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INTRODUCTION

Deep Structures

I cordially welcome readers to this exploration of the “deep structures” of our teaching practice (to borrow a phrase from learning theorist Robert Kegan). We will be examining foundational research from both within and outside our discipline, paying particular attention to classic learning theory and recent work outside of our discipline related to motivation, transfer of knowledge, and critical thinking. As I hope readers will see, there are a number of areas where our teaching practices are not congruent with this large body of important work. It is my goal here to help our discipline engage or reexamine this work and to begin building a pedagogy that is more responsive to this foundational scholarship and research, especially as it relates to everyday teaching practices in the classroom. We will be focusing on three major areas—listening, motivation, and habits of mind. Each of these areas is developmentally scaffolded and linked, and each is an interrelated part of the approach to composing that I am theorizing here. Good teaching and learning depend on three things: first, we have to design excellent curriculum; second, we have to motivate students to engage it; and finally, we have to think about transfer of knowledge to other contexts, disciplines, and knowledge domains. This book addresses each of these vitally important and interrelated elements of our teaching practice.

We begin our journey together by focusing on perhaps the most basic and most essential of subjects for teachers of writing—what we assign in our classrooms, why we assign what we do, and what such assignments actually ask students to do intellectually and cognitively. We will examine a very common type of assignment in the writing classroom, the simplistic argumentative essay, in light of classic learning theory. As I hope readers will see, much commonly-assigned argumentative writing traps students in lower order cognitive orientations and serves to support routine, automatic, and largely unexamined ways of looking at the world and engaging complex problems (see Bargh 1997; Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Willingham 2009). I propose, instead, the development of a different kind of pedagogy and teaching practice, one that is designed to be

congruent with learning theory and privileges listening, empathy, and reflection as its primary values. A great deal of evidence supports a move to this kind of pedagogy.

We will then move on to consider motivation and the extensive body of research outside of our discipline about this subject. Motivation is a vitally important precondition for any kind of real learning and meaning-making, of course, but it is routinely ignored or undervalued when we theorize approaches to teaching and learning. We can have the best pedagogy and curriculum in the world, but if students are not engaged and motivated, our pedagogy and curriculum does us very little good. “Intrinsic motivation” is the key variable here, and if we can help nurture this kind of potent, indispensable, and transformative passion in our students, there may not be anything more important that we do.

Finally, we will look beyond our own classrooms and our own discipline to consider transfer of knowledge and the nature of writing expertise. What skills and dispositions actually transfer from one context to another? Research related to critical thinking, transfer of knowledge, and the development of writing expertise suggests that intellectual and dispositional “habits of mind” may be more valuable to students, especially in the long run, than knowledge about traditional subjects at the center of most writing instruction, including the thesis statement, MLA format, and even essays themselves. These “habits of mind” include curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Research suggests that these dispositional characteristics do, in fact, transfer and can be of great value to students across their entire life span—at home, at work, and in their communities.

A PEDAGOGY OF LISTENING

This book attempts to begin building a foundation for a new kind of pedagogy, one focused around the art of listening. “Listening” is theorized here as an active, generative, constructive process that positions writers in an open, collaborative, and dialogical orientation toward the world and others. Following Levinas (2006) and Nussbaum (2001) (who we will discuss in more detail later in the book), listening is also theorized here as a philosophical orientation toward the world that is characterized by “a radical generosity” toward “the Other” and is informed most essentially by empathy and compassion. I would like to move these values to the center of our pedagogical practice in the composition classroom.

James Berlin has famously noted that “in teaching writing we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student’s place and mode of operation in it. . . . we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (Berlin 1982, 766–76). If we are, indeed, teaching “a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it,” what better choices can we make than to build our curriculum around listening, empathy, and reflection?

REFLECTIVE THINKING AND WRITING

Following King and Kitchener, Perry, Baxter Magolda, Levinas, Nussbaum, Dewey, Hillocks, Yancey, Fort, Zeiger, Meyer, Heilker, Qualley, Rogers, Elbow, and a variety of feminist scholars, the pedagogy I am theorizing here links listening with reflective thinking and a type of reflective writing activity that I believe has enormous potential for use in writing classrooms. I have been developing and field testing this particular version of reflective writing in my classrooms now for over ten years. I define this kind of writing activity in some unique and specific ways:

REFLECTIVE WRITING DEFINED

1. The primary focus for student writers should be on “listening,” defined here as an active, generative, constructive process that positions readers, writers, and thinkers in an open, collaborative, and dialogical orientation toward the world and others.

