

Transcription: “The Political Economy of Composition with Tony Scott”

Run Time: 23:54

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SD: Seth Davis (host)
TS: Tony Scott (guest)
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AH: This Rhetorical Life is a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Cue intro music.

SD: Central to our work in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric is the teaching of first year writing. Regardless of your position in the university, you have inevitably found yourself or still find yourself sitting in a dungeon on the bottom floor of a building in a cubicle grading papers, meeting with students, and chatting with colleagues about how life is really unfair. No doubt during one of those venting sessions you have dreamt about how wonderful it would be to be paid more, to have fewer students in each of your classes, and to have more freedom in your classroom to teach what students want and need to learn.

TI: Tony Scott, in his book, *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*, is one of the first few scholars in our field to seriously analyze the political economy of composition and rhetoric classes and he substantiates his arguments with research and plenty of experience as a writing program administrator. He begins the academic conversation about what needs to happen in order for composition and rhetoric studies to really achieve all that it theoretically aims to.

SD: Currently, Tony Scott is Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric and Director of Undergraduate Studies at Syracuse University. In the following interview, we speak with Tony Scott about *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition* published by the Utah State University Press in 2009.

TI: Can you talk about the impetus for writing *Dangerous Writing*?

TS: When I was in graduate school, I was really excited about learning about rhetoric and composition as a field broadly, but I went into graduate school already with some political commitments so it was natural I think once I began to understand the full spectrum of the field that I would gravitate toward labor issues in composition, especially in first year composition. So when in graduate school, I met Mark Bousquet. He was faculty at the University of Louisville at the time and started doing some work with him and then we put together an edited collection that was a part of a broad project of trying to understand and address problems of labor in first year writing. But then, and this was

really important to me—I think my development intellectually in the field and my development of my stance, my intellectual stance and scholarly stance, I started to see teaching of writing as materially embedded, as a material act, so I started to become really interested in researching and understanding more about how that impacts curriculums and pedagogy. Day to day pedagogy, curricular policy, et cetera. So that led me down the road to beginning to do the research that became this book. I drafted the book actually after I got my first job. Although, my dissertation was focused on assessment, I actually focused more on academic labor as it relates to composition and composition scholarship at that point. Although, the two do intersect.

TI: Early on, you were advised not to go this route. Can you talk about that and offer advice for graduate students?

TS: I think especially prior to going on the market for my first job I was advised to stay away from these issues. I think there's been a tendency in the field, and I don't think this is as much the case now as it was ten years ago but I think there's been a tendency in the field to say, "Yeah, we have problems with academic labor. They exist. So the response to that should be that *we're nice*. We're nicer than other people tend to be to contingent instructors rather than we're nice but a) what are we going to do? And b) how is the fact that so many writing teachers are contingent teachers—how is that shaping who we are as a field and what our possibilities and limitations are?" So those are kind of big stick questions and they do tend to raise hackles. The other thing that I was starting to touch on that was raising some hackles at the time, I think, was the position of the WPA within this relationship. Again, WPA work is hard work. There are no easy answers, but I wanted to explore the relationship between contingent labor, first year writing, and institutions as it is mediated by WPAs. And that sort of gets into to what extent is a WPA helping a situation in a given institution and to what extent is a WPA actually enabling the situation which was and is a kind of controversial thing to talk about.

SD: One of the main points you make in *Dangerous Writing* is the need for open and honest dialogue about what it is that we are doing in Comp/Rhet?

TS: Maybe a good way of starting an answer to this question is to talk about the situation I encountered when I became a WPA myself. I took over a program that was at the time 63% part-time. And part-time at this institution meant that teachers were teaching on one-semester contracts making \$2000 a class with no benefits. The teachers were turning over at a rate of about a third a year meaning any given year you have a third new teachers coming into the classroom. And the remaining roughly forty percent, thirty percent of the classes were being taught by full-time lecturers-these were people on multi-year contracts but they were non tenure line and then about ten percent TAs so depending on your definition of contingent either the whole program was being taught by contingent teachers or 60-70% which is a lot, but if you go out and look at the scholarship and research in the field you have all these amazing discussions of pedagogy as it relates to so many different things from technology to what is public discourse et cetera, but you have an amazing lack of critical research on how the fact that we are using, almost in some

cases entirely contingent groups of teachers to teach first-year writing, is shaping what we do.

