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Review Essay

Common Sense and Theory in the Teaching of
Composition Teachers

Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants

Sally Barr Ebest

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005

Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum

Sidney I. Dobrin, editor

Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2005

Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing

Irene Clark, with Betty Bamberg, Darsie Bowden, John R. Edlund, Lisa Gerrard,
Sharon Klein, Julie Neff Lippman, and James D. Williams

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003

Stories and essays about teacher preparation understandably often focus on teacher resistance, its sources, its character, and its possible solutions. In many scenarios, new teachers tend to resist theories more so than practices, though discussions of resistance to both abound. A new teacher often arrives at the scene of the practicum with a commonsense understanding of teaching writing. This understanding of how writing is taught is usually not particularly

theorized in any self-conscious way. It has been drawn often from personal memories, vague cultural expectations, and other nontheoretical sources. Of course, sometimes a new teacher, especially if that teacher has had formal training or experience at another institution (e.g., an MA student who decides to take a PhD at another school), comes to a practicum with an overt theoretical framework. In this case, the incompatibility (or the compatibility) of the previously held theories and practices with those of the new institution is what may account for resistance (or lack of resistance) on the part of the teacher. It is also possible to see this transferring student teacher as moving from the common sense of one institution—even if put in theoretical terms—to the common sense of another institution, since I agree with Antonio Gramsci, that a theory, if successful, will become a new kind of common sense. Theory, or philosophy, in Gramsci's terms, if it is politically successful, becomes common sense, and common sense over time becomes folklore or, as it is sometimes commonly referred to in composition, "lore":

Every social stratum has its own 'common sense' and its own 'good sense', which are basically the most widespread conception of life and of man. Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of 'common sense': this is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. 'Common sense' is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is as a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time. (*Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, 1949, 144, qtd. in *Prison Notebooks* 326 n 5)

It is not hard to imagine institutions at which certain dominant pedagogical theories function as common sense (for example, current-traditionalism, expressivism, social constructionism, or poststructuralism); nor is it hard to imagine the practicum as a key site where that institutional common sense is invoked. Consider, for example, a teacher who brings the writing process approach to a practicum at an institution where a poststructurally informed social constructionist approach to teaching writing functions as common sense.¹ But when a theory becomes common sense, then the next round of questioning should begin for an individual, as well as for a program. The practicum, I would argue, is an excellent place and time for students and instructors to explore this dialectical movement between practice and theory, between com-

mon sense and critical reflection, between acceptance and resistance, between tacit understandings and thoughtful praxis.

All three books under review approach the goals and methods of the practicum with these various relationships between common sense and theory, or practices and critical reflection, in mind, though the ways in which they address or formulate these relationships vary. The first book, *Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants*, by Sally Barr Ebest, is a sustained ethnographic study of new graduate teaching assistant resistance to some composition pedagogies, theories, and their practices. The second book, *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum*, edited by Sidney I. Dobrin, is a collection of essays that represents a variety of positions on the intellectual, curricular, and field function of the practicum course, particularly as it manifests the tensions between theories and practices. The third book, *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*, by Irene Clark, with Betty Bamberg, Darsie Bowden, John R. Edlund, Lisa Gerrard, Sharon Klein, Julie Neff Lippman, and James D. Williams, is a kind of textbook for a practicum, a combination of theoretical and historical readings and writing assignments for graduate students and new teachers to do within a practicum, but also to employ within their own writing classrooms. While *Concepts in Composition* is older, by two years, than the other books reviewed here, it provides compositionists with an important and sustained example of how one might pedagogically approach the practicum, and as such, it complements in interesting ways the projects of Dobrin et al. and Ebest.

