Institutionalizing Normal: Rethinking Composition’s Precedence in Normal Schools

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Composition historians have recently worked to recover histories of composition in normal schools. This essay argues, however, that historians have inadvertently misconstrued the role of normal schools in American education by inaccurately comparing rhetorical education in normal schools to rhetorical education in colleges and universities. Consequently, claims that normal schools set useful historical precedents for rhetoric and composition are misguided. In order to understand normal schools’ importance for contemporary teachers and scholars, composition historians need to account more precisely for larger institutional objectives—common objectives that constitute an institution type across individual cases—that shaped the conditions for rhetorical education.

A normal school is a school established for the academic and professional preparation of teachers. It is a technical school differing from academies and colleges in its objects and methods of work. The objects of the academy and college are general culture and the acquisition of knowledge; the object of the normal school is to impart culture, discipline, skill, and learning to its students for a specific and technical purpose, viz, that of fitting them to teach others.

—Eliphalet Oram Lyte, “The State Normal Schools of the United States,” 1903 (1104)

The normal school under this name or some equivalent title has been established in all lands where there exists a system of state-supported schools. It is a vital part of the public school system because well-trained teachers are a prime requisite for efficient schools.

—David Felmley, “The Collegiate Rank of the Normal School,” 1923 (41)

As David Felmley, president of the State Normal University in Normal, Illinois, indicates in the epigraph, normal schools served an essential function in American education for many decades—training teachers to teach. Normal schools are now relics of education history, but they were once prominent, if not exactly preeminent, teacher-training institutions. Hundreds of normals were founded in communities in nearly every state in the nation, and in some cases, cities and towns aggressively lobbied state governments for the right to open normal schools (Ogren 26, 57-59).
They educated tens of thousands of students each year during the height of their popularity, and although they ultimately produced only a fraction of the teachers needed, in the last decades of 1800s, normal schools enrolled more students than any other type of institution of higher education (Burke 216; Harris xiv-xix). Furthermore, because they were often founded in rural settings and open to students without regard to race, class, or gender, education historian Jurgen Herbst argues that “[n]ormal schools, rather than land-grant universities, were the pioneers of higher education for the people” (“Nineteenth-Century” 227). It is not an exaggeration to say that normal schools played an integral role in the spread of universal education in America; without them, large numbers of students—especially underprivileged students, non-white students, and female students—would not have been exposed to formal rhetorical education or composition instruction. In recognition of normal schools’ significance during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, composition historians have recently begun researching their role in providing rhetoric and writing education (see Bordelon; Fitzgerald, “Platteville,” “Platteville Revisited,” and “Rediscovered”; Gold; Gray; Lindblom, Banks, and Quay; Ritter; Rothermel, “Our Life’s Work” and “Sphere”).

By and large, composition historians have found in the normal school “a site that turns out to harbor rich intellectual, methodological, and political implications for composition’s tradition” because “several contemporary attitudes about composition theory, methods, teachers, and students have precedent in the normal schools” (Fitzgerald, “Rediscovered” 225). There is some question about the degree to which normals embraced theories and pedagogies that existed in colleges and universities, but there is widespread consensus that normals belong to what David Gold calls “a rich, alternative tradition of rhetorical education in America” (x). As such, composition historians have argued that studying normal schools is important for understanding how large numbers of students were taught to write, as well as for discovering historical precedents that have shaped the modern field of rhetoric and composition. Like Fitzgerald and Gold, I agree that normal schools merit closer attention from historians. However, in service of discovering the rich intellectual, methodological, and political implications of normal schools, composition historians have significantly misconstrued the role of normal schools in American education. By focusing their scope of inquiry on disciplinary norms and practices (c.f., Gannett, Brereton, and Tirabassi), historians have not accounted for important institutional issues that framed how students were taught to write. As a consequence, claims about normal school precedence for contemporary rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars are problematic.

One critical concern with normal school histories is that they rely on a flawed comparison of rhetorical education in normals to rhetorical education in colleges and universities. That is, historians have sought to understand normal schools by drawing comparisons from pedagogies, curricula, and
theories at colleges and universities. But, as I discuss below, normals were not colleges or universities, nor were they meant to be. In fact, they were specifically designed in contrast to colleges and universities. So, while such comparisons may potentially yield some valuable insights, they are substantially limited. As well, discussions of historical precedence overlook crucial aspects of normal schools’ objectives and histories, such as normal schools’ objective of providing both secondary and post-secondary instruction. Consequently, the lessons composition historians have drawn from normal schools—about writing pedagogy, rhetorical curricula and extra-curricula, and historical precedence—are misguided inasmuch as they fail to appreciate the ways in which normal schools’ unique institutional objectives shaped the conditions for rhetoric and writing.