I think the honest dialogue needs to move beyond, *We need to be as nice and humane about the situation as we can*. We do. And it needs to move beyond, *Okay we need to get people a little bit more money and a little bit more benefits*. We do. If we are a field that remains serious about teaching pedagogy, theory, and research, we need to understand how teaching is actually being enacted, and the terms under which it is being enacted, and how that's shaping actual pedagogy. I think it's shaping even the research we do in ways that aren't being acknowledged.

TI: So, just going from that point, let's talk about some of those problems. In *Dangerous Writing*, you write, "My sense is that most PhDs in rhetoric and composition are not prepared by our professional training or our scholarly discourse to fully grasp and effectively account for the organizational and professional contradictions we encounter we enter into our professional lives." Can you talk more about this issue of compartmentalizing our work into academic work versus administrative work? And, if you could discuss, what can PhD programs do to prepare students for the realities of this future reality of professional life?

TS: At one point in drafting the book I had this kind of elaborate metaphor, and I used the old show, *Upstairs, Downstairs*. In my graduate program, there was literally an upstairs and a downstairs, and it's not that uncommon. Actually, there's an upstairs and a downstairs here, although I'm not saying that things are that compartmentalized in the same way. But all of the TAs and the part-time teachers had carrels together down in the basement of the building. And so when you had your teacher's hat on that's where you were, down there in the carrel or in the classroom. And then when you go upstairs we are PhD candidates, developing scholars in the field. People took our ideas more seriously, we took ourselves, I think, seriously; if not full-fledged professionals then as people on their way to being full-fledged professionals, and in my experience the two identities were pretty compartmentalized. And the two, if I see the two floors, downstairs and upstairs, in terms of activity, the activities were compartmentalized, as well. In one compartment, we talked about theory, we talked about research, we talked about what we would like to see happen in the classroom in informed ways. And downstairs it was, you know, people living hard scrabble lives: people having their cars break down, people having their addresses changing often, the office environment itself was not the greatest that you'd ever seen, conferencing with students with fellow teachers six feet away. So I think that we are encouraged to see the upstairs as the field when we're in graduate school. That when we get to our jobs we're going to get to leave the first floor behind us, and we're going to be managers, and we're going to spend a lot of our time researching and talking about writing in somewhat distanced, disembedded ways, but we're not going to have to connect in any kind of involved way with first-year writing and that scene anymore.

SD: We've talked about the problems of compartmentalization, but let's turn it to a discussion of the students that we're actually teaching in these courses. For instance, in *Dangerous Writing* you say, "Spurned on by the marketing of higher education, students at working

class institutions come to us precisely because they want a more economically secure life in an economy that is now characterized by its insecurity." How has the composition of college students changed over the years? What must writing programs do to address the change in student bodies?

TS: In so many classrooms, first-year writing was taught by part-time teachers who had part time jobs they were stringing together, and then their students themselves were part-time workers. In institutions such as the one I was at, at that time, 50% of the students were first generation college students, most of them paying their own way, and most of them running from a job to the class, and the teacher was as well! Running right back out of the classroom beside them to a car and then running off to another institution or to a job at Kinko's or whatever. That seemed really important to me because, again, you have the two tiers. You have the academic sphere, in which people are, again, doing this really fascinating research on writing and discourse, and then you have the material sphere, in which the majority of classes has part-time teachers teaching part-time workers. And so I asked, "What does that mean?" and the answer was, "Okay. Part of how I tried to understand the question was, how does this fit into the broader economy?" And I think it does. It fits into an economy that offers people lots of promises about what can happen if you have an education and you "play by the rules"—that was Bill Clinton's phrase. [Laughs]

