



College Composition in the Anglophone Caribbean: The Search for a Caribbean Identity

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Abstract: The study presents the findings of web-based survey of college composition theorists and practitioners working at postsecondary institutions around the Anglophone Caribbean region, paying particular attention to what pedagogical strategies Caribbean compositionists view as 'distinctly Caribbean'. While several of the surveyed composition instructors do suggest strategies to localize the discipline of rhetoric and composition to best meet the needs of Anglophone Caribbean students, the study finds no evidence from the Caribbean compositionists surveyed that college composition instructors in the Anglophone Caribbean define their practice explicitly against North American (post-) process norms. Accordingly, the study has implications for compositionists attempting to build national and regional identity for the field of rhetoric and composition in areas outside of the United States.

Keywords: Caribbean composition; digital survey; disciplinary identity; rhetoric and composition

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Introduction

While important steps have been made in recent years to internationalize the discipline of rhetoric and composition (see, for example, Horner & Kopelson, 2014; Martins, 2015), a look through the program of the annual NCTE Conference on College Composition and Communication with a critical eye toward the institutional affiliations of the participants will quickly affirm that the tradition of rhetoric and composition studies remains an almost exclusively American pursuit. Little is known within the discipline of rhetoric and composition regarding the pedagogical practices and policies of college writing instructors working at institutions outside the United States. Moreover, the discipline of rhetoric and composition as it is practiced, studied, and taught in the United States is largely unknown at postsecondary institutions in much of the English-speaking world, including the UK and many parts of Canada.

This incomplete spread of the discipline of rhetoric and composition outside the United States includes the Anglophone Caribbean, where, despite the fact that American-style college composition has been taught at numerous institutions in the English-speaking Caribbean for decades, there have been, at present, very few published academic studies from the perspective of composition theory analyzing the specific problems and potentials in the teaching of writing to Caribbean postsecondary students. Furthermore, there does not exist a substantial body of research within the tradition of rhetoric and composition analyzing the state of academic writing pedagogy in the Anglophone Caribbean; nor is there an Anglophone Caribbean university that offers Ph.D. studies with an explicit focus on rhetoric and composition. That is to say, knowledge of the findings of the field of rhetoric and composition in the Anglophone Caribbean is 'flat'. Instead, most of the academic studies that have directly analyzed the college composition issues faced by Caribbean students have utilized the methods of applied linguistics or TESOL. Studies in this applied linguistics/TESOL tradition include those offered by Nero (2000; 2001), Bain (2005), and Rose and Sookraj (2015).

While college composition has never been truly 'nativized' in the Anglophone Caribbean, continued concern among both faculty and the wider populations regarding the state of Anglophone Caribbean postsecondary students' writing skills — due in significant part to the fact that Caribbean students' home languages are largely English Creoles (languages that developed in the colonial era out of the contact of English with the myriad African languages spoken by contemporary black Caribbeans' slave ancestors) — has led Caribbean postsecondary institutions to 'import' American-style college composition, oftentimes using textbooks and style guides written originally for the American college composition market. In fact, at my home institution, the University of the Bahamas (UB), faculty and administrators are so unimpressed with students'

Standard English writing skills that our students enrolled in Bachelor degree programs must take three separate English composition classes during their course of study.²

Working to fill the existing gap in the literature, the current study presents the findings of an ongoing survey study of the present state and historical development of composition pedagogy in the Anglophone Caribbean. Specifically, the current study presents the findings of an internet survey study of college composition theorists and practitioners working in several postsecondary institutions around the Anglophone Caribbean. The primary motivation behind the study is to gauge both the ways that Caribbean compositionists and practitioners modify the American discipline of rhetoric and composition to meet the needs of their students and whether there is evidence that Caribbean compositionists define their practices against American 'lax' (post-)process composition norms. In the study, specific focus is placed on what pedagogical practices and philosophies college composition instructors and theorists in the Anglophone Caribbean view as 'distinctly Caribbean'. To achieve these aims, I shall: first, provide more background on the current state of composition studies in the Anglophone Caribbean; second, overview important landmarks in the research literature on the teaching of college composition in the English-speaking Caribbean and the relevant research literature on survey methodology; third, outline the design of the survey study and questionnaire instrument; next, present selected results from survey respondents, critically analyzing a handful of responses; and finally, in the conclusion section of the piece, reflect upon what the survey study can offer composition theorists and practitioners working in other regions outside the United States.

