

BOOK REVIEW

Scott, Tony. *Dangerous writing: Understanding the political economy of composition*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2009. Print.

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In this well-written and engaging work, Scott explores the modern first-year composition classroom through a critical lens that seeks to reemphasize the importance of material production on a Marxist conception of class. Weaving together compelling narratives of composition students and teachers as well as thoroughly reviewing a diverse collection of academic literature, Scott argues that current first-year composition classes are often taught as part of unjust labor conditions under circumstances that rob teachers and students of the possibility of critical change. Scott offers critically infused post-process writing as a framework through which students and teachers can examine their own material circumstances within composition classrooms and within emerging fast capitalism. He concludes by offering his own pedagogical practices as an example. Scott covers a wide swath of academic territory but his focus is on exploring the “relationships between postsecondary writing, institutions of higher education, and the world of service work in fast-capitalism, with a particular emphasis on class” (8) and is a welcomed contribution to the scholarship on composition.

In *Dangerous Writing*, Scott successfully weaves descriptions of two studies he conducted amongst a broad range of literature relevant to a critical analysis of the first-year composition classroom, with his own studies very much supplementing this larger analysis rather than being the focus of this book. He describes his two studies in chapters two and four with the remaining chapters devoted to theoretically exploring the intersections between fast capitalism, the changing demographics of university students, the possibilities of Freire-inspired pedagogy, while focusing on the modern first-year composition classroom.

In the first study, Scott analyzes how writing teachers “conceptualize, choose and use textbooks” (33) by interviewing and collecting documents from twenty-one instructors of first-year composition. Scott found that none of the first-year composition instructors self-identified as scholars of rhetoric or composition and that there was a heavy reliance on the textbook, where the textbook essentially became the teaching philosophy. In examining the reasons for choosing a textbook, Scott found student cost to be overwhelmingly important to instructors. This valuing of cost came along with a need then to use the textbooks in order to justify students’ expenditure on the book. Additionally, Scott found that for many of these instructors, the textbook was an authority that could anchor their own pedagogical practices.

In the second study, Scott discusses his own composition class in which students focused on their own labor as an area of inquiry. He describes his composition class, in which students write about their experiences as workers in a work autobiography, and then do interviews with fellow workers, group-centered

projects, as well as more conventional composition work such as journaling and revising papers. He describes this as an effort to connect the world of insecure fast capital work and the world of the academically focused student. Scott also describes the somewhat turbulent outcomes of writing practices and then extensively describes the case of Sophia, a student in Scott's composition class whom he describes as a problematic case. Throughout the course, Scott's goal was to get his students, including Sophia, to focus on "the contradictions that shape physical and intellectual labor, power, and opportunity in everyday life" (173), and in Sophia's case she began this process. Scott discusses the shift in her writing that began with language that resembled a restaurant training manual, reproducing the discourse of the good worker. However, as the course progressed she wrote more extensively on the sexist and unjust conditions of her workplace, began to adopt multiple voices when discussing issues of labor, and linked her own labor conditions with those of others. However, in the conclusion of her final project, Sophia returned to writing from the position of good student/worker advising potential students on strategies for success in university and in the workplace. Overall, Scott found that Sophia's writing improved but he found her final conclusion ultimately unsatisfying, as she still was not linking her own position as a worker with those of others. By presenting a problematic case Scott effectively highlights some of the difficulties in engaging in this type of pedagogical practice as well as the possibility that the composition class can be a place of transformational change.

The strength of Scott's book is in deftly weaving together multiple research projects alongside a wealth of literature from diverse fields into a criticism of both the pedagogical aspects of first-year composition classroom and the material means of producing these classes. He does this with a reinvigorated critical stance that looks at the continuing effects of fast capitalism both on the university as a place that is taking on an increasingly corporate mentality and on the lives of university students who are often presumed to be middle class, but often are working a variety of service jobs in an increasingly insecure work environment. Further, Scott highlights how teaching composition itself, especially in the first-year composition classroom, is an increasingly insecure job done by temporary workers who are the backbone of a new fast capitalism. Similarly, he highlights the many contradictions that exist between composition as an academic field and as a bureaucratic system managed by writing program administrators built upon the contingent labor of writing teachers.

The primary weakness in the text is the casual dismissal of some of the criticisms of critical pedagogy that have come from more postmodern scholars and a failure to engage in discussing the conflicting nature of social justice. Although Scott dismisses critics of Freire, as Scott believes they have not produced any alternatives, he does not consider the criticisms of Ellsworth and others regarding different students' experiences and conceptions of social justice. He does not address situations where students have been the beneficiaries of fast capitalism or have no experiences with the world of work he asks them to describe. Scott makes a well-reasoned and forceful argument for focusing on the working lives of university students, but other scholars could have easily focused on issues of students' engagement with the environment and the impact of environmental degradation within students' lives, or questions of language, race, or gender. The question that remains for critical scholars is: which of the myriad of issues facing students entering university should composition scholars discuss in their classes? Regardless, by bringing together the labor practices of the first-year composition classroom and classroom pedagogical practices Scott makes a worthwhile contribution to composition scholarship that should be read by those interested in composition, critical theory, and higher education.

Ellsworth, Elizabeth. (1989). "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review*. 59. 3. (1989): 297-324. Print.