Sally Barr Ebest's book, *Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants*, demonstrates how new instructors (here graduate teaching assistants) may resist theory, and how they may also resist, sometimes as strongly and vociferously, practices. Or, to put it in the framework I have borrowed above from Gramsci: one way of reading Ebest's book is to see it as a dramatic example of how new teachers respond to having their own common senses challenged by the new common sense of the writing program in which they are teaching. Taking an ethnographic approach and informed by feminist scholarship, Ebest presents eighteen case studies in order to ascertain the sources of graduate student resistance to composition pedagogy and its use in graduate courses (and often by extension in undergraduate classrooms). While her book is a study of such resistance, it also clearly argues that faculty should employ composition pedagogy in their own graduate courses, and not just in undergraduate courses. According to Ebest, composition pedagogy should be employed on the graduate level for two reasons:

first, graduate students as teachers and future faculty should become familiar, from the inside out, with the pedagogies they are asked to value and enact in their undergraduate classrooms; and second, composition pedagogy is helpful for graduate students as they try to find their voices, both personally and professionally, both written and oral, in the classroom but also in academia at large. Through ethnographic methods such as conducting and analyzing interviews and taped group discussions, as well as reading graduate student writing, Ebest locates the source of graduate student resistance in the students' literacy formations, particularly in students' socialization in family, cultural, and school environments. Or to put it in Gramsci's terms, she locates their resistance in the sediments of their philosophies of life, which have settled into common sense. While students' resistance or nonresistance might actually be further distinguished as resistance, opposition, or accommodation, Ebest does not make such distinctions.² In other words, she seems to suggest that graduate students resist because of who they are and what they are bringing to the classroom (undergraduate or graduate), not because composition pedagogy itself is particularly problematic. But what is Ebest's conception of composition pedagogy?

Ebest uses a variety of terms and phrases to characterize her pedagogy: constructivist approach, feminist pedagogy, composition pedagogy, and process approach. There is quite a bit of slippage among the terms, and often Ebest simply refers to her approach as "composition pedagogy" in moments like this: "The following case studies demonstrate how composition pedagogy helped to strengthen and unify [the graduate students'] voices (140). Her continued use of the phrase "composition pedagogy" makes the concept seem to function at the level of common sense in her text, as if her readers are supposed to tacitly know what she means. Yet it is not just that there are many different kinds of composition pedagogies—poststructuralist, postmodern, cultural studies, radical, classical rhetoric for the modern student, current-traditional—it is also that Ebest seems to willfully ignore the variety of pedagogical approaches throughout her book. By composition pedagogy, Ebest means not just a process approach to teaching writing, but "the process movement": her book "is based on longitudinal case studies that explore how graduate students respond to the process movement in composition, explaining how they accept this pedagogy as students and how their acceptance affects their performance as instructors and future professors" (3). That she really means "the process movement in composition" is clear from the practices she advocates: freewriting, multiple drafting, peer feedback, small group work, collaborative

work, personal narratives, writing to learn, inquiry-based writing (here most evident in “action research”), reflective writing, the use of reading responses, journal keeping, and teacher-student conferences. Certainly some of the practices she advocates are employed by many teachers of composition regardless of the varying goals and values of their pedagogies. And certainly, it is undeniable that the field of composition has reaped many benefits from the writing process movement (historically and in its current manifestations) and continues to employ some of the movement’s strategies, while complicating or even outright rejecting others. In fact, many of the practices and values of the writing process movement function presently at the level of common sense in many classrooms and programs. Indeed, its tacitness has been implicated in arguments both for and against the relevance of writing process approaches and practices. A fact that Ebest seems to ignore.

I had thought that in part 1 of her book, “Context and Theory,” Ebest might acknowledge, at length, critiques of the process movement as a way to make the case for her continued commitment to its approaches, but this did not happen. Instead, in part 1’s three chapters, “Researching Teaching,” “Establishing Context,” and “Teaching Theory,” Ebest reflects on her use of ethnographic methodology, tells a brief history of TA and faculty training, and discusses educational theory, much of it addressing cognitive psychology theory, which partly covers some of the ground that justifies process approaches and also partly explains the emphasis she places throughout her book on “self-efficacy”. Indeed, Ebest values self-efficacy, “voice,” personal expression, dialogue, and personal growth above all. Thus, when graduate students have a hard time producing personal writing or avoid producing personal writing, Ebest views this not only as resistance but also as failure. Similarly, when graduate students do not want to share rough drafts or peer-review each other’s papers, or when they refuse to freewrite or express hostility at being required to free write, this too is resistance and failure. When graduate students come with already strong voices (prior to their “empowerment” by the writing process approach), their powerful voices are problems for Ebest and the process approach. And generally, male students resist more often and often more dramatically than female students, although women with strong voices resist as well. Indeed, gender (and occasionally sexuality) is a key factor in resistance to or acceptance of the process approach. The relationship between gender and resistance as well as the importance of personal efficacy, voice, and resistance is further emphasized in Ebest’s use of epithets, categories, and types throughout her chapters.