Background Information

Having received my doctoral training in rhetoric and composition in the United States, and having worked for postsecondary institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean for several years, I have found the prevailing pedagogical strategies used at my own institution and the other institutions I have had dealings with very 'traditional' — a response similar to the overall assessment of the state of composition pedagogy in the Caribbean of the several other American-trained rhetoric and composition scholars teaching in the Caribbean that I have met. Indeed, it is clear to see that many Caribbean composition instructors, in part due to the influence of traditionally-focused also-American-in-origin textbooks and style guides, have retained much of what is often derided by contemporary rhetoric and composition scholars as *(current-)traditional pedagogy* (e.g., the 'modes' discourse taxonomy and a product-focused orientation to

² In addition to teaching at my home institution, I have taught composition at the local campus of the University of the West Indies, a regional Caribbean institution, an institution that does provide some degree of regional educational identity, working with faculty in several different territories. Thus, I believe I can speak with some authority regarding the pedagogical practices used throughout the Caribbean region.

the teaching of writing). That is to say, if the United States is the origin point of 'progressive' (post-)process composition pedagogies in the Caribbean, it is also a primary source of 'traditional' pedagogy in the Caribbean as well.

Furthermore, whether a result of former and present connections between certain postsecondary institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean and the postsecondary institutions in UK (the University of the West Indies, for example, once had connections to the University of London), or as postcolonial hypercorrection/overcompensation of British '*stiff-upper-lip*' assessment criteria, the grading standards enforced by many Caribbean-trained faculty can seem to American-trained faculty as overly punitive — especially considering that the home languages of most Caribbean students are English Creoles rather than Standard Englishes. In fact, the idea that we might be more accepting of the local creoles and their attendant 'errors', at least according to Standard English, in terms of subject-verb agreement, presence of past participle morphology, etc., in students' writing is interpreted by a good number of composition instructors in the Caribbean as yet another example of lax American '*everyone's a winner*' pedagogy. Nonetheless, a similar preference among American black educators for more 'traditional' '*skills-focused*' English writing pedagogies — in opposition to the '*process*' models preferred by the (largely white) liberal educational establishment — has been noted, and eloquently defended, by American black educational theorist Delpit (Delpit, 1995, p. 25).

The fact that certain salient elements of discipline of rhetoric and composition (e.g., [post-]process models) can be pigeonholed by English composition instructors in the Caribbean as '*American*' ideas has, without a doubt, affected the uptake of the findings of rhetoric and composition in the Anglophone Caribbean. Indeed, at my institution one of the main contentious issues between the younger largely American-trained faculty members and the older, more-likely-Caribbean-trained faculty when we are having discussions regarding pedagogy and curriculum is whether what appears to the American-trained rhetoric and composition faculty to be 'modernization' of our curriculum is, in fact, an 'Americanization' of our curriculum, leading to the a loss of the essentially Caribbean elements of our pedagogy. This issue is one of the primary reasons I have been interested in developing the current study. For example, if the survey finds that the majority of the respondents hold modes-based pedagogy near and dear and view it as something that is now 'distinctly Caribbean' (despite the modes' origins in the 19th century American composition textbook tradition [see, for example, Connors [1997]]), then perhaps composition programs in institutions in the Anglophone Caribbean should take seriously enshrining modes-based curriculum as a core feature of their pedagogy. If, instead, the study finds that Caribbean composition instructors and theorists do not find traditional pedagogy as core feature of the self-identity of Caribbean composition, then this can be used as evidence by compositionists working at postsecondary institutions in the Caribbean that 'traditional' pedagogy can be

abandoned at their institution without losing distinctly Caribbean features of their curriculum. Indeed, one of the primary goals of the current study is to attempt to uncover what, if any, pedagogical values and strategies Caribbean compositionists believe to be 'essentially Caribbean'.

