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Composition, Critical University Studies, and The Fate of Higher Education

Hello and thanks so much for coming to this session. The purpose of this talk is to consider what each of the three Cs of my title--Complexity, Composition (especially beginning or first year composition) and Critical University Studies—have to do with one another OR what they *could* have to do with one another. I will then offer a proposal for how complexity, composition and critical university studies ought to fit together and a claim for where they are already occupying a shared space and common mission, even as I argue how that space and ultimately its mission is under siege.

I will go out of order. I begin briefly, with the term **Critical University Studies,** which I will return to more fully at the end of the talk. Thanks to Jeff's opening and his scholarship we learned something about how this emerging field is coalescing around particular issues concerning the university and the idea of the university.

But there is also a methodology that critical university studies has in common: critique as argument. The books and articles about higher education that have helped generate this field and galvanize collective interest within and outside the academy all proceed through argument and critique, which separates the field from related fields, which might rely on ethnography or narrative. I bring this is up not to distract us from the issues of Critical University Studies, which I share, but to

suggest that methodology pulls us in particular directions for research and not to others.

So I start the talk by with a kind of alternative to arguing a case: a writing prompt. *You have these old-school index cards in front of you, and I ask that you take a minute to jot an answer to the prompt on the screen.*

What role does first-year composition play in an increasingly "complex" university and culture?

Let me say at the outset that I personally find this kind of participation from the audience thing—especially at academic conferences, most especially at the MLA—incredibly annoying and I apologize for it. There's nothing worse than thinking you have 45 minutes to zone out only to find out you had to "engage." But I asked you to do it because I think this kind of activity or heuristic: writing on demand, writing without notes, writing without specific purpose, talking to almost strangers cringe-worthy. And often the first response to such a directive is, naturally, to avoid it. Because to write alone together is to be uncomfortable: uncomfortable out loud, in public. Having to compose and connect without ample time and anchoring in a particular subject feels both stifling and dangerous all at once. Stifling because you are constrained by your situation and your self—you can only use the tools at hand to construct your answer, your take on this issue—and dangerous because you are likely to have to confront the limits and sometimes horizions of your and others' perspectives.

Despite the dizzyingly diverse approaches the course almost every American college graduate has in common—first year composition—this activity, what I call presentist writing, is what most of them have in common. I will say more about this kind of writing at the end of the talk, when I return to question of methodology and critical university studies. For now, I'll say that this genre, this practice, is how I've come to define the **first year composition.**

I had some practice with this kind of writing and observing countless students avoiding and engaging in presentist writing as part of a year long ethnography of first year composition. From August 2011-June 2012 as part of a sabbatical, I became a student of freshman composition, English 110 at Lehman College, CUNY, and wrote like this—taking risks, sharing unchecked prose, revising on the spot—every Monday and Wednesdays from 11-12 40 and many days in between. The purpose of this project was simple: to document the last days of this course as it would exist at my college. By the spring of 2012 the largest general education reform in the nation, the Pathways initiative at CUNY, would mandate a new curriculum for introductory writing that both lessened the time spent in writing and required syllabi to conform to university-wide outcomes—outcomes with one stated goal: moving students out of the general and into their specializations.

This is when I come to the first term of my talk **complexity.** Pathways like other recent curricular overhauls at public colleges and universities across the nation—New Hampshire and Georgia are two examples—was inspired by The Common Core Standards for K-12 schools and by foundations like the Lumina—the

largest source of funding for undergraduate education in American—and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which argued, rightly, that universities must be updated for what he called "21st century" complex needs. The question I want to raise here is how the needs of a complex 21st century are defined by updating curricular that doesn't eliminate composition but downgrades it to "not complex." The stated purpose of Pathways was to streamline the CUNY undergraduate experience so that transfer among the 24 campuses would be easier and graduation swifter. The methodologies for achieving ease of transfer and better graduation rates at what is the largest urban university in the country was up for debate. But the Board of Trustees buttressed their single approach—to make beginning writing serve specialization—not with evidence from pilot programs or case studies but with ideology. That ideology is the authors of four recent polemics on the "crisis" in higher education call "complexity." *Show slide of Delbanoco, Academically Adrift, Losing Our Minds, Brooks)*

Complexity is a term that is ubiquitous in the literature on higher education. It's never defined exactly, but everyone from educational theorist Carolin Kreber to the scholars who authored the Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement to the Common Core architects to Governor Rick Scott in Florida, the one who wants to charge students for majoring in Anthropology, use complexity as synonymous with specialized and "networked" or connected. Colleges and universities are charged with both meeting the needs of a complex culture and creating that culture through courses that are, in the words of the authors of another polemic on the crisis in higher education, "core competencies" (Arum and

