



## Review: The Course as Text/The Teacher as Critic

### Reviewed Work(s):

*Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literature Courses* by James M. Cahalan; David B. Downing

*A Primer for Writing Teachers: Theories, Theorists, Issues, Problems* by David Foster

*Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature* by Nicholas J. Karolides

*Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response* by Judith A. Langer

*An Introduction to Composition Studies* by Erika Lindemann; Gary Tate

Joseph Harris

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# REVIEW

## THE COURSE AS TEXT/ THE TEACHER AS CRITIC

Joseph Harris

James M. Cahalan and David B. Downing, eds. *Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literature Courses*. Urbana: NCTE, 1991. xi + 385 pages, including a 40-page bibliographical essay. \$24.95.

David Foster. *A Primer for Writing Teachers: Theories, Theorists, Issues, Problems*. 2d ed. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1992. viii + 252 pages. \$16.00.

Nicholas J. Karolides, ed. *Reader Response in the Classroom: Evoking and Interpreting Meaning in Literature*. New York: Longman, 1992. xv + 251 pages. \$19.95.

Judith A. Langer, ed. *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response*. Urbana: NCTE, 1992. ix + 211 pages. \$14.95, \$10.95.

Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate, eds. *An Introduction to Composition Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. vi + 189 pages. \$12.95.

“I sometimes feel,” Judith Williamson once remarked, “that teaching is like sex—you know other people do it, but you never know what they do or *how* they do it” (83). Sex and teaching are activities famous for going on behind closed doors, and we often seem almost as circumspect about entering each other’s classrooms as their bedrooms. But this hardly means that what happens behind those doors escapes the anxiety of influence or the pressures of culture. On the contrary, precisely because teaching tends to be imagined as a space of freedom, the classroom spoken of as *our* classroom, as a place where we are master, able to do as we see best, and where what we do is almost never subjected to the direct gaze or criticism of our peers, it is here that the workings of our discipline and culture are likely to be most insidious and strong. We too often teach out of misrememberings of classrooms we were in as students, out of a

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desire to emulate teachers who affected us powerfully but in ways we can only half understand, out of fears that we will never be able to recover their authority, out of an anxious wish to be liked by our students, out of a nervous sense of loyalty to the standards and practices of our discipline, out of a repertoire of texts, questions, exercises, and gimmicks that, at one point or the other, and for one reason or the other, “worked good,” got us through the class period, or the week, or the term, or a career, with a minimum of tension, complaints, disruptions, moments where what was happening threatened to spill out beyond “our” classroom doors and our control, to prove to others what we know they suspect already, that unlike them we don’t really know what we’re doing after all.

These five books all try in various, and for the most part admirable, ways to take teaching out of this anxious and quasi-private realm and into a more public one, to make what we do as teachers the subject of useful interchange and criticism among ourselves. In trying to do so, they point to the extraordinary difficulty of re-presenting the work of teaching, of “what we do and how we do it,” in ways that allow others anything more than the most tightly filtered (or blindered?) insight into our courses. The question that thus came to shape my reading of three of these books—which deal with the relations between “theory” and teaching literature—was how to turn the work of teaching and learning into a “text” that is rich and complex enough for various readers to *disagree* about how to interpret it. Let me discuss them first here, then, as they set up the question that framed my reading of the other two books—which have to do with the relations between the emerging field of “composition studies” and teaching writing.

The first thing to note about these three books—all essay collections—is the peculiar institutional and developmental niche they inhabit. Both *Reader Response in the Classroom*, edited by Nicholas Karolides, and *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response*, edited by Judith Langer, are loosely centered on studies of secondary classrooms. The more explicit focus of *Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literature Courses*, edited by James Cahalan and David Downing, is specified in its title. Viewed as a group, the three books are thus concerned with the teaching of literature to students in roughly grades 7 to 14, ages 12 to 21, most of whom are not likely to go on to advanced study in English. In other words, these books carve out a space where, on the one end, “literature” has emerged as a subject distinct from the more amorphous study of the “language arts” in elementary school, but has not yet become, on the other end, the focus of a specialized disciplinary training in advanced college and graduate courses. It is thus perhaps the space where claims for the study of literature as some kind of equipment for living, some sort of preparation for a more critical and literate citizenship or for a fuller and more complex individuality, can be most powerfully made. It is where the action is, where most of the people are. Nearly everybody