If composition historians are to learn significant lessons from normal schools, it is imperative that we consider more carefully normals’ unique role in American education—especially given the fallacies that constitute many widely held beliefs about them. In Feminist Rhetorical Practices, Jacqueline Jones Royster notes that when she began researching African-American women’s rhetorics, she was met with “deep disbelief” about their contributions to nineteenth century rhetorical history (Royster and Kirsch 9). “[T]he growth of the historical documentation of lives and contributions of women of African descent,” which countered entrenched understandings about African-American women, was necessary for Royster’s claims to be understood. The same, I contend, is true of normal schools. That is, in order to draw useful conclusions about normal schools’ significance, historians must first upset entrenched understandings of normals by developing broader historical documentation of normal schools’ functions in American education.

In this paper, I begin the work of developing a more precise historical account of normal schools’ functions in American education, first by analyzing normal schools’ distinctive institutional objectives—the common objectives that constituted normals across individual cases. Then, I turn to the example of a single institution, Tempe Normal School (TNS). I use Tempe Normal as a case study because it exemplifies the qualities of normals that are supposed to qualify them as part of the “alternative rhetorical tradition”—it was rural, in the West, served primarily female students, and offered students a robust rhetorical curriculum and extra-curriculum. TNS is also notable because it eventually transformed into Arizona State University, one of the country’s most prominent twenty-first century research universities. I use the example of TNS to argue that, despite parallels with other post-secondary institutions, rhetorical education differed significantly at the normal because of institutional objectives. Finally, I draw out some of the potential lessons that can be learned from normals when they are considered apart from the search for historical precedence.
Institutionalizing Normal

“It Wasn’t Much of a College”

As I noted, composition historians have generally compared rhetorical education at normal schools to that at colleges and universities. Even when historians have recognized important distinguishing characteristics of normals, these comparisons persist and they strongly inform claims to precedence. For example, even after noting complex differences between normal schools and colleges in her influential article, “A Rediscovered Tradition: European Pedagogy and Composition in Nineteenth-Century Midwestern Normal Schools,” Kathryn Fitzgerald contrasts the Pestalozzian intellectual traditions at normal schools to current-traditionalism in college composition. She concludes that normal school values (e.g., student-centered pedagogy, intellectual freedom, etc.) strongly reflect contemporary values in rhetoric and composition, and therefore deserve historians’ attention. Fitzgerald’s comparison is understandable inasmuch as it echoes similar characterizations of normal schools in education histories more broadly (see Ogren 2-3). However, it significantly oversimplifies normal schools’ purposes for existing by describing them as institutionally parallel to colleges and universities, which they were not.

Of course, normal schools did resemble colleges and universities in important ways. For instance, normal schools offered rhetoric and/or writing courses that resemble courses offered at other types of institutions (see Gray for a good example). However, as Fitzgerald notes, “Normal schools were established in a completely different social and educational environment from the elite schools on which historians have primarily focused so far” (225-226). I would extend Fitzgerald’s analysis by noting that normal schools were established in completely different social and educational environments than virtually all colleges and universities, elite or otherwise. Most pointedly, normal schools differed from colleges and universities in that they were not exclusively post-secondary institutions. Rather, normal schools were designed to be simultaneously secondary and post-secondary. As superintendent of Denver schools, Aaron Gove, wrote in his contribution to the 1903 Report of the Commissioner of Education, “The education covered in the average normal school corresponds well to that of the secondary school, with the increased task of professional work” (357). Gove’s description of normals is neither apologetic nor accidental—normal schools were expressly intended to overlap secondary and post-secondary levels in order to meet the institutional mission of training teachers for public schools. This characteristic overlap had serious effects on normal schools in general, and as I argue later, on rhetorical education in particular.