I am not sure why Ebest chose to give the students in her case studies epithets, but she did, and they are revealing, mostly in terms of the nature of Ebest's particular frustration with a given type of graduate student: "Daddy's Girl," "The Antifeminist," "The Activist," "Mr. Negative."³ That these four labels occur in the "Resisting Change" chapter perhaps accounts for their negative overtones. In her chapter titled "Overcoming Resistance," the epithets drop off, though the typing continues as students are labeled as "inexperienced writers," "superstitious perfectionists" and "cynical, experienced writers." In her chapter "Building Confidence," the categories continue: "Personal Construct and Silence," "Personal Construct and Stifled Creativity," "Personal Construct and Sexism," "Personal Construct and Muted Feminine Voice," "Personal Construct and the Socialization of Males." And in the last case studies chapter, "Strengthening Voice," we get a mix: "The Tomboy," "The Mormon Influence," "In the Company of Women," "The Feminist," "The Nurturer." It is not hard to guess from the epithets, types, and categories which students resist the replacement of their current commonsense understandings about writing and teaching by "process movement" approaches, and in what ways and why they resist.⁴

In each chapter, after presenting the graduate students, Ebest includes a section called "Applying Theory," in which she analyzes student resistance (or lack of resistance) using primarily feminist theories. Then she ends each chapter with a section entitled "Implications for Teaching" in which she reflects on her own role as the seminar teacher and makes suggestions about how to help students overcome resistance. For example, the chapter called "Resisting Change" offers three suggestions: pay special attention to the construction of collaborative-learning groups; be a mentor, especially to female graduate students; and "instantiate these pedagogical changes in every class . . . [since graduate students] need sufficient time and opportunities to recognize and understand why change is necessary" (97–98). Or, for another example, the chapter "Overcoming Resistance" ends with two major suggestions: first, that faculty who teach practicums or seminars in teaching need to model the pedagogy they are asking graduate students to employ in undergraduate classrooms; second, that asking graduate students to do "action-research" (also known as "teacher research" or "classroom research" [14]) in their own classrooms will decrease graduate student resistance (133). Understandably, Ebest claims that such research allows graduate students to test theories in the classroom by keeping a teacher-research journal in which they reflect on their students, their teaching, and themselves.

True to the overall argument of her book—“To understand composition pedagogies and convince students of its value, we must try it ourselves” (121)—Ebest tries it herself and comes to empathize with her graduate students. Indeed, one of the most interesting (and perhaps ironic) moments in the book comes in the last chapter when Ebest admits that she was struggling to find her own voice (210). A colleague suggests that she “free write,” and Ebest confesses: “When I introduced free writing and encouraged my students to use that strategy to develop drafts, I assured them it was an integral part of my own composing process. That was not a lie; it was only a partial truth. I did free write when I composed, but I composed only academic texts, so delving into my feelings about teaching and writing insightfully about my role in the classroom felt not just awkward but incredibly jejune. It was not easy to straddle the line between useful reflection and embarrassing self-disclosure” (210). Since she generally argues that having graduate students try writing process strategies in their own writing makes them more compassionate teachers, and since Ebest does try to freewrite, and since her own attempts at freewriting cause her to develop more respect for her graduate students, I can only surmise that freewriting remains an uncontested strategy or an inherent good in her pedagogy.

There is much to admire about Ebest’s position—that teachers should at least try (even if they do not regularly use) the writing strategies they advocate in the classroom. On the one hand, her conception of the practicum seems to emphasize a kind of dialogue between theory and practices. On the other hand, the dialectic that graduate students are encouraged to explore privileges the writing process approach so strongly that the dialogue seems intended as a tool to reduce student resistance rather than foster reflection (by all participants, not just the graduate students) on the dominant pedagogy, which continues to function forcefully at the level of common sense. Indeed, Ebest’s focus on overcoming student resistance seems to blind her to any potential questioning or criticism of her pedagogy. Readers who wholeheartedly embrace “the process approach,” who ignore critiques of that pedagogy, who are unwilling to consider discussions of the “post-process” turn in composition, and who also continue to emphasize freewriting, personal writing, and “voice” as unquestionably good practices and categories, will see Ebest’s book as a positive affirmation of their positions. Additionally, they will find in her book both answers to their questions about why students resist the process approach and strategies for getting graduate students to see the value of the process approach not only in their teaching but also in their own experiences as graduate stu-

dents and people. However, Ebest's unwillingness to consider critiques of the writing process movement limits her book's readership. For those who have given some serious thought to critiques of the process approach and who have reflected on the post-process turn in composition, Ebest's book can seem anachronistic.⁵

