

Review Essay

Compassion and Social Justice: What We Can Learn from *Sixteen Teachers Teaching*

Charles Grimm

Sixteen Teachers Teaching: Two-Year College Perspectives, edited by Patrick Sullivan. Utah State UP, 2020. 309 pages.

Cheri Lemieux Spiegel, Darin Jensen, and Sarah Z. Johnson's Summer 2020 issue of *WPA* focused on WPA work in the two-year college (2YC), providing insights from WPAs in various 2YCs, where WPA positions rarely exist with clearly defined positions and boundaries. Patrick Sullivan's recent collection of essays, *16 Teachers Teaching*, offers further insight into the 2YC world and its peculiarities of staffing, teaching, and learning. Authors in this volume range from adjuncts to established professors to student authors, whose voices too frequently do not appear in scholarly literature. This inclusive cross-section of the 2YC forwards one primary purpose: pedagogy as democratic action.

In his introduction, Sullivan introduces social action as inherent in teaching in the 2YC, recounting its origin in the 1947 Truman Commission, which sought to create more leaders for a nation desperately wanting leadership. In 2019, 34% of students enrolled in post-secondary education were enrolled in two-year colleges, marking a high degree of success for Truman's plan ("Undergraduate Enrollment"). Sullivan divides his collection into five parts: An Introduction to Teaching Writing at the Two-Year College, Teaching Informed by Compassion and Theory, Equity and Social Justice at the Two-Year College, New Approaches to Teaching Developmental Reading and Writing, and a Conclusion. From advocacy programs to food pantries, from adjuncts publishing from their position of precarity to theoretically-informed graduate students finding themselves unfamiliar with how to teach actual students, *16 Teachers Teaching* contains voices that seek an audience with writing program administrators.

In keeping with the democratic ethos of 2YCs that keeps student voices at the forefront, this review recognizes the insights students offer before discussing the chapters written by instructors. Bridgette Stepule opens the student chapters, emphasizing flexibility for students in the 2YC who desire education amid busy lives of family, work, and other concerns that

remove a four-year degree from their immediate futures. Stepule specifies that teachers who kept their focus on what students needed rather than on formatting and mechanics provided her the greatest benefit. Lydia Sekscen-ski adds encouragement as a key to successful 2YC instruction, reminding instructors that constructive feedback and positive reinforcement that encourages students to believe in themselves are heard above harsh criticisms in lives already steeped in hardship.

In the second section of the collection, Darlene Pierpont recounts her own struggles through English courses. The familiar discomfort of learning through reading and the fear of making grammatical errors pepper her account of this time, but in these classes she benefitted from teachers who were passionate about their subjects, who were patient in their approach to student writing, and who showed compassion to students. Similarly, Kevin Rodriguez defines the boundary of useful instruction: “teachers who were both organized and engaging (found ways to connect with the students) created the most enjoyable, thoughtful, and memorable learning experiences for me” (129). He warns that humor alone can open students up but also cause some students not to take the course seriously, and he adds that asking about students’ lives without following up detracts from students’ perception that professors care.

The third section includes Lauren Sills’ view that 2YCs’ lack of the gatekeeping mechanisms of standardized test scores and high school GPAs allow 2YCs to exist as a true community with the respect and natural diversity often lacking in larger institutions. In the fourth section, Jamil Shakoor similarly locates Real Life within his education. He acknowledges the hard work required for students entering mostly in developmental programs and appreciates the way the professors keep responding to drafts with a mixture of understanding and intellectual rigor. Remediation, a term he introduces into his text, prepared Shakoor for success to such a degree that he argues strongly that any attempt to remove remedial courses from students who did not grow up with the privilege of strong schools and/or family structures “is founded on a serious lack of *real-life* experience” (246, italics original). Thus Sills and Shakoor leave the reader with narratives of what community looks like, with first-hand accounts from the students 2YCs serve describing their desire to be met where they are in their educational journeys. For students, then, a successful writing program depends more on engaging students meaningfully rather than on the theoretical approaches or assessments the field of writing program administration may find more comfortable.

Turning from the student-authored to professionally-authored chapters, disparity becomes a recurring theme for 2YC contexts, often most notably

in how to treat struggling people as people rather than problems. Perhaps it is fitting, then, that Darin Jensen's chapter opens the first section with an unflinching description of the world of the contingent writing teacher in the 2YC. Acknowledging the precarity of his own position along with the precision of his professional work makes teaching that much harder, because teaching about democratic principles while being excluded from those same principles serves to underscore the "tension of two competing realities and ideologies" (42). Similarly, Sullivan's interview of Helene Adams Androne points out the friction between instructors' demands in teaching, scholarship, and service, encouraging readers to link the three in as many teaching tasks as possible to build momentum in all three areas with a focus on helping students. She concludes "What [our students] do and how they find success matters to many more around and behind them, so facilitating their journeys is a privilege. We must keep learning and working hard for their sakes and for the future of all of our communities" (64). In closing Part 1 of the book, Sullivan provides the reader with a cross section of life at the two-year college, touching briefly on many of the victories as well as the continuing struggles, priming the reader for the compassion requested in Part 2.

