

Fragile Material

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When I signed on to edit this journal in 2013, I didn't realize that I had also agreed to be head archivist of forty-one years of publishing history. Not even when I received the thirty or so cardboard boxes shipped by previous editor Jennifer Clary-Lemon from the University of Winnipeg in Canada to the English department office at the University of Cincinnati in Ohio.

No, my first thought was how to move these towering boxes to my office. After retrieving a rolling cart from a supply closet, I loaded as many boxes as I could while still being able to push the cart down the hall. Three trips later, I had unloaded the entire boxed history of *Composition Studies* in my suddenly cramped office.

As I opened the boxes and poked around, I began to feel uneasy. Shouldn't this material be in a library somewhere, not in a second-floor office of the charming but shabby McMicken Hall? Inside was a complete print archive. I found a photocopy of the first issue, when the journal was called *Freshman English News*. A three-columned newsletter published in 1972 by founding editor Gary Tate at Texas Christian University, it looked like something I might have produced in my Desktop Publishing class in 1987. I later read on the journal's website that the inaugural issue was "pasted together on [Tate's] dining room table and distributed for free" ("History"). The more I explored the contents of those boxes, the more I could see the professionalization of the field in the format of the journal itself. It began as a stapled series of 8.5" x 11" pieces of paper and over time became a bound 6" x 9" journal with cardstock covers, and later glossy covers, most in off-white or beige. Simultaneously, the journal morphed from being a site for teacher exchange to one that hosts a broad range of scholarly and pedagogical work in writing studies.

Browsing the stuff in those boxes, I could see, too, how the logo for the journal name was refined from a neat cursive line to the current design: "composition" in lower case, and "STUDIES" just underneath in all caps. About the creation of that refined logo, Peter Vandenberg, editor from 1996 to 2003, described in an email to me how he and his assistant (and future editor) Clary-Lemon fiddled to get it right: "I will never forget the fumbling around with new-to-us design software that Jen and I did to get that 'p' in *composition* to line up with and breach the 'u' in *studies* (which we worried about for quite a while for the obvious reasons)."

Vandenberg told me that when he assumed the editorship in 1996, he drove from Chicago to Fort Worth to pick up the entire archive and then

drove it back across the country to his home institution, DePaul University. Wanting to ensure that the journal would be safely stored and made accessible to future readers, he donated a complete set of issues to his university's library. As it turned out, that set never made it to the stacks or anywhere else. It was likely thrown away when the librarian's office was cleaned out upon death or retirement, Peter didn't know which.

Luckily, that wasn't the only set of issues. The boxes I inherited included the full print archive, yes, but also copious evidence of how the journal was made over time and where it had traveled. Among my discoveries: personal correspondence between editors and authors, receipts for bills long since paid, three-ring binders overflowing with correspondence from subscription companies like EBSCO and JSTOR, microfilm reels in acid-free storage boxes, promotional pens from Texas Christian University, a vintage-looking stapler, and an embossed stamp bearing the journal's name. Traces of editors surfaced in handwritten post-it notes and copies of typewritten letters on institutional stationery addressed to subscribers and contributors.

Unsure what to do with this slice of the field's history, I cleared six shelves of a bookcase in my office to house the print archive of the journal. The binders and other random materials were stacked willy-nilly on top of a filing cabinet. During my six-year tenure as editor, I rarely accessed content in this clunky archive, instead completing most of my work digitally. But I did handle the physical journal during post-production. Dave Blakesley at Parlor Press sent me hard copies for contributors twice a year. I packaged each contributor's copy in a mailing envelope, printed and applied address labels, and carried stacks of envelopes to the outgoing mail station in my departmental office.

Taking sample journals, pens, stickers, and subscription forms to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) each year was the other instance when I dealt with the literal weight of the journal. When CCCC was a flight away, I packed journal supplies in an extra suitcase; when it was driving distance, everything went into my backseat; when both were impractical, I mailed boxes of supplies to the site in advance of the conference, after which I then repackaged and shipped everything back to myself. Some of these expenses were covered by my department; sometimes I absorbed the cost, having forgotten to get receipts. I never asked assistants to do these tasks, which I considered too menial, bordering on insulting, but in hindsight I could have used a hand.

In my role as editor, I joined a long line of caretakers who have preserved the physical history of *Composition Studies* by overseeing the archive's journeys from Fort Worth to Chicago in 1996, back to Fort Worth in 2003, on to Winnipeg in 2010, to Cincinnati in 2013, and then back to Fort Worth in

2019 (more about that below). Must be dumb luck that not a single box was lost or destroyed in these many moves across state and country borders.

Understanding that luck runs out and preservation requires intention and planning, I arranged, with Brad Lucas at TCU, a stable home for *Composition Studies*' archive. That's where it will stay for use by future researchers and historians, no longer leading a peripatetic existence as editorial teams change every three to six years. More to the point, original paper copies are finite. If issues go missing, one version of the history of the field does too. Print copies embody more than readable content; their tactility, born of a specific material, technological moment, is unreproducible in digital form.

What's probably obvious in this story is the outsized role that individuals have played over this journal's history. Also, there's a rag-tag quality to the work behind the scenes, as there likely is for many independent journals. Idiosyncrasy and autonomy are precisely what make indy journals exciting—they can innovate and respond to what's going on in the culture and the profession with a nimbleness not always available to journals beholden to parent organizations. *Composition Studies* is demonstrating that right now through the FEN Blog, where contributors write about “the ways that writing and literacy education meet the needs of the moment and contribute to pluralistic, democratic public discourse” (“FEN Blog”).

The freshness of indy journals comes with a share of risk. How will our histories be preserved? Who will drive across the country to pick up an archive? How long can non-revenue-generating projects that we need for connection, growth, and career stability survive? What happens when caretakers don't have the resources to pay for web presence, travel to conferences, mailing expenses?

While answers to some of these questions might be to forsake print, it's no secret that digital publishing is also resource hungry. Matters of sustainability and preservation loom large in the life of any journal, regardless of medium. For example, the field's longest continuously publishing online peer-reviewed journal, *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, recently created a voluntary membership model that asks readers to help cover increasing server expenses—costs traditionally covered by the senior editorial staff out of their own pockets (the journal's open-access status is unaffected by membership) (“Kairos”). The short-lived *CCC Online*, which published one issue in 2012—the content of which has remained inaccessible almost since then—is also proof that sustainability is not limited to print (or independent) journals (“CCC Online”). To some extent, all knowledge-making ventures are vulnerable to time, money, space, human resources, and the limits of good intentions.

So, let's not take for granted the significance of this 50th anniversary of an independent journal that began on a kitchen table. Originally a forum for first year writing teachers at two-year and four-year colleges to share their ex-

periences, the journal has grown with the field and shows no signs of slowing down. Let's think about how to support the sponsors of knowledge-making that we depend on for community and career advancement, among other things. What human, institutional, and organizational resources are necessary for another 50 years of continuous publishing?

Like other publication venues, *Composition Studies* might look from the outside to be more stable than it really is, less dependent on individuals than it really is. The growth of our field and our personal livelihood rely on having the means to share our work. This sharing is frequently contingent on the good will, energy, and uncompensated labor of people behind the scenes who make this very fragile enterprise a reality for the field at large.

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