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David Seitz

Wright State University - Main Campus, david.seitz@wright.edu

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REVIEW: Hard Lessons Learned since the First Generation of Critical Pedagogy

David Seitz

McComiskey, Bruce. *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000. 147 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Wallace, David, and Helen Rothschild Ewald. *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. 165 pp. \$14.95.

Durst, Russel K. *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. 197 pp. \$25.95.

But I know something now: I know that how my students perceive my teaching will ultimately be the pedagogy that teaches them.

—Sherry Cook Stanforth, *Collision Course*

To my mind, Stanforth expresses here a growing response to the problem of critical pedagogy scholarship that arose in the early 1990s. Four years ago, Carol Severino articulated the first half of this problem when she summed up the critical teacher's ethical dilemma in first-year composition courses. The teacher must always ask whether the course should attempt to "help students fit into society or to convince them to change it" (74). When Stanforth separates what she *intends* to teach from what students *perceive* are her motivations and objectives, she clarifies what I see as the other half of this problem—the issue of persuasive authority.

David Seitz teaches courses in composition, literacy, ethnography, and rhetoric at Wright State University. His publications include a chapter in *Under Construction*, an essay in *Composition Studies*, and chapters in the forthcoming books *Practice in Context: Situating the Work of Writing Teachers and Labor*, *Writing Technologies*, and *the Shaping of Composition in the Academy*. He is currently finishing a book, *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?: Non-Mainstream Students' Responses to Critical Writing Pedagogy*.

For teachers of working-class students, this dilemma reminds them that critical teaching will be meaningful to students only if it also serves their individual motivations to succeed. Describing the resistance of black teens to a particular teacher's critical agenda, Victor Villanueva put it this way: these kids "were not in school to have their dreams destroyed" (61). From this angle, the question of the teacher's moral obligation raised by Severino is a moot point. Severino's dichotomy of service or critique assumes that we always have the persuasive authority to convince different students the course is about either getting into the system or dismantling it. In reality, teachers never can or will have control over what is internally persuasive to each individual student, regardless of their pedagogical strategies.

Because the first generation of writings on critical pedagogy often strategically sidestepped this reality, many well-meaning teachers such as Stanforth have learned this hard lesson on their own. In *Collision Course*, Russel Durst follows Stanforth's concerns and frustrations teaching from these earlier assumptions of critical pedagogy as a TA at the University of Cincinnati in the early 1990s. Durst's classroom ethnography examines the implications of this lesson for teaching critical writing with pragmatically oriented, politically conservative, mostly middle-class students. In *Mutuality in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom*, David Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald see persuasive authority as the crucial issue of interpretive agency, a necessary component for developing their alternative pedagogy of mutuality. On the basis of their observations and case interviews from a first-year composition class and a graduate course in communications theory, they distinguish between agency, a commonplace in arguments for critical teaching, and the far more elusive concept of interpretive agency. Whereas teachers can support students' agency in the ways they negotiate curriculum, classroom discourse, and so forth, teachers can only make room for students' interpretive agency—and they can never predict how students will interpret the teacher's ethos and logos. In *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, Bruce McComiskey does not explicitly discuss this issue of persuasive authority, but he does imply that cultural studies approaches to composition may be more persuasive to students if these approaches emerge from writing process theories and practices.

Of the three books, McComiskey's responds most directly to recent pedagogical applications of critical and postmodern theories, specifically challenging the logic of three familiar approaches to critical teaching. First, he rejects a cultural studies pedagogy that requires students to apply a theorist's interpretive model to their own experiences or to a particular reading. He aptly describes this strategy as the "read-this-essay-and-do-what-the-author-did approach" that I associate with curricular work in the vein of David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*. This approach, McComiskey argues, can lead teachers to implicitly rely on the cultural theory as the content in the writing class, a view that can revert to an emphasis

on a particular product, rather than on writing as a social process. I would add that my own research and teaching have shown me that the course text is often the least persuasive voice in the classroom. Students tend to grant the greatest persuasive authority to their peers, followed by their teacher, depending on how each student responds to his or her ethos, and possibly only then to the class text.