While the study draws heavily on the divide between '*traditionally-focused* Caribbean pedagogy' and '*process-focused* American pedagogy' for framing and to introduce important discussions about college composition pedagogy in the Anglophone Caribbean, I recognize that this is an oversimplified dichotomy; it draws upon, and potentially reinforces, the stereotypes that Caribbean-trained composition instructors and American-trained composition instructors in the Anglophone Caribbean have of each other. Nonetheless, the presence of these stereotypes is a legitimate social fact in the Anglophone Caribbean postsecondary institutions. In the study, my goal is to collect empirical evidence to critically analyze and potentially problematize this simple dichotomy. Furthermore, I recognize that any notion of an 'essentially Caribbean' identity is, like any notion of a stable identity, also a stereotype, a myth. However, as former (or still current) colonies still developing their own national education systems, I believe that it is both fair and desirable that Anglophone Caribbean countries wish to develop their own national and regional educational values distinct from those of the UK and the United States.

The State of Play in the Anglophone Caribbean

The task of overviewing the present state and historical development of college composition in the Anglophone Caribbean is, of course, made difficult by the fact that by the territories of the English-speaking Caribbean are spread over the one million square miles of the Caribbean basin and are, for the most part, developing countries (or still colonies) with small populations, and oftentimes limited resources for or traditions of academic research. Furthermore, any researcher attempting to survey the present state and historical development of composition pedagogy in the postsecondary institutions of the Anglophone Caribbean must deal with the fact that there is not a unified Caribbean educational identity; we must take into account the competing American and British spheres of influence in the Caribbean — in addition to the various national differences. The Anglophone Caribbean includes all of the following: former British colonies that are now independent, Commonwealth countries with UK-inherited legal and educational structures (this list includes Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago); current UK colonies (this list includes Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, and the Turks and Caicos Islands); and even an American colony in the case of the US Virgin Islands.

Puerto Rico is also, of course, a US territory, but not primarily Anglophone. However, because of its connections to the US, and its tradition of teaching English college composition, I have included it in this study.

While the former British colonies of the Anglophone Caribbean have received the bulk of their political and educational structures from Britain, we must, nevertheless, take into account the ever increasing 'soft colonial' influence of American media, language, and educational culture. Indeed, in most Caribbean countries American English has either already or is in the process of replacing British English as the most important variety of 'foreign English' (Roberts, 2007, p. 22) according to which people understand and define their own variety. In the Bahamas, the present stalemate between British and American Standard Englishes, educational cultures, and language norms is symbolized nicely by the orthographic preferences of the two main mainstream newspapers in Nassau, the capital and largest city, with one more consistently using American spellings and the other more consistently using British spellings (Oenbring, 2010, p. 55).

Literature Review

Perhaps not surprisingly, most existing studies of the distinct composition proclivities and issues of Anglophone Caribbean students have been of Caribbean students studying at institutions in the United States (e.g., Carney, 2009). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, most academic studies analyzing the composition issues of Caribbean postsecondary student writers have come from the field of applied linguistics and TESOL. Nevertheless, there have been a handful of recently published academic studies in the Anglophone Caribbean squarely operating from the tradition of rhetoric and composition. The most substantial of these recent studies is Milson-Whyte's magisterial (2015) volume critically analyzing the historical development of postsecondary writing pedagogies at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. In the book, Milson-Whyte makes a strong case for pedagogies that build students' awareness of the distinct styles of writing used in different academic disciplines (i.e., WAC/WID) in the Caribbean postsecondary context, arguing against what she calls the "rhetoric of transparent disciplinarity" (Milson-Whyte, 2015, p. 10). Also in the study, Milson-Whyte notes how UWI has, in part due to its British colonial pedigree, maintained an institutional emphasis on the rhetoric of *excellence* rather than *equity* or *access*, something that manifests itself in the classroom as highly demanding grading standards.

Further to the north (that is on the cultural and geographic boundaries of the Caribbean), there have been a handful of studies in the past decades by rhetoric and composition scholars investigating the teaching of writing in postsecondary institutions

in the Bahamas. Fiore and Elsasser (1982) overview the latter's challenges and successes teaching college composition using explicitly Freirian models in the late 1970s at the College of the Bahamas, the institution that would become the University of the Bahamas. More recently, Bruce (2015) analyzes the unique problems and potentials in serving as a Writing Program Administrator (WPA) at her American university's small Bahamian campus. Furthermore, Oenbring et al. (2016) presents the results of a student exit survey of the largest first-year writing course at the University of the Bahamas, finding that students rated the class as highly effective in building their college composition writing skills.

