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What does it mean to teach after pedagogy?
For a long time, composition's pedagogical conversation has been defined by its theoretical disagreements. Is learning a cognitive process or a social one? Is the self expressed or distributed? Can writing be understood as a process, or is any process too messy to be understood? These debates have finally run out of steam, argues Paul Lynch, leaving composition in a “postpedagogical” moment, a moment when the field no longer believes that pedagogical theories can account for the complexities of teaching.

After Pedagogy extends the postpedagogical conversation by turning to the experience of teaching itself. Through the work of John Dewey, After Pedagogy argues that experience offers an arena in which theory and practice can coexist. Most important, experience can fashion the teachable moments of postpedagogical practice into resources for further growth. “We cannot know what precisely the student will do with what we have offered,” says Lynch, “but we can think with the student about the experience of the offer itself.”

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Jay Jordan
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Redesigning Composition for Multilingual Realities argues that students of English as a second language, rather than always being novice English language learners, often provide models for language uses as English continues to spread and change as an international lingua franca. Starting from the premise that “multilingualism is a daily reality for all students—all language users,” Jay Jordan proceeds to both complicate and enrich the responsibilities of the composition classroom as it attempts to accommodate and instruct a diversity of students in the practices of academic writing. But as Jordan admits, theory is one thing; practical efforts to implement multilingual and even translingual approaches to writing instruction are another. Through a combination of historical survey, meta-analytical critique of existing literature, and naturalistic classroom research, Jordan’s study points to new directions for composition theory and pedagogy that more fully account for the presence and role of multilingual writers.

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Editors’ Introduction

Teacher Epistemology and Ontology: Emerging Perspectives on Writing Instruction and Classroom Discourse

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The articles in this issue make teachers the central focus of attention, examining how teachers know, understand, and approach writing, the teaching of writing and, more broadly, classroom discourse. Across the articles, teachers, rather than students, are cast as main characters, moral agents at the center of complex systems of political, cultural, and linguistic action that constitute “pedagogy.” The inquiries span across English classrooms, across other secondary school subjects, and beyond the classroom into the lives of teacher-writers.

An overarching theme of the issue is named by George Newell, Jennifer Van-DerHeide, and Allison Wynhoff Olsen as “teachers’ epistemologies.” If epistemology deals with “the theory of knowledge and understanding, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion” or functions “as a count noun” to mean a “particular theory of knowledge and understanding” (Epistemology, 2004), then teacher epistemology in relation to writing entails not just considering a theory of knowledge and understanding about writing itself and how writing works, but also considering theories of knowledge and understanding about the teaching of writing. A focus on teacher epistemologies becomes especially valuable in a time when teachers’ knowledge, methods, theories, and practices are hyperscrutinized, undervalued, and grossly misunderstood, if taken into account at all.

In terms of theories of knowledge and understanding about writing itself, Anne Whitney, Troy Hicks, Leah Zuidema, James Fredricksen, and Robert Yagelski refer to writing as a “way of being” (drawing from the previous work of Yagelski). This ontological sense of writing involves consideration not only of the writer’s writing (the text produced by any act of writing), but also of the experience of the act of writing—what writing does and can do to the writer herself. It is this ontological sense in which teacher writing can be said to be “transformative,” we think. This area of writing scholarship—conceptualizing both the teacher-writer and teachers’ epistemological stances toward writing—bears much deeper development, as Whitney and colleagues suggest in the essay. Yagelski’s work points the field in a more theoretical (as opposed to empirical) direction, and in particular it seems useful to consider how both epistemology and ontology (i.e., what teachers know and who teachers are) may interrelate. Understanding this interrelationship,
in turn, contributes to the work of building theories of teacher knowledge and understanding of writing itself. Yagelski’s line of work takes its cue from the fields of phenomenology and continental philosophy, but it may also be the case that other intellectual traditions, including, for example, psychoanalytic theory and moral philosophical work in the analytic tradition, might shed light on the interrelations between epistemology and ontology with respect to writing. Ontology seems to matter, in large part, because of the themes of shame and vulnerability that seem to emerge in the empirical accounts of how people experience writing in their lives (Brandt, 2001). And of course, many of those experiences of shame affiliated with writing have happened to people in schools, an observation made also in the interdisciplinary shame research (e.g., Brown, 2012).

On epistemologies of writing instruction itself, this issue of RTE has much to say. Professor Newell and colleagues focus on the teaching of argument, developing the idea of “argumentative epistemologies” in particular. They take the stance that teacher beliefs about what students should learn about argument underlie writing instruction (rather than, for example, emerging in concert with situated classroom or other activity systems). Thus teacher epistemologies are seen to impact instruction, but it is unclear whether—conceptually—teacher epistemologies of writing instruction might in turn be shaped by teachers’ experiences of teaching writing, whether in or beyond the classroom setting. That is, to what extent might teacher epistemologies of writing shift and change over time, in response to acts of teaching writing?