In a post-process world, there is not just one process for all writers or teachers. If the process approach is a kind of totalizing (or totalitarian) grand narrative of composition, other compositionists, in the last twenty or so years, have been putting pressure on its commonsense quality and its tacit power, and acknowledging and making room for the *petits récits*. In other words, freewriting is not a good idea for everyone; personal writing is not always the best approach; individual voice is not paramount; not all students are recursive in the same ways, or even recursive much at all, and so forth. I suppose for those strongly committed to the writing process approach, these realizations might be slightly terrifying (if not heretic), but for others, these realizations are liberating. Though some might argue that the post-process turn in composition leaves one pedagogy-less, I would suggest that it returns the power of contingency to the writing classroom and demands multiple pedagogies (not just multiple practices within a pedagogy that strives toward an artificial, even forced, coherence). We use the pedagogies we need to use to teach the specific students who show up in the institution at which we teach. If graduate students resist the theories or practices of a practicum, we should not only consider the students but also consider our pedagogies, as well as where the goals of our students and the goals of our institutions, and even our field, as manifested in our practicums, meet or diverge. In other words, we should not assume that only graduate students or other new teachers are subject to the negative constraints of common sense. Writing programs and institutions and their faculty, too, can seem to be rigid and immobile. All participants require the dialectic necessary for the frequent transformation of theory and commonsense.

An examination of various institutional contexts for the practicum and the ways in which these contexts manifest commonsensical conceptions of the field of composition are foregrounded in Sidney Dobrin's edited collection of essays, *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum*. Dobrin intends for the book to "bring more scholarly debates regarding the role of the curriculum to the fore in professional conversations so that compositionists better understand not only why this course [the practicum] has become a 'universally' offered course, but also why it is—and has been historically—one of the most

contested and questioned courses offered in graduate-level English Studies” (2). As Dobrin reminds us in his excellent introduction, the course may be so highly debated because it “is the largest, most effective purveyor of cultural capital in composition studies” (21), and as such, it is often meant to introduce graduate students (and sometimes undergraduates or instructors) to pedagogical theories and methods (with day-to-day classroom guidance); to composition theory; to composition research methodologies; to composition studies as a discipline (including its history); to larger disciplinary questions about writing (not just the teaching of writing per se); and to the profession (whether practicum participants aim to be compositionists or not).

Don't Call It That is an invaluable resource for Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), scholars in composition, and graduate students in English studies, particularly those pursuing composition studies, as it represents, in individual essays and across the collection, a series of conversations (sometimes arguments) about the relationship of theory to practice in the practicum. The book is most obviously helpful for those who design, revise, or teach practicums or seminars in the teaching of writing. Indeed, at the time I was reading the collection and writing this review, I was, as a WPA of a first-year writing program and a graduate faculty member, responsible for designing the course syllabus for the first-year writing class that all new TAs are required to teach, designing and then teaching the summer orientation, designing the practicum that I would teach, managing course placement for first-year students, and preparing to teach a graduate course in rhetoric and composition that fulfills a core requirement for graduate students. I solicited and required collaboration as much as I could; still, I realized my person(a) represented the nexus of a lot of compositional activity. As many of the essays in *Don't Call It That* discuss, the potential for a “cult-of-personality” effect increases dramatically when one person occupies such multiple positions, and, indeed, this point resonated with me. Generally, I am grateful for the book, since read as a whole, it can give one (as it did me) the sense of being at a really interesting (albeit large) conference workshop on teaching the practicum. There are disputes among the essays; there are confluences and similarities; there are inspiring stories and tragic stories, lessons learned, questions posed, and handouts, often in the form of appended syllabi and assignments. What was most interesting to me was not just the materiality of the essays, but the way in which all of the writers situated their texts within their specific institutional contexts and the field of composition more broadly.