Before looking specifically at rhetorical education, it is worth considering the more general curricular objectives defined by normals’ overlapping secondary and post-secondary education. A fundamental assumption of normal school proponents was that normal students (often called “normalites”) would receive an education that differed significantly from that given at
colleges and universities. Whereas colleges were expected to offer students a liberal education (see Cohen 145-147) and universities were designed to facilitate content-specific research (see Lucas, American 194-195), normal schools were conceived of and established to impart teaching methods and classroom administration, irrespective of content knowledge (Ogren 32-33). These objectives were geared toward preparing students for the demands of public school teaching, where teachers simultaneously taught and administered schools; students ranged in age from 6 to 15, and had radically diverse levels of academic preparation; and teaching conditions (i.e., materials, attendance, etc.) varied dramatically from one school to another.

Meeting the distinctive curricular objective of preparing future teachers, not surprisingly, required that normals adopt a distinctive curriculum. In “Nineteenth-Century Normal Schools in the United States,” Jurgen Herbst explains that normal schools were “created for a two-fold purpose: to review the basic subjects taught in the elementary schools as proper objects of the teacher’s pedagogical expertise and to instill in the future teacher a few basic precepts of professional knowledge” (220). In short, normal schools provided (1) an academic curriculum that focused on elementary (and secondary) school subjects, often called the “common branches,” and (2) a professional curriculum that trained normalites in methods. The academic curriculum refreshed students’ acquaintance with subjects they would be expected to teach, and the professional curriculum provided teachers with skills necessary for efficient teaching and classroom management.

In addition to refreshing normalites’ acquaintance with basic subjects, the academic curriculum also addressed practical realities. An important consequence of normal schools’ broad admissions policies was that many students who attended normal schools had little or no formal education. In fact, normal schools were sometimes the first schools established in a given area. Therefore, it was not uncommon for normalites to need introduction to and review of basic subjects, including reading, writing, and arithmetic. As Ogren writes, “Basic liberal-arts subjects were a necessary part of the curriculum at all state normals from the beginning,” because most students “arrived with limited exposure to anything beyond what was offered in the common schools” (45). Some students arrived without any prior formal education, and normals were often not in a position to deny admittance based on students’ qualifications or lack thereof. Therefore, the academic curriculum enabled normals to address students’ widely varying academic preparation under the guise of meeting the second, and central, purpose of the normal: providing general methodological, meta-discursive knowledge—“sound techniques for teaching”—deemed necessary for teaching (Lucas, Teacher 29).

According to normal school proponents, the genuine and distinctive function of normal schools was imparting general teaching methods—what Edward Everett, an early advocate of normal schools, called “those principles of our nature on which education depends; the laws which control the fac-
ulties of the youthful mind in the pursuit and attainment of truth; and the moral sentiments on the part of the teacher and pupil which must be brought into harmonious action” (qtd. in Ogren 32). Everett indicates that teacher training started from general methods, which could be used to teach any subject to any student in any classroom (e.g., recitation, study skills, organization, etc.). These methods fitted students for the essential demands of teaching and prepared them to be effective irrespective of the conditions in which they taught. Normal instruction then moved to subject-specific methods—the “peculiar methods, applicable to each branch of knowledge”—that made teaching biology or history more effective (Ogren 32).

The focus on methods was seen as normal schools’ greatest strength, in part because it distinguished normals from colleges and universities and countered the accusation that normals duplicated other institutions’ offerings. This was especially an issue in places where institutions had to justify the expenditure of state funds for establishing and maintaining institutions of public education. The importance of the distinction can be seen in education reports filed around the turn of the twentieth century. In 1895, for example, the National Education Association (NEA) formed a normal school committee. According to the committee’s 1899 report:

The work of the normal school is unique. It means more than teaching subjects; it means more than the developing of the character; it means the teaching of subjects that they in turn may be taught; it means the development of character that it in turn may be transfigured into character; it means such a preparation for life that it in turn may prepare others to enter fully, readily, and righteously into their environment. Thus to prepare an individual to lead and direct a little child is a grave responsibility. (“Report” 838)

As this passage indicates, the committee put strong emphasis on articulating normal schools’ professional, methodological focus. Although the report makes occasional reference to the importance of liberal education, it attaches far greater importance to normal schools’ unique professional work: “It is this kind of work that distinguishes normal school work in the branches from academic work proper as we find it in the high school. It is professional” (840). In other words, the professional curriculum represented normals’ distinct value in contrast to high schools, colleges, or universities.