has had to read (or at least to pretend to read) *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, and far too many of us can, I am sure, recall “the experience of enjoying-the-wrong-meaning,” as James Sosnoski puts it, in an introductory literature class (*Practicing Theory* 279). If we want to have an impact on the lives of people who are not training to become professional intellectuals, then this (along with the composition class) would seem the place to work in English.

So what’s going on there? Two pieces in *Literature Instruction* report on national surveys of high school English teaching and testing, and most of what they have to say is depressing. In the first, Arthur Applebee argues that, contrary to the worries of conservative reformers, the curriculum in English actually changes with “glacial slowness,” remaining to this day “dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white, male, Anglo-Saxon tradition” (7). While a few minority writers have been added to the current canon (Langston Hughes now ranks as the third most often taught writer in high school, behind Shakespeare and Steinbeck), when teachers are asked to name the works they have taught in the last five days, only eight percent turn out to be by minority authors and sixteen percent by women. So much for the Decline of the West. In the second, Alan Purves reports on a survey that shows that most state and commercial tests simply ask students to restate or summarize, at a very low level, the content of literary works. Since these tests are very often the real determinants of what students will “get out” of their studies, at least in the form of grades and access to further schooling, Purves argues that it is not surprising that work in English becomes “a serious business,” the relation of which to “the lofty aims which literature and literature education set for themselves in curriculum guides and professional publications” is mystified and contradictory (22). In his book *Work Time*, Evan Watkins defines this gap in terms of the values that circulate *in* English (beliefs and ideas about literature) and those that circulate *from* it (grades). The contrast between the two is dramatized in sad and funny ways by another study in which Purves asked students to give a younger friend advice on “how to do well in literature classes in your school” (21). Most of what these students suggest turns out to have little to do with the announced goals and concerns of literary study, but rather deals with things like test-taking strategies, whether or not to skim first, whether to underline or take notes, where to sit in class, whether to volunteer or wait to be called on, using Cliffs Notes, getting advice and even exam questions from friends, and so on (21). The image of the English classroom evoked by these studies is a familiar and discouraging one, and both Applebee and Purves try to counter it with some useful (though also familiar-sounding) proposals for redesigning curricula and testing. But this still leaves the question of what individual teachers are to do while waiting for (and perhaps working for) such broadbased reforms—and that is the concern of most of the other pieces in these volumes.

The survey is also one way of answering my question about how to textualize the work that goes on in English courses. You can ask people, that is, to describe what they do, what materials they use, what problems they have. And you can do so in ways that are as specific as possible. (Applebee's question about what texts have actually been taught in the last five days, for instance, strikes me as a more useful approach than simply looking at what texts happen to be collected in a particular anthology.) Or you can catalogue and criticize the materials that support teaching: tests, readings, syllabi, assignments, and the like. One of the best pieces in *Practicing Theory* does just that. James Sosnoski presents a devastating critique of the formalistic underpinnings of a recent hypertext program designed for use in literature classes.

All this may seem to belabor the obvious, but it is in fact hard to read much writing on teaching without soon feeling that you don't really know, at the most basic level, what's supposed to be going on here, what it actually would be like to be in this writer's classroom rather than in some other one, what real and differing possibilities for work they might allow. For instance, a common tactic in writing about teaching at the college level is for the writer to present his or her own reading of a text as a classroom "discussion" (this is a problem with several pieces in *Practicing Theory*):

*Our discussion begins with . . .*  
*I then ask . . .*  
*We are next ready to look at . . .*  
*I then explain . . .*  
*I outline . . .*  
*Finally, students begin to see . . .*

These are all typical signposts in loose classroom narratives of this sort. The voices of students do sometimes enter into such accounts, but usually only briefly and anonymously.