Methods

There is a growing tradition in writing studies of using web-based surveys for research. Lauer, McLeod, and Blythe (2013) note, for example, that in January and February 2013 no fewer than seven requests for survey participation were distributed through the Council of Writing Program Administrators listserv (Lauer, McLeod, & Blythe, 2013, p. 330.). Following in this research tradition, for the current study, an electronic survey entitled the Survey of Tertiary Writing Instruction Methods in the Anglophone Caribbean, was developed using the Google docs platform, and invitation emails were sent to composition theorists and practitioners at numerous institutions around the Anglophone Caribbean. To develop the list of those faculty members to send email invitations to, I collected emails from college and university websites, selecting those faculty members who either indicated composition or writing instruction as an area of research or teaching focus in their bios on the institutions' websites or that were listed as on the course schedules as instructors for college writing courses. Invitation to participate emails were sent to faculty at all of the following institutions: the University of the Bahamas, the University of Belize, the University College of the Cayman Islands, the University of Guyana, the University of Puerto Rico, the University of the Virgin Islands, and the University of the West Indies. In addition to sending out email invitations (read: *spamming people*), I also posted the link to the survey on relevant internet forums such as the Society for Caribbean Linguistics' Facebook group. The invitation emails encouraged would-be respondents to forward the link to others that might be interested in participating in the study in order to encourage snowballing. Before completing the survey proper, respondents were required to select a check box acknowledging that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they acknowledged that their responses could be used for research purposes.

While snowball sampling does not provide an ideal random sample, it has, nonetheless, been promoted by social scientists as a cost-effective method for reaching disperse or difficult-to-reach populations (Voicu, 2011), as reaching an adequate

sample of composition theorists and practitioners, a group not yet organized by a regional professional organization, across the vast physical and political space of the Caribbean basin without a doubt is. What's more, despite the fears that some scholars have expressed of a growing 'digital divide' in research and otherwise between the West and the global south (Norris, 2001), other scholars (Fielding et al., 2011, p. 31) have suggested that digital-medium-based scholarship such as internet surveys can actually serve as effective tools for collecting information in countries with relatively few resources for research and unreliable snail mail systems. Indeed, there is an established tradition in Caribbean of using electronic surveys for research (see, for example, the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS 2014 survey homosexual practices in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Men's Internet Survey). Furthermore, as several scholars have noted, an obvious advantage of Internet-based surveys is their relative low cost and overhead in comparison to other methods of survey distribution (e.g., phone or mail surveys) (Fowler, 2009, p. 77).

Having aims understanding Caribbean compositionists' self-understanding of their field rather the particular types of the writing assignments they assign to students, in designing the study, I consciously chose to avoid closed-ended questions or check-boxes about the prevailing composition philosophies and assignment types used at the respondents' institutions. That is to say, I aimed in the study to understand Caribbean compositionists meta-critical awareness of the field at their institution. Indeed, Fowler (2009) notes that one of the main advantages of Internet surveys, in comparison to other methods such as phone interviews, is that they "provide the time for thoughtful answers, checking records, or consulting with others" (Fowler, 2009, p. 83). The open-ended nature of the questions also allowed for more elaborated responses. Following the suggestion of Lauer, McLeod, and Bythe (2013) to design web-based surveys with user-experience as a central focus —and to increase the chances that invitees would actually participate in the survey — the survey instrument was limited to four short open-ended questions. The questions of the survey instrument are as follows:

1. Do you believe that there is a uniquely Caribbean approach to the teaching of college composition (i.e., distinct from the approaches used in the US, UK, Canada, etc.)? If so, please describe.
2. How would you describe the overarching pedagogical approach(es) used to teach composition at your institution?
3. In what ways have the methods used to teach composition at your institution changed over the years? Please describe.
4. Do you believe that the largely oral nature of Caribbean culture and/or the Caribbean esteem for public oratory influence the teaching of college writing at your institution? In what ways?