2. Reflective writing assignments should invite students to engage what learning theorists call “ill-structured problems”—complex kinds of questions that cannot be comfortably encountered intellectually or easily resolved. These ill-structured problems are often the kind of “big questions” that the Association of American Colleges and Universities recommends that we put at the center of our college curriculum (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007, 26, “Principles of Excellence”).

3. The privileged cognitive disposition should be reflection—that is to say, an openness to others and to new ideas and a willingness to acknowledge complexity and uncertainty. Unlike much current writing students are asked to do at school, the focus is not on closure and certainty. Here we are following King and Kitchener’s important work on developing reflective judgment: “Judgments derived from the reflective

thinking process remain open to further scrutiny, evaluation, and reformulation; as such, reflective judgments are open to self-correction” (King and Kitchener 1994, 8).

4. Assignments and classroom activities should be designed, following classic learning theory, with the primary purpose of “empowering individuals to know that the world is far more complex than it first appears” (King and Kitchener 1994, 1).

5. Reading should be situated at the center of this reflective writing activity. Here we follow Salvatori’s foundational work on reading that asks students “to imagine a text’s argument not as a position to be won and defended by one interlocutor at the expense of another, but rather as a ‘topic’ about which interlocutors generate critical questions that enable them to reflect on the meaning of knowledge and on different processes of knowledge formation” (Salvatori 1996, 440; see also Sullivan 2010).

6. Empathy should be modeled in the classroom and privileged as a key learning tool and an essential cognitive capacity.

A CONVERSATION

This book is designed to be a conversation about the teaching of reading and writing, framed as a series of questions that I would like to explore collaboratively with my readers. These are essential questions for teachers of writing at all levels of instruction, questions that we will explore over the course of this book as we look at the current state of teaching reading and writing and survey current research and scholarship on this and related subjects:

1. What might we be able to say that we know for sure about learning how to read and write?

2. What do we know about the current state of teaching reading and writing in the United States?

3. How are students in the United States doing right now in terms of reading, writing, and college readiness?

4. What does a review of research and scholarship in our discipline tell us about what we should be doing in the writing classroom and how we might be able to do it most effectively?

5. Is there any scholarship *outside of our discipline* that we might need to consider and be familiar with as teachers of writing? Is any of this essential work that all writing teachers should be familiar with?

6. And what are the limits of our knowledge about these subjects? Philosopher Lorraine Code (1991) in her book, *What Can She Know?*

Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge, suggests that knowing is always a matter of degree. Examining the limits of our knowledge and understanding will always be essential to any kind of informed engagement with the kind of large and important questions we are pursuing here. So it is important that we proceed with caution and humility.

There are good answers available to these questions, if we are willing to attend carefully to a wide variety of research and scholarship that can help inform our pedagogy and shape our curriculum. This book seeks to provide some direction toward providing these answers.

The problems facing our discipline, 6–13, are well known and diverse (see, for example, Beaufort 2007; Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin 2005; Darling-Hammond 2010; Friedman and Mandelbaum 2011; Koretz 2008; National 2007; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2008). Students in the United States are underachieving to an alarming degree, especially when compared to peer cohorts in other nations around the world (Sahlberg 2011; United States Department of Education 2014, 116–123; Wagner 2008). We are currently experiencing a “college readiness” crisis in the United States, and we obviously still have important work to do related to articulation and alignment across institutional boundaries (Achieve, Inc. 2007b; ACT 2010; ACT 2006; Association 2007; United States 2011). Not to put too fine a point on this, but many of our students don’t write or read well. A large number of our students don’t read for pleasure, and many don’t read at all. A large number of students in our classrooms are also uninterested and unmotivated learners, and many would appear to prefer not to be there. We also have a transfer of knowledge problem—skills students currently learn in writing classes do not appear to transfer from one course to the next, one grade level to the next, or one discipline to the next. Increasing reliance on standardized testing at all levels of education has taken a great deal of control out of teachers’ hands and have left many teachers almost powerless in their own classrooms.

Some excellent solutions to these problems are available to us, all supported by significant bodies of research. I invite readers to work collaboratively with me as we examine this work and think together how best to address these important problems facing our discipline. Although the issues we seek to address together are complex and multifaceted, research strongly supports the following solutions:

- Reduce our overreliance on argumentative writing, especially simplistic argumentative writing.
- Make listening, empathy, and reflection the primary skills we value in our classrooms.