The NEA committee’s comparison of normal schools to high schools—not colleges or universities—is telling. It reinforces the point that normals cannot be easily equated to colleges. But equally important is the committee’s focus on differentiating “academic work” from “professional work.” The committee’s report reiterates the conception of academic work as elementary and/or secondary and professional work—that is, teaching methods—as normals’ only properly post-secondary subject matter. To put it another way, as a general rule, normal schools’ post-secondary curriculum was solely
focused on teaching methods. This distinction has important ramifications for studying rhetorical education in normal schools because, as I discuss in more detail below, courses in rhetoric, writing, composition, and literature and language were usually considered “academic.” They were, therefore, generally confined to the secondary level.

In detailing normal schools’ institutional objectives to this point, I do not mean to suggest that all normals were identical. Nevertheless, normal schools’ institutional objectives remained relatively stable across individual examples. In his description of the national condition of normal schools for the 1903 Report of the Commissioner of Education, Eliphalet Oram Lyte writes, “As a rule all the normal schools of a State have the same general course of study, and there is no great variation among the States of a division of the Union. There is more difference in the standards applied by the faculties of different institutions than in the courses of study” (1132). Individual normal schools had particular emphases, and rigor could vary greatly from one normal to another, but there was still significant uniformity with regard to normal school objectives, including what constituted appropriate elements of the post-secondary curriculum.11

Given the relative uniformity among normal schools, and given the general tendency to restrict post-secondary training in normal schools to teaching methods, composition historians’ inclination to compare rhetorical education in normal schools to rhetorical education in other post-secondary institutions necessitates serious scrutiny. When, for example, Kathryn Fitzgerald notes that “normal teachers [in 1900] reported using texts by Scott and Denney, Buck and Woodbridge, and A.S. Hill” (“Rediscovered” 231), it bears examining whether those texts were used: (1) to teach rhetoric and writing at the post-secondary level, (2) to teach rhetoric and writing at the secondary level, or (3) to teach future teachers to teach rhetoric and writing at the elementary and secondary level. Fitzgerald strongly implies the first case, but in light of normals’ post-secondary focus on methods as outlined above, it seems unlikely. If, in fact, the texts Fitzgerald identifies were used in the secondary-level “academic curriculum,” then direct comparisons to first-year composition are problematic, to say the least, considering the different levels of instruction comprised by the comparison. Likewise, if the texts were being used to impart teaching methods—that is, if A.S. Hill’s textbook was used to teach normalites how to teach writing in elementary and secondary schools, as opposed to teaching normalites how to write—the comparison seems equally problematic. There may be meaningful connections, in the latter case, between the normal curriculum and TA training, but even that comparison would be somewhat artificial because of the different populations students would eventually teach. Ultimately, Fitzgerald’s comparison of normals to other post-secondary institutions is untenable, as are all normal school histories that rely on similar comparisons, because it strips away the effects of normals’ institutional objectives on rhetorical education.
It should be sufficiently clear by now that normal schools were not merely second-class colleges, and normals’ rhetorical education cannot be understood without broader reference to institutional objectives. In the next section, therefore, I describe normal schools’ rhetorical education more specifically in light of the institutional objectives I’ve already laid out. In particular, I develop the claim that normals offered rhetoric and writing courses exclusively at the secondary level in order to demonstrate that more precision regarding institutional objectives can augment the lessons of disciplinary histories.

**Rhetoric and Writing in the Normals**

One benefit of the relative uniformity among normal schools is that focusing on circumstances at an individual institution can help composition historians locate broad themes that tell us about rhetorical education in normals more generally. Therefore, I turn now to a brief history of one normal school, Tempe Normal School (TNS). TNS was founded in 1885 in Tempe, Arizona—a rural outpost approximately ten miles east of Phoenix—to address Arizona’s teacher-shortage problem (Hopkins and Thomas 43-44). When it was founded, TNS was the only institution of higher education within 400 miles, and although TNS was not without idiosyncrasies, it represents well the conditions in which normal schools existed around the turn of the twentieth century—it was founded in a rural community, enrolled predominantly underserved populations of students, and evolved similarly to other normals. By looking more closely at TNS’s example, it is possible to discuss more precisely the conditions in which rhetorical education existed in the normals, particularly given the distinction between “academic” and “professional” curricula.