Results

At present the survey has been completed by 20 respondents representing most of the institutions I solicited responses from, including the University of the Bahamas, the University of Belize, University College of the Cayman Islands, the University of the Virgin Islands (in the United States Virgin Islands), and the University of the West Indies. (It should be noted that respondents were not required to indicate their institutional affiliation and some didn't.) While I am generally satisfied with the number of respondents at present, I aim in the future to continue to solicit responses in order to increase the sample size for continuing studies.

Although my working hypothesis in the study was that a number of respondents would emphasize the greater '*rigor*' (the code-word of choice) of composition pedagogy in the Caribbean in their responses, there was no evidence for this pattern in survey responses; perhaps the most surprising finding of the study at present is that none of the survey respondents mentioned '*greater rigor*' or the equivalent in their responses to the question about whether there is a uniquely Caribbean approach to the teaching of composition. Moreover, none of the respondents made any statements indicating that they view *current traditional rhetoric* or modes-based pedagogy as an integral element of Caribbean composition. Of course, it seems possible that this may be due simply to the fact that those faculty who were more likely to complete the study were those more likely to be versed in the findings of rhetoric and composition and less likely to endorse '*rigorous*' or *current-traditional* pedagogy. Conversely, those instructors and respondents who practice traditional pedagogy may be simply unaware of labels such as *current-traditional pedagogy*, *rhetorical pedagogy*, or *process theory*, and thus did not use the terms in their responses. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that the attitudes expressed by the survey respondents are explicit attitudes rather than implicit attitudes; those who hold an ideology or bias usually do so unreflectively, and they are unable to describe how that ideology influences their judgment.

However, an interesting pattern that I have found in the responses to the question of whether there is a uniquely Caribbean approach to teaching composition is that a number of respondents suggested that Caribbean composition pedagogies can and should take account of the fact that college composition students in Anglophone Caribbean largely come to the academy with home languages that are English Creoles rather than Standard English(es). The following response from a faculty member at University of the Virgin Islands is illustrative of this broader pattern:

Yes, there is a uniquely Caribbean approach in that students need to learn code-switching to an even greater extent because most of them speak in local dialect and some have difficulty coming to terms with the idea that they have to write in standard English for their university courses, and that being able to communicate

using standard English is also important for the post-graduate employability.

Following a pattern suggested by several other respondents, the above response emphasizes that teaching students how to code-switch (or, in more recent terminology how to *code-mash* or *code-mixing*) is a central feature of a uniquely Caribbean approach to the teaching of college composition. Also of interest in the above response is the respondent's clear dichotomy between the 'local dialect' and 'standard English', a distinction that several instructors also made; it is clear that the dichotomy between 'dialect' and the potentially-loaded notion of 'standard English' is in wide use by Caribbean composition instructors. Furthermore, while the above respondent's invocation of the notion of 'post-graduate employability' is noteworthy, no other respondents mentioned 'post-graduate employability' or similar notions.

What's more, many respondents suggested that Anglophone-Caribbean college composition pedagogies can and should utilize the uniquely oral nature of Afro-Caribbean cultures to build students' rhetorical awareness. The following response from a faculty member at the University of the Bahamas exemplifies this broader pattern:

Of course, content should reflect the lived experiences of the students as well as the experiences we want them to move toward having. Additionally, I think we can exploit the culture in instruction. For example, if the local culture has a strong oral tradition, this can be used to help students understand rhetorical principles and writing strategies, and examine the similarities and differences in expectations.

As the above respondent suggests, several instructors emphasized that composition instructors in the Anglophone Caribbean can and should draw upon Caribbean students' cultural proclivities to oratory and orality, encouraging students to "examine the similarities and differences in expectations" in various rhetorical situations. Instructors can do this by encouraging students to reflect upon how they adapt their language to meet the needs of specific rhetorical and sociolinguistic situations (e.g., speaking to a professor versus speaking to a friend) and extending that to written forms of communication as well. This strategy of having students directly analyze examples from the local culture as a way to build rhetorical awareness, a strategy endorsed by other respondents, is similar to methods endorsed by noted American black educator Delpit (Delpit, 1995, p. 53). Furthermore, composition instructors can draw upon Caribbean students' cultural proclivities to oratory by using oral presentations, discussions, and debates as brainstorming or scaffolding tools for students' written essays. Finally, while the above respondent's use of the term '*exploit*' is suggestive, seemingly reaffirming the colonial legacies of exploitation and reaffirming the instructor as an 'outsider', it seems likely that the respondent, although choosing their words

potentially poorly, meant *'exploit'* in the sense of *'use'* or *'take advantage of'* without intending a manipulative sense from the word *'exploit'*.