Second, McComiskey rejects “social content” composition courses, as typified by many teachers’ use of the popular composition reader *Rereading America*. Courses relying on texts such as this tend to “foreground cultural politics as a material to be mastered, and students write to demonstrate what they have learned” (2). On this point, McComiskey is supported by Durst’s conclusions. The English 102 curriculum at the University of Cincinnati, which Durst examined through his qualitative research in Stanforth’s classes, used *Rereading America*, and although Stanforth tried to remain open to her students’ discursive positions—in other words, to keep the subject of writing as a critical process at the core of the course—the majority of the students steadfastly perceived the political issues in the text as the course content. As Stanforth later writes, she was unable to convince them the course was not about “dissecting personal values for the sake of a grade” (160).

Finally, McComiskey indicates where the cultural studies composition model developed by James Berlin (his former mentor) stops short of its full potential. Berlin’s model, based on the work of the Birmingham school of cultural studies, centered on “production criticism.” In general, students examine how cultural meanings and values are produced within particular cultural artifacts such as advertisements, school textbooks, or rules for a workplace. McComiskey revises and extends Berlin’s model, pointing out that the full cycle of cultural meanings also includes the contexts of cultural distribution of produced meanings and their varied consumption by audiences. So, for instance, when students analyze an advertisement in a magazine, they should also investigate the contexts of the magazine as the site of cultural distribution to develop a more complex picture of multiple meanings and purposes. Similarly, when individual students in a group compare their responses to the advertisement, they should examine how consumers are also producers of meaning, sometimes interpreting messages in very different ways than companies may have intended. For each project assignment, McComiskey provides the detailed heuristics, based on this theory of social process, that he gives to his students with which to develop their critical essays.

Most important, though, McComiskey wants his students to understand and find ways to intervene in this rhetorical cycle. All of his assignments flow back to this goal for his pedagogy of social process composition. When students analyze all three parts of the cycle of cultural meanings, they should “develop the sense that culture is itself a constantly changing process, and that their own writing can influence some of the changes cultures undergo” (24). Consequently, this philosophy of

writing as cultural production means every major assignment should include a practical rhetorical action to address the concerns unearthed in the students' critical essays. I admire this commitment as I frequently find myself wondering about my own teaching, "Well, has this ethnographic project shown students how they can intervene in the power relations their research has interrogated?" For McComiskey, the students' problem-posing becomes a means to a more positive problem-solving strategy. In terms of internally persuasive authority, my research has shown that most students do not see cultural criticism as a positive end in itself. Indeed, they may see it as just another part of the academic game. For most of the project assignments McComiskey details in his book, the practical component is a letter addressed to an audience involved in one part of the cycle of cultural meanings the students have examined in their critical essays. In addition to the rhetorical form of a letter, other assignments have students redesigning the cultural artifact to address whatever problems they see in the cultural messages, such as in chapter 5, in which students critically analyze the discourse of college view-books in order to redesign them.

Some teacher-scholars, such as Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, have promoted these objectives of practical action or utopian design before, leaving others, such as Joseph Harris, to wonder if this approach ultimately devalues the learned habit of intellectual inquiry as its own goal. Indeed, this debate over fashioning future activists or cultural critics surfaced throughout the texts of critical pedagogy's first wave, as especially evident in the transcribed dialogues of the authors in Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz's collection *Composition and Resistance*. To McComiskey's credit, he rejects this dichotomy; both approaches are necessary to nurture critical thinkers as doers in the world. But as the classroom scenes and interviews in *Mutuality* and *Collision Course* demonstrate, nothing will guarantee that a particular group of students will necessarily identify their sense of self with either critical objective as more than exchange value for the grade.

In that respect, some teachers might see McComiskey's strategy of letter writing as naïve. The social critique of this practice is familiar—after focusing on social analysis, students return all too easily to developing individualized solutions for systemic problems. But McComiskey's insistence that students compose practical action also shows me he trusts his students' ways of seeing the social problems in their lived experiences. Moreover, each student must analyze at what point in the larger cycle of producing cultural values it would be most rhetorically effective to intervene. McComiskey also suggests his students learn complex lessons when they receive the obviously mixed responses from various corporate or institutional authority figures to whom they write. For that reason, I wish he had included some of the response letters and the students' evaluations of them in the book, so readers could fully assess the value of this approach for themselves.