- Develop curriculum with learning theory clearly in mind, especially landmark work by Perry, Kegan, King and Kitchener, and Baxter Magolda.
- Bring “ill-structured problems” to the center of our pedagogy.
- Teach reading.
- Theorize reading and writing as dual and essential elements of the same activity—thinking.
- Teach reading and writing together. Most writing that students do in writing classrooms should be linked to reading, and should require, following Hillocks, a rigorous “process of inquiry” (Hillocks 2010, 26).
- Construct and design learning activities and writing assignments very carefully and purposefully, targeting key areas identified by learning theory, cognitive psychology, and critical thinking scholarship.
- Move reflective, dialogic, exploratory writing to the center of our pedagogy and curriculum.
- Make transfer of knowledge an essential consideration in pedagogical and curricular design. Knowledge of the scholarship on this subject should be considered essential for anyone discussing curriculum for our discipline.
- Develop curriculum that acknowledges the powerful links between writing expertise and genre.
- Make improving student motivation a primary concern for teachers of writing. This should be an essential part of what it means to teach writing.
- Promote variety in the writing curriculum. Students should have to “write and write often in multigenres: stories, personal essays, critical essays, parodies, poems, freewrites, letters to teachers, journals, jingles, reader responses, lists” (Lujan 2010, 56).
- Find ways to bring choice into the classroom.
- Design creative activities that disguise repetitions of writing tasks.
- Develop policies and practices that require students to take responsibility for their own learning and their own development as readers, writers, and thinkers.
- Adopt an active learning pedagogy: reduce “teacher talk” (Hillocks 2002, 7–9) in the classroom so that teachers “teach less” and students “learn more” (Sahlberg 2011, 62–69). Active learning is widely acknowledged as an important component of good teaching, and conventional wisdom suggests it is widely practiced in our profession. Evidence provided by Hillocks and others, though, appears to suggest otherwise. In *The Testing Trap*, for example, Hillocks (2002, 5–33) still finds a great deal of “teacher talk” and reductive epistemologies driving much classroom practice.
- Intentionally and systematically nurture creativity and creative thinking, 6–13. Creativity is an extraordinarily important human capacity that has been routinely overlooked and undervalued in recent

discussions of academic rigor, curricular alignment, and articulation. As Ken Robinson notes, “Creativity is the greatest gift of human intelligence. The more complex the world becomes, the more creative we need to be to meet its challenges” (Robinson 2011, xiii).

- Attend carefully to critical thinking scholarship and the “habits of mind” identified in the WPA/NCTE/NWP document, “Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing” (Council 2011). Dispositional characteristics like curiosity, open-mindedness, flexibility, as well as a “willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted” (Facione 1990, 25) are essential to good writing and good thinking. Furthermore, these are habits of mind that appear to transfer because these dispositions are not context-, discipline-, or field-dependent. These are habits of mind that all good thinkers and writers need to produce strong work, regardless of field, occupation, or discipline.
- Embrace recent work from neuroscience, especially “the revolutionary discovery that the human brain can change itself” (Doidge 2007, xvii). Active learning, a focus on questions, and a curriculum that nurtures curiosity should be key elements for all writing curriculum (see Healy 1999, 73).
- Attend carefully to international models that produce engaged students and quality learning.

There is much to consider here and important scholarship and research for us to assess. I invite readers to collaborate with me on this journey as we consider this important scholarship and research together.

AUDIENCE AND ORGANIZATION

Finally, a word about audience and organization. The intended audience for this book is anyone who cares deeply about the teaching of reading and writing. But it is also my modest goal here to radicalize a new generation of writing teachers, to provide them with the means and the rationale to take back our classrooms and make writing the fascinating and essential subject it has always been—not the Dickensian Gradgrind experience it so often has now become, even in the best schools, 6–13 (Perlstein 2007; Ravitch 2010; Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder 2008). So, for those of you getting certified to teach high school English, and for those of you who are in graduate school preparing to teach first-year composition, this book is perhaps most essentially for you.

The organization of this book has been inspired and made possible by Paul Heilker’s (1996) work on the essay and his development of an organizational strategy he calls “*chronologic*,” a form of writing that privileges an openness to diverse and nontraditional forms and organization.

This book does not have the classic symmetry that one might typically find in a traditional work of scholarship. Its final form, instead, is much more asymmetrical and organic. Part I, which focuses on listening, could be a book in itself, in fact. Parts II and III are much shorter, but they are equally important to my purposes here. It is my hope that readers will find a way to embrace these asymmetries.

Let us begin this journey together, shall we, following Sun Tzu's wise and immortal advice: "Know your enemy."