

Review Essay

Anxieties of Influencers: Composition Pedagogy in the 21st Century

Barr Ebest, Sally. *Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2005.

Dobrin, Sidney I., ed. *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2005.

Vandenberg, Peter; Sue Hum; and Jennifer Clary-Lemon, eds. *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2006.

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In my graduate school department, I was once told, a few of the literature faculty who took turns leading the teaching practicum referred to it as the “kill the father” course. For their generosity in helping a dozen or so TAs plan and debrief a year’s worth of composition classes, the story went, they were repaid by caustic critiques of their pedagogical advice (and thus of their own teaching) from rank novices eager to claim their academic birth-right.

Nearly twenty years later, one might quite reasonably assume that we’ve left much of that angst behind us: composition-rhetoric continues to gain ground as a field, and TA education is moving increasingly from ad-hoc late-summer workshops into serious seminars and extended professional mentoring, led by WPAs who know and respect the discipline. The TAs themselves are more likely to identify with, or at least be aware of, composition-rhetoric as a discipline. Yet even in the titles of three recent books related to TA education I hear echoes of anxieties we have not yet escaped. Sidney Dobrin asks us to (re)consider the composition “practicum” through the articles in his collection, but cautions us, *Don't Call it That*, while Sally Barr Ebest investigates *Writing and Resistance* in TA education. Less directly, Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon convey

their own and their contributors' concerns about the un-place-able aspects of writing instruction as they explore the *Relations, Locations, and Positions* of post-process composition theory that new writing teachers might encounter—a discussion they describe as “fraught with pitfalls” (8). In turning to these books I found much useful advice, plenty of insightful reflection, and some important mappings of the geographies over which composition pedagogy ranges these days. I also found evidence of the ways in which the disciplinary and institutional uncertainties facing composition-rhetoric specialists and WPAs, particularly inescapable in a class that purports to be both an introductory and comprehensive representation of the theory and practice of composition, continue to feed the anxieties of graduate students and teachers alike.

I'm not a neutral—or unconflicted—observer or reviewer. Teaching and mentoring composition teachers constitutes simultaneously the most rewarding and the most frustrating work I've done as a WPA. My views are particularly conditioned by my experiences working primarily with new and continuing teachers who do not see composition as their scholarly field, and sometimes do not see teaching as their ultimate goal. Moreover, I feel the weight of institutional expectations: that the university's newest teachers be prepared for their positions in the most efficient possible manner; that first-year composition (FYC) students be given comparable, consistent education across hundreds of sections each year; and that the vagaries of disciplinary exploration in rhetoric or pedagogy should give way before the demands of large-scale general education in concrete, transferable skills. I have thus come to view the pedagogy course and the concepts behind it as both impossible and crucial to teach—in part because of who and where the students are when they enter our classes, in part because of where we need them or want them to go as teachers and as scholars. Like any introductory class, the composition pedagogy seminar is constrained by fundamental questions we must ask about our graduate students, including several that pervade the volumes I'm reviewing here: what do students *already* know and desire to know, what do they *need* to know (to accomplish personal and/or institutional goals), what *can* they come to know in a single semester, and what *ought* they to know (to enter into the discipline rather than remaining on the threshold)? These are daunting questions. Fortunately, the authors and editors represented in these three new texts don't dodge such questions but reveal (and sometimes revel in) them; in doing so, they help orient us toward viable pathways for composition pedagogy education.

It's not surprising that when some of the university's most committed “guides on the side” start educating future guides (and often doing so with

insufficient time and resources), we get nervous about issues of resistance, wary that we might be angling for conversion rather than conversation. Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon worry about conversion and resistance in their critical introduction, as does Dobrin in his, but it's Barr Ebest's book that takes resistance as its theme, reviewing the intellectual and emotional progression of students as they study and practice writing-teaching. Over five years, she collected materials—mostly reflective writing and audio-taped discussions—from 40 graduate students enrolled in composition theory or pedagogy courses she taught. While she describes *resistance* as a condition that provides opportunity for progress as well as frustration, she presents to her readers a not-uncomplicated success-narrative:

Enacting change is no easy task. Merely calling for change or even outlining what is needed ignores the human element—the feelings engendered by the teacher and student alike as they try to adapt ... and deal with the resulting frustrations. The effect, said one student, was “like sending an earthquake through a place that was always home.” Yet, she, like the majority of her peers, eventually overcame such feelings.... By providing graduate students with pedagogical sites for research and reflection, faculty enable them to ... write their way to a new understanding. (21)

After a deft, quickly-paced review of the recent history and current status of graduate teacher education (from Cardinal Newman to Preparing Future Faculty programs),¹ she grounds her particular study in theories of cognitive development, self-efficacy, and active learning—noting, for example, the ways in which writing and teaching may seem to be entirely transparent processes to successful graduate students who “are generally unaware of how they were taught” (43), much less how they were taught or learned *to write*. A late chapter on how female TAs struggle to find their voices in the academy and the classroom reflects Barr Ebest's initial interest in the particular effects that gender has on new TAs' confidence, but the primary study expands beyond that question.