Brett Griffiths opens Part 2 of *16 Teachers Teaching* by describing a visit to her school's writing center as a student, where she was met by a calmer voice than she had found in instructor feedback on her papers. Now, as the director of a writing center, she encourages teachers to meet students "who they are" (74). This means asking genuine questions about the welfare of the writer and responding helpfully, even walking students to various campus resources that help meet their material needs. The literacy sponsorship Griffiths describes allows students to find opportunities to re-situate themselves as writers and appreciate mistakes as opportunities to learn, while Klausman describes a course that provides direction through transfer. As a WPA, he set up reading groups to discuss multiple texts concerning how to help students take knowledge from writing classes forward. Designing his course for transfer required "the explicit teaching of key terms, the essential role of reflection, and the development of theory" (93) within a framework that allows primary research, some structured writing, and consistent returns to reflections. By the end of the semester, his students create their own theory of what college writing is or should be so that they can adopt this model in other courses as they continue their education. Just as Griffiths actively encourages compassion, Klausman actively encourages clear application that meets students' needs beyond English classrooms, both of which embody what Jeffrey Andelora explains as the need for TYC faculty to be researchers.

Sullivan's interview with Jeffrey Andelora runs the gamut from discussing treating students with respect to designing a course to engaging with scholarship. Throughout the interview, Andelora balances the need for instructors to be active in their research on the front lines of composition teaching as well as being present with the students they have in their classes. Most notable, however, is Andelora's realization: "I noticed the lack of two-year college voices in the field of composition, and was struck by the fact that the theorists, the knowledge-makers, were those who for the most part didn't teach much composition, yet two-year college faculty were teaching five sections of it every semester. Where was our voice?" (122). Andelora praises those who have taken the time to commit to research on top of heavy teaching and/or administration loads, but he states that the type of drive and enjoyment people get from research should not differ greatly from the enjoyment of reading and writing that led many of us to become English teachers in the first place (123). Regardless of whether instructors publish, Andelora leaves readers with the final exhortation: "figure out how to stay fresh, how to bring something new to the classroom. We owe that to our students. . . . find a practice that will sustain you over the long haul. The richness you bring to the classroom is only as deep as your enthusiasm for being there" (124). For this particular 2YC instructor, these words weigh heavily – Andelora's break-up speech at the 2018 CCCC that announced the beginning of the TYCA national conferences gave me just such a boost when losing my way as a graduate student despairing of finding an academic job. Since then, TYCA has been sustaining for me.

Holly Hassel opens the third section, which focuses on equity and social justice, by discussing critical information literacy as a necessary skill in first-year composition. Hassel details how working in writing centers, moonlighting at community colleges, and taking writing theory and pedagogy courses while a grad student did not prepare her for the classroom. Her preliminary approach worked poorly for those not yet acclimated to academia, causing a mutual frustration between teacher and students. It was not until she discovered the scholarship of teaching and learning that she was able to fit all the pieces of assessment, placement, and development into a meaningful arrangement for the students in her classes at community colleges. Regarding the possibility of frustration, Hope Parisi reminds readers that each student in every class in the 2YC context has overcome struggles to be in that seat (155). Parisi asks teachers to view low performance as a chance to intervene in an area of a student's life where they may be facing scarcity rather than to make meritocratic assumptions about the student's worth. This choice, Parisi argues, advances social justice by focusing on who we have in the classroom rather than who we wish we had.

Hassel and Parisi both advocate using multiple low-stakes assignments with ample feedback to meet students where they are and to serve as sign posts for students trying to re-enter a course later in the semester. Rather than defeat students, Hassel and Parisi structure their courses to celebrate student accomplishment.