And then what are the realities? How many full-time professional jobs are actually out there, and what do you have to do to get them? I think what writing programs and writing curriculums need to do to address the problems is to, for lack of a better phrase, *get real* about what's happening in the classroom. Stop having part-time teachers try to pretend that they're professors with full-time jobs and the lives of professors. It's not true, and there's a sense in which people know that. And I don't think students have to come into classrooms pretending like, acting like they're students at institutions like ours [Syracuse]—now, institutions at which, you know, most students have their educations paid for and they're not running from class to a job. If you get real about what's happening in the classroom, you start to get more real about all the issues that are surfacing in people's lives.

TI: I was speaking with a retired writing program administrator who said WPA is a no-win game. What do you think?

TS: [Laughs] I think that's really funny because it's the type of thing that all of us say as WPAs because no matter how idealistic you are when you get into the job, you realize when you get into it that you're just making tough choices. You're making lots of tough choices. It's a no-win game, I agree, in the sense that there's no real winning. If people gave you the money that you needed [laughs] and resources that you needed in order to run a really good, effective program, that would be a win. I've yet to see that happen.

So what you're doing is you're making really tough choices about who's in the classroom, about how much agency classroom teachers should have given varying levels of expertise and experience, and given the need to have some level of coherence and

consistency in the curriculum. It often feels like a no-win game in terms of first-year writing's position in institutions. People often express lots of concerns about writing, but again the institution as a whole is really reluctant to put many resources into the teaching of writing, and that's almost everyone you talk to as a WPA will tell you the same thing.

If you're located in the English department, English departments like to have first-year writing programs because they bring in lots of FTE. When almost every student who comes into the university has to go through your department, that bolsters your department's overall position in the university. That has bearing on the resources you get, the tenure lines you get. However, English departments tend to keep first-year writing programs starving on the vine. They want to have them housed in departments because of what they bring, but the resources go to lit. So in that sense, it's a no-win game as well. Do you want me to go on with this depressing scene? [*Laughs*]

TI: Highlight maybe one more of these.

TS: I think the public conversation, within the institution but the broader public conversation about writing, can just be very tough. And I think that gets people down as well. The assumptions people carry about writing in general are not the assumptions that we carry in the field. And as a WPA, you're sort of on the frontline of those conversations. You can't live within the happier fold of the department, doing your research and having your students and letting it be that. You actually have to explain what writing is to other stakeholders, and that sometimes feels like a game you're not going to win.

TI: So you're here in the Writing Program. We have certain ideas about what writing is, but then when you go out to other departments—when you go out to speak with deans, when you try to get everyone on board with your plan or your vision for what you think writing is according to the theory we study—you come, I'm sure, against a lot of pushback. How do you deal with that?

TS: I think the best way to deal with it is patiently. [*Laughs*] Because if you get your hackles raised and start saying I'm the authority and you're not. How much research have you done in writing? You get nowhere. So you have to pull back and say, Okay, where can I go with this person? What are the immediate goals in this situation? And can I move the person at least some in terms of how they see writing and the realistic goals of first-year writing program. Beyond that, I think it's pretty situational but a move I often like to make is to have people step back from the immediate milieu [*Laughs*] of student in a classroom because as soon as you go there, then you have generic student in classroom and you have all these generalizations about decline. I like to have people start talking about their own lives as writers in academia. How do you function as a writer? What specific things do you see students doing well? That sort of thing.

SD: Speaking of the relationship between teacher and student, can we discuss some of the challenges of assessment in composition and how assessment changes based on the teacher's place in the hierarchy of higher education?

