



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer by Susan Miller

The Written World: Reading and Writing in Social Contexts by Susan Miller

Joseph Harris

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- Integrating the significance of vocational-technical education into the concept of college education,
- Guiding and teaching underprepared students,
- Fulfilling requests for community education,
- Melding disparate demands/services with college mission and resources.

Other items for consideration are:

- How to realign cooperation with four-year institutions (fewer two-year students are transferring to them; more of their students are transferring to two-year colleges),
- How to balance concepts of university-parallel programs with vocational programs and community-education programs,
- How to increase funding,
- How to build a professional identity for faculty.

Additional topics discussed in the book include governance and administration, finances, and student services.

The secondary emphasis of the book is the weaving in of historical background and development of the two-year college. Authors Cohen and Brawer give due honor to the pioneers: William Rainey Harper (University of Chicago conceiver of the lower-division plan); Walter Crosby Eels (professor of education at Stanford University), first editor of the *Junior College Journal*; Leonard V. Koos (professor of education at the University of Minnesota, later at the University of Chicago); Doak S. Campbell (junior-college president, professor of education at George Peabody College for Teachers); Alexis F. Lange (professor of education, University of California); and others.

The authors show the organizing of the American Association of Junior Colleges, its inception and evolution. They chronicle the golden era of the sixties and early seventies. They present enrollment data, faculty data, college organizational systems, and much more—all in substantiating the dynamics of two-year college development and transition.

A question of growing importance to me as a community-college teacher of 23 years and to all who are concerned with public education is whether community colleges can maintain their credibility as institutions of higher education and at the same time continue to accept almost everyone who applies for admission. In exploring this question, community-college teachers, administrators, legislators, students, and the general public would do well to begin with a thorough reading of *The American Community College*.

Rescuing the Subject: A Critical Introduction to Rhetoric and the Writer, Susan Miller (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989, 200 pages).

The Written World: Reading and Writing in Social Contexts, Susan Miller (New York: Harper, 1989, 611 pages).

Reviewed by Joseph Harris, University of Pittsburgh

Picture two writing classrooms. In the first students have simply been asked to write about something that interests them. In class they break into small groups and begin to read their texts aloud to one another. After a student has finished reading his piece, the members of his group begin to question and advise him about what he has written. The writer takes notes on what his readers have to say and perhaps asks them

some questions back. In this way the group works through the writings of all its members, in each case first comparing what the writer intended to say with what he actually ended up writing, and then trying to find ways of bringing the two closer together.

The second class also focuses on student writings, but in a different way. In it the members of the class have been given copies of the same student essay. There is no name on the text, and although its author is sitting somewhere in the room, the custom of the class is that she stay silent and anonymous. The students here have done the same readings and written in response to the same assignment, so they raise and discuss the following questions: In what ways does this text respond effectively to the issues raised by the readings and assignment? What moves and gestures does its writer make, what strategies and conventions does she draw on, in order to lend it authority and interest?

The ways these two classrooms are set up reflect important contrasts in how writing teachers have imagined their subject. The first classroom links writing closely to speech. It brings readers and writers face to face, dissolving the gaps in space and time that usually separate them, and makes the subject of their talk not so much the writer's text as what he *wants* to say. The text gets seen as a kind of imperfect extension of its author. And so what really counts is what the writer/speaker means, not what his text happens now to say (since that can always be changed). The job of his readers centers on helping him get those meanings straight. As its many advocates have made clear, the goal of this sort of classroom is not to analyze writings but to work with writers—who in this context are not seen as very different from speakers or even thinkers.

The second class deals more with writing *as* writing. It does not ask if a text accurately expresses what its author might have wanted to say—since that author and her intents are unknown. Instead it looks at how this writing responds to other texts (in this case, to the readings and the assignment) and at how it draws on the peculiar commonplaces and conventions of its form of written discourse, at the moves and gestures that place it as part of the field of, say, criticism or sociology or autobiography. The power and meaning of a text are seen to stem largely from the stance it takes towards other texts. The task such a class defines for the student, then, is one of finding her way into a *written* world, of gaining control over a set of textual conventions that often differ widely from those she uses as a speaker.