Of particular significance at this point in the CWPA's continued pursuit of social justice and equity, the final chapter of the social justice section comprises an examination of a single institution's ongoing struggle to achieve racial equity among instructors at both the departmental and institutional level. The saga details some faculty members' work to incorporate critical race theory into job descriptions, inquests to expose racism against candidates and/or colleagues, and the reticence of the institution to engage in frank discussions of the role of race in hiring and maintaining its workforce. Discussions at their institution broke down quickly into tone policing, silence, or underground conversations, rendering the heartbreaking summary "We broke. We are still broken" (180). Even as these authors found a publisher interested in publishing their account of antiracist labor, they encountered a lack of willingness to market the book, even at the largest disciplinary conferences where their presentation was being awarded. The authors of this chapter ask the question all institutions concerned with social justice must ask: from individual teachers to whole institutions, how can we rise up against perpetuating historical injustices? Their eight bulleted answers offer practical and necessary solutions for our current rhetorical situation that explain the significance of silence and the complexity of historical colonization and subjugation, but their conclusion holds the hope for how to fix what is broken: "we need these texts, and the decolonizing practices within them, to get into the hands of writing teachers across the country, one teacher at a time if necessary" (198).

The fourth major section deals with basic writing (BW) in the 2YC context. Gallagher argues that teaching BW provides a necessary component of learning for professors. Due to the wide variation in writing and reading skills, each class becomes a custom-made course to help students learn to improve their writing. Gallagher draws attention to the ways antiracist pedagogy can help students engage in this progress by including a "Language and the Politics of Proper English Essay Prompt" along with a consideration of how allowing students to use their vernacular language in an academic essay better prepares students to evaluate their language choices. Giordano picks up this same concept, extending it further to encourage BW content that challenges students while showing them in manageable stages what college-level work looks like. These courses, just as Gallagher argued, need to be individually tailored to the students taking them, not as an additional

burden to overloaded teachers but as a means of directing ownership of readings and writing assignments to students. In an effort to help teachers or programs tasked with building dynamic BW programs, Giordano also includes multiple resources for assignments, schedules, and evaluations. Peter Adams completes the section on BW with a critical reflection on his 10 years of experience with the ALP, including a generous packet of materials, but he explains in greater length than the other authors the difficulty of teaching BW just after completing a graduate program. Few graduate students get direct experience with or instruction in BW due to institutional initiatives to remove BW courses paired with a sustained focus in many graduate programs to emphasize that securing a job at an R1 school is the only acceptable job market outcome.

Leah McNeir helps conclude the collection with a chapter written to new English teachers. McNeir encourages teachers to remember what makes them passionate about the work of teaching so that they can keep that focus during challenging times. She also encourages new teachers to remember that they have a duty to their students to help students take ownership of their education, which touches back on the impetus for the creation of community colleges detailed in the book's introduction. The final chapter contains Sullivan's interview with Howard Tinberg, a celebrated figure in TYC communities as an author, editor, and chair of national organizations. Perhaps the most intriguing question Sullivan poses is why someone would choose to teach at a 2YC rather than settle for teaching at one. Tinberg answers by providing insight into his own initial ignorance concerning the work at a 2YC before explaining the richness in diversity at 2YCs that represents the surrounding community, and the willingness of students at a 2YC to work hard, encapsulating attitudes within the classroom and in many students' lives outside of the classroom. Tinberg's closing words offer a vision of FYC as a space that creates better citizens, a vision that fits our cultural moment for teachers and students as it offers true hope.

Many of the chapters in this collection demonstrate the close connection of two-year college scholars to the classroom, and many chapters speak to the lack of sufficient graduate-level training in community college and basic writing programs. These two issues go hand-in-hand: as a recent graduate teaching assistant who left his assistantship at an R1 to take on a full-time position at a 2YC, I learned directly and indirectly that research matters more than teaching to many people in academia. In speaking glowingly of this book, I practice the same praise I do for my students outside the classroom: many people already look down on the work, so I will stand to advocate for its sincerity and intensity. *Sixteen Teachers Teaching* offers a

critique that WPAs and those training future WPAs in graduate programs need to pay attention to and account for within the field by offering coursework and professional development opportunities specifically focusing on BW and 2YC contexts, and not just FYC “in general,” a term which often defaults to representation of SLACs and universities.

As noted in the review above, this book also offers a way to think through the CWPA’s current situation regarding anti-racist labor. It offers solidarity for those who have spoken up, especially those who have been censured in various ways. It offers background for those who have not yet investigated the implications of critical race theory for institutions. And, in the way that literature often does, it provides an external account that all sides of the CWPA reckoning with white supremacy can approach as an external rather than personal event to weigh arguments more fairly. I believe any fair reading of Coleman, DeLong, DeVore, Gibney, and Kuhne’s chapter will promote acceptance of the solutions that they offer for individuals, as the conclusion calls for, or for institutions willing to do that difficult work.

WORKS CITED

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Charles C. Grimm is Assistant Professor at Georgia Highlands College, a rural community college northwest of Atlanta, where he teaches composition. He is currently ABD at Georgia State University with a dissertation investigating the usefulness of ghostwriting as both a corporate and educational practice, with an expected spring 2022 defense date.

