

Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location, by Lisa Ede. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. 280 pages.

Reviewed by: [Nancy Myers](#)

Rev. of *Situating Composition: Composition Studies and the Politics of Location*, by Lisa Ede. *Composition Studies*. 34.1 (2006): 126-29.

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**Article:**

I have always been fascinated by the triptychs of the Middle Ages, such as Bernardo Daddi's "Triptych: Madonna, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and Saint Paul." Triptychs are three panels usually hinged together that tell three stories and one. The center panel is the main focus with the two side panels providing two more narratives but in dialogue with the primary one, thus producing a fourth story. Just as the title of Daddi's triptych suggests, each panel represents a different time, a different place, and different circumstances of religious teachings, while it simultaneously reinforces the continuity and community across all three. Like the Roman writing tablet from which this art form draws its name, the triptych opens to meanings institutional and individual, a testament to the religious doctrines via the work of an artist's imagination. What I value about the triptychs are their dialogic relationships between artistic vision and Christian didacticism, form and function, and innovation and tradition. Multivalent and multivocal, the religious triptych requires that viewers focus on the subject of each panel and their relatedness to the others within the con-texts of the knowledge, history, and practices of Christianity as well as on the hinged-and-framed structure's material location as an altarpiece.

In a secular way, Lisa Ede's *Situating Composition* operates as a triptych in its dialogic interplay of three-and-one stories and in its multiple locations of the creator's arguments within academe's doctrines, traditions, and disciplinary expectations. As the one or complete work, situated within disciplinary knowledge paradigms and published by a leading university press, the book provides another scholarly voice on two discussions: the history and impact of the process writing movement and the epistemological and institutional theory-practice binary. Ede argues that the future of the field may be better served if composition scholars more directly examine their scholarly practices and the ideological implications of them. In her analysis, historicizing, and critique of the professionalization of composition studies, she enters into the theory-practice dialogue by maintaining that "there is an inevitable gap between that which seems real, good, and possible in the realm of scholarly research and that which seems real, good, and possible in specific situations where material constraints interact with theoretical possibilities" (xiii). She traces the intricacies and complexities of this "gap" by examining the question: What constitutes progress in the field? Contending that scholars are concerned with "anxieties about composition's professional and disciplinary status," she exposes the ideological and material forces that undergird the disciplinary privileging of theory and that limit the view of progress to new theory (33). This disciplinary anxiety over the academy's acceptance has led to a disjuncture between theory and the daily practices that are grounded in the processes of literacy and pedagogy. She repeatedly comes back to this question of progress through the locations of her own and others' teaching experiences, her own and others' writing practices, and her own and others' analyses of this theory-practice issue to demonstrate that professionalism in Composition Studies progresses in various and contradictory ways depending on the site or location in the field. Ede's proposal to address this gap is twofold: to make the scholarly arguments relevant and credible "for those who teach the majority of composition classes" and "to enact a model of disciplinary progress that does not require the continual disvaluing of previous theories and practices" (153). Modeling this

suggestion through her multi-genre approach, her various positions in academe and the discipline, and her balanced and continually qualified analysis, she offers a view of progress in the field as situated acts of change based on self-reflexivity, incremental steps and actions, institutional and ideological resistance, and acceptance of the plurality of knowledge.

Structurally, *Situating Composition* operates as a triptych in its three individual stories that are in dialogue with each other. Each section highlights Ede's professional life and work but for distinct purposes: the first shows how the professional is personal through a series of unrelated academic experiences and through her positioning of herself in the scholarly conversations and in her institutions; the second highlights Ede as historian, aspiring professional, and teacher-researcher; and the third demonstrates her intellectual and scholarly ability. The first section, and shortest of the three, outlines the foundational questions of Ede's examination, defines key terms, and underscores her personal and academic locations within the discipline, her institution, and her classroom. The second section is a reexamination of composition studies' professionalization from the mid-1970s to now and is balanced between a disciplinary history of professional and economic influences and a personal examination of how theory influences teaching across that same time period. It functions as the core of the book: for its critique of earlier histories and its rereading of the "writing process movement" as multiple economic, social, political, and institutional forces interacting on a range of tangentially linked theories, research methodologies, and projects underpins her critique of theory in the third section (47-80). This history is juxtaposed with Ede's personal teaching history and pedagogical analysis of twenty years of her undergraduate composition course descriptions. The third section contends that the theory-practice dichotomy should be viewed as a practice-practice dichotomy since both theory and teaching are practices, but distinct in aims and means. She proposes alternative ways of dealing with the multiplicities by "thinking through practice" in theory and teaching (120). Always questioning, always qualifying, she offers fifteen strategies for doing this (191-207). In sections two and three, she systematically critiques and rejects the continuity and monolithic impressions of the privileged or master narratives and hierarchical binaries and maintains that revolution is not possible, so "we have to work within the ideologies of professionalism and disciplinarity" for change (118). She invites us not to invert the hierarchies but place the dichotomous terms side-by-side, in dialogue with each other: scholar-teacher, theory-practice, progress-tradition, hope-reality.

Because a triptych is always parts and whole, material and symbolic, and innovative and traditional, the viewer is aware of its paradoxes. As a reader of *Situating Composition*, I realized those same tensions in Ede's use of multiple genres and her systematic questioning and qualifying. Both techniques remind the reader that Ede is resisting stylistically the conventions of scholarly discourse to enact her argument and proposal. Her innovative blending and blurring of genres—personal narrative, history, theoretical critique, theory, and propositional heuristic, all of which I suggest are forms of argument—pro-mote her message that the professional is personal, so each member of the discipline is accountable for her discourse on yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Ede continually qualifies that her distinctions, needed for the sake of analysis, foreground only partially the complicated enterprise and myriad configurations of being an academic. While these qualifications, extensions, and asides are provocative and needed, they ask readers to read differently, more slowly, more reflexively.

It is Ede's historical, critical, and personal views set within the layered processes of literacy and pedagogy that define the book as a triptych, for its multi-narrative vision teaches and its epistemological and stylistic innovation and argument dialogue with tradition in ethical ways. Whether focusing on Composition Studies' professional history, its master narratives, or its theoretical practices, she always keeps the other two in visible relief and frames their central location with the personal and pedagogical. Her invitational rhetoric, grounded in crossdisciplinary research expertly and extensively cited, asks readers to consider her questions, her arguments, and her proposals about Composition Studies as a means to "better negotiate its politics, rhetoric, and ethics" (6). Ede invites all in the discipline to reexamine personal and institutional motives and actions within the rhetorical and political spheres of work. Because the professional is personal, ethics is a daily issue whether in writing, in classrooms, or in program deliberations. *Situating Composition's* tone and narrative, qualified arguments, and insightful evaluation of the field's recent past and current practices are worthy of multiple readings whether resistant or accepting.