More significantly, while I applaud McComiskey's criticisms of earlier pedagogical models that provide students with a theoretical blueprint for social critique, I found McComiskey unreflectively tending toward the same error. As I encountered essentially the same heuristic structure in most of McComiskey's assignments, the approach began to feel too much like painting by numbers, the students dutifully filling in the spaces with the appropriate colors. McComiskey's heuristics tend to lay out the social theory that students follow, rather than offer an approach that requires they build their own social theories from close scrutiny of their local contexts. I wondered if McComiskey makes room in these assignments for the students' parody and humor, potentially some of their strongest critical tools. As a teacher, I think I would soon tire of responding to and evaluating writing based on these heuristics. Clearly, McComiskey intends these heuristics only as a guide, as analytical approaches to be negotiated and made socially meaningful as appropriate for each individual student's situation. I believe he would argue that the heuristics need to change as social contexts change. But he does not show us in the book how he renegotiates his assignments or reflects on revising them based on his students' concerns.

Whereas McComiskey wants to rethink critical teachers' assumptions about possible writing projects, David Wallace and Helen Rothschild Ewald focus on revising the dynamics of the classroom itself to support a mutuality of knowledge making among all members within the class. Every main tenet of their book leads back to their definition of mutuality in the classroom: "teachers and students sharing the potential to adopt a range of subject positions and to establish reciprocal discourse relations as they negotiate meaning in the classroom" (3). Wallace and Ewald believe that earlier critical pedagogies, such as those drawn from feminist and Marxist theories, have helped teachers to pursue this goal of social transformation through dialogic interaction in rhetoric and writing classrooms. But because these previous teaching approaches assume that students' resistance to cultural reproduction must be an *a priori* goal of the course, Wallace and Ewald contend that these approaches cannot sustain the goal of mutuality. For this reason, they prefer the term "alternative pedagogy," a teaching philosophy that takes from earlier critical models but rejects assimilation or resistance to the status quo as a predetermined objective.

With this theoretical shift, Wallace and Ewald divorce themselves from the main assumption of practically all previous critical teaching approaches since, they argue, the students' consent to resist dominant culture must also be up for negotiation. In a sense, they encourage teachers to give up "critical theory hope"—the faith in conversion—so that they can be more fully attentive to the moment of interaction with students. Without the students' consent to meaningfully integrate "their

knowledge and experiences with the teachers' disciplinary representations of knowledge," there can be no internally persuasive authority, which Wallace and Ewald call interpretive agency (17). Despite this focus on the individual's consent to persuasion, they do not attribute interpretive agency to the individual student. Borrowing from social philosopher Donald Davidson, they define an individual's interpretive agency as the creation of passing theories. Individuals bring prior theories about a subject to every interaction with others. Passing theories, "the knowledge created among classroom participants," emerge from the discursive dynamics of group interactions in response to individuals' prior theories (101). Interpretive agency, then, is "the bringing of one's prior theory to bear in the creation of passing theory with others" (102).

The three core chapters of Wallace and Ewald's book present a structure of teaching practices articulated by understandable theories to foster these goals of mutuality and opportunities for class members' interpretive agency, while still acknowledging the inescapable realities of institutional authority. They organize these practices in three areas: alternative speech genres, course architecture, and interpretive agency. Their affirmation of alternative speech genres in classroom discourse rejects the teachers' authority inherent in the IRE discursive model, in which the teacher initiates a question, students respond, and teachers evaluate. Instead they describe practices for students and teachers sharing turn taking, initiation and exploration of topics, and reciprocal evaluation of knowledge making in the class. Mutuality in course architecture refers to making space for students' own decisions and ongoing negotiation in the design of assignments and classroom business. To maintain this dynamic, Wallace and Ewald recommend students help decide how to define genres for assignments, how disciplinary knowledge relates to students' knowledge, and what identity roles are available for participants. In the chapter on interpretive agency, Wallace and Ewald examine a controversial classroom situation, about a student's paper on affirmative action, that flared up in Wallace's composition class. In one of the best critically reflective moves of the book, they analyze how the classroom participants' actions and assumptions, particularly Wallace's reluctance to revise the disciplinary form he expected in a student's paper, limited the possibilities of mutuality they want to strive for.