Barr Ebest uses the middle chapters to explore in much-needed depth the psychological, epistemological, gendered, and institutional roots of many new TAs' resistance to constructivist writing pedagogies. (While she focuses wholly on graduate students, the breadth of her analysis supports parallel conclusions about educating other writing faculty, even when their resistances may not be as linked to their inexperience as writing teachers.) I recognize most of the student-responses she reports; her case study approach allows TAs to be heard from at length in this study, a crucial move in ana-

lyzing a course that can often feel more like “us vs. them” than graduate courses in English generally do. The book is valuable for anxious pedagogy instructors if for no other reason than to confirm that these resistances and challenges are real and can be traced in part to complex causes originating outside one’s particular pedagogy classroom. I also appreciate Barr Ebest’s honest and empathetic portrayal of students’ frustrations, her own frustrated responses, and the negotiations that followed as everyone “tri[ed] to adapt” (21). Specifically, she recommends two strategies for helping students move beyond their initial resistances: adopting a writing-focused pedagogy that emphasizes reflective writing and draft-and-revise processes (that is, applying composition pedagogy to TA education); and involving new teachers in action-research in their classrooms. Both approaches serve, she argues, to build students’ confidence as writers and teachers, to reduce some of the fears that lead to resistance, and to allow students to design their own pathways around or through points of resistance.

Neither approach, to be sure, is likely to entirely relieve our own anxieties as pedagogy teachers. Writing, Barr Ebest notes, is as likely to be “the catalyst for resistance” as it is the “cure” (5). Students may come out the other end more confident of their pathways and aware of the values of process-based (writing) pedagogies, but along the way we get to find out more about their resistances than we may want to know. Likewise, action research (in which students pose a question or theory about teaching writing, propose a way to test it in their own classrooms, keep a log and write up the results) may, as in the cases Barr Ebest reports, produce dramatic resistance-reversals or even conversions. Yet the uncertainties new teachers encounter require patience on everyone’s part and individual support from the pedagogy instructor, along with a willingness to allow students to invest significant time in a single issue, when instructional time is already at a premium. Barr Ebest’s astute analysis and candid reflection provide us with a range of strategies and reasons for being tolerant of—and empathetic with—the resistances of new writing teachers. Since she would have us teach *into and through* these resistances, however, and since some of us may suspect we’ll have fewer success stories in our own classes than appear in published descriptions like Barr Ebest’s, we are unlikely to find composition pedagogy a more comfortable course to teach any time soon.

The 27 authors represented in Dobrin’s collection, meanwhile, see resistances along with complex, situated opportunities throughout the enterprise of educating new writing teachers. *Don’t Call it That* provides the broadest survey yet of approaches to teaching composition pedagogy and the only book dedicated to theorizing the place and identity of the course. As Dobrin notes in his introductory essay, pedagogy teachers frequently

struggle to find a place and enough space: space *for* as well as space *within* “the course that appears to have been cast as the graduate version of FYC” (23). We feel our discipline’s growing-pains perhaps nowhere more acutely than in these one-shot attempts to prepare new writing teachers for an ever-more-complicated field, as these essays demonstrate. Even if our graduate students had no resistances or inner conflicts, our own would show through clearly as we find ourselves having to choose whether in Week 12 we should address multimodal composing or multicultural students, Plato or plagiarism, assessment or assignment scaffolding or argument theory. Increasingly, because the course has departmental, institutional, and disciplinary goals to meet, we need it to serve, as Joe Marshall Hardin notes, as at least three courses: local FYC practicum plus composition pedagogy course plus composition theory seminar. Moreover, we find that the course not only serves but constitutes the discipline, as Jeff Rice explains: “The composition canon is created . . . through the practicum, which has become the tool for disseminating knowledge regarding how to teach rhetoric and composition” (269). And Susan K. Miller, Rochelle Rodrigo, Veronica Pantoja and Duane Roen nudge us to go beyond disciplinary knowledge to professional development, suggesting reasonably—if we had world enough and time—that the course should strive to help TAs to adopt some of Ernest Boyer’s guidelines and so “view all of their work in the academy as scholarly” (82). Carrying all that responsibility can’t help but be anxiety-producing, for teachers and teachers-to-be alike.