First-time writing teachers often imagine that the practicum is a skill-based course, full of practical advice on how to write assignments, grade papers, plan classes, manage workloads, and more. These expectations often reflect the broader cultural common sense about introductory English courses—that is, that they are about giving students basic skills.⁶ Practicum teachers, increasingly professional compositionists, with scholarly commitments to the field, might imagine the course as an introduction to the intellectual riches that teaching writing can yield. This, too, might be understood as a kind of common sense of the field of composition for many scholars. Dobrin's introductory essay, "Finding Space for the Composition Practicum," helps us ground these broadly competing visions of the course in a historical context and reflect on the specificity of these generalized commonsense conceptions of the goals of the practicum. Apparently, even before the advent of professional compositionists, practicum instructors did not blithely ignore theory: "what I find . . . interesting is the manner in which lore has evolved about the practicum course, casting its history as one of a tradition of a practically focused class. [. . .] The fact is that the emphasis on theory—and the subsequent questioning of that emphasis—has existed since the inception of the idea of composition practica" (17). Given this history, Dobrin intends the collection to "situate the practicum as one of the most important locations in which composition's 'theory wars' or theory/practice debates are played out with very material ramifications" (3).

As I suggested above, many of the essays include deep description of institutional contexts, including course descriptions, syllabi, readings, and assignments, alongside theoretical arguments or personal narratives. As Dobrin acknowledges in his introduction, the essays often turn to the "personal/experiential" (29). He suggests that there are two possible reasons for this: one, conversations about practicums have been so limited that there is little context in which to discuss courses other than the personal/experiential context; two, "notions of teacher-student relationships still maintain a strong hold over the very discourses in and through which we can discuss teaching" (30). While the seventeen essays in the collection seem to be arranged in no particular order—a fact that might be somewhat frustrating for those readers who like a collection to have indicative sections—the titles of the pieces reveal their focus, if not their arguments. I offer the following groupings in the spirit of the issues that Dobrin suggests the collection addresses, but I admit that my grouping is artificial, even somewhat strained, since many of the essays contradict,

complement, elaborate, interpenetrate, and expand on one another when read together.

Four of the essays focus on the relationship of WPAs to the practicum course. Guerra and Bawarshi explore ways that they, as new WPAs in a transition period, used their revision of the existing practicum course to critically reflect on the field of composition studies, as well as to make changes—in consultation with others (e.g., teachers of the first-year writing course, other administrators, etc.)—to their writing programs. Kyburz examines the situation of a college or university that does not have a practicum but has forums (or potential “anti-forums”) for professional development of faculty, forums that can function similarly to or differently from practicums. Belanger and Gruber address the challenges that WPAs as practicum instructors must face as they find themselves “presenting different sides of ourselves to GTAs, students, colleagues, and administrators, and at local and national conferences” (117). In her story, Huntley describes a difficult semester teaching the practicum within the context of recent departmental restructuring. The creative writing program had split from English and formed its own department, yet graduate students in the MFA program still worked, along with masters’ students in English, as teaching assistants for the required English composition courses. She narrates how a variety of factors—the restructuring, her role as director of composition, her emphasis on theory in the practicum, and graduate student resistance—culminated in a series of pedagogical crises and an atmosphere of miscommunication and tension.

While many of the essays in the collection tackle the theory/practice relationship, the following essays take it either as their primary focus or take a specific position vis-à-vis theory/practice. Hardin argues that the curricular purposes of graduate courses need to be clarified and that training of new teachers should be separated from “the teaching of composition pedagogy and the teaching of composition pedagogy from composition theory” (41). Michel suggests that encouraging students to move from acquiring theory to theorizing requires understanding student resistance to theory and developing alternative pedagogical approaches. Fischer also explores reasons for graduate student resistance to theory and offers ways to ameliorate student resistance. Odom, Bernard-Odals, and Kerschbaum argue that the relation between theory and practice is a dialectic and explain how they attempt to maintain this dialectic as they train new teachers to teach a writing course with argument as its focus. Stacey discusses the process of training English education majors by having students tell stories and by using theory to interrupt or challenge the