Like McComiskey, Wallace and Ewald illustrate their theoretical rationale with clear examples and scenes from their teaching. But McComiskey sticks to his students' writings, often analyzing their written discourse, whereas Wallace and Ewald largely draw their examples from transcripts of their classroom discussions. While some of Ewald's project assignments for her graduate course in communications theory suggest innovative approaches to the goals of mutuality, much of Wallace's more conventional assignments for his English 101 course described in the book seem to hinder the purposes of their alternative pedagogy. Wallace and Ewald, how-

ever, do not take the approach I object to in McComiskey's book. They include case students' responses to the transcripts, which sometimes challenge the authors' interpretations. By including and discussing the students' interpretations, they practice what they preach—promoting the mutuality of perspectives they argue for in alternative teaching. Although the practices in *Mutuality* will affirm the often-unacknowledged work of seasoned writing teachers, the book will probably be most useful for TA classes and new teachers. Unlike most books for new writing teachers that emphasize preparation, *Mutuality* reveals and analyzes the dynamics of everyday interactions in the critical writing classroom while still offering practical advice drawn from experience and a synthesis of earlier research.

Nor do Wallace and Ewald underestimate the difficulties of enacting their form of alternative pedagogy. They address how teaching assistants and part-time teachers may be constrained by standard syllabi and evaluations that work against the sharing of authority with their students. Even tenure-track teachers may face evaluation committees who expect traditional approaches to teaching. New teachers who have not yet developed a confident classroom ethos may also require a stronger authority to maintain students' cooperation and engagement. Nor do Wallace and Ewald assume that a pedagogy of mutuality will lead to less tension in the classroom. "Because such a pedagogy encourages the expression of different perspectives and because the nature of authority in such classes has changed," they advise teachers to expect and value students' disagreement and resistance (14).

This resistance to teaching practices of mutuality, however, is not the same thing as students' resistance to the a priori goals of critical teaching that Durst chronicles in *Collision Course*. More than Wallace and Ewald, Durst analyzes the general underlife of students' resistance to critical teaching in more humane terms than just about any other book in our field. Far too many early scholars on critical pedagogy obsessed over student resistance to their teaching, embracing it as their *cause célèbre*. Licking their wounds, they would describe students' resistance as a deficit, arrogantly claiming that these students lacked critical consciousness. As Marguerite Helmers pointed out several years ago, much of our profession's writings have always represented students as lacking something already possessed by their teachers. Before, it was a linguistic deficit; now it's a political one—once again with implications of a moral lack. This rhetorical strategy always prepares the way for the teacher as hero or well-meaning martyr to the course. Instead of denigrating the careerist values of students at the University of Cincinnati as a deficit of critical perspective, Durst links their concerns to a long tradition of American pragmatism as seen in the work of de Toqueville and Dewey. Recently Tom Newkirk also drew from this philosophical tradition to complicate critical teachers' reductions of students' writing and to celebrate their rich textual performances of self.

Durst is also careful to situate the students in his research, pointing out that although two of his case-study participants are from working-class backgrounds, most of the university's students come from white middle-class suburbs. Attracted to the University of Cincinnati because of its preprofessional programs and the city's probusiness climate, most of these students identify with conventional socially conservative positions in their writing and comments in class. Durst portrays several scenes from Stanford's English course using *Rereading America* to illustrate the students' intertwined "twin resistance" to the class agenda (128). As they resisted politically from their middle-class conservative values, they simultaneously resisted intellectually, relying on their pragmatic values to avoid what they viewed as unnecessarily complex social arguments. Lest critical teachers believe themselves above the students' motives manifested in this "twin resistance," Durst also reminds us that even academics identify with practical career goals. And when we writing teachers intellectually complicate our theories and practices, this act of intellectualizing also serves our career goals as cultural capital in the academic marketplace.