*I ask students to list . . .*  
*Their reactions vary . . .*  
*One student remarked that . . .*

A variation of this tactic is to walk the reader not simply through a single class but through an entire syllabus, listing a series of texts, goals, and approaches as if they were the end rather than the beginning of a course.

With such pieces it's hard to tell whether the problem lies with the teaching or the writing or both. There may in fact be a fair amount of classroom discussion going on that just never gets textualized and is thus never made available for *our* discussion as readers. Or the problem may be more like the one sketched out by Robert Small in his lead article in *Reader Response in the Classroom*. Small offers a detailed seven-page transcript of a seventh-grade class on Emily Dickinson's "A

Bird Came Down the Walk," in which it becomes clear that the teacher is leading students to a very particular interpretation of the poem. And so while many students in the class do seem to be working hard, what they mostly seem to be working *at* is trying to figure out what their teacher wants them to say. So when she is afterwards asked about the class, as readers we feel a certain dramatic irony in hearing the teacher say:

We had a really good discussion of the poem. It took them awhile, but they finally saw the contrast between the poet's sensitivity for nature and the bird's natural self-centeredness. (9)

Small goes on to contrast this "discussion" with a much looser and less predictable sort of talk about the same poem in another classroom. His point is to valorize this second response-centered class; mine is rather to note the broad range of practices that can fall under the single term "discussion," and to suggest that we thus need to find ways—both as teachers and writers on teaching—to represent not only our own view of what is going on in the classroom but those of students as well.

One way of doing so is to offer transcripts of class talk, which is something that many of the contributors to both *Reader Response* and *Literature Instruction* do, and that Mark Hurlbert offers an exemplary version of in *Practicing Theory*. Hurlbert writes of his attempts to enact a "collectivist pedagogy" in an introductory literature course for non-majors, as he and students together plan out the writings they are to do, the exams they are to take, and the ways they are to be graded. (Hurlbert did reserve the right to assign readings himself.) In doing so, he recreates several class discussions throughout the term, reflects on the positions taken by students in them, and also reproduces a number of student journal responses to the readings, each other, and the course itself. The result is not a simple success story, but a sustained questioning of his goals and practices as a teacher—which as readers we can join him in doing since he has offered us so many of the materials needed for such an inquiry.

But not all. For while we are shown several instances of his students talking together and of their informal work in their journals, Hurlbert fails to offer us samples of their more extended and considered writings. (We know, for instance, that his students composed and published a class book, but we see none of the pieces in it.) This focus on fairly spontaneous and informal uses of language—classroom talk, small group work, journal writings, pre-reading and pre-writing exercises—is a very strong one throughout the three volumes. This means that while we are given a lot of examples of students' thinking aloud, working towards an understanding of a story or poem, we don't get to see them *rethinking* what they have to say very much—and we almost never see them in strong disagreement over the meaning of a text or the value of a certain classroom practice.

My guess is that this has as much to do with certain *social* agendas in teaching as it does with intellectual issues in reading or criticism. I was struck in reading through these pieces by how much the work of a course, for both students and teachers, seems imagined as occurring within the limits of a fifty- or seventy-five-minute class period. That is, while we often hear the remarks of students in class, we rarely get to read the sustained or revised writings they do outside of it; similarly, while we get to listen in many times on how teachers manage class “discussions,” we are rarely shown the comments they make on student texts. The “course” thus gets pictured, for the most part, as the “classroom,” and as a result the goals of teaching often seem to have as much to do with how students interact with each other as with how they read and write about literary texts.

