluation of most non-tenure-track instructors, who often teach up to half of the undergraduate courses at colleges and universities, solely on student evaluations. However, many researchers (John V. Adams, Janet Auer Jones, Valen Johnson, and others) have argued that student evaluations are inadequate as a single discrete measure of teaching. Also, evaluations often do not reflect the goals of general education courses taught by most contingent faculty. There are seldom empowering mechanisms in place, such as observations by tenure-track mentors. Furthermore, few colleges consider instructors' community or institutional service, conference presentations, or publications. Instructors lack voting rights at most institutions of higher education and are excluded from administrative procedures that shape evaluations. Instructors often receive lower scores on evaluations than they deserve, and contingent faculty often lose their jobs based on unsubstantiated and isolated student complaints. To remedy these problems, colleges and universities should consider giving instructors voting rights and redesigning evaluation and complaint procedures for non-tenure-track faculty.

When students complain about an instructor, the real problem may be inequitable working conditions. While tenure-line professors rarely teach more than three classes per semester, contingent faculty often teach four or more classes per semester. Tenure-line professors rarely have composition courses; however, contingent faculty members usually must teach a heavy load of first-year composition courses. Although tenured professors have small classes, non-tenure-track instructors have large class sections. Tenure-line faculty usually have their own offices, but untenured faculty often have no office space or share an office with up to twenty other instructors. These overcrowded, noisy offices make it hard to meet with students in privacy—despite the universities' lip service to FERPA—and to grade papers or do research.

Colleges and universities react to student evaluations and complaints differently, depending upon whether a faculty member has tenure-line status. If a contingent faculty member receives low student evaluation scores and/or students complain, he or she often gets fired; however, if a tenure-line faculty member receives low evaluation scores or some student complaints, he or she gets mentoring from other professors. This double standard in the use of student evaluations creates an unjust system. Although tenure-line professors have due process and academic freedom at most colleges and universities, instructors do not. Students frequently choose

to bring their complaints to a dean, provost, or president before meeting with an instructor or department chair. This means that the administrator hearing the complaint usually does not know the instructor and is not familiar with the situation.

These different contexts exacerbate the issues related to student evaluations. Research demonstrates general problems with college-level course evaluations and with administrators' overemphasis on numerical ratings to make decisions about retention, awards, promotions, and tenure. For example, John V. Adams contends that student evaluations are problematic because they take the complex matter of analyzing teaching proficiency and translate it into numbers. Adams's research shows that administrators often lack training in how to interpret these statistics. Scholars David Dickey and Carolyn Pearson analyze the problem of "recency effect," students' "tendency to assign more weight to activities occurring near the time of the formal review," which distorts evaluations (2). And Diane Auer Jones argues that evaluations of college faculty exaggerate issues such as whether students "liked" the professor and whether the class was entertaining, rather than what critical thinking skills students learned during the course (Teacher Evaluations). During my teaching career, I got the best student evaluations when I was younger, prettier, and seemed "cool" to the students. However, now, at age sixty-three, I am a much better instructor and know much more about teaching writing and critical thinking. Auer Jones suggests that universities should "structure . . . evaluations in a way that helps the student understand the role of the instructor, which is not to spoon-feed, to entertain, or to reduce rigor, but instead to lead, to motivate, to challenge, and to help the student question his or her own beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and knowledge"(Teacher Evaluations).

Similarly, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa argue in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* that colleges focus so much on students as consumers that these institutions neglect their central mission of developing students' "critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing" skills (36). As consumers, students "focus on receiving services that will allow them, as effortlessly and comfortably as possible, to attain valuable educational credentials that can be exchanged for later labor success" (17). Valen Johnson's research has shown that there is a strong correlation between grade inflation and more positive course evaluations. Furthermore, he argues that student evaluations do not measure how much students have learned (14).