As we read it, the term epistemology as used by Newell et al. becomes a kind of count noun in which three different teacher epistemologies of argument writing instruction are identified, illustrated, and compared. These three epistemologies are grounded in historical approaches or emphases in the teaching of writing writ large, but applied specifically here to argument writing: structural, focusing on the text and structure of writing (as, for example, in the time-honored five-paragraph theme [Johnson, Thompson, Smagorinsky, & Fry, 2003]); ideational, focusing on inquiry and the generation of ideas (as, for example, in the work of Hillocks [2011]); and social practices, tied to the rhetorical idea of “audience-driven argumentation in a social context” which can be traced to Aristotle’s On Rhetoric.

While this article paves the way for further conceptual advancement about teacher epistemologies of argument instruction, the set of contrasting teacher epistemologies around argumentation it does offer suggests rich implications for professional development and for research on writing instruction beyond argumentation. We imagine, for example, the potential development of questionnaires or quizzes that teachers might take and discuss to locate themselves—epistemologically—as writing instructors. Note, too, that Newell et al. do not take the stance that any one of these teacher epistemologies of writing instruction is inherently better (in the spirit of discussions of “best practices” in teaching writing). They resist, we think rightly so, the idea that all teachers everywhere are best served by any singular epistemology of writing instruction. While that claim is certainly debatable (we ourselves struggle with the value of formalist approaches in most situations), we
see this stance as a pedagogically/pragmatically useful premise in working with teachers. Instead of casting teachers as passive receptacles of knowledge, it frames them as agents and advocates in the ways described by Whitney et al.

Further developing the idea of epistemologies of writing instruction is the paper by Shih-Chieh Chien, which reports on a survey-and-interview study of 23 college-level English writing instructors working with Chinese-speaking students at a university in Taiwan. This paper takes up the sometimes-hot topic of plagiarism in the field, introduced into this volume year in Rebecca Howard’s Forum essay (RTE issue 49.1). Howard offered a helpful summary of some themes that researchers in the field, herself included, have explored around plagiarism:

Students’ textual missteps are not a unitary category of unmitigated evil that we can “catch” with a software program and punish under the label plagiarism but are instead a mixed bag of language acquisition, source misuse, incomplete comprehension of US conventions, undeveloped critical reading processes, multicultural textual expectations, and yes, sometimes evil, deliberate appropriation of unacknowledged sources. (Howard, 2014, p. 76)

Chien heeds Howard’s testimony about the power of coding in writing scholarship on plagiarism. He also expands Howard’s discussion to look closely at teachers and specifically teacher epistemologies surrounding plagiarism. He draws particular attention to the culturally conditioned nature of teachers’ perceptions of plagiarism. The study uncovers culturally variable logics that can guide (and, if disrupted, might differently guide) teachers’ responses to student plagiarism. He discusses Confucianism in particular as a relational theory of being (ontology) and knowing (epistemology) in a writing classroom. Some teachers in the study attributed Chinese students’ struggles with plagiarism to their Confucianist epistemologies, suggesting that students steeped in this “way of being” would not place the same value on the intellectual property of a single person’s writing. The focal population of the study alone should prod a re-centering of the Western bias in scholarship on and teaching about plagiarism in English writing instruction (and perhaps writing instruction in other languages) around the globe. What is interesting, moreover, is how teachers seemed to understand plagiarism from both Eastern and Western perspectives. While this may seem contradictory, it strikes us that teachers are always living within contradictions to some extent—as Newell et al. seem to be suggesting with their idea that no singular epistemology of writing instruction is “best” for everyone, everywhere. And often, teachers find themselves caught translating or mediating across contradictory epistemologies.

Finally, returning to the theme of shame introduced above, the Taiwanese teachers spoke of plagiarism—as did the media and other pundits described in Howard’s essay in our last issue—in morally loaded terms, such as “serious moral offense,” that would lead a teacher to “condemn their [students’] deeds.” Howard (2014) used the stronger language of “unmitigated evil.” Here again, we land on the distinction between ontology and epistemology, where being some kind of (perhaps
bad or evil) person who writes and having some knowledge/understanding about writing (knowing to, and how to, do the right—morally good and proper—thing in writing) seem to overlap. The implication is that someone who makes a certain (plagiarizing) move in his or her writing is in danger of having his or her status as a morally good and proper person called into question. It is little wonder that so many people feel so vulnerable around acts of writing. It is little wonder that teachers struggle so mightily with how to address plagiarism in classrooms in ways that are both humane and pedagogically effective.