Several (N=10) survey respondents suggested *'process writing'* to be a guiding pedagogical philosophy at their institution. While this clearly indicates that the *'process writing'* label has become at least partially established in the Anglophone Caribbean, we should be careful not to infer too much from this finding. Indeed, it is clear that the *'process writing'* label has, in at least several Anglophone Caribbean institutions, been nominally and superficially adopted but with the curriculum retaining a product focus. Milson-Whyte notes, for example, that at UWI the process label has become entrenched, but this merely means that “superficial elements of process writing [have been] grafted onto a product-driven system” (Milson-Whyte, 2015, p. 152). Nonetheless, I am willing to say that I see it as a good thing that several respondents mentioned *process writing* to be a prevailing idea at their institutions.

While *process writing* was the most commonly mentioned school of thought in the study, respondents indicated the presence of other approaches in their response to the question asking them to describe the pedagogical philosophies and strategies used for the teaching of composition at their institution. All in all, the range of responses to that particular question were similar to what I would expect from a survey of a broad range of composition instructors and theorists at institutions in the United States. Somewhat surprisingly, only one respondent indicated the presence of *traditional rhetoric* or the equivalent as one of pedagogies practiced by instructors at their institution. This instructor, from the University of Belize, emphasized that traditional rhetoric is only one of the myriad approaches to teach writing used at their institution. Furthermore, several instructors mentioned concepts that rightly or wrongly have become associated with the canon of *expressivist* thought (e.g., *freewriting*, a strategy most closely associated with the work of Elbow [1973]) as strategies used at their institution. Finally, several respondents mentioned *social constructionism*, a concept more closely associated with *post-process* composition theories, as a prevailing school of thought at their institution.

Conclusion

While rhetoric and composition faculty in most American universities no doubt face issues in attempting to sell the findings of the discipline to colleagues not versed in the tradition both inside and outside of English departments, American-trained rhetoric and composition faculty working in institutions outside the United States may face the added hurdle that the discipline of rhetoric and composition can be dismissed as *'American'* ideas. Indeed, faculty at institutions around the globe in regions that may lack systematic studies of postsecondary writing pedagogy — whether they are American

expatriate faculty, or they are locally-trained faculty discovering American rhetoric and composition research literature — likely face similar issues in attempting to present current best practices in rhetoric and composition to faculty not versed in the findings of rhetoric and composition. Thus, it is indeed important for rhetoric and composition to continue to look outside the United States and continue to internationalize the field in order to reduce the perception — whether rightly deserved or not — that implementing common policies and practices within the American tradition of rhetoric and composition in institutions outside the United States constitutes a form of American cultural imperialism. Furthermore, for rhetoric and composition faculty working in regions outside the United States looking to advance the systematic study of postsecondary writing at their institution, the current study may provide a model for how to assess what are the prevailing pedagogical values in the teaching of writing in their region and how to build pan-regional pedagogical identity that does not discount local knowledge and practices, all while doing its best to avoid the *ugly American* trope.

Although there is, for certain, much more that can be written on the historical development and disciplinary identity of college composition in the Anglophone Caribbean, the current study hopes to be a tentative step towards a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of the self-understanding of college composition in the region. As I have noted, most systematic studies of postsecondary writing instruction in the Anglophone Caribbean have, up to now, used the methods of TESOL and/or applied linguistics rather than the lenses of composition theory. The evidence in the study suggests that there is, at present, a clear divide between the composition theorists who participated in the study (who do not endorse traditional pedagogies as a core feature of the identity of Caribbean composition) and composition instructors (who clearly do use more *'traditional'*, product-focused pedagogies). What's more, although the Caribbean clearly has established and developing distinct traditions of college writing pedagogy, there appears to an established core of faculty working at Anglophone Caribbean postsecondary institutions who are well aware of current discussions in the field of rhetoric and composition.

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