Jospia). This is the exact term used by the CUNY Board of Trustees in their argument for why general education and, eventually, first year composition must be regulated. They need to serve the complex courses that engender competencies. Competencies are equated with "mastery" and mastery is distanced from "beginners." The New College for American, like the authors of *Academically Adrift* go further, arguing that "Key employees seek advancement" and, as Linda Adler-Kassner's research illustrates, this declaration signals foundations like The Lumina Foundation but also the Board at CUNY to move "introductory courses" elsewhere, "away from college. A 2011 report put out by administration provides a visual of this move out of beginning and into advanced study. "From Labyrinth to Pathways" shows the new map for complexity: quick routes to specialization, fewer detours caused by beginning courses.

This is how general education and beginning writing courses get reduced to what they are becoming on my campus: a set of six outcomes and accompanying practice genres that go with them. But more importantly this is how beginning writing courses, the students in those courses, and the practices happening in them are labeled "not complex."

At CUNY, like at other public universities, we are used to attacks on "remediation". But this isn't the usual unmaking of the public university we are used to: no one is directly attacking a group of people (underprepared students) nor a pedagogy, professor, ideology or epistemology. Rather we are all just embracing the future, the complex culture. This is revolution as evolution.

Introductory courses are not being eliminated but merely naturally not surviving in the networked, global world of complexity. For those of us in literary, cultural, and writing studies, this new formula for complexity should worry us. Because it in the humanities where complexity theory has earned a warm welcome from post-culture studies theorist looking to explain our posthumanist world.

Popular science and social science writers like Steven Johnson and Malcolm Gladwell talk about ant colonies, cities, and the internet as self-referencing, "autopoietic" emergent systems: they use their own material to make more material. Key to the scientific description of systems, as defined by researches at the Sante Fe Institute is how they are "dynamic," changing rapidly but also self-referntially. Philosophers and cultural critics have shown us how such systems are all around us, how, in sociologist Niklas Luhmann's term, our observations are embedded in these systems . Considering art, literature, culture and the idea of human itself in the embedded context of shifting technologies and what Jane Bennet called "vital matter" expands the reach of the humanities, into animal studies and the digitial, into the **posthumanisms** of our network culture. Johnson describes coral reefs as existing with this self-organizing patterns; Mark Tayor traces contemporary architecture to the physics of such systems, Ira Livingston describes the ocean waves and poetry as autopoietic cultural systems, Katherine Hayles, Maragret Syverson and Byron Hawk look at writing, rhetoric, and critique itself as a complex systems. In my field, composition and rhetoric, complexity theory—the study of writing as it exists in an informational, telematics world—is the justification for creating an entirely new discipline, "writing studies." The premise of this field is that

we are, in Sidney Dobrin's term, "postcomposition"—beyond the consructivist shackles of subjectivity. As one theorist puts it: the study of writing is "the network itself" (Hawk).

Some of the most politically progressive and theoretically astute research on writing today assumes that beginning students in composition classes are excluded from the post-subjective, networked world of information we live in today. And that's worrisome on two fronts: first, because we are theorizing a new culture of complexity without the contributions of beginners. Beginners are not only the majority of undergraduates at public university they are also, I argue, the source of its innovation. For without beginners complexity is unidirectional: outcomes without the disruptive, uncomfortable, inconsistent participation of those not yet codified in systems.

We're in a tricky and unusual situation: radical theorists of emergence and posthumanism in bed with bottom line educational reformers rewriting the university for mastery. Supporters of general education do exist—they are perhaps the humanists that are left in the posthumanist culture—and you can count on committed compositionists to defend basic writing as the backbone of public education and indeed the democratic ideals of America. But nostalgic cries for intellectual well-roundedness and stalwart assumptions the needs of the underserved do not do this class justice.

I want to end this talk by returning both to that writing you did at he start and to the term I began with : **critical university studies**. I'll conclude by arguing that the critical university studies community claim composition as a resource for

seeing the way making of the university in action. The practices of composition students matters to this complex moment and to the idea of the university because the practices of beginning writers concretize that space that exists between beginning and specialized, between creativity and commodification, between almost and actual. Composition shows "emergence" in action, when ideas are poised to evolve but are still tied to their host environment, when writing is at once constrained and public, when we observe ourselves as part of but somehow other than the collective. The activities of first-year composition—writing, reading, speaking, collaborating without a particular disciplinary end-goal—challenges theories of complexity and critique and locates them not only the end-product of scholars but as processes of beginning students, which is to say, sometimes, all of us.