

The Asymptotic Relationship Between C&W and DH at MLA

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Quotes are derived from the January 8, 2015 entry for
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asymptote>

"In analytic geometry, an asymptote (/ˈæsɪmptəʊt/) of a curve is a line such that the distance between the curve and the line approaches zero as they tend to infinity."

I don't need to rehash the history of Computers & Writing or its relationship to DH because that's been done in at least seven other papers at MLA this year alone. This is why writing studies belongs at MLA.

Rhetoric has been an axis in English departments for longer than the MLA has been in existence. Writing has always been present, but whether it has been seen as a disciplinary field is a different story.

Like the microscopic space between curve and asymptotic line, writing studies exists.

Contains multitudes.

As the curve gets closer and closer to the line, the gap becomes infinitely smaller. Whether the curve is DH or C&W is of no regard. Or, rather, is perspectival, speaker-dependent, rhetorical.

"The word asymptote is derived from the Greek ἀσύμπτωτος (asumptōtos) which means "not falling together",..."

What if "not falling together" doesn't mean "not coming together" but "not tripping, not stumbling, not failing together"?

Last night at the Digital Rhetorics in Flux session, Dean Rehberger stripped the myth of DH and C&W as parallel lines, independent of each other, and defined DH as collaboration. Over the last 90 years, writing studies has actively publishing research on collaboration, with at least 1864 records listed in CompPile, an index of scholarship in writing studies. This is how we not fall together, fail together. This is how we asymptote.

"The idea that a curve may come arbitrarily close to a line without actually becoming the same may seem to counter everyday experience."

This is to say that C&W doesn't have to dismantle its identity to embrace MLA. And neither does rhetoric, composition, and creative writing more broadly. We are already arbitrarily close.

We fall together.

"The representations of a line and a curve as marks on a piece of paper or as pixels on a computer screen have a positive width. So if they were to be extended far enough they would seem to merge, at least as far as the eye could discern. But these are physical representations of the corresponding mathematical entities; the line and the curve are idealized concepts whose width is 0. Therefore the understanding of the idea of an asymptote requires an effort of reason rather than experience."

An effort of reason rather than experience.

It stands to reason that, as idealized concepts, rhetoric and composition are 1/3 of the intellectual grid in every department they hold, creative writing another third, and literature, a remaining third. These lines and curves can be idealized as merged entities, as far as the eye could discern.

"Therefore the understanding of the idea of an asymptote requires an effort of reason rather than experience."

Writing studies at MLA must stand together to bring not just the shared collaborative DH work of Computers and Writing but creative writing and literacy studies and writing program administration, and technical communication, and all of the issues of writing practice, pedagogy, and research that are conducted on texts and with people and through materials.

"Only open curves that have some infinite branch can have an asymptote. No closed curve can have an asymptote."

The scholarship of writing studies is an open curve, infinitely branching. Let MLA cleave its closed curve and bend open to infinite branching.