Another teacher epistemological stance that gets explored in this issue, in the paper by Michael Sherry—and that will be further developed in a subsequent issue in a paper by Maureen Boyd—is the notion of dialogic stance (e.g., Boyd & Galda, 2011; Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013). When a teacher takes a dialogic stance, he or she invites students to participate in classroom talk not just to display what they already know (i.e., display talk), but to actively “talk to learn,” to take an intellectual journey through the give and take of competing ideas, via discourse (and oftentimes other semiotic means), in the cultural life of the classroom (Britton, 1969/1989). Sherry draws attention to the idea of collaborative conflict as a generative resource for classroom talk in English, through close analysis calling attention to the cultural and linguistic resources of one teacher, along with her epistemological stance toward her students and their cultural and linguistic repertoires. In an interpretive study drawing upon sociolinguistic classroom discourse study, Sherry shows how collaborative conflict talk in discussion is made possible through teacher knowledge and use of student language practices. In the focal example of the article, the teacher used indirect challenges and provocative paraphrases to promote collaborative disagreement during whole-class discussion. These discursive strategies were features of the African American sociable conflict-talk practice known as The Dozens, made possible because the teacher spoke African American English. It was, moreover, through dialogue with the teacher-researcher that the epistemological stance of the teacher—her idea that she could and should call upon her own cultural language practices shared with many of her students to engage them in discussions—became clearer to her. As a specifically African American cultural practice, however, moving The Dozens to a classroom may not be entirely innocent in other contexts with other teachers. Transformations and appropriations of this rhetorical strategy can take place with the potential consequence of unintended marginalization—for example, some may read women as being marginalized by the traditionally “masculine” cultural practice of playing The Dozens in African American communities (although we do not believe this critique could be justifiably leveled at Tamara Jefferson in Professor Sherry’s article). What, then, is the right space and when is the right time to mobilize cultural discourse practices of students in whole-class discussions or other participation structures? Under what conditions should teachers claim authority to import such cultural practices into classrooms? What consequences, intended or unintended, follow from such discursive appropriations?
Similarly, the paper by Kristen Campbell Wilcox and Jill Jeffery is premised on a dialogic stance, which values “writing to learn” as opposed to writing merely to display what has already been learned. This paper reports a large-scale replication of Applebee’s (1981) earlier study of writing in secondary schools, comparing writing tasks across disciplines and looking at adolescents with different academic performance histories and language backgrounds. The study aims, in part, to discern “instructional shifts needed in classrooms” as “higher demands for disciplinary writing” become more prominent in standards movements, such as the Common Core State Standards in the United States. The study finds few opportunities for extended writing—that is, “writing to learn”—happening outside of English classrooms in secondary schools. Wilcox and Jeffery also find that both academic performance histories and language histories shape the kinds of writing students have the opportunity to do, with English language-heritage speakers and those with sustained histories of high school performance having greater opportunities for a wider range of writing. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the construct of “high” versus “low” performance histories is itself troubled (and troubling) and shaped by long histories of inequity and injustice in United States schools.

This article, along with the article by Professor Newell and colleagues, leads us to further ask: How much ought the exigencies of the Common Core motivate the questions of writing researchers right now? In pondering this question, we note first the predominantly structural intellectual epistemology on which those standards seem to be built (e.g., almost exclusive attention to the “writer’s writing” and more specifically to the formal properties of that writing). Secondly, we observe the many pragmatic, economic, and equity questions surrounding accompanying testing regimes in states around the nation.

We also pose a second question in response to the articles: What theories of language undergird the research on/claims about teacher epistemology? Do the theories of language privilege the cognitive dimensions of writing and discourse practice? The social dimensions? The historical dimensions? The equity dimensions? In considering how observations of classroom talk, writing, and practice get used to infer teacher epistemology, it seems important to remember that classroom language is slippery and polysemous, often exerting an agency of its own in classroom life—what Derrida (1978) called the “iterability” of text. Once an utterance issues forth, it may elicit any manner of unintended consequences, responses, or historical reverberations. Acts of classroom language-in-use may at times betray epistemological stances that any given teacher might not assent to propositionally, if asked directly in an interview. Therefore, what assumptions about how language works are—and should be—made in the unfolding study of teacher epistemology both within and beyond writing instruction? We suspect the most valuable work—after Whitney et al. and Sherry—will be done by teachers, themselves, who take up and further develop the questions and use them to improve their practice, advocate for students and schools, and question their own construals of what it is that is happening in the classroom from moment to moment, day to day, and year to year.
REFERENCES


