On Writer's Block: A Study of Disciplinary Negotiations in the Faculty Office and Classroom

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When I transitioned into a full-time career as a compositionist, I found myself grappling with a paradox: I taught writing, but didn't write. Well, that isn't true. I did a lot of writing, just not the kind that brought much professional recognition in my new field. I'd like to think I had good reasons not to write: keeping my previous position wasn't contingent on publishing in the discipline and there were many institutional obstacles to integrating writing into my day. Like most writing program administrators, I juggled teaching and programmatic responsibilities that kept me busy, if not frantic, during the year. But lately I've been asking myself why I had difficulty protecting this research from the incursion of other responsibilities. I wanted to write, taught writing at a respected research university, considered writing studies my new disciplinary home, and had written over a thousand pages of comments on student essays, yet still hadn't published a peer-reviewed article in the field. I knew I'd cultivated insights into the study and teaching of writing, yet had a difficult time envisioning where to begin and to whom I would write.

Of course, writing studies scholars have been concerned with versions of this topic since the discipline's founding. In 1986, Maxine Hairston argued in "When Writing Teachers Don't Write" that instructors are stymied by the "fear of making one's self vulnerable by putting something down on paper for others to examine and evaluate" (63), a claim that now seems outdated given how so many of us regularly put ourselves in public contexts where our

perspectives may be controversial—advocating for resources for our instructors and articulating visions for our programs sometimes in tension with the beliefs of influential members of our institutions. Further in the essay, Hairston's assessment hits closer to home. Anxiety about writing is exacerbated among composition teachers, she argues, because we're more likely as a group to have strong commitments to the risks and rewards of writing, yet often teach in institutional contexts where writing productivity is undervalued and scholarly mentors less accessible (63-66). Hairston speaks to a collective form of guilt when she claims that "[t]eachers who do not engage in the writing process themselves cannot adequately understand the complex dynamics of the process, cannot empathize with their students' problems, and are in no position either to challenge or to endorse the recommendations and admonitions of the textbooks they are using" (62). While I consider myself fortunate to have had access to supportive mentors and resources along the way, I saw *not* writing as a form of disenfranchisement, a disavowal of the scholar's commitment to wrestle with complex ideas in a community invested in the truthfulness of claims. Writing, for me, has always been a means of stepping away from the narrow confines of urgent tasks to ask the unanswerable questions that sustain our work. Good writing translates paralysis into curiosity, the commonplace into the strange; it's also the stage where we return to the roots of our disciplinary training and participate in a conversation that's larger than our offices or classrooms.

But here the question of expertise becomes tricky, particularly for those of us who have migrated to the field of rhetoric and composition from the once (and in some departments still) adjacent field of literary studies. I developed an interest in writing studies at the University of Chicago, where I completed my doctoral degree in comparative literature. Early in my studies, I

began attending workshops with the late Wayne Booth and was trained in the teaching of writing by the Little Red Schoolhouse, a product of the renaissance in writing program development in the 1980s (Williams and Colomb 84-91). While this training was enormously helpful, I found that new teaching contexts required different approaches, setting me on a journey to seek answers in the library, my classroom, and the faculty lounge. In other words, I entered the field of writing studies indirectly as a trained comparatist and largely self-taught compositionist whose study of writing had been praxis-oriented and intensive but more akin to the wild and unwieldy education of an autodidact whose most structured curriculum came in the form of conferences, professional workshops, recommended reading lists, and conversations with mentors along the way. While this approach has its advantages, it raises questions about disciplinary authority. At what point is a practitioner-scholar expert enough to enter a scholarly conversation? And might that arrival now seem especially belated, particularly given the shift in writing studies away from close readings or, as the field calls it, rhetorical analyses of student texts (a methodology that is the literary critic's bread and butter) and toward more data-driven approaches that make writing studies more akin to a social science? Chris Anson, for example, has recently called for a greater emphasis on empirical research in writing studies to move "public discourse about writing from belief to evidence, from felt sense to investigation and inquiry" (12).