For instance, in talking about his experiences teaching Ursula LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, Patrick Murphy remarks that “limiting oneself to the task of generating class discussion and a thoughtful essay on the novel falls far short of the alternative pedagogical practice that this novel encourages” (*Practicing Theory* 172). He then goes on to describe what can in some contexts be very effective teaching practices: small group work, panel discussions, daybooks, position papers and responses, group essays, and so on. I have no objections to such work. I do much of it too. I can’t help but suspect, though, that these practices have somehow become ends in themselves—that group work is good because it’s good to work in groups, not because it helps students articulate a view of a text or understand a problem in expression in ways they couldn’t do alone or as part of a whole class discussion. I am especially troubled not just by Murphy’s quick dismissal here of “thoughtful essays,” but by the near absence of such work from these books. As I imagine many readers of this piece also do, I still keep a box in my attic filled with papers I’ve saved from my college days, ones that struck me as pretty good at the time and that I continue to hold on to now because they seem the best evidence I have that something really happened in all those classes I took. They’re not all great papers, but they give me a sense of who I was then, what I wanted to argue for, and, by contrast, who I’ve since become. A sense of the individual doesn’t emerge in quite the same way from the brief class comments and journal jottings cited in most of these pieces. We get glimpses of personalities, but not a view of students staking out positions as intellectuals, working and arguing through issues.

Things could be different. For instance, in a piece on “Confrontational Pedagogy” in *Practicing Theory*, Ronald Strickland sketches out a classroom practice that seems to offer students an unusual, if perhaps unnerving, chance to view themselves as intellectuals:

I require students in my classes to produce several one-to-two page critical response/position papers on issues concerning the structure, content, and practice of the course. Each week I reproduce a packet of eight to ten of these texts, along

with position papers that I write against some of them, for distribution to the entire class. In this manner a considerably larger proportion of the class discourse is textualized than would be the case in a traditional lecture/discussion course. . . . Through this practice of publishing the texts of student and teacher, positions are occupied in a way that makes them much more accessible for critique than in the traditional classroom discussion. (120)

While I wonder how “accessible for critique” Strickland’s own position papers seem to students, and thus worry about how such a practice might affect the already uneven workings of power in a classroom, I am intrigued by his attempt here to textualize many of the discourses of teaching—and so am disappointed that he then fails to quote or reflect on any of these student texts in his writing. Instead Strickland simply describes the mechanism and lets it go at that. But his attempt as a teacher to represent students *through their writings*, rather than simply through their impromptu remarks in class, strikes me as an important and useful one for us keep in mind as critics of teaching—since texts always have a way of eluding the full grasp of their commentators and can thus tell us things about our work as teachers that we ourselves could never say.

Anthony Petrosky and David Bleich are the only two writers in these volumes who deal in a sustained way with the written responses of students to their own reading. Petrosky’s piece in *Literature Instruction* is also perhaps the most thoughtful and self-critical in all three books, for he is working through a *problem* in teaching, as shown in his students’ work, not applying a theory or defending a syllabus or advertising a new approach. Here’s what he has to say about his method as a writer and critic:

You should also expect to read long excerpts from my students’ writing. It’s possible for me to create the class conversations, but in a study of dialogues that involve interpretations, we need more than that, and the simple “flavor” of a piece of writing . . . isn’t enough. You need to see as much as I saw as is possible to present in a paper (and still keep it readable) to enable you to think not only about my claims but also about the things I miss and can’t see. And you also need to be attuned to my mistakes, to missed opportunities, to contradictions and inattentions, for as much as their opposites are involved in teaching, so are they. (168)

Ditto.

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I have so far centered this review on the problem of how to turn the work of teaching into a text that can be read and criticized by others. This leads me to a question about professional identity, about what it means to be a critic of teaching. And here the first thing to make clear is that this is not at all the same thing as to ask what it means to be a good or committed teacher. There are plenty of people in English departments who teach very seriously and very well, but who

would never think of defining their “field” as teaching, who would rather place their work as being “in” theory, or film, or creative writing, or the Nineteenth Century, or the like. And, conversely, the simple fact that someone happens to write about teaching does not guarantee that he or she is a better or more dedicated classroom teacher than anyone else. So what *does* it mean, then, not only to be a teacher but to do work “in” teaching, to claim a kind of critical or expert knowledge about something that almost everyone in the profession does?