Tempe Normal was established as part of a broad legislative agenda in Arizona in 1885, which included the allocation of a land-grant university, the University of Arizona, to Tucson. According to TNS’s charter, the school was established for “instruction of persons . . . in the art of teaching and in all the various branches that pertain to good common school education” (“An Act”). In short, by legislative act, the focus of the normal education was primarily defined as “the art of teaching,” which referred specifically to the professional curriculum focused on teaching methods, and “the various branches,” which referred specifically to the academic curriculum focused on elementary and secondary level subjects. Students as young as sixteen could enroll at Tempe Normal, provided they had already completed the equivalent of a 7th grade education. Students could begin coursework at TNS in what were called “Sub-normal” courses, covering the 8th and 9th grades (McClintock 10), for one year prior to enrolling in the secondary curriculum. Once students completed the equivalent of a 9th grade education, they could enroll in the “normal course,” which began with two years of high school equivalent “academic” coursework. According to TNS’s first archivist, Alfred Thomas, Jr., “For several years after its beginning, the work of the Normal was car-
ried on largely at the high school level with a small portion of the program being devoted to teacher training work” (315). In fact, TNS was the only high school in the greater Phoenix area for a decade after it was founded, so even students who had no intention of becoming teachers enrolled at TNS to earn a high school diploma. Following the secondary coursework, students could enroll in the post-secondary “professional” curriculum, the completion of which qualified them to teach in Arizona’s schools.

Rhetoric, writing, and language and literacy courses constituted a significant portion of TNS’s curriculum. In 1888, for example, students took “Grammar—Analysis and Parsing,” “Spelling, Oral and Written,” “English Composition,” “Reading,” and “Word Analysis—especially in the Greek and Latin Elements of English” in their first year (“Prospectus”). In the second year, students took “Rhetorical Work—Orations, Essays and Declarations,” “Rhetoric,” “English Literature,” and “Rhetorical Work—Orations and Discussions” (“Prospectus”). Rhetoric and writing courses were distributed throughout the curriculum to reinforce the lessons normal students would be expected to teach in the state’s elementary and secondary classrooms. However, rhetoric and writing were remanded to the first two years of TNS’s curriculum (three for “Sub-normal” students), which were wholly “academic” in the sense delineated by the NEA committee. They were equivalent to high school courses and were meant to refresh students’ acquaintance with subjects they would be expected to teach in Arizona’s public schools. Alongside the rhetoric and writing courses listed above, students also took other “basic subjects,” including math, geography, history, science, and civics. When read in the broader normal school context, all the evidence of rhetoric and writing education at TNS must be understood as secondary in nature.

In contrast, the post-secondary curriculum at TNS required no coursework in rhetoric or writing. After completing the secondary coursework (or after demonstrating “advanced standing” by passing an examination), TNS students enrolled in the post-secondary courses, which included: “Primary Methods,” “Arithmetic Methods,” “Pedagogy,” “School Management,” etc. (Farmer 3). With the exception of Latin and Geometry, the professional curriculum was entirely focused on methods, and rhetoric and writing courses were no longer offered, much less required. The only courses even related to rhetoric and/or writing were Latin and potentially “Professional Work,” in which students were required to teach “at least one class in Arithmetic, Geography, Grammar, Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship for half a term under the supervision and criticism of the principal” (“Prospectus”). But any relation to rhetoric or writing was incidental. As soon as students embarked on the post-secondary course of study, they were involved in rhetoric and writing education only inasmuch as they were expected to (1) learn methods that would enable them to teach rhetoric and writing, and (2) practice teaching them.

It is easy to see why researching rhetorical education at normals is inviting to composition historians. Without needing to look much further
than course catalogs, there are many apparent parallels that can be drawn between rhetorical education at Tempe Normal, as one example, and rhetorical education at colleges and universities. There is ample evidence to suggest that rhetoric and composition at TNS were simplified, instrumentalized, and inflected with current-traditional sensibilities between 1885 and the early 1900s. According to the 1896-97 “Circular and Catalogue,” for instance, writing was taught using the infamous modes of discourse, “advancing by easy steps from simple description to exposition and to the construction of argument” (18). Theories, pedagogies, and texts reflect what has long been known by composition historians about rhetoric and composition at colleges and universities at and around the turn of the twentieth century. Add the founding of literary societies at TNS in 1896, the establishment of a school newspaper and literary journals around the turn of the century, and the introduction of intercollegiate debates with the University of Arizona starting in the early 1900s, and Tempe Normal School’s history naturally aligns with histories describing the state of rhetorical curricula and extracurricular at colleges and universities across the country during that period. But read in the context of normal schools’ institutional objectives, all of these comparisons become dubious because the parallels that are so apparent meet different objectives at different levels of education for different populations of students.