Despite the deeply disciplinary nature of these questions, when I sought to understand the challenges of becoming a productive literary-scholar-turned-compositionist I stumbled upon a wealth of research popularized in academic self-help books like Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks* or Robert Boice's *Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing*. These publications focus on the logistics of revising for publication (in the

case of Belcher's guidebook) and on the development of short, regular writing routines (in the case of Boice's book). Both seek to debunk the myth of writing as a solitary act of inspiration that requires the right timing and large blocks of time. Yet the focus of such guidebooks, and the research that supports them, assumes a body of scholars essentially embedded deeply enough in disciplinary practices to do the drafting and revising necessary to produce quality research. We are meant to assume that they simply choose (consciously or unconsciously) otherwise. "The median number of scholarly publications for even the most prolific disciplines like psychology is zero," Boice and Ferdinand Jones report (567). And those who do write seem to be doing most of the work and enjoying the bulk of the rewards, these studies argue. By one estimate, 85% of scientific publications are written by the same 15% of the qualified population (qtd. in Boice, *Professors as Writers* 7). A 2005 survey of over 40,000 U.S. faculty corroborates these findings, showing that 26 percent of professors report not writing at all and another 27 percent claim to have never published a peer-reviewed article (qtd. in Belcher 1).

While such research highlights the ubiquity of writer's block, it tells us little about the social contexts—institutional and disciplinary—prompting such reticence from faculty who find themselves at the interstices of disciplinary practices. In this article, I focus on one particular social context that poses an obstacle to scholarly productivity: how writer's block can emerge not from failed routines or a lack of nerve, but from the complexity of becoming socialized into a field of inquiry. What I've come to learn is this: the challenges that I once faced with scholarly writing were not simply cognitive-behavior, as the popular conception goes, or a matter of too little discipline or drive, but rather were more closely akin to the challenges all novices face when they first enter a new discourse community—a challenge that the very field of writing

studies can help us see. Blocking is a phenomenon affecting many of us on a continuum—from tenured faculty to first-year students in the composition classroom. By reading writer's block through the lens of writing studies scholarship on blocking and disciplinary expertise, we gain a greater understanding of the struggles faced by even the most expert writers when tackling new projects or writing within new or adjacent disciplines. While this research on disciplinarity and expertise may not be new to compositionists, I imagine it's unfamiliar territory to those English faculty whose training is based in literary studies or creative writing. And rhetoricians may find novelty in this highlighting of the limits of popular guidebooks offering faculty and graduate students—perhaps the most blocked of all writers—advice on productivity, since they tend to disregard that writing is a situated practice dependant on the activation of complex knowledge domains. My broader purpose is to facilitate an empathic understanding of the challenges faced by students in writing-intensive courses and of the obstacles and opportunities encountered by faculty trekking through unfamiliar disciplinary terrain. As the popular saying goes, *we've all been there*.

Unblocked Writing: or, a Brief History of Scholarship on Writer's Block

Perhaps ironically, scholars have written prolifically about writer's block since the late 19th century. As Boice recounts in his study of the history of treatments for writer's block, research dates back to at least 1883, when it was first described as writer's cramp, a psychosomatic malady. In response to reports of hysterical episodes of hand tremors, spasms,

and paralyses, French psychoanalyst Pierre Janet created a protocol in 1919 for curing writer's

block by having his patients do a series of physical therapy exercises to strengthen the muscles of

their hands.[1] Subsequent approaches ranged from Freudian psychotherapy to automatic writing.

In the twentieth century, the term "writer's block" was popularized in 1950 by psychoanalyst

Edmund Bergler in *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, a book that dismisses blocked writers as

regressive neurotics because "[n]ormal people just don't feel impelled to write" (qtd. in Boice,

"Psychotherapies for Writing Blocks" 184).