This has seemed a particularly pressing question in recent years for many of us who see our work as part of the new (or at least newly respectable) field of composition studies. What are or should be the connections between the course in freshman composition and the field of study that has grown up around and, in many ways, reached well beyond it? That a book like *Practicing Theory in Introductory College Literature Courses* seems a badly needed response to an ongoing problem is itself evidence that questions about the relations between scholarship and teaching are still far too seldom asked in mainstream literary studies. But they are perhaps the defining concern of composition studies. And the final two books under review here suggest two very different ways of responding to that concern.

The approach taken by David Foster is shown by his title, *A Primer for Writing Teachers*. Foster presents writing teachers with a wide range of readings and issues to consider *before* they enter the classroom. His basic mode throughout is synthesis, and his claim to expertise is of a familiar and somewhat old-fashioned sort. He knows all the secondary materials in the field—has read all the relevant research on composing processes, rhetorical theories, invention strategies, and the like—and is able to cite the proper authorities on particular subjects with impressive ease. What he doesn't offer are very many close readings of specific classrooms or teaching practices. Even his closing chapter on “Teaching the Course” remains basically a review of the literature. The result is a clearly written and knowledgeable book, but one that seems oddly distanced from its subject. My sense is that if I read it as a beginning teacher I'd feel as if I knew a lot more about the field of composition but still not much about why and how to teach writing.

*An Introduction to Composition Studies*, edited by Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate, doesn't offer that much more insight into specific problems in teaching writing, but it does provide a very different feel for what it might mean to do scholarly work in the field of composition. In their brief introduction to the collection, Lindemann and Tate say their aim is to acquaint readers with some of the “assumptions, history, bibliographical resources, methods of research, and professional activities” that characterize the “relatively new academic discipline” of composition (v). But I think their book actually does something different and more interesting. For while many of the pieces that follow do involve “introductions,” they are of a much more personal sort than that offered by Foster. For instance, Andrea Lunsford begins the volume with a piece recalling how, as a

graduate student, she screwed up her courage to ask Mina Shaughnessy and Lynn Troyka, who were both at that time already well-established figures in the field, for advice about her teaching and research, and was startled and delighted by their immediate willingness to help out someone they had never met before. Lunsford goes on to make it clear that it is this sense of openness—of a relative lack of “discipline” and hierarchy—that continues to underlie her commitment to composition. Both Charles Schuster and Charles Moran also offer stories about how they got started teaching writing and why they continue to do so well into their careers. James Slevin contributes a striking analysis of the documents—job ads, letters setting out initial terms of employment, writing program descriptions—that structure the ways many of us enter into the profession. John Gage points out the historical and institutional peculiarity of our work by noting that the *OED* does not even include a definition for “composition” as a school subject, that outside of America students are rarely trained in writing as a separate course of study. Lisa Ede reflects on the problems of connecting research on writing to its teaching and on her ongoing felt need to do so. This recurring emphasis on both professional autobiography and on situating what gets said in precise institutional contexts backs up Lunsford’s remark that “indeed every essay in this volume might be subtitled ‘A Life in the Profession’” (4).

Which is great if you’re already in the profession. I liked this book a lot, but what I liked most about it is precisely what weakens it as an “introduction” to composition studies for someone outside the field. These are pieces addressed to colleagues, not to students or outsiders. They thus do not try particularly hard to explain current theories, issues, or problems in the study of composition. (Actually, Foster is much better at that.) Instead they work through some of the personal and political problems of being committed to issues in teaching, curriculum, and institutional reform while being part of a profession that often fails to reward such commitments. But as James Slevin puts it: “Institutional resistance usually occurs for significant reasons, because something fundamental is at stake” (154). These pieces suggest that what is at stake is not only better classroom teaching, but also how we choose to imagine ourselves as intellectuals.

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