“success” narratives of teachers. Murray suggests that the practicum should focus on practice, since new teachers find theory less helpful than different kinds of mentoring, such as observations, conferences, and drop-in visits. In the spirit of the National Writing Project, Winslow argues that teachers of writing must themselves write—not just academic papers, but a variety of genres to be represented in graduate student portfolios. Addison focuses on the teaching practicum as site of inquiry and action, particularly regarding the teaching of grammar. And Miller, Rodrigo, Pantoja, and Roen argue that the practicum needs to encourage graduate student teachers to view all their work, including their teaching, as scholarly. While some essays argue hardily for or against theory, most are concerned with finding the proper proportion and relationship between theory and practice.

The remaining essays engage many of the same issues of theory/practice, curricular location, practicum formation, and writing program administration, but they also focus on more particular circumstances, such as teaching writing with technology, media, or training undergraduates to teach writing.⁷ Blackmon and Rose discuss a mentoring program for writing teachers teaching with computers. Jeff Rice argues that the dominance of expressivist pedagogy in composition canon seems to leave less room for, or even oppose, the teaching of new media technology. Trubek discusses teaching undergraduate tutors in a practicum called “Teaching and Writing Across the Curriculum,” concluding that the composition practicum should not include composition theory. And Bush, Hill, and LaHaie recount their experiences teaching a practicum that includes upper-level undergraduate English education students who teach sections of their college-level basic writing courses in a practicum with graduate students who also teach.

Collectively, the essays in *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum* provide readers who have to design, implement, take, or think about the practicum or similar teaching seminar a peek into the range of approaches in different institutional contexts and how those contexts inform the character of the practicums. Perhaps more importantly, however, the essays when read together create one dynamic, if sometimes contradictory, portrait of the field of composition studies and the relation of theory to practice that the practicum manifests or can manifest. There appear to be two general arguments against much or any theory in the practicum: theory is not always helpful to new teachers, who are more urgently concerned with what to do on a day-to-day basis; and theory can be draining, demanding, an obstacle, or even destructive to new teachers, who may already be on shaky ground and who might feel thrown

further off balance by being exposed to new or intellectually demanding theories. In the introduction, Dobrin mentions one version of this position and his response: “Ultimately, [Wendy] Bishop argues that because students come to graduate programs with their own theories and because the theories we often throw at them are contested by other theories, the very introduction of theory can confuse new teachers as they try to negotiate their own ideas about teaching (I am still trying to understand why this would be thought of as a bad thing)” (18). I tend to agree with Dobrin’s response. As I think my earlier discussion of the theory/practice dynamic suggested, despite the common phrase “resistance to theory,” one does not resist “theory” per se; one resists certain theories or resists that particular act of theorizing. A practicum that claims to not teach “theory” but to teach only practices is merely holding fast to the prevailing common sense of that institution (or program or WPA), or by allowing, as Bishop suggests above, students to hold fast to their own theories, often tacit and functioning at the level of common sense. Yet, introducing theory (or new theories) to students, and asking them to theorize, is necessary to provide an environment in which tacit theories of both students and writing programs are drawn out, articulated, explicitated, questioned, put into dialogue with complementary theories, challenged, and even put into conflict with competing theories. In this way, the theories behind the common senses can be desedimented, and through new theories and practices, common senses of individuals and programs can be, as Gramsci reminds us, “transformed.”

Such a back and forth between action and practices, on the one hand, and research, reflection, and theorizing, on the other, is the core structure of *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*, by Irene L. Clark, Betty Bamberg, Darsie Bowden, John R. Edlund, Lisa Gerrard, Sharon Klein, Julie Neff Lippman, and James D. Williams. *Concepts in Composition* provides some historical/theoretical contexts, some primary readings, and lots of opportunities for graduate students (or any new teachers) to reflect not just on their own writing and teaching practices but also on the relevance of certain composition theories, pedagogies, and specific practices to their own particular classrooms and institutions. *Concepts in Composition* intends to help students maintain the dialectic between theory and practice:

Focusing on scholarship in rhetoric and composition that has influenced classroom teaching, the book aims to foster reflection on how theory impacts practice, enabling prospective teachers to develop their own comprehensive and coherent conception of what writing is or should be and to consider how people

learn to write. Each chapter addresses a particular theoretical concept of relevance to classroom teaching and includes suggestions for writing, discussion and further exploration. Such an approach allows prospective instructors to assume the dual role of both teacher and student as they enter the conversation of the discipline and become familiar with some of its critical issues. (xviii)

And while writing process advocates (e.g., Peter Elbow) and the practices and values of the writing process movement are a strong presence in *Concepts in Composition*, there is also an interesting mix of rhetorical theory (when the concept, such as invention, is clearly rhetorical, much of the theory is classical) and contemporary composition research and scholarship.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. In each chapter, a contributor discusses a key concept in composition: process, invention, audience, and genre (Clark); revision (Betty Bamberg), assessing writing (Julie Neff Lippman), voice (Darsie Bowden), grammar and usage (James Williams), non-native speakers of English (John Edlund), language and diversity (Sharon Klein), and electronic writing spaces (Lisa Gerrard). In addition, the book includes two appendixes: “Developing Effective Writing Assignments” and “Developing a Syllabus.” For each concept, each contributor provides some historical or theoretical background and asks new teachers to reflect on their own practices or ideologies vis-à-vis writing, learning, and teaching. Each chapter also includes one or more complete reading selections for readers/students/teachers to analyze and reflect on, as well as a bibliography for further reading. Each chapter is nicely done—a balance of theory, history, questions, arguments and counter-arguments, readings, assignments, and practical suggestions.

I found the chapter on “Voice” particularly engaging and thoughtful. The way that Bowden briefly historicizes “voice” in composition will no doubt be very helpful to new teachers who might not have thought so much about this key concept in the teaching of writing. The subtitles in her section are particularly telling: “A Little History,” “Self-Expression in the Writing Classroom,” “Voice as Role Playing,” “Critique of Voice,” “Other Metaphors: Women’s Studies,” “From Another Angle: Electronic Technology,” and “What About Style?” The questions for “Writing and Discussion,” following the general pattern of the entire book, ask readers to reflect on their own ideas, experiences, and knowledge of the concept of voice, analyze examples of student writing for voice, consider voice and writing assessment, think through pedagogies that would value (or not value) voice in student writing, analyze essays (included in the book) on the issue of voice, and do some research. Two bibliographies—

“For Further Exploration” and a list of the texts that Bowden specifically referenced—follow. Betty Bamberg’s chapter on “Revision” is similarly a nice balance of history, theory, prompts for reflection on experiences and teaching strategies, and includes Nancy Sommers’s canonical essay, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” The rest of the chapters more or less follow this effective format.

Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing is one example of how to bring composition and rhetorical theory together with self-reflective practices for new teachers and suggested teaching strategies for the classroom. As such, it would make a fine textbook for a practicum or seminar in teaching composition. Though I sometimes wished that there were other readings included (or certain ones were replaced with other readings), or that the questions for writing and discussion took a harder line of questioning vis-à-vis power, discourse, and institutions, I do not want to split hairs because not only does the book include full texts of key essays in rhetorical and composition theory and pedagogy, but it also includes bibliographies for each concept for further reading, bibliographies that could be of excellent supplementary use to a practicum or seminar teacher to suit his or her particular writing program or curriculum.

All three books reviewed here provide readers with a wealth of arguments to consider about teacher preparation, about the teaching of writing, and about the debates that animate and define the field of composition. As Irene Clark reminds us in her preface, it is less common (though still prevalent) that writing teachers go unprepared or unsupported into the composition classroom (xvii–xviii). Things have changed. There are practicums and teaching seminars and mentorship programs and other institutional and curricular apparatuses to help writing teachers think seriously about what they are doing in their classrooms. There is also a growing body of scholarship on postsecondary teacher training, to which the three books under review contribute admirably. Certainly Ebest’s sustained willingness to put her pedagogy, her students’ resistance, and her own reactions to their responses on the table for reflection and discussion in *Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants*, provides readers not just with the insights gained from her eighteen case studies but also with the insights produced by her own reflection on her location. And the collage-like (or Burkean barnyard) quality of *Don’t Call It That* highlights our field’s ongoing debates about the relationship between practice and theory, between common sense and philosophy, as well as demonstrating what is involved as individuals, institutions,

and the field choose to place one term at the top of the hierarchy of their dialectic and let the other sink: practice over theory or theory over practice. But to point to Gramsci one last time—Gramsci, who gave philosophy the place of pride over common sense (philosophy as the source of common sense), but who never denied their intimate relationship—we see another turn in the dialectic:

Philosophy in general does not in fact exist. Various philosophies or conceptions of the world exist, and one always makes a choice between them. How is this choice made? Is it merely an intellectual event, or is it something more complex? And is it not frequently the case that there is a contradiction between one's intellectual choice and one's mode of conduct? Which therefore would be the real conception of the world: that logically affirmed as an intellectual choice? Or that which emerges from the real activity of each man, which is implicit in his mode of action? And since all action is political, can one not say that the real philosophy of each man is contained in its entirety in his political action? (Gramsci 326)

All three books reviewed here take seriously these questions about intellectual choices and modes of conduct, about philosophy as theory and political action as practice as they pertain to teacher preparation and to the teaching of writing. And all three books help readers understand how specific institutional contexts, as well as political and individual projects, frame the choices we make in the field of composition to uphold, reconsider, or transform our commonsensical understanding of writing, teaching, and teacher preparation.

Notes

1. I am aware that I am following a path similar to one that Nancy Welch takes in her essay “Resisting the Faith: Conversion, Resistance, and the Training of Teachers.” We come to some similar points, especially as Welch reflects on her experience as a student in a teaching seminar and practicum at what she calls “University B”: “Increasingly, they were disrupting my beliefs and prompting me to reflect critically on what I once took to be common sense about teaching and about the world” (399). It is interesting that we come to similar points because, while Welch transfers to a different graduate program as a result of her perception of teacher training at “University B” as agonistic, I not only stayed at “University B” but was also inspired by the intellectual rigor of the teacher training program to become a compositionist.
2. See, for example, Geoffrey Chase’s reworking of Henry Giroux’s arguments in Chase’s key essay, “Accommodation, Resistance and the Politics of Student Writing.” See also Hurlbert and Blitz, *Composition and Resistance*, and Greenbaum, *In-*

surrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies, for interesting variations and elaborations on the concept of resistance. Ebest does briefly acknowledge Giroux but dismisses his arguments about resistance as a project of political liberation, for reasons that are unclear, as “too narrow” (66–67). Despite Ebest’s references to Ira Shor vis-à-vis resistance, my reading of her book concludes that she resorts to a rather overgeneralized notion of resistance (67).

3. Certainly anyone who has taught a practicum or who has to teach a practicum regularly encounters graduate student resistance and can find him- or herself feeling accordingly frustrated (perhaps even to the point of conceiving of hostile, unspoken nicknames). However “honest” it might have been, it still seemed a surprisingly reductive way to address graduate students in a book that intends to think theoretically about graduate student resistance in teacher preparation.

4. Reading Ebest’s readings of her students’ resistance, I found myself often counter-reading. I was reminded—here again perhaps revealing bits and pieces of what contributed to my own intellectual formation—of Joseph Harris’s rereading of Janet Emig’s discussion of her student Lynn (*Teaching Subject* 60–63).

5. Critiques, helpful situating histories, and discussions of process-movement and post-process abound. See, for just some examples, Lester Faigley, “Competing Theories of Process”; Sharon Crowley, “Around 1971”; Thomas Kent and others in *Post-Process Theory*.

6. This point is particularly true of first-year writing courses, those courses for which practicums most often prepare new teachers. James Seitz puts it succinctly: “Composition studies’ war on skills-based instruction may be over twenty years old, but composition courses still remain at the entrance to the curriculum, where they are conceived as primarily suitable for—and designed to meet the needs of—first-year students who lack ‘preparation’ for courses they will encounter further on in their education” (15).

7. One might imagine that a separate book could be written on any one of the specific issues that *Don’t Call It That* addresses. While I appreciated the essays on technology, I was struck by the nontechnological nature of many of the practicums described. This cannot be accurate in general, I imagine. My own pedagogies for TA workshops and practicums have become increasingly more than supplemented by email exchanges, online discussion boards, exchanges of electronic texts, and Web materials. However, I cannot say that I have yet thought through the ways in which this affects the nature and function of the practicum at my institution.

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