In addition to these general inadequacies of course evaluations, student ratings often disadvantage contingent faculty, who primarily teach general education and composition courses. Robert E. Haskell has found that "required courses hold less

interest and receive lower evaluations than elective courses" (7). Also, students in lower-division classes—the main purview of non-tenure-track faculty—may be less cognizant of the academic significance of the courses. Contingent faculty rarely choose their own textbooks or use their own teaching approach for multi-section classes because supervisors control these matters. Adjuncts often have the least comfortable classrooms or classrooms that lack high technology and audiovisual devices. Furthermore, non-tenure-track instructors are frequently assigned early-morning or late-evening classes that students find inconvenient.

Poorly worded or vague questions on evaluation forms may invite overly subjective student reactions. Examples are "Rate the overall quality of this course" ("Instructor and Course Evaluation System," Western Michigan University, question #2) and "My instructor grades fairly" ("University of Tennessee Chattanooga Student Rating of Faculty Instruction," question #5). Queries like these may invite students to include their overreactions to constructive criticism or a low grade on a paper. More specific questions will yield more objective results. For example, the following question is much more precise: "Was the instructor able to explain difficult material to your satisfaction?" ("Instructor and Course Evaluation System," question #9).

In recent decades, MLA has urged colleges to involve contingent faculty "in determining departmental and institutional policies" (Guidelines 2f., "MLA Statement on the Use of Part-Time and Full-Time Adjunct Faculty"). Specific recommendations include incorporating NTT faculty "into the life of the department to the fullest extent possible, short of participation on department committees pertaining to the evaluation of tenure-track faculty members" ("MLA Statement on Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members" 1). Colleges and universities should consider giving all contingent instructors full voting rights and proportional representation in departments, programs, divisions, faculty senates, and committees. Voting rights are especially important for committees that choose textbooks or write evaluation forms for courses taught by contingent faculty. Universities should revise evaluation forms so that they contain questions that are appropriate for general education, lower-division, and composition courses.

In consultation with contingent faculty, colleges and universities should establish fair, consistent, and objective procedures for performance review of instructors. NCTE supports the involvement of instructors in "the development of evaluation procedures and instruments" (College Section Working Group, section 3). These procedures should resemble those for evaluation of tenure-line faculty and include peer reviews of teaching, community service, institutional service, conference pre-

sentations, and publications. These policies should be published so that all faculty members know about them.

The “MLA Statement on the Use of Part-Time and Full-Time Adjunct Faculty” urges colleges and universities to make sure that contingent instructors are “hired, reviewed, and given teaching assignments according to processes comparable to those established for the tenured or tenure-track faculty members” (Guidelines 2a). MLA’s “Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members: Recommendations and Evaluative Questions” insists, “. . . [D]epartments should establish procedures for appeal or grievance in the event that an NTT faculty member alleges substantial violations of such criteria” (2).

In 2007, MLA passed Resolution 2007-1, which supports “state legislation aimed at ensuring fair pay and job security with full due-process protections for contingent faculty members.” In a similar resolution ratified in 2009 (2009-1) MLA called for “job security” and “due process” for all college and university faculty, whether working full- or part-time.

If program administrators conclude after an objective review process that a contingent faculty member needs to improve his or her teaching, they should assign that individual a faculty mentor. The non-tenure-track instructor should be given at least a semester to show improvement in teaching skills before being dismissed.

If colleges involve instructors in shaping policies and evaluation procedures, non-tenure-line faculty will feel more at home in higher education, they will waste less energy combating bureaucratic discrimination, and they will become better teachers. English departments will benefit from the input of more creative minds, and students will be happier and learn more.

Note

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Janet Ruth Heller wrote the award-winning children's book about bullying, How the Moon Regained Her Shape (Sylvan Dell, 2006), the poetry books Folk Concert: Changing Times (Anaphora Literary Press, 2012) and Traffic Stop (Finishing Line Press, 2011), and the scholarly book Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and the Reader of Drama (University of Missouri Press, 1990); she is president of the Michigan College English Association.