I offer the contrast between these two classrooms as a way of dramatizing some of the issues at stake in *Rescuing the Subject*, Susan Miller's interesting and useful revision of the history of rhetoric. Miller is uneasy with the ways the study of (written) composition has been linked to (oral) rhetoric. She argues that modern attempts to define rhetoric as the study of *all* discourse blur crucial differences between writing and speech. The rhetoric of classical times took as its object of study the single scene of a speaker facing an audience. Since then, though, that oral rhetoric has needed to be ceaselessly stretched, altered, or truncated in (largely failed) bids to account for the many new scenes of discourse that have emerged along with the technologies of writing and print. (For instance, Miller notes how the classical notion of *elocutio* was revived in the 18th century to describe not how a *speaker* might choose his words for his listeners but rather how a *reader* might give voice to a written text. As the rhetoricians of the time turned their attention from speech to print, so too the sense of the term shifted from "eloquence" to "elocution.")

Miller argues that this history of continual tinkering and patching suggests that what we really need is a new model. She urges us to abandon the familiar but speech-based triangle of speaker, subject, and audience, and instead to take up a specifically *textual* rhetoric that more clearly shows how prior texts, cultural codes, and the various forms and genres of writing influence and constrain what a writer can say. Such a

rhetoric, Miller suggests, could also better account for the postmodern sense of the self as something a writer *constructs* out of other texts and voices. In this sense her title is a pun. She aims not only to recover the subject *of* rhetoric from a limiting oral tradition but also to rescue a workable sense of the subject *who* writes from recent critical theory.

Miller both shows why a textual rhetoric is needed and offers a sketch of what one might look like. It is disappointing, then, that she fails to apply this new rhetoric to specific cases. She closes *Rescuing the Subject* with an admiring glance at the ways Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae have read the work of university basic writers—perhaps the most striking examples one could find of proficient speakers who find themselves lost and baffled in a world of texts. Beyond this, though, she does not offer much sense of how a textual rhetoric might change what as teachers we do with these and other student writers.

But one can gain a good idea of this from Miller's new textbook, *The Written World*—perhaps the first anthology that takes seriously the poststructuralist call to study all texts as closely as literary ones. *The Written World* offers a wonderful catalogue of things to read—from the transcribed tales of an old Eskimo woman to public speeches, military documents, legal texts, diaries, letters, poetry, reviews, reportage, case studies, rhetorical treatises, and the doubling recursive fictions of Borges and Hoban.

Unfortunately, this unorthodox and appealing set of texts is framed by a conservative teaching apparatus that comes complete with thematic and rhetorical indexes, writing assignments keyed to modes of exposition, and the like. The assignments also tend repeatedly and unimaginatively to ask students (a) to picture the context or situation a writer was working in and figure out what he was trying to do in it, and (b) to attempt something along the same lines in their own writing. A result is that students are often asked to take on strained and improbable roles as writers ("Imagine that you are a time-travelling reporter, transported to ancient Rome" [48]; "Imagine that you are isolated as Malcolm X was in prison" [184]; and so on). I would have preferred instead a closer attention to the real world context that most students using the book are likely to find themselves in—that is, to the writing classroom with its pressing demands that they take on a new sort of academic discourse.

But these are small complaints compared to the large virtues of this anthology. Any teacher likely to use *The Written World* is also likely to want to make her own way through and her own course out of its readings. For *The Written World* offers materials for a new sort of writing course, much as *Rescuing the Subject* opens up new lines of thought for composition theorists.

Writing as Social Action, Marilyn M. Cooper and Michael Holzman (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1989, 243 pages).

Reviewed by Deborah Brandt, University of Wisconsin-Madison

That writing is social action seems a noncontroversial claim, especially in these post-cognitive times in composition studies. So sometimes the space that Cooper and Holzman give to knocking romantic views of writers, cognitive models of writing processes, and skills-oriented approaches to literacy seems excessive and unwarranted. But as one moves through this collection of fifteen essays, eight previously published and seven new ones, the claim gathers complexity, resonance, and renewed urgency. For Cooper and Holzman, "writing as social action" is the only truly meaningful—and thus the only truly revealing—framework for studying writing and for teaching