In the 1980s, composition scholars turned their attention to the cognitive dimensions of

the writing process, describing interrupted processes and identifying successful methods that

writers could emulate in response. Mike Rose's *Writer's Block: The Cognitive Dimension* (1984)

is the most notable book on the subject. Rose defines writer's block as a "composing process

dysfunction" characterized by "an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a

lack of basic skills or commitment" (3). Challenging previous studies by John Daly and Lynn

Bloom characterizing blocked writers as anxious, he argues that many affective and social

factors influence a writer's productivity (4). In his study of the writing processes of 10 UCLA

undergraduates, he concludes that some writers follow "rigid, inappropriately invoked, or

incorrect" rules, have false beliefs about the writing process, edit prematurely, plan or strategize

inappropriately, use contradictory plans and strategies, or don't understand and appropriately

hold themselves to evaluation criteria (4-7). To overcome these blocks, he suggests teachers

provide students with a wider range of methods and tools that can help them shift their beliefs to

become more flexible and realistic in their approach to the writing process (84-99).

Subsequent research builds on these findings by investigating the social dimensions of writing as discourse and practice, including Rose's edited sequel *When a Writer Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing-Process Problems* (1985), which features David Bartholomae's now canonical essay, "Inventing the University." Bartholomae helps faculty understand the positions of blocked student writers who enter our classrooms as uninitiated outsiders to a discourse belonging to "those of us with power and wisdom" (156). "Every time a student sits down to write for us," the essay famously begins, "he has to invent the university for the occasion—invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English" (134). Bartholomae makes visible the enormity of the task faced by students asked to write their way into different discourse communities—each with their own complex set of assumptions and conventions. Students often cope by retreating to the safety of commonplaces (137), misrecognizing that to become successfully socialized into academic culture, they must learn to work against commonplaces of all kinds—not only their own, but those articulated in a given field—a move that requires students to acquire a tremendous amount of authority to speak. To get there, he argues that students must assume a "position of privilege," whose membership is sometimes paid for with self-alienation (156).

Writing one's way out of commonplaces and into different discourse communities is complex because disciplines possess complicated histories, practices, and ways of knowing. Anne Beaufort's recent research enriches our understanding of the difficulty of becoming an expert scholarly writer. In *College Writing and Beyond* she identifies five knowledge domains that are activated in professionals' writing: discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and procedural knowledge (221). Beaufort

provides a heuristic for understanding what we know implicitly from years of practice: scholarly writers draw on a deep base of context-specific knowledge, while sustaining an awareness of the discourse community, which allows them to introduce new modes of thinking about problems that can reshape a scholarly conversation or approach to a problem (17-19). At the same time, expert writers have a strong grasp of the purposes, structures, and conventions of a given genre—in addition to rhetorical knowledge of the text's audience and the best means of communicating with them (20). And finally, they develop writing processes that help them effectively accomplish tasks (21).

Given this overlapping and complex set of practices, it seems unsurprising that even the most expert writers can find themselves overwhelmed by their writing assignments, particularly when research interests shift and audiences are interdisciplinary or unfamiliar.

A Case Study in Blocking: Classroom Glimpses

These cognitive, procedural, and social reasons for blocking offer a useful lens for analyzing the shape of communicative reticence on the page. First-year writing is a particularly apt genre for studying writer's block because the struggles of novices are often starkly visible as they navigate the careful social positioning in scholarly work. Novices often have not yet gained competence in key conventions of academic—let alone disciplinary—writing, which makes their struggles in acquiring authority all the more apparent to experienced readers.[2] Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz summarize succinctly the challenges faced by first-year students in the composition classroom:

> Freshmen are required to become master builders while they are still apprentices—to build as they become familiar with the materials and methods of construction. They are asked to develop expertise in new subjects and methodologies, while still learning how to handle the tools of these disciplines and decipher their user's manuals. (131-2)

Like Bartholomae, Sommers and Saltz sympathize with the steep learning curve students encounter their first year when they are asked "to consider questions for which they don't have answers, or to write for readers who aren't already converted to their way of thinking, and to accept their own minds as capable of synthesizing and making judgments about dense ideas" (133). To succeed, Sommers and Saltz argue that students must practice "writing *into* expertise" (as opposed to "writing *from* expertise," which is impossible), requiring them to see themselves as novices open to experimenting with new approaches, while also possessing confidence in their ability to succeed (133). As they begin the paradoxical task of constructing authority for themselves in fields about which they know very little, students must write "simultaneously as a novice and an expert," even if they do not yet know "what information is important or how different pieces of information relate to each other" (132).