Contributors to this volume are, like Barr Ebest, sympathetic to and frustrated by new teachers’ resistances, particularly resistances to the theory(ies) that define(s) us as a discipline but which can seem unnecessary and often disorienting to new composition teachers.² In a memorable and revealing turn of phrase, Kelly Ballenger and Sybille Gruber note that new composition teachers seem “unprepared to wallow” in the uncertainties of theoretical discussions (114). David Stacey offers one persuasive explanation of that resistance, noting that the less-theoretical teacher-narratives that our students often find most engaging display very little wallowing, hewing instead to a dominant success-narrative paradigm. Thus, he argues, we should not be surprised at new teachers’ concerns: theory works to complicate practice, and “who wants to complicate success? Especially before one has actually had any!” (250) Or as Lu Ellen Huntley’s students explained to her, participating in a course that seemed to be “always in process” was intensely anxiety-provoking rather than, as she had hoped, reassuring (295).

Students aren’t the only ones feeling a little wallow-y. Ballenger and Gruber discuss, insightfully, the “generative tensions” WPAs may also feel

as we use the pedagogy course both for indoctrination into a particular (often compromise-based) local curriculum, and as an introduction to a more flexible world of composition and pedagogical theories. Or as Anne Trubek asks, in a section sub-titled “Why It Is Impossible To Teach This Course,” how should a pedagogy instructor “teach heuristic methods heuristically” to novices who are quick-marching toward (or already teaching in) the composition classroom? (161). Like the tutors Trubek describes who are “chronically feeling guilty” (167) for, say, providing directive assistance even though that contradicts a key tenet of tutoring, faculty (including the authors in this collection) seem equally likely to feel guilty for including too much “theory” or too little. We may also feel guilty for including theory but lacking surefire ways to “make a compelling case for it” as Ruth Overman Fisher wishes (201), or failing to ensure that students are capable of integrating it into practice and using it “as a means to scrutinize, disrupt, or adapt prior notions,” as Anthony J. Michel hopes (192). And if you aren’t yet feeling guilty about how far your syllabus currently is from integrating technology-pedagogies throughout the semester, having your students write and revise in an authentic workshop process, or overtly modeling professional best practices in each class meeting, perhaps you should be: Rice, Rosemary Winslow, and Miller et al., respectively, make compelling cases for raising the pedagogy-class bar in each of those areas. Like Barr Ebest’s book, the articles in Dobrin’s collection gave me important new ways of seeing and planning for my pedagogy teaching, but (and?) left me newly anxious about how to serve my students, my institution, and my discipline simultaneously through this course.

But wait, there’s more. While the back-cover blurb for *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers* begins by describing it as an “anthology for beginning teachers,” I have difficulty imagining it as a key text in any of the beginning-teacher courses I’ve taken or taught. That’s not to say it’s not a timely, well-thought-out, innovative anthology: it is, and as a post-process, education-transformation reader for (soon-to-be) composition specialists, it fills a niche not yet served by books such as *Cross-Talk in Composition Theory*. Yet in the distance between the editors’ and some of the essayists’ *intent* to reach out to new writing teachers, and my certainty that the new TAs with whom I work would not find much in this book “accessible” or “useful,” I see another clear marker for my discipline-related anxieties.

Relations does stretch toward nonspecialist writing teachers. Its three sections each comprise an introductory essay, 6-7 essays reprinted from publications such as *CCC* and *JAC*, and two or three short, newly-commissioned “Pedagogical Insights” essays. The three introductory essays go beyond

summary of the upcoming selections to become accessible, well-informed reviews of the section's main questions; I found the first one, "Theories of Relation," particularly cogent in its positioning (and complicating) of post-process theories. The "Insights" essays more directly address an audience of new teachers: I was engaged and re-located by Derek Owens' energetic exhortation to teach *in situ*; Karen Koppelson's conscientious revisitation of her decision not to officially come out to her students as a lesbian but to construct a "productively indeterminate teacher identit[y]" (565); and Malea Powell's transformation of the academic-personal-pedagogical essay into a shrewd, funny-serious, on-the-page (and beyond-the-page) enactment of her communally focused pedagogy. At least one of those essays is likely to find its way onto my pedagogy syllabus the next time I teach.