- TS:** I think the sobering thing for me in assessment when I started to become interested in assessment was seeing what’s happened in K-12 education nationally over the last thirty years and seeing how the positions of teachers have diminished in terms of their levels of professional status and how that status has been diminished by accountability and assessment measures—teaching to the test. That’s the first thing many K-12 teachers will tell you is, *My work is being controlled so that students can score well on tests and now there’s a closing of the circle in terms of private industry.* The folks who make tests are the same people who are making curriculum and making textbooks. And teachers now as much as ever are being positioned as technicians in a classroom with limited agency in terms of what they can do. I could see that happening in higher education. I think there are movements afoot to try to make it happen. There was just an editorial in the *Times* over the weekend. There was a woman from a think tank—I forget her name and I actually forget the think tank—I think it could have been the Heritage Foundation, but she was asking, “Who’s accountable in higher education?” And then the answer is, “People need to be made accountable and they can be made accountable through testing.” So that provides some of the context for how I see the assessment. I think first-year writing is especially vulnerable to external control through assessment and the reason is because tenure line people are not teaching first year writing. You can’t make tenure line people do much. We’re in the way. And so whatever operations you have that are, pardon the sexist term, manned by part-time teachers, by teachers who don’t have a lot of professional status—you have operations that can be externally controlled and the easiest and best way to control curriculum is through assessment and accountability. So that’s big to me. I want to develop models for assessments that respect teachers as creative informed agents in the classroom. I don’t want assessments to be used as tools for standardization.
- TI:** In both the article that I read that you wrote and then also in this final chapter in the book, *Dangerous Writing*, you give this example of this program at Texas Tech University called ICON. And it says, “The ICON program relies on an interactive, computer automated system that facilitates the distribution of a writing curriculum, the management of a composition staff, and the assessment of student’s writing.” And so what people experience is very much a factory experience in teaching writing. And in the book you argue that this is an extreme example, but the systems we’ve come up with are not very different than this in terms of our approaches. Very simplified, uncomplicated approaches to writing. Let’s say a teacher has 100 students or 200 students. How do you assess that number of students with just one teacher? There are different approaches, but there’s an inherent problem in the number of students, if you’re going to do a good job.
- TS:** There is, but you can do efficiency model education that looks really good from the outside if you set it up with the right assessment. I could do it right now, here. [*Laughs*] I could do 40 or 50 student classrooms with teachers who are less expensive at the heads of those classrooms and I can set up an assessment that makes all that look like it’s, not only working well, but incredibly well. Students are scoring high on this, that, and that. And we can do that through making sure that teachers are hitting these three things, right, and the pedagogy. It all works! And it’s inexpensive, and administrators love that [*Laughs*] ... it’s very attractive. Universities have this problem, when, in the case of that

institution, 3,600 students a year coming in to classrooms, and the first year writing pedagogy model of rhetoric and composition is dramatically inefficient. We have to have small classes; we have to intensively know the writing of our students and respond to it... It's labor intensive. It's not attractive when you're looking at bottom lines. That's what we're struggling in the end.

SD: What have been some of the reactions to dangerous writing?

TS: I've had a lot of positive feedback. It's very gratifying to have people say: "you've described the field as I have been living it." Which is nice, it's nice to hear that. To the extent that I've had negative feedback, it's been... some people have said that I'm being unfair to WPA's, that I'm not being comprehensive enough in terms of how I'm describing the work. I think there's some validity to the latter part of that. I think if I were able to do another edition of the book I would talk more about the difficult positions that WPA's are in and I would complicate more how people need to respond to situations. When I wrote the book I still hadn't been a WPA. But overall, you know, within the field the response has been positive. Frankly, I would like to see, at least the issues that are raised in the book taken up more, because I do think that when you bring up difficult issues you risk being on the margins because they're just tough [laughs] they're tough issues. But, it hasn't been this big controversial thing, *Dangerous Writing*, within the field.

SD: And that was Tony Scott, Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric, and Director of Undergraduate Studies at Syracuse University, discussing his book *Dangerous Writing: Understanding the Political Economy of Composition*. And this has been Seth Davis.

TI: And Tamara Issak.

SD: Doctoral students at Syracuse University's Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program, reporting for *This Rhetorical Life*.

Cue music.

BK: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of This Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Kariann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.