These first-year writers, it seems to me, represent more extreme versions of graduate students beginning a dissertation or experienced scholars embarking on a new research path. One key difference is that freshman are often encountering the foreignness of scholarly writing for the first time so they don't possess the "mental schema," or metacognitive framework that Beaufort argues is essential for organizing context-specific knowledge in writing and transferring learning to new tasks (17).

We can see this in action by analyzing student texts. Tony,[3] a student in a first-year writing seminar on American culture in the 1980s, regularly produced drafts showing discernible signs of blocking—or difficulty grappling with the expectations of expertise in research writing. His writing process seemed stymied all semester. Tony didn't substantively revise his four major assignments, despite frequent coaching and a class ethos around the value of revision. Yet at the same time, each of his papers contained the seeds of a promising argument, demonstrating a working understanding of college-level expectations. During the semester's second half, when students develop independent research projects on topics of their choosing, he concentrated on the emergence of hip hop, focusing in particular on the music of Public Enemy. In his reflective cover letter submitted with his paper, Tony is articulate about his enthusiasm for his research, one of the criteria Sommers and Saltz argues is crucial for student success (140): "I chose this topic because I love music, particularly old school hip-hop," he tells us, "and the gangsta rap movement just seemed like an impossible event to overlook." He goes on to tell his reader that his "main point is to divulge into the purpose of gangsta rap: *how* it was used, *why* it was used— by *whom*. I wanted to explore all aspects of this dense topic." A tall order for any writer.. Given his broadly defined purpose (exploring *all* aspects of the theme), it's perhaps unsurprising that Tony ran into some roadblocks along the way. . So what happened to contribute to Tony's blocking?

The writing program at my former home institution, like many thoughtfully organized programs, is designed to prevent writer's block and help writers gain confidence in their ability to write for different purposes and audiences. The program believes strongly in Sommers and Saltz's finding that students can best write their way into expertise when "faculty treat freshmen

as apprentice scholars, giving them real intellectual tasks that allow students to bring their

interests to a course" (140). Students are supported throughout the research process through

carefully scaffolded assignments and classroom activities that lead to greater intellectual

independence. The process-oriented approach of the writing seminar teaches students how to

stage a project, from developing and refining a research question to engaging purposely with

sources in order to craft an original claim. By writing in response to prompts in class, drafting

and receiving feedback on low-stakes assignments, and conferencing with their instructors and

peers, students have the opportunity to test their ideas on academic readers and revise with a

clearer sense of their audience and purpose. The generous discussion of model texts—both

novice and expert—helps students envision and understand the genres of academic writing they

are being asked to produce.

Of course, all of this is easier said than done. Writing, even when staged in a supportive

environment, is a messy process. Blocks are part of that process, a sign that an emerging idea is

complex and the evidence difficult to reconcile. Yet each semester my colleagues and I

encounter students like Tony who have difficulty moving through such inevitable impasses. In

response to such tensions, we see texts that revert to commonplaces, as Bartholomae has

described, or as Mark Gaipa puts it, resort to "dropping out" out of the scholarly conversion in

the sense of "avoiding the difficulty of seriously engaging the criticism"—although the reasons

for this avoidance are complex (432).

This was the case with Tony's incomplete drafts and revisions. His writing shows

elements of grasping a key assumption of the discipline—that the social life of art matters—and

that scholars must establish the importance of their claims early in the paper—a key feature of

academic writing. Yet Tony struggles to build authority for his argument. We can see this in the draft's opening sentences, which rely on sweeping generalizations to establish a motivating problem.