Yet most of my engagement with the texts in *Relations* stems from my *not* being a novice. My experience in reading the main essays for this review mirrors my experience as a second-year professor sitting in on all the lectures in my college's collaboratively-taught Western Civilization course. I discovered through each endeavor an intelligently-organized, often engaging concatenation of ideas that I should probably have learned in the previous decade but hadn't—in part because I wasn't ready to learn them earlier, in part because I hadn't yet been shown such clear patterns and linkages. The progression of essays in the first section of *Relations*, for instance, helped me connect the concepts of *literacy* and *genre* in ways I hadn't considered before, and that will no doubt also percolate into my teaching. But then, 20 years into teaching writing classes, I'm more intrigued by disorientation than I used to be, and that condition may be a prerequisite for reading many of these essays. Indeed, the editors' motto for this collection might be found in their statement that "to be a *subject* means that one is often only *momentarily situated* while moving within discursive spaces" (373), an idea reinforced by articles in the second section on geographic and imagined locations, and by the third section's articles, each of which addresses a non-normative subject position—class, disability, race—to collectively reveal the interplay of ideas among these positions.

Faculty who teach a post-initiation pedagogy or theory course, or who teach students who have or desire a broader background in composition-rhetoric, may find that the imaginatively-integrated conversations in *Relations* help invigorate classroom discussion of how we view the shifting project of writing education. However, while the selected essays often address *teaching writing* as a material and daily practice, they weren't intended for novices; with a few exceptions (notably, the essays previously published in *College English*), they clearly adopt an insider discourse that limits access by new teachers. One needn't go all the way to the language of John Clifford's essay

“The Subject is Discourse”—”Althusser thus uses the Pascalian dialectic ... to conflate and dissolve our traditional notions of how ideology is created” (390)—to locate an example that would seriously challenge a student new to the field.³ Since the new TAs in my most recent class found the chapters in John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* and Cindy Moore and Peggy O’Neill’s *Practice in Context* about as “theoretical” as they were ready (and possibly needed) to be, this isn’t the collection for them. And that leaves me anxious about my own position as an ambassador of the field’s best new ideas to the uninitiated graduate students who enter my classes and concerned about whether “the field” can or should agree on how much of its expertise needs to be interpolated into introductory pedagogies.

Relations’ distance from my current pedagogy students makes me glad, though, for the work of Barr Ebest and the authors in *Don’t Call It That*, who for the first time are engaging in reflection and study of the composition pedagogy seminar—not just TA education or composition faculty development generally—as a particular institutional and disciplinary place with particular goals and challenges. Barr Ebest and Dobrin have each helped to remedy the “lack of articles and book-length works on composition practica,” surprising “in a field largely defined by its commitment to the teaching of writing,” as Joanne Addison points out (*Don’t Call* 256). While the authors and editors represented in these volumes might agree with Michael Stancliff and Maureen Daly Goggin in their recent *WPA* essay, who “take it as a given that teaching (and naturally then, teaching our teachers) is always a local and situated practice” (11), collectively these books may help us also engage with broader questions about how we each connect our local pedagogy-pedagogies with broader disciplinary expectations. The course itself may not grow any less difficult to teach, but companionship can significantly reduce anxiety. The more we see ourselves as engaged in a shared endeavor, the better we’re likely to feel as pedagogy instructors, and the more progress we will make toward addressing some of the common challenges and meeting some of the common goals of composition pedagogy education.

NOTES

¹ See also similar historiographies recently included in books by Shari Stenberg and Margaret Marshall; taken together, the three texts reveal a range of institutional and cultural roots for both our goals and our anxieties as composition teachers and pedagogy-experts.

² As much as pedagogy specialists like Stephen Brookfield, Ruth Ray, and Jo Sprague and Jody Nyquist assert that teachers must eventually develop abilities to “acknowledge and encourage ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity” (Ray 157), new teachers who are often also new to composition and to graduate studies may have limited tolerances for such exploration.

³ One consequence of the professionalization of composition-rhetoric is that fewer articles or book sections have been published recently that are about important, complex issues facing writing teachers generally *and* are accessible to the non-specialist writing teachers who might most benefit from a better understanding of such issues.

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