Durst's chapters on the latter half of Stanford's English 101 and the standoffs in English 102 best illustrate the students' twin resistance to the writing program's expected curriculum. As many teachers have also found, the students' political resistance centered on concerns of authority and tradition. In response to their text's and teacher's invitation to critically scrutinize American cultural values of the model family, individual success, and the melting pot, the majority of students held fast to the belief that authority should be respected and accepted. Durst chronicles the main exception to this rule, when Stanford invites the university director of affirmative action to speak to the class in an effort to persuasively expose resentful white students to other perspectives on the issue. If, however, we consider the perspectives of young people whose families have only attained a middle-class income in the previous generation and who now face the unknowns of an ever-shifting job market, it is not surprising that they maintained the necessity of traditions that supported their families in earlier generations. As *Mutuality* also includes a classroom controversy over affirmative action, we need to acknowledge that many current students' anxieties over future employment will likely complicate the persuasive authority of critical teaching.

Despite the strong student beliefs described in Durst's book, several groups of students seem to tacitly make pacts not to debate their differences, implicitly choosing to sidestep conflicts during several of Stanford's attempts at group discussion. In these instances, we see the pragmatically oriented thread of the twin resistance. For example, Durst describes a role-playing exercise meant to highlight rhetorical strategies for problem-solution papers. A small group volunteers or is chosen to debate issues of teen pregnancy from different roles while the class takes notes, but the activity fizzles into unspoken bad feelings for all involved. Similarly, many of the

students avoided more controversial topics and arguments in their papers whenever possible. When the class looked at issues of race and prejudice through Gordon Allport's theories of group identification, most discussed their religious groups rather than confront issues of race. These students describe writing about race and ethnicity as "boring and dangerous," showing us their awareness of the perils of left-leaning teachers institutionalizing particular topics for critical writing (157).

Like McComiskey and Wallace and Ewald, Durst finally proposes an alternative approach to the problems he sees in critical pedagogy. In an all-too-brief final chapter, Durst makes a case for a pedagogy of "reflective instrumentalism." This approach values and begins with most students' pragmatic motives for attending college, but seeks to cultivate critical analysis within a framework of students' examining school and career issues through textual and field research. Durst convincingly argues that John Dewey saw instrumentalism as a necessary step in students' social education, rather than as the enemy of critical understanding, as Kurt Spellmeyer and other composition scholars have often categorized it in demonizing students' pragmatic concerns. Nevertheless, I was disappointed that Durst devotes fewer than three pages to the actual practices of his approach, particularly since NCTE has promoted this aspect of the book in their advertising material. Moreover, while I agree with Durst's reasons for the approach, I think he could have drawn upon the work of James Zebroski, David Jolliffe, and others who have already created similar strategies. Zebroski, who has always believed critical teachers must start with students' motivations, has developed a series of critically theorized assignments in which students use field research to investigate the cultures of writing in their majors. In this work, they interrogate the nature of academic disciplines in relation to labor issues and their career interests.

Despite the absence of a fully fleshed-out pedagogical response to his research conclusions, Durst's book is valuable for the way it makes us question the persuasive authority of other teachers' critical pedagogies. Indeed, no single book here offers a full picture for developing courses, dealing with the rhetorical situations that arise, and learning how to critically reflect on continual revision of this teaching. But each one gives us a different necessary piece of the puzzle toward creating answerable, humane teaching of critical writing. To reap the most for our future teaching, we can look for the intersections of these books' claims and their teachers' approaches toward their students. McComiskey offers a theorized teaching practice that merges writing process methods more accessible to students with the critical study of discourse. Paying attention to the nuances of middle-class students' underlife in Durst's book helps us foresee the possible pitfalls in McComiskey's projects. And Wallace and Ewald's pedagogy of mutuality, which collects the best thinking on dialogic classroom dynamics, gives practical strategies with which to better negotiate the problems of classroom interactions that we encounter in Durst's research. Under-

standing the strengths and shortcomings of these books can make the next generation of writing teachers more alert to the inevitable gaps and traps in these approaches to critical teaching—proving we can learn from others' hard lessons after all.

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