> The 1980s was a time filled with many social, economical and political changes. There were newly emerging designers in the fashion industry, a new president, countless new forms of media, gay rights movements, the crack/cocaine epidemic, and a vast collection of cultural experiences, to name a few. In the wake of a spike in national crime rates, music was the hero that salvaged the urban youth of America.

Tony begins in this passage to frame his topic and define his research question. Yet the text shows signs of difficulty discerning, as Sommers and Saltz note, a hierarchy of importance (132), resulting in prose that reads like a torrent of hasty speculations. The opening lines are engineered to convey to the reader the urgency of the *topic*, without yet defining and explaining why the writer's particular *approach* to that topic is interesting and valuable. The music, as opposed to his argument, is the hero of his story so far.

Later in the introduction, we get a clearer sense of Tony's angle—and the potential source of his blocking.

> In this essay, I wish to explore the realms of urban hardship in America and the means by which these youngsters escaped their difficult lives. I will divulge into a few of the pioneers of the gangsta rap movement and display how they used this newfound genre of music to create awareness of their cause and to expose socio-economic wrongdoings and cultural ignorance. Gangsta rap of the eighties was

used as an outlet of pent up aggravation in inner-city youth, as particularly seen in

the aggressive, acrimonious lyrics; it was used to communicate to the world the

trials and tribulations of a young person, and to make claims on the inequity of the

justice system.

Tony demonstrates that he understands quite a lot about argument. He's articulated a thesis, even

if he hasn't yet positioned it within a scholarly conversation. He has begun to narrow his focus to

help his reader understand how hip hop served as a medium for young people to intervene in

cultural debates about racial inequality in America. Yet we can see why it might be difficult for

Tony to execute his claim with expertise. To make good on the thesis's promise, Tony would

need to survey the literature on hip hop and identify a claim or approach to complicate or extend

with the help of his case study. He'd need to research the sociology of race and poverty in urban

America during the 1980s in order to situate his argument about the music's politics. And he'd

need to analyze how song lyrics function as a vehicle for youth protest.

That's a lot to do in several short weeks—and across 10-12 pages. Illuminating the

context in which Tony is beginning to embed his argument sheds light on the complex process of

framing an argument—and why there's so much room for writers to experience paralyzing

frustration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the rest of the paper betrays this paralysis. It contains mostly

fragments summarizing background information about the period and the music without

analyzing the lyrics and their response to a focused set of cultural or political questions. At the

same time, there's a moment of productive insight that suggests the writer recognizes his

readers' expectations that he intervene in a debate. After synthesizing a scholar's claim that rap

originated in the oral traditions of Africa reappearing in nineteenth century America, Tony

begins to stage an interpretive problem for his readers.

> Gangsta, or, hardcore rappers produce music to primarily cater to inner-city
>
> youths. The music did not suddenly arise because of the struggles of the eighties,
>
> but rather it was a continued lineage of musical empowerment movements. It is
>
> not just the product of 'spitting' of words into a recorder—no, it is rather spiritual
>
> because blacks put their inner thought and aspirations in music, according the
>
> black theologian James Cone.Some scholars may even cosign with Cone and state
>
> that the gangsta rap movement is a continuation of the Black Panther movement
>
> of the 1960s and 1970s… (DO MORE RESEARCH ON THIS).

This passage is exciting because it starts to stage an authentic scholarly argument. Tony

recognizes that he can gain more authority for this argument by situating it within a larger

conversation ("Some scholars may even cosign with Cone…"). Yet his stance remains invisible,

hidden behind the voices of his channeled critics. Tony's imperative to "DO MORE

RESEARCH" suggests a recognition that his argument would have more authority if he had

more expertise in his subject, but it also implies that he may lack the confidence or experience to

know how to put reasonable parameters around his project by focusing his argument on

extending or complicating only one important claim in the scholarly literature.