This history of TNS is necessarily abridged, but even this condensed version challenges the belief that normal schools set useful precedents for contemporary rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars. Certainly the notion that “contemporary attitudes” have precedence in the normal school is troubling when we consider the different objectives for rhetorical education in nineteenth century normals and contemporary colleges and universities. If the attitudes praised by Fitzgerald and others were considered better suited to secondary education a century ago, and if we feel that such attitudes effectively define us as a field in the twenty-first century, there are serious implications for rhetorical education to be contemplated, including whether we should teach rhetoric and writing in colleges and universities at all. Add the fact that normal schools were systematically eradicated from American education before World War II because they became obsolete, and normal schools offer historical precedents we should be loathe to repeat.

**Normal Lessons**

The conclusion that rhetorical education at normal schools cannot be compared to rhetorical education in colleges and universities might be understood to suggest that composition historians should abandon normal school research altogether; I think that would be a mistake. Even if normal schools do not exemplify the kind of “rich, alternative tradition of rhetorical education in America” (Gold x) that historians have imagined, there are still important lessons to be learned from studying normal schools. In
the remainder of this essay, then, I sketch out some tentative lessons that can be drawn from normal schools for contemporary scholars and teachers.

One of the important lessons of normal schools is that institutional objectives have played a crucial role in shaping the conditions for rhetorical education. To some degree, composition historians have known this for some time—it is commonplace, for example, that the institutional requirement of first-year composition in colleges and universities has had lasting consequences for rhetorical education (e.g., Crowley, especially Chapter 10). But it is a point that needs to be made more forcefully because institutional objectives are often considered contextual, rather than formative. Most historians ultimately resort to cultural, local, or disciplinary exigencies to explain various developments in rhetoric and writing education. For example, in “Mid-Nineteenth-Century Writing Instruction at Illinois State Normal University,” Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, and Risë Quay explain writing pedagogy at Illinois State Normal University by reference to the increasing cultural value placed on academic credentials in the last half of the nineteenth century (96); David Gold contends that local exigencies at East Texas Normal College, specifically President William Mayo’s pedagogical ideals, shaped the rhetorical education students received (114); and Kathryn Fitzgerald argues for the importance of normal school pedagogies by contrasting them with classical rhetoric (230). These cultural, local, and disciplinary lenses are unquestionably illuminating, but they generally relegate institutional objectives to background information.

As the example of normal schools demonstrates, however, institutional objectives played a primary role in how hundreds of thousands of students were exposed to rhetorical education. Normal schools’ common objectives of (1) reinforcing basic subjects, (2) training teachers, and (3) remaining distinct from high schools, colleges, and universities determined that rhetoric and writing were secondary, not post-secondary. Even granting variations in academic standards and possible exceptions, normal schools’ institutional objectives were common enough that most normalites would have taken similar classes at similar times for similar reasons. Although institutional objectives were certainly not independent from cultural, local, or disciplinary concerns, neither were they less consequential. Furthermore, institutional objectives often shaped the conditions of rhetoric and writing more directly than cultural, local, or disciplinary exigencies. Therefore, for historians interested in how rhetoric and writing were taught in bygone eras, attention to institutional objectives is essential.

The importance of studying institutional objectives is even more striking when one realizes that around the turn of the twentieth century, students could earn some form of post-secondary education at colleges, universities, normal schools, women’s colleges, black colleges and universities, junior colleges, law and medical schools, seminaries, institutes, technical colleges, and more (see Cremin). Each type of institution competed for students, to a greater or lesser degree, with other institutions, and each had distinct objec-
tives that differentiated them from other types of institutions. If historians want to understand how vast populations of students were taught rhetoric and writing, and how different systems of rhetorical education related to one another, considering how rhetoric and writing education were inflected by various institutions’ objectives is vital.

A second lesson normal schools can teach composition historians is that the resemblance of theories, pedagogies, and curricula across institutions cannot be the sole basis for historical research. To put it another way, composition historians cannot look for normal schools, or any other institution for that matter, to mirror contemporary perspectives about rhetoric and writing. Rhetoric and writing in normal schools strongly resembled rhetoric and writing in colleges and universities during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but as I have argued, the resemblance is misleading. In drawing comparisons historians have neglected—or worse, assimilated—the characteristics that make normals distinct, and therefore worth studying in more depth. Obviously, this is not intentional misrepresentation, but it is a function of historians’ search for research subjects, based on resemblances, linked to the search for precedence.

Detached from the search for precedence, however, the fact of resemblance can be indispensible. Kathryn Fitzgerald asserts in “The Platteville Papers Revisited” that “the most significant contribution historical research makes to the contemporary field” is “to enable us to critique still current practices from an outsider’s point of view” (116). In other words, the proper objective of historical research is to understand the present by reference to the past, and it is an important point for historians to recognize. The fact of historical resemblance, coupled with the realization of fundamental differences between historical and contemporary subjects, helps to reveal the limits of contemporary thinking in order to aid the critique of current practices from an outsider’s point of view. Less abstractly, the fact that normals provided rhetorical education at the secondary level which strongly resembles rhetoric and writing education in contemporary post-secondary institutions should raise a red flag for historians. The resulting dissonance can help historians evaluate current practices and their attendant values and beliefs by provoking questions about why we believe what we believe. The goal of historians, ultimately, is to critique current practices so as to improve them, rather than finding historical precedence that appeals to contemporary convictions and reinforces current practices.

I should note that this lesson—that resemblance can be useful, but is not sufficient, for identifying research subjects—has implications far beyond normal school histories. To extend Fitzgerald’s point, critique of current practices is as necessary for digital humanists as it is for composition historians, as important for cutting edge theorists as for classroom practitioners, and so on. Critique enables teachers and researchers to evaluate our own beliefs and values with an eye toward improving the work we do to the benefit of our institutions, our fields, and our students rather than simply affirming beliefs.
Composition historians already hold. So while this essay is specifically calling for composition historians to be more critical in their search for normal school precedents, it is a reminder for all researchers and teachers that a critical attitude is a necessary component of all scholarly work.

A third lesson proceeds from the first two: composition historians need to expand their scope of inquiry to consider more specifically institutional conditions that shaped the possibilities for composition’s existence in higher education. Doing so compels composition historians to become much better acquainted with education history. The history of rhetorical education for much of the past 200 years is largely a history of American education. Certainly rhetoric and writing were taught outside of educational institutions, as historians including Royster have powerfully demonstrated. At the same time, the majority of formal education in America was predicated on basic subjects which included rhetoric and writing instruction; and as education developed, so too did rhetoric and writing. Historians would do well to investigate that relationship more closely. Education history—as opposed to the history of rhetoric and composition, cultural history, or local history—can provide us with an important frame for understanding how educational institutions developed, how different institutions reacted to similar cultural exigencies, how institutional objectives shaped the conditions for rhetorical education, and ultimately how students and teachers encountered rhetorical education. Moreover, education history can help us to better recognize the resemblances and differences among institutions that enable us to critique, and thereby improve, current practices.

Composition historians’ focus on disciplinary norms and practices is invaluable, and education history cannot replace disciplinary, cultural, or local historical research. But it must become a more central part of historians’ repertoires if we are to understand the lessons of nineteenth- and twentieth-century rhetorical education. An added benefit is that the history of American education is well documented. There are vast collections of primary sources available for study, many of them available in digital collections, which can help us find resemblances that invite deeper study, if not easy comparisons. The combination of important avenues of research and relatively ready access is fortuitous and should be embraced by composition historians.

Normal schools continue to represent one such avenue of research. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, as a result of many complex educational, political, and cultural factors, normal schools came under sustained attack as inferior institutions that provided inadequate training for the nation’s teachers (Ogren 2-3; Rettger). By the time David Felmley gave his talk in 1923, normal schools were under siege from colleges and universities, which increasingly offered four-year, liberal arts-based teaching degrees. In the subsequent decade and a half, normal schools virtually disappeared, either shuttering their doors or transforming into teachers’ colleges in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. In 1925, Tempe Normal followed the national trend and transformed into Tempe State Teachers’ College, replete
with four-year liberal arts curriculum and a required, two-course, first-year composition sequence. In fact, the rhetoric and writing curriculum at Tempe State Teachers' College strongly resembled the curriculum that exists to this day in thousands of colleges and universities across the country, despite radical differences in institutional objectives at teachers' colleges and other post-secondary institutions. Questions about how and why are potentially enlightening for contemporary teachers and scholars, but they have not yet been asked. In short, composition historians have much work still to do.

Notes
1. I want to thank Kyle Jensen and Matthew Heard for their invaluable contributions to this essay.
2. In this essay, “normal” refers to the normal school tradition and is not a qualitative judgment (e.g., “Normal department” is a teacher education department).
3. According to Felmley, “We use the term teacher training [as opposed to ‘teacher education’] because we recognize that teaching is an art in which skill is to be acquired rather than a science of which knowledge is to be gained” (47).
4. Teachers in American schools were traditionally male, but many education reformers believed that women were ideally suited to teaching. During his time as Massachusetts Secretary of Education, Horace Mann defended training female teachers, writing: “Is not woman destined to conduct the rising generation, of both sexes, at least through all the primary stages of education? Has not the Author of nature preadapted her, by constitution, and faculty, and temperament, for this noble work?” (qtd. in Herbst, And Sadly Teach 28). Herbst and Ogren discuss the relationship between women and teaching at length. Ogren also discusses the normals’ tradition of courting other types of nontraditional students (see esp. Chapter 2).
5. I borrow this title from Ogren. “[A]lthough it ‘wasn’t much of a college,’” she writes, “the state normal school was a revolutionary institution in the field of higher education” (4).
6. Colleges and universities differed significantly during this period as well, both in missions and methods. Nevertheless, the conflation of colleges and universities has predominated in composition histories, and I maintain it here on the grounds that rhetorical education seems to have existed in similar measure at both institution types. I recognize the probability, inherent in my own argument, that closer examination would prove the conflation unsustainable.
7. The “common branches” (i.e., “basic subjects”) constituted the curriculum in the vast majority of American public schools. Although there was considerable disagreement about what constituted the common branches, basic literacy was a ubiquitous component.
8. Mariolina Salvatori claims that the professional focus of normal schools became a political problem in the 1880s when some people “began to argue for the inadequacy of normal schools ‘to educate’ teachers [. . .] because of their exclusive and limiting reliance on ‘methods’” (xiv). Despite the political opposition, normal school proponents continued to champion normal schools' methodological focus for at least another forty years.
9. Normal schools were not in a position to turn students away for a number of reasons, including the desperate need for teachers to teach in public schools. But there were also pressing economic and political considerations that militated against rigorous admissions policies (Ogren 61-62). If normals failed to attract sufficient enrollment, for example, legislators threatened to withdraw state funding. In Tempe Normal’s case, according to Hopkins and Thomas, TNS faced a series of challenges—particularly legislative challenges—that threatened to shutter the school permanently in its first two decades in existence (97-114; see also Hronek 81, 98).

10. John Ogden, a prominent figure in teacher education during the nineteenth-century, lists the general methods as: school-room duties, study, recitation, school business, recreation, and school government (iii-iv). The title of Ogden’s book, The Art of Teaching, was a commonly used phrase to describe the aim of teacher training. There is a fairly extensive literature on “the art of teaching” that is informative for understanding what goals normal schools were attempting to meet (e.g., Barnard).

11. Normal schools evolved over time and their objectives gradually shifted, but there remained significant uniformity across institutions well into the twentieth century. It is not within the purview of this essay to detail normal schools’ evolution of over time, but such a project would no doubt reveal that rhetorical education changed significantly as normals’ institutional objectives shifted to meet various exigencies.

12. TNS had four different names during its forty years as a normal school. For the sake of brevity and consistency, I refer to the institution as Tempe Normal School or TNS.

13. The “Sub-normal” curriculum was disestablished in 1905 (“Tempe Normal”).

14. TNS’s rhetoric and writing curriculum changed significantly over the years, but two important things remained constant: (1) the courses were always widely distributed throughout the curriculum, but (2) they were confined to the secondary level.

15. TNS’s textbooks should be familiar to composition historians. Between 1890 and 1906, students used textbooks by Adams Sherman Hill, John Genung, Fred Newton Scott and Joseph Villiers Denny, Gertrude Buck, Virginia Waddy, and George Quackenbos, among others (see Carr, Carr, and Schultz for discussion of these authors’ books with regards to composition history).

Works Cited


—. “The Platteville Papers Revisited: Gender and Genre in a Normal School Writing Assignment.” Donahue and Moon 115-33.


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