Tony's drafts are fascinating to read because they register the writer's attempts to reclaim

the value of hip hop as a critical form of social discourse by writing his way into an academic

discourse that includes some readers while excluding others.[4] Herein lies the paradox of

scholarly writing: we need to know the codes, but we also need to know how to resist the codes

in order to do ambitious and original work. As genre theorist Anis Bawarshi argues, "various social forces [...] constitute the scene of production within which the writer's cognition as well as his or her text are situated and shaped" (5). Drawing on Charles Bazerman's theory that writing practices are forms of participation essential to social organization, Bawarshi challenges the romantic understanding of writing as creating something from nothing, arguing instead that composition is a dialectical social process: "Writers invent within genres and are themselves invented by genres" (7).

Ironically, Tony's draft begins to achieve "flow" and "invention" precisely where he performs the conventions of disciplinary discourse while asserting his departure from those very commonplaces. His prose loses its cadence when his stance is unclear or when the essay misrecognizes its rhetorical context, relying on the kinds of verbal flourishes rewarded on standardized essay exams but seldom valued by academic readers.

Notes from the Field: Writer's Block, Revisited

As these passages suggest, writer's block is often triggered by the difficulty in starting, engaging, and sustaining an argument developed in relation to other sources. It's not just caused by a failure of confidence or nerve, but rather by the complexity of rhetorically and conceptually managing the often competing and expansive voices informing academic debates over time. The writer must find a way to assimilate those arguments efficiently and truthfully while foregrounding his or her own position. If scholarly discourse is a form of community, then writing within that community requires us to insist on our belonging and develop processes that

allow us to follow through on the assertion of that membership. Yet this process remains infinitely fraught. As Richard Post argues in a recent issue of *Critical Inquiry*, "When we speak of a discipline, … we speak not merely of a body of knowledge but also of a set of practices by which that knowledge is acquired, confirmed, implemented, preserved, and reproduced" (751). The academic essay or research article confronts writers with all of these interwoven and situated practices.

It's perhaps no small irony that the essay before you now has been the object of writer's block for many months. If memory serves me right, I adhered quite closely to Boice's guidelines about the importance of short, daily writing sessions. Yet I kept finding it difficult to invent a methodology for a project about roadblocks encountered by writers traversing disciplinary terrain within English studies. Who was my audience—those in literary studies or those in writing studies? I didn't singularly belong to either at the moment of composition.

If we teach what we want to learn, we also write our way to a deeper understanding. By recalling the long process by which we have become socialized into our fields, we can empathize with students tackling challenging and authentic intellectual tasks in the classroom. We first write our way *into* expertise before we can write *from* it. Yet expertise can work against us, too, because each project is sparked by curiosity—a genuine question about something that isn't known. Asking a good question requires expertise, but it also involves occupying the position of the novice who's uncertain about the answer. In other words, to some degree scholarly writers possess expertise only to defer it in the pursuit of knowledge, which becomes the basis of expertise in the final product. In this sense, being an open-minded novice comes with some advantages, allowing writers to perpetually see what isn't there and keep looking for answers.

Our students' writing can rekindle our understanding of the complexity and excitement of this process. Their moments of struggle and progress—however uneven—mark their entrance *into* expertise so they can begin to ask questions and derive answers *from* it. As my first scholarly article published in writing studies, this essay marks the trajectory of that process for me and my own uneasy straddling of the paradoxical novice/expert divide.

Notes

[1] This historiography is based on Robert Boice's excellent synthesis of these developments in "Psychotherapies for Writing Blocks," here pg. 195.

[2] I am using "academic writing" here in the sense of Joseph Harris's use of the term. In an interview with Carol Rutz, he calls academic writing "a pretty big term, for sure, but at least it specifies a particular context of work and a particular type of writing, one that deals with texts and ideas. At Duke [in the Thompson Writing Program], we've tried to narrow that context yet a bit more in actual practice by setting up a program in which teachers from a wide range of disciplines design courses that ask students to write about very different materials and issues" (86). My former institution shared a similar approach to the teaching of first-year writing, but focused more on research writing.

[3] Tony is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the writer. Tony's writing is used in this essay with IRB approval.

[4] Special thanks to Patrick Moran, my former colleague in the Princeton Writing Program, for reading an earlier draft of this